

We were learning on the go.

An Interview with Yugesh Walia on the 19th of June 2020 by Cathy Wade.

African Oasis shows a specific truth and history that wasn't documented, televised or reflected within the national media. One that falls outside the optics of official culture, that we could easily miss or never have known. Commissioned by the Arts Council, and independently filmed in collaboration with Handsworth Cultural Centre in 1982, the film shows the life of the Centre. The film is part of the archive held at Vivid Projects and has been acquired by Birmingham Museums Trust for the City's collection. As the work is being screened by Vivid Projects, it felt timely to talk to the film's director Yugesh Walia about his experiences of making the work.

CW: Looking at 1982, the year that African Oasis was made, you have these strange echoes with the present. A Conservative government that is entrenched and in power, the links between the profiling of black communities and protests. While now, the Black Lives Matter movement is framed against the COVID 19 pandemic and images of daytrippers on the beaches.

YW: Well, I thought things had changed actually. But it's becoming clear to me that in America things haven't changed at all, especially with the President. Over here the Black Lives Matter protests are heartening to see. In the old days it was mainly Black people going on protests, whereas now you get to see a good mixture. There's a lot of white people, Asian people, Chinese, Black. Everybody's involved. In that sense things have moved on, we are in it together now, but you are still hitting a brick wall. You are still having people like Dominic Raab not understanding what taking the knee is all about. These people are so disconnected from the minority communities of this country.

CW: That he'd only take the knee for his wife or the Queen, it's an extraordinary thing to say in the present.

YW: He thinks that taking the knee came from Game of Thrones. That that's all it refers to. Raab doesn't understand the significance of it and that's really sad. How can things move on when people in power just don't understand?

CW: One thing we keep finding with work from the archives is this circularness. How often the language around debates might change or shift just slightly, yet the issues remain embedded. What's fascinating looking at African Oasis is how we focus representation and self-representation through the arts. I'm interested here in how your connection with the Handsworth Cultural Centre came to be.

YW: Two people were instrumental in that, one was Roger Shannon who ran the Birmingham Film Workshop and the other was Bob Ramdhanie who ran the Cultural Centre. I had already made a couple of short films with the workshop. Roger was keen to develop connections and networks with other art organisations in Birmingham. He got to know Bob and through this I started running a course there on filmmaking for young black kids. Slowly and slowly the idea developed; this was a unique place that wasn't happening anywhere else. Bob's idea was channelling young people's energies into art, mainly dance and music; for them to have somewhere to go, rather than drift into crime. It was initially intended for mostly young offenders.

We developed this idea about a documentary and Roger suggested I pitch it to the Arts Council, who initially said no to me, because they felt I didn't have enough experience, but they said they wanted to support this project. So, they gave the commission to the Birmingham Film Workshop on the basis I was working with them and it became a Film Workshop project. Roger Shannon was the producer and we all mucked in, we all researched, and I directed it. Everyone working on it didn't have much experience.

Birmingham film making at the time, there wasn't very much. It was really hard to make a film. Technically it was difficult, you had to buy film, you had to expose it in a camera unlike now. That's how it came about, people wanted to support it and we were given just enough money to get it made.

CW: The behaviour of film stock is so different from the ability that we have now to document events in real-time as they happen.

YW: The thing is we were very young. I wasn't very politically aware at that time. It was the process of making these films that made me politically aware, and that's how you grow yourself. Before that I didn't really care, I came here as a student to study on a course and that was it.

CW: The Birmingham Poly days, there's always a balance with knowing what a media does and understanding the world it lives in. Yet there were also the arts labs and projects that created alternative access to filmmaking and photography, where people could create a space in which they were foregrounded. This is so different from photography being purely technical.

YW: You know Vanley Burke? Well, he was the year below me in college. He was very politically aware even then. The photographs he was taking at the time were a reflection of what he's become. Pogus as well; I got to know him much later. He was very active at that time as well. These are the people whose work I eventually got to appreciate.

CW: Looking at Handsworth Cultural Centre through the lens of today, in your film there is a performance at the start that's presenting the need for culture and cultural fusion to have a centre. In this moment there's no sense of it being a probation centre. To take a service and reimagine it in such an original way is extraordinary.

YW: Bob didn't want the Centre to be seen as a probation space, he wanted it to be seen as an Arts Centre. He had to fight battles to make that happen. In the end, people who were not offenders were also encouraged to

come and use the Centre and take part. That's partly why it was successful. If it had just a probation service label on it, I don't think people would have come.

CW: There's a legacy there for a community that is so heavily policed. What Handsworth Cultural Centre represents, it's a significant time to look back on it. Especially with the austerity measures we have now. I'm curious about your memories of Birmingham from that time, what kind of environment did it strike you as being?

YW: I'm trying to recall now. We had a lot of shop scenes on Soho Rd at the beginning of the film. It was fast becoming a very Asian dominated area and it had been an African Caribbean area before that. That change was taking place and, later on, caused some friction. I remember the riots that happened, there was friction between the Asian Community and the Black community as well. There was envy and jealousy and all kinds of things going on. There were huge riots in Lozells in 1985. At that time there was a lot of racial strife and it was mostly with the far-right white community but, there was strife between Asians and Blacks as well.

CW: Different cities have different histories and social histories present.

YW: I watched African Oasis recently and thought, God, what people are saying, this is all still relevant.

CW: This is why it's such a necessary time to screen it; we are in a time period that is quite extraordinary. The statue of Colston rolling into the sea, if someone said this was going to happen in 2020, it would have felt really improbable.

YW: There is a call now for British history to be taught differently, isn't there? People have resisted that for many decades, let's see what happens regarding that... We never used to question these things and people are now, which is great. We just assumed that that's how things are.

CW: The Narrative voice in both Handsworth Songs and African Oasis showed how you could explore what a documentary is and how it operates. In African Oasis you are witnessing what's happening as it's occurring. That you are discovering this together feels really present.

YW: I remember Channel 4 discussed wanting to buy the film, but they made certain conditions. They said the first five minutes had to be recut, that it just wanders around Handsworth for far too long. We talked about it in the workshop and decided "who are they to tell us how to make our film". Channel 4 was very new and it was our very first encounter with a broadcaster. Obviously, we had no idea (unlike nowadays) that you can't do anything without them approving it. Later, when I started making films for Channel 4 you were very much told "You must do this cut, that cut, put this there" because they're commissioning it. It's their money, whereas then we were so idealistic. We said we were not going to sell it to Channel 4, we've made our film and that's how it stays.

CW: This has meant that your work was preserved as you intended it.

YW: Nowadays a style like that would never get approval. The first five minutes are now used as trailers basically saying this is what you are going to see. These kinds of films were never meant to be shown like that; they were slowly unfolding narratives. Television just can't cope with that.

CW: And you were working and running classes within the Community Centre. That changes the position of it, from somebody who is coming in from the outside to somebody who is embedded within it.

YW: Yes, there's already a relationship. People were much more welcoming and opening up more because they knew me. They saw me as part of them, part of the Centre as much as they were.

CW: I'm also thinking of the posters and information boards in African Oasis and how people found out about things. In the present

we look at projects online, there's an interesting question with culture and democracy there.

YW: Its good talking to people who see the film now and see things in it that perhaps I never saw when making it. I kind of get it now when people tell me. In those days it was just instinctive, it wasn't written down, there was nothing like that. We didn't know how to make a documentary we just went out there with a camera and started filming.

African Oasis (Yugesh Walia, 1982, produced by Roger Shannon for Birmingham Film Workshop) will be screened online by Vivid Projects from the 16-22 July.