

Connected Communities

Diasporic Film in Communities

A scoping study of the relationship between screen culture, stakeholders and communities

Sarita Malik



Background

Executive Summary

The *Diasporic Film in Communities* project set out to critically examine the role of Diasporic film culture in Diasporic communities. A case study approach was used to explore how three postcolonial publics (African-Caribbean, Chinese and South Asian) mobilise around film, interface with cultural organisations and reflect on their significance as film communities.

A range of collaborative activities were held in partnership with the British Film Institute (BFI), including participatory screenings, networking events and a final research seminar. The primary data collection included interviews, focus groups with Diasporic cinema audiences and an observation of the BFI's Diasporic film programme for which it depends on a community 'collaborative programming strategy'.

Three main findings emerged in the research. First, film contributes to strong feelings of cultural and group identity in various shifting local and global contexts. Second, in spite of the differentiated Diasporic social histories explicated in the research process, issues of race, culture and power are pervasive in how the role of Diasporic cinema is discussed across groups. And third, there is a clear discourse of interdependency between cultural organisations and community partners; this is seen to raise critical dilemmas regarding the politics of cultural programming.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Diasporic Film in Communities

1. Introduction

This discussion paper summarises the key themes and findings of the *Diasporic Film in Communities* research project led by Dr Sarita Malik from Brunel University (Sociology/ Communications) in collaboration with the project partner, the British Film Institute (BFI). The BFI is the UK's lead organisation for film in the UK.

The main objective of the project, built into its research design, has been to gain an understanding of the ways in which cultural cinema, for the academic/research community, cultural organisations and diverse publics themselves are linked to ideas of community.

The project has aimed to:

- Scope the relationship between cultural products, organisations and communities as a dynamic interaction.
- Facilitate dialogue with and engagement between cultural organisations and cultural groups about the role they see film playing in community life.
- Produce a critical overview of the relationship between Diasporic film culture and communities.

The research focus was on postcolonial Diasporic communities and cinemas because 1) they have a particular historical and socio-cultural relationship to UK screen culture and heritage, 2) Diasporic cinema has a prominent role in the BFI's Education-led film programme, 3) there are a range of Diasporic groups with whom the BFI has a 'collaborative partner' arrangement, and 4) Diasporic screen culture has potential significance for academic and public debates around cultural diversity policy and practices of engagement.

This paper provides a project summary, key points for discussion, recommendations for future research and selected bibliographic references. Emergent themes are considered in relation to the conceptual foundations that were identified in the preliminary review of available academic literature (organised into three categories, literature on 'Diasporic identities and communities', 'Diasporic film' and 'cultural policy' with specific reference to cultural diversity and film policy). Future dissemination of the *Diasporic Film in Communities* project will continue to be oriented towards an exchange of knowledge and expertise between academics, communities and key stakeholders in understanding the film/community nexus.

2. Methods

The review of literature recognises work that has pointed to the limitations of 'diaspora' as a critical tool and to the ideological orientations Diaspora discourse carries by presuming certain conditions (Soysal, 2000) and links with an 'imagined community' (Hage, 2005). The critiques of 'Diasporic film' are also acknowledged (Saeyes, 2009) because its associations with the 'exilic' (Naficy, 2001) or 'intercultural' (Marks 2000) arguably downplay the transnational and mobile nature of film and filmmaking alongside rapid transformations in global mobility and multi-directionality (Iordanova, 2010: 65). It was agreed with the project partner and research participants that 'Diasporic screen culture', 'Diasporic communities' and indeed (the contested terrain of) 'community' were to be used *flexibly*, as conceptual frames (Goffman, 1974) through which to explore feelings of 'community', cultural formations and processes at work.

The data collection involved indirect and unstructured observation of the BFI's public Diasporic film programme over the course of six months. The primary focus was on its working methods that are based on a participatory, consultative approach to public film programming involving voluntary external community partners such as the African Odysseys BFI Consultation Group, Filming East Festival and South Asian Cinema Foundation. One of the aims of the observation was to consider this as a potential template for engaging with communities. The particular programming approach is interesting because it stands in 'contrast to the staple BFI fare of expert-led programming at the BFI' (Somerset, 2012: 8) and because the BFI itself has grappled with issues of 'cultural diversity' and perceptions of it being a social space that appeals to a white, middle-class, cinephile elite (British Film Institute, 2000).

The qualitative methodological approach also included interviews with BFI personnel along with focus groups with BFI community 'collaborative partners' and audiences at three public Diasporic film events held at BFI Southbank, London. An analysis of the field-notes, transcripts of the focus groups and interviews and supporting documentation (including policy reviews and industry-commissioned reports) was conducted.

Finally, an open research seminar was held at the National Film Theatre in London to explore the research themes and present preliminary research findings. The seminar was an important part of the stakeholder engagement activity, bringing together community 'collaborative partners', BFI personnel, academics, film programmers and cultural policy-makers. It was chaired by Colin Prescod (Chair of the Institute of Race Relations) and included presentations from David Somerset (Education Curator, Adult Programmes, BFI) Richard Paterson (Head of Scholarship and





Research, BFI) and Anna Kime (Manager of Cultural Film Exhibition & Education Projects, Film London).

Significantly, the project integrated a 'critical reflection phase' for the collaborative project partner. One output is a BFI-compiled report, *A reflection on the Diasporic Film in Communities project*, outlining the organisation's policy and programming approach in this area, both historical and current, and producing a substantive appendix of further related documents (Somerset, 2012).

3. Research Findings

Three summative findings are outlined here:

3.1 Strong feelings of cultural and group identity are formed through film

The first research finding, emerging from the focus groups and observation, points to the function of film as a medium that creates and maintains shared values, contributes to strong feelings of cultural and group identity and generates modes of belonging. The group reflections probed the link between screen experience and community and were a useful

method for understanding attitudes and motivations.

In the reflexive accounts, Diasporic film was situated as an important aspect of postcolonial historiography and the contemporary Diasporic condition. As the UK's African-Caribbean, Chinese and South Asian communities are experiencing rapid change in relation to global, national and local factors (that, in turn, influence media consumption and cultural policy flows); the appeal of Diasporic film, entwined with public cinema-going, remains permanent within these shifting contexts.

The transformative effects of film, from archive classics to new cinema, were intimately described, as was the role of film in cultural education and life-long learning. Participants were keen to talk about the 'emotional impact' of cinematic encounters, reminiscing about cinema-watching with friends and family, from childhood to adulthood. There were recollections of 'late night Hong Kong films' in basement cinemas targeted at the Chinese catering community in the 1970s and, for one recently-migrated Sri Lankan attending the BFI screening of a Shyam Benegal classic, memories of 'when my father used to take me

to see all the good films as a child'. In spite of the differentiations of social histories apparent, collective viewing experiences of Diasporic cinema in public cinema spaces were linked directly to powerful feelings of cultural identity and imaginings of community within and across groups.

3.2 Race and power are high on the agenda for Diasporic publics

Cultural and group identity was, however, more voluntarily described in politicised terms. Conversations that started around 'affect' in cinema (Deleuze, 1986) recurrently turned into 'political talk', based on evaluating historical and current approaches to 'minority' film programming and exhibition. There was a shift therefore from participants speaking *as audiences*, to speaking *as citizens* with an apparently clear affiliatory cultural politics and purpose.

Although there was broad support for the BFI's inclusive and embedded 'collaborative programming' approach, wider patterns of racism and cultural exclusion were described. There was an open critique of racialised hierarchies of cultural decision-making, diversity policies, marketing, audience development and marginalised representations. There was obvious support for increased visibility, awareness and access to diverse screen cultures that are still regarded as separate, 'minority cinemas' even within other modes of cultural cinema. Simultaneously, there was recognition that Diasporic cinema and audiences only represent a 'thin slice of the market' (Chinese group) in the new discourses of creative economy and industry. The intermittent 'Diasporic events' can lead to what one film-goer referred to as, 'the exoticification of the other'. Such discussions indicate that film culture and the film experience are implicated

in a set of cultural and social relationships and engagements that can also result in difficult inequalities.

A tension or 'ambivalence of community' (Bauman, 2001) is manifest therefore between how 'community' is chosen as part of a 'social imaginary' (Taylor, 2004) that enables cultural identification and solidarity and, in other instances, 'community' is resisted because of the essentialist identity paradigms and de-individualising processes it helps produce and sustain. Identity choices are complicated here; with the film experience having the dual effect of both cementing common interest in a shared public space and mobilising deep concerns around power and inequality.

3.3 'Cultural brokering' raises critical dilemmas for understanding the film/community nexus

A third finding is based on how communities connect with cultural organisations and the communal issues and opportunities of such interactions. The data insight provided by the observation, institutional discourse and group narratives, demonstrates a strong level of interdependency between cultural organisations and communities involved in the practice of collaborative programming.

Community 'collaborative partners' function as what might also be termed 'cultural brokers', mediating the space between 'communities' and cultural organisations – acting as a bridge from the 'outside' to the 'inside'. The basic premise of a 'cultural broker' (as opposed to the more economically-oriented 'broker') – as described in Anthropology (Sausz, 2001) and Education (Geertz, 1960) contexts – is that they facilitate border crossings from one set of constituents to another. Such a crossing was identified in the research as both cultural (with the cultural brokers coming from 'inside' Diasporic communities) and operational

(so that those 'outside' of institutionalised contexts (i.e. not BFI personnel) work with those professional, expert, salaried cultural gatekeepers on the 'inside').

The BFI solicits the kinds of knowledge and 'cultural intelligence' of those awarded broker status (using such expertise to inform film choices and marketing) and, in turn, brokers are supplied with a venue, promotion and, as seminar speaker Tony Warner (African Odysseys BFI Consultation Group) described it, 'some credibility' by being linked to such a major national cultural organisation. Cultural brokering, through knowledge exchange, helps sustain and build new links with audiences, communities and networks that the BFI, both because of its cultural and operational positions, may otherwise have limited ability to reach.

There was no obvious criticism of such an arrangement either from the 'cultural brokers', audiences or cultural organisation. The Diasporic collaborative programming strategy is an iteration of what Hill has termed a 'cultural defence of film' (2004), relevant in the wider recent contexts of UK film organisational restructuring and renewed film policy interest in questions of 'diversity' (BFI, 2012: 49).

The voluntary participation of these community actors in the public sphere was seen as a worthwhile project to help 'translate' cultural identity (McKiernan, 2008: 90-1), but it also reflected what one respondent described as a 'sad element'. 'Cultural brokering' is only required because of the representational patterns of omission and racialised structures of inequality that the participants so readily identified. So Diasporic cinema takes on a symbolic role as a response to a lack of representation in other

national texts and contexts, and the cultural brokering role becomes a form of social action, a strategy for inclusion, a way of ensuring 'authenticity' of representation and a means of challenging wider institutional blockages in 'elite' public spaces. For these community consultants that exist outside of an organisational setting, critical dilemmas are therefore raised: first, in relation to power and knowledge and second, within broader processes and systems of cultural production, exhibition and governance.

4. Emerging Questions and Themes

Diasporic screen culture research has focused on how textual representations have redefined understandings of identity (Berghahn, 2010, Loshitzky, 2010), on industrial contexts (Pines and Willemsen, 1989, Iordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal, 2010) and on questions of authorship and origins (Naficy, 2001). Research that connects ideas of value for film cultures to both institutional and cultural spaces and to 'social, spatial and temporal networks of exchange and meaning' (Harbord, 2002: 9) remains limited.

The objectives of the *Diasporic Film in Communities* project demonstrate a shift in focus from aesthetic cinematic experiences or questions of representation that have prevailed. The concern has been with how audiences reflect on film culture, on the 'social experience of cinema' (Puwar 2007) and how this might connect with feelings – and indeed the cultural politics – of community.

Linking the social and emotional role of film to broader institutional and socio-political domains is not intended to unequivocally problematise 'the freedom of the reader'

(Morley in Appardurai, 2011: 51). It is however meant to accommodate a space in which the 'collective experience of spectating' (Naficy, 2010) can be understood as a wider social process that might be framed by feelings and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion. This research suggests that experiences of Diasporic screen culture are influenced by perceptions of how we are socially and politically located in 'our communities'. How these multi-faceted ideas of community and connectivity are constructed or acted upon also underlines the importance of seeing communities as action, process and activity (Walkerdine and Studdert, 2011).

5. Recommendations for Future Research

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The findings of the research and summary of evidence gathered during the stakeholder engagement activities highlight that cultural film programming and participation is a broad and complex area for research. It was always the intention that this exploratory work could generate further insight in the field. A number of recommendations for future research have emerged from the scoping study. In particular:

- To build on the links established through this scoping study and plan collaborative research that foregrounds the significance of lived differences in how various communities experience film culture and the role of cultural politics in how the activity of reception is framed.
- More specifically, to engage in in-depth research on the social experience of cinema and on comparative forms of engagement across communities. Such an approach might draw on the cross-disciplinary literature on community, sociological

audience/reception studies and cultural studies (particularly for what it can add to understandings of inequality).

- To develop a shared framework for interpretation and criticism of Diasporic screen culture that locates 'community' at the centre.
- To further develop research that directly involves policy-makers, with the aim of encouraging cultural policy frameworks to directly address the political significance and participation of a diverse range of constituents. Broadly, this has implications for how we discuss the organisation of 'diversity' in multicultural contexts.
- To develop further research that partners with those 'inside' cultural organisations in the design, delivery, objective-building and evaluation of research. The value of the research partnership with the BFI has many dimensions: securing major access, building links beyond the Higher Education context, knowledge transfer and accommodating a self-reflexive process for a cultural organisation itself.

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www.bfi.org.uk/education-research

**African Odysseys Consultation Committee
at the BFI**

<http://africanodysseys.wordpress.com/2011/06/17/hello-world/>

Black History Walks

www.blackhistorywalks.co.uk/

Filming East Festival

www.filmingeast.org/

South Asian Cinema Foundation

www.southasiancinema.com/

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