**The Time Is Now: *Pressure*, *Guerrilla*, and the (Re)invention of Black British Cinema and History**

**James S. Williams**

In February 1968, at the West Indian Students’ Centre in London, James Baldwin delivered a now-famous lecture on black experience and identity in Britain and America. Boldly rejecting simplistic notions of race and color by elucidating the history of racial mixing in the United States and the colonies, he also led a discussion with civil rights activist and comedian Dick Gregory on the role of white liberals in the black struggle. The event was brilliantly captured by Trinidadian-British photographer and recently-trained filmmaker Horace Ové in *Baldwin’s Nigger* (1969), a 48-minute black and white documentary made in a simple but intimate cinema verité style.[[1]](#endnote-1) At one point Baldwin is asked by a member of the audience where he thinks the black man will be in fifty years’ time. His answer is cautiously optimistic, imagining a future black state of mind and sense of pride that could bring forth a new kind of identity. He evokes the “vigor . . . vitality . . .. sense of life” of the “black personality.” This was a potent and thrilling prospect in 1968.

Yet two months later, on April 20, 1968, the British Conservative politician Enoch Powell gave his notorious anti-immigration “Rivers of Blood” speech that argued the *Empire Windrush* (the boat which brought the first large-scale group of immigrants from the Caribbean to London in 1948) was a Trojan horse and that West Indians were an occupying force that threatened the very survival of British civilization. Powell then issued a deliberately inflammatory threat: “In fifteen or twenty years’ time, the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.” Although Powell was immediately censured by his own party, his extreme racist views cast an ugly nationalist shadow over the course of multicultural relations in Britain for years to come.

Baldwin’s radical vision remains powerful and alluring today precisely because of the continuing legacy of violence and racism, both in the United States and Britain.[[2]](#endnote-2) In Britain, the current Windrush scandal would suggest that nothing has substantially changed for the country’s black immigrant population, even though the original Windrush generation and their descendants are now firmly settled and integrated into British society, having lived to see the Muslim community replace them in the public consciousness as the demonized Other. Caught up in the Windrush affair are the 57,000 Commonwealth-born people who arrived in the U.K. before 1971, the year that a new Immigration Act restricted primary immigration. Those who have not managed to regularize their residency now run the risk of being criminalized and losing their homes, jobs, benefits and free state healthcare, and, in some cases, of being deported.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The current period of political turmoil in Britain is centered on historic issues of race and discrimination but it coincides with the anniversary of May’68, offering an opportune moment to revisit the vexed question of cinema’s role as a potential agent of social and political change and a force for shaping and articulating new kinds of racial and cultural identity. In the immediate wake of May’68, Ové’s *Baldwin’s Nigger* stood out as the seemingly sole expression of radical, black British cinema.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In 1974, Ové finally was able to direct his first feature, *Pressure*, the first British feature by a black filmmaker with black writers (Ové and Samuel Selvon) and a black cast. It was immediately shelved for two years by the British Film Institute which had commissioned it amid concerns over its representation of police violence. Both Scotland Yard and the Race Relations Board demanded to see the film; in the end, it did not gain full general release until 1978.

A film of great historic significance, *Pressure* was the first of a new wave of pioneering films focused on the descendants of the Windrush generation. Set in Ladbroke Grove in West London at a time of chronic unemployment, racist policing, and white panic over immigrants exploiting the state benefits system, it was the first drama to convey in vivid and authentic detail the anger and frustration felt by young black men in the early 1970s.[[5]](#endnote-5) Its protagonist Tony (Herbert Norville), a British-born black teenager and son of an immigrant family from Trinidad, leaves school with good qualifications but encounters a series of job interviews where all that matters is his background (perceived by white employers as irremediably inferior) and finds himself caught between two cultures, inexorably entering a life of petty crime with his West Indian friends.

*Pressure* has none of the auteurist swagger of *Leo the Last* (John Boorman, 1969), an art-house curiosity that was similarly set in the crumbling urban wastelands of Notting Hill and contained sequences of Blaxploitation *avant la lettre*. Instead, Ové adopts a naturalistic, observational style to reflect the reality of black people’s lives and counter head-on the racist stereotypes of the delinquent black immigrant and loose lothario popularized by mainstream media and cinema. With an explicit focus on the “immigrant problem” and questions of assimilation, as well as on poor housing and education, lack of job prospects, racist scapegoating and media manipulation, *Pressure*, as Jim Pines rightly observes, was a classic 1970s race relations drama, produced at a time when race relations and multiculturalism were being institutionalized in the UK.[[6]](#endnote-6)

By exploring the contradictions inherent in the very idea of “Black British,” *Pressure* is at once rhetorical and dialectical in approach. Positioned as the “English boy” who cannot share the dream of home held by his older brother Colin (Oscar James), Tony attempts to move beyond the opposing views advanced by his aspirational parents and the Black Power activists he encounters via his brother, including Brother John, the “Black Panther from Islington” (played by noted Guyanese performance poet and singer Ram John Holder). He articulates the real question confronting black Britons of the time: namely, whether their situation is specifically a symptom of white racism, discreet or otherwise, or a condition of the social and political system under which they happen to live and which also affects the majority of whites. It is a complex question which the film never entirely resolves.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Only when Tony witnesses a brutal raid on a Black Power meeting by police without a warrant and sees the mounted forces of repression at work does his political awakening start; he begins slowly to emerge with his own voice and acquires agency by engaging in grass-roots collective action (for example, helping to design posters for Black Power events). His metamorphosis can be read as a belated response to the spirit of May ’68, but it is surely also inspired by James Baldwin’s ideal of a confident and empowered black subject.

Crucially, while this process does not entail militant counter-violence against the police, Tony must still confront his God- and neighbor-fearing mother Bopsie (Lucita Lijertwood) in an explosive family scene after the home has been turned upside down by police ostensibly searching for drugs. In this inevitable clash of the generations, it is Tony who speaks the blunt truth of their impossible situation as black immigrants vis-à-vis the authorities, to the point of symbolically tearing off her wig. Bopsie’s protestations of shame and blasphemy prompt Tony’s father, Lucas (Frank Singuineau), to accuse her of being wholly naïve and misguided in her “white dreams” of the promised “better life.” She had persuaded him to trade his comfortable life as an accountant in Trinidad for sixteen years of humiliation as a laborer in the UK. “I’m nothing,” Lucas rages.

A landmark film about black experience in Britain during the fraught and pivotal period of the early 1970s, *Pressure* remains a relatively unknown chapter in British cinema. One small measure of its seminal importance and status in the history of black British artistic expression is its presence via a short extract of Tony dancing with a white female friend in Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), an emphatic nod to its legacy.

***Guerrilla*: Rebooting Revolution**

*Pressure*’s significance today is enhanced by the appearance of *Guerrilla* (Sky Atlantic/Showtime, 2017), a six-part British television mini-series by John Ridley.[[8]](#endnote-8) Ridley is best known for the popular TV show *Barbershop* (2005), which he wrote, directed and produced, and for his script for Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013) for which he won an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay.

A period drama set in London in 1971, *Guerrilla* takes place against the explicit backdrop of the Immigration Act, regarded then and now as an overt policy of racial discrimination since it distinguished between “patrials” with the right of abode who were welcome (children and grandchildren of people who had originally migrated from Britain to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India and parts of Africa) and “non-patrials” who were not. In this regard, the film appears strangely prescient of the present “hostile environment” in both the U.K. and the United States. Yet *Guerrilla* is also wholly and deliberately imbued with the radical spirit of May’68 and does exactly what *Pressure* deliberately eschewed: it pursues the option of revolutionary violence.

*Guerrilla* is centered on a young couple—Marcus (Babou Ceesay), a “patrial” Nigerian-British teacher, and his “non-patrial” partner Jas (Freida Pinto), an Indian nurse—and charts their gradual move from political activism and symbolic resistance to militancy and armed insurrection as members of a small, Marxist-identified Black Power cell. The trappings and consequences of militant violence are explored through radio communiqués and revolutionary rhetoric as well as bungled attacks, collateral damage, and the strict hierarchy of international terrorism’s professional workings. *Guerrilla* makes explicit references to Eldridge Cleaver, the IRA, the Red Army Faction, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Lebanon and Algeria. Its episodes open with epigraphs that range in source from Ho Chi Minh to Sojourner Truth and Claude McKay, constituting in themselves a parallel Internationalism. One of the cell members, Leroy (Brandon Scott), is identified as a Black Panther who escaped from the United States to London after killing a cop in the 1967 Newark riots. Jas, brandishing a machine gun in her raincoat, felt hat, and sunglasses, appears the essence of 1970s radical chic, a composite of Angela Davis, Leila Khaled, and Ulrike Meinhof. Yet *Guerrilla* avoids merely mythologizing the era of the British Black Panthers (who were inspired by the U.S. Black Panther Party but never affiliated with it) by focusing on the competing goals and causes within the cell, as well as its disputes and infighting; it also enters into the lives of the police, who in *Pressure* had remained a faceless enemy.

*Guerrilla* provides an important service, in fact, in that it fills in some of the historical background for *Pressure* by publicly revealing for the first time the existence of a counter-intelligence unit dedicated to suppressing black activism: known as the Black Power Desk, it operated within the Special Branch at Scotland Yard. Such secret action went hand in hand with police corruption, which included the policy of drug recycling whereby officers would seize drugs, report only a share of what was seized, and use the rest to supply a network of informants within the black community. These activities, all depicted in *Guerrilla*, were verified by the program’s consultant, the Trinidadian-British human rights activist, writer, and broadcaster Darcus Howe, an original member of the British Black Panthers who read the script, advised the production, and even appears as an extra.

Yet *Guerrilla* became the immediate object of controversy when it premiered in London due to its casting of Pinto, an Indian actress, as the female lead. Such a choice enraged activists for once again erasing black women and perpetuating the persistent idea that lighter skin is more marketable. Within the entire series there are only two major black female figures and both occupy problematic roles. One is the charming yet cynical powerbroker Omega (Dawe Ashton), who urges the black intellectual and former radical Kent Fue (Idris Elba) to counter violence by working with white liberals. The other is the working-class Kenya (Wunmi Mosaku), whom she refuses to help. Kenya, a sex worker, is the mistress of the racist Rhodesian police inspector Pence (Rory Kinnear) for whom she works as an informant against the movement in order to support her young boy (conceived with Pence). The only other female West Indian character in *Guerrilla* is Christine (Sophia Brown) who occupies a minor role as the organizer of a black women’s campaign for decent housing, a character apparently inspired by Olive Morris who founded the Brixton Black Women’s Group and specialized in staging sit-ins at council offices. In fact, many other Caribbean women had occupied key positions within the British Black Panthers, including Althea Jones-LeCointe (who took over as leader in late 1968), Barbara Beese, Beverley Bryan, Elizabeth Obi, and numerous others. It was Obi who first denounced Ridley’s portrayal of black women in *Guerrilla* as “unforgivable.”

Ridley, who is black and American, responded very personally to the accusations, insisting on the active female roles both within the story of *Guerrilla* (the dominant and determined Jas) and at the level of the film’s creation (Yvonne Isimeme Ibazebo produced it, British-Nigerian Misan Sagay scripted the sixth episode). Jas at one point even declares to Marcus: “Being partners doesn’t mean disappearing into you. I’m not here to be the girlfriend or the sidekick. I’m my own agent.” Such dialogue from a forceful and complex woman character stands in marked contrast to *Pressure*, since the trajectory of politicization in its 1970s universe is exclusively male and its few female figures are negatively drawn. The figure of an older American, Sister Louise, for instance, delivers a rousing speech at one Black Power meeting in *Pressure* but is sexualized from the outset and functions ultimately as a seductress to teach Tony the necessary facts of life.

To justify his particular choice of an East Indian woman as the female lead in *Guerrilla*, Ridley invoked his own relationship with an Asian woman. It was finally Farrukh Dhondy, a prominent South Asian member of the British Black Panther movement, who defended the film on its own terms and endorsed its racial configuration. He claimed the character of Jas was historically accurate and inspired by his own wife, the late Bengali writer and human rights activist Mala Sen, one of some twenty Asian women in leadership positions in the Black Power movement.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In *I Am Not Your Negro*, Peck asks: what could have happened if Baldwin had finished writing *Remember This House*? Ridley structures *Guerrilla* on a similar speculative scenario: what if the Black Power movement had taken up arms and black terrorism had infiltrated the very core of the British Establishment? Alternately, a viewer might ask: what are the implications of *Guerrilla*’s retrospective filmic approach that appears to reinvent and “re-radicalize” early British black cinema like *Pressure* by projecting 1970s London as a primary space of and for revolutionary violence? What is gained by imagining such violence through a resolutely interracial lens, inflected by contemporary concerns and debates about race and identity?

What does *Guerrilla* have to say to its intended public about violence as an agent of progressive change and racial equality, then and today? A detailed analysis of the series with a specific comparison to *Pressure* will, I hope, reveal the full stakes and continuing relevance of Ové’s film in the history of radical black British cinema.

**Remapping London, 1971**

*Guerrilla* opens, like *Pressure*,with a typical example of racial discrimination as Marcus is humiliated by a faceless white male voice in an unemployment exchange. Something is immediately missing, however: a sense of place. *Guerrilla* is markedly different in this respect from *Pressure* and the other defining British films that followed which grounded the second-generation black immigrant experience acutely in environment and locale. In contrast to Godard’s view of London in *One plus One* as a free, fluid, Third space, these films presented a set of precisely demarcated and contested urban spaces. *Babylon* (Franco Rosso, 1980) employs the now-standard trope of a young, black, unemployed male youth in trouble with the police. The protagonist Blue (Brinsley Forde), a Jamaican garage-hand who loses his job, ends up on the run, and is hunted down by a police patrol car on the desolate streets of South London (Deptford and Brixton). It was shot by Chris Menges in a new, bracingly raw, neon-scarred fashion. The same attention to place is evident in Barbados-born Menelik Shabazz’s *Burning an Illusion* (1981), the first British film to revolve around a black female protagonist. Its narrative arc of Pat’s (Cassie McFarlane) shedding both physically and mentally her “white,” middle-class illusions of social and economic assimilation in order to dedicate herself finally to community activism with other Rastafarian women, unfolds in the same socially disadvantaged terrain as *Pressure* -- the dilapidated terrace houses, new high rises, and covered markets of Ladbroke Grove and North Kensington—and includes scenes shot live during the Notting Hill carnival.[[10]](#endnote-10)

*Pressure* possessed a documentary commitment to recording real people and locations: Ové’s young teenage actors were non-professionals, whom he discovered hanging out in the same derelict basement hideout where he shot. He filmed on the streets unannounced with a mobile 16mm camera in fluid, New Wave fashion, entering the bustle and din of Portobello Road and immersing the audience in the ambient sounds, smells and textures of working-class, black everyday street culture: patties at the market, the rhythms of West Indian *patois*, casual banter, reggae music, and sound systems. There is a lightness in the air, and for its audience a sense of surprise and exaltation at seeing London through a black lens that captures organically both the performativity and precariousness of black urban life. Some critics of the time complained of too many low-angle medium close-ups, but just as Tony is moving always between different spaces and repositioning himself in different worlds, so the camera is constantly negotiating the extremes of long shot and close-up through intuitive panning and tracking shots, overheads and zooms.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Withits austere look and somber hue (low-key lighting, faces unadorned by make-up, bleached-out colors, exterior shooting in natural light), *Guerrilla* would appear to be paying direct stylistic homage to the stark, gritty, social-realist idiom established by *Pressure*. Yet despite a similar linear trajectory and rigorously objective point of view, with few reverse shots and dialogue often relayed tangentially, *Guerrilla* feels more like a posed study of a BCF (before cell-phone) and crucially pre-CCTV era, with a deliberately unshowy and unsentimental respect for the drabness of the period (dingy flats, dreary cafés, seedy back-alleys and slow, rattling trains). The camera is rarely on the streets, though, sequestered instead in safe-houses in a hushed, brooding silence. The scenes of Black Power meetings feel curiously muted, the council estates eerily quiet, and even the moments of rock or soul music are kept to a bare minimum, with just the odd burst of a sound system or the brief sounds of a Hendrix record in the flat of the young black teenagers dealing drugs. Lost is the liberating noise of black counter-culture that is deafening in a film like *Babylon* which stages a competition between dub reggae sound systems.

*Guerrilla* seems to be operating in a rarefied vacuum, a sense heightened by the use of specially commissioned electronic drone music by Max Richter which creates a mood of continuous dread. Moreover, *Guerrilla* manifests a clear spatial strategy: since 1970s London is impossible now to recapture, it renders the capital instead as a generic metropolitan space: Hammersmith Hospital is no more than a sign on a standard entrance, the canal in Regent’s Park could be any canal-side, the lock-up garage could be any garage. Any identifiable topography presents a sly travesty of locations. To cite one example: the Rhodesian High Commission appears as part of a typical Georgian square, whereas the real building (now Zimbabwe House) stands in the Strand.

Such elements shape an ironic viewing experience: the audience is ensconced in a drama of revolution, with the extended duration of real time in long takes and the intimacy of extreme facial close-ups, while knowing full well that it is all pure conjecture, utilizing the panorama of a vague, abstract London as a screen for projecting revolutionary thoughts. To the film’s credit, the pared-down, minimalist mise-en-scène clears the frame of clutter, while the accurately conveyed period details (guns, knives, cigarettes, joints, typewriters, rotary phones) seen in close-up are seldom fetishized and remain entirely functional to the plot. The hollowed-out frame creates an echo chamber for revolutionary debate to resound with maximum force. In this restrained form of realism refashioned as style, the clamor and commotion of the “real” London—a city in transition with growing social and cultural tensions—are lost. Denied deep space and evacuated of atmosphere, the capital is portrayed instead in wide-angle long shots as an amorphous, even abstract, mass of negative empty space -- a grimy backwash with just enough of an outline to constitute a dystopia. It is only the odd “Cha!” from a West Indian man in charge of the Brixton safe-house that indicates this is a specifically Caribbean neighborhood.

Perhaps Ridley wished to keep the screen as plain as possible in order to foreground the relationship between Jas and Marcus. Unlike *Pressure*, where the burden of social oppression is relieved, if only temporarily, by intermittent moments of sexual desire, their relationship is essentially chaste. Indeed, *Guerrilla* is impressively unromantic in its solemn depiction of radical fervor and idealism devoid of sex, drugs, alcohol -- just a sublimated yearning for the Cause and extended moments of silence and boredom during life underground.

**Reverse Maneuvers**

*Pressure* sought faithfully to record the realities of black immigrant life, but Horace Ové was not above manipulating realism; the police raid, for instance, was shot “for real,” with the unsuspecting actors noticeably intimidated by the sudden intrusion and aggression. Ové employed a similar strategy when he had the preacher (Norman Beaton) incorporate obscenely racist words about a white God (“Cleanse your heart of blackness!”) during an actual service filmed with a black congregation. *Pressure* demands a continually alert and vigilant spectator, a process initiated by the opening credit sequence when misty, old color photographs of the Caribbean segue abruptly into black and white, cartoon illustrations (by Una Howe) of the daily struggles encountered by Windrush immigrants upon arrival in the “motherland.”

That demand is especially true towards the end when a sudden, unexpected shift in tone yields a riveting, hyper-stylized fantasy sequence worthy of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Tony imagines himself in rare subjective POV shots walking through a park of white statues and entering a colonial-era mansion where, completely naked, he stabs in obsessive, bloody fashion something hidden under white bed clothes that is revealed to be a pig. This extravagant orgy and release of all-too-obvious symbolic violence against the pigs of authority, a ritual accompanied by off-screen tribal chanting, is not the film’s conclusion, however. Instead, a reggae song (“Let it burn!”) is followed by a return to committed, non-violent protest, as blacks and a few whites gather together outside the Old Bailey, demonstrating in silence in the pouring rain against the arrest of Tony’s brother (Ové teases the viewer again by peremptorily freeze-framing the scene, then just as casually restarting it).

*Guerrilla* delivers equally striking instances of stylistic play that disturb its cultivated, smooth, realist surface, not through common screenwriter tricks like withholding information or linking up every major figure in interweaving threads and spirals, nor visual and poetic leitmotifs which form its mosaic of patterns, nor even the compositions that echo the fleeting, lyrical, overhead panning shots in *Pressure*. No, I am referring to *Guerrilla*’s sudden mini-flashbacks, its subtle tricks of desynchronized sound and image, an arbitrary move into slow-motion, an unmotivated switch from wide-angle to close-up, even the extended play of remodulated sound in the first communiqué.

These formal ripples of style reveal a clear thematic agenda: to cut through reductive notions of blackness and emphasize racial and cultural difference. Indeed, the pieta-like tableaux uniting Jas and Marcus as well as Pence and Kenya are part of the continuous configuring of black/white/Asian skin in precise formation; they demand a direct consideration of the limits and possibilities of cross-racial relations linking different communities, including the police. In this respect, Ridley is working squarely against the period he is filming, for in that era in Britain, it was politically correct to invoke blackness non-differentially. In a move that betrays a contemporary, intersectional perspective on diversity, he insists on the facts of class, race and ethnicity. For example, the antagonistic relationship between teacher Marcus and fellow cell-member and firebrand Dhari (Nathaniel Martello-White), which undermines any universalizing ideas of black male unity, is presented explicitly in terms of differences of background and culture (African professional vs. West Indian “street” convict).

The particular pleasures of form and composition activated through inversion and reversal in *Guerrilla* almost always involve sequences that turn on the idea of race. An early scene in a pub when Fallon (Louise Gough) is knocked to the floor by Pence’s deputy Cullen (Daniel Mays) for being an uncooperative “bitch” (he had sought to manipulate her by invoking their shared experience as Irish people of discrimination in Britain) is neatly reversed in the final episode, when Fallon sets Cullen up and controls the scene, set in a black-run bar she has chosen and which puts him on edge. “It’s a little too dark in here for me,” he complains. Comfortable in this hybrid space of different ethnicities (including Chinese), she spends an excessively long time in the toilet before eventually reappearing. She wants to prove conclusively that she can be thoroughly trusted and has no plans to escape, sobbing that the cell will kill her for informing on its whereabouts in Brixton. It emerges later, however, that this was all a performance; in the time it took to stage the ruse, she has secretly armed herself with material for a bomb.

The only sexual act fully displayed in *Guerrilla* is a brief hook-up in the woods in Episode Four between Dhari and an anonymous young, female, German terrorist who was pictured moments earlier cleaning highly phallic AK-47 rifles outside the country mansion headquarters. He penetrates her from behind, an act performed mechanically and observed in the distance by Jas behind a tree in a rare, brief, subjective POV shot. Instead of crude voyeurism, however, this scene is rendered in an exceptional instance of shot/counter-shot, as the two women’s eyes meet, with the German staring blankly back at Jas, pictured in extreme close-up. The reverse field produces a criss-crossing of active and passive positions, of watching and doing, that blurs gender and racial lines (Indian, German, West Indian).

Interconnecting motifs of desire are repeated elsewhere in different forms. When DhariasksJas if she loved Éliette (Bella Dayne), the Québecoise separatist with whom the cell strikes a strategic alliance, he immediately claims to understand the possibility of homosexual desire due to his time in prison – as if this explains his predilection for anal sex. Queer resonances abound also when Dhari declares to Marcus: “I feel Jas is my girl too – in a different way. What you want, I want that too” – an intimation of mimetic desire with homoerotic suggestions that leaves Marcus confused and in tears. The charged relationship between the two men lifts *Guerrilla* away from the more normative territory of black male identity and sexuality presented in *Pressure*, even though Tony embodies a gentler, more vulnerable form of masculinity free of the aggressive macho posturings of Colin and Brothers like Junior who proclaim death to the white man.

*Guerrilla*’s respect for cinematic style and interracial combinations is taken to a dazzling if improbable level with an intertextual reference to *Mandabi* (The Money Order, 1968) by Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène, a film which just happens to be playing -- in the original Wolof minus subtitles -- in the garage of the West Indian fixer Jiverly (Ricky Fearon) whom the cell has gone to meet in order to obtain equipment for a bomb. The extract is easy to miss: it is not acknowledged by the characters in the scene, is not formally credited, and, most astonishingly, appears as a mirror reflection. In an ingenious instance of reverse projection, the clip works to subtly equate Jiverly, who turns out to be a traitor, with the corrupt officials in *Mandabi*; the scene that is playing is one where the poor and naïve Ibrahima Dieng is seeking to obtain identity papers at the police station, preceded by his first wife’s warning: “You know how it is in this country – when they hear ‘money’ everyone turns up.”

**The Spectacle of Violence**

With intricate interracial/intertextual maneuvers and an admirable commitment to restoring hidden aspects of British black history to full view, *Guerrilla* might initially seem to fit well into the recent celebration of black British experience in the UK. I’m thinking most obviously of the nationwide “Black Star” festival co-organized in 2016 by the British Film Institute of black actors on film and TV from Britain, the US and Nollywood (including *Pressure* and other films mentioned here).[[12]](#endnote-12) *Guerrilla*, however, is far more interested in what did not take place in the 1970s: namely, black revolutionary violence. Ridley is at pains to make it happen now, however belatedly, in dramatic, apocalyptic fashion.

Indeed, where *Guerrilla* gets it really wrong, for all its stylistic sophistication, is where it arguably matters most: in the presentation of police violence, starting early in Episode One with the vicious bloody murder in plain sight of Fallon’s black lover Julian (Nicholas Pinnock) during the peaceful anti-fascist demonstration he had organised to counter a National Front march. His head is savagely beaten to shreds by police thugs with truncheons, the screen blacking out with each deadly whack. There was, of course, open discrimination and violent intimidation against blacks and Asians during this period, a fact fully acknowledged and conveyed in different ways in *Pressure* and the later black films where the deep mistrust between black youth and the police is even more entrenched. Yet the violence was rarely labored or made graphic in such films because it was simply a given of black urban life. In the scene, for instance, in *Burning an Illusion* where Pat suddenly finds herself the victim of a drive-by shooting by white fascist thugs, the action occurs almost discreetly in the far background. The emphasis is on how the experience seals her growing Black Afro awareness, galvanized by seeing her boyfriend Del (Victor Romero Evans) falsely arrested and beaten by the police, then doomed to a life in prison. On the rare occasion of black on white violence, as in *Babylon* when Blue responds to a racist insult from a white neighbor by angrily lashing out and stabbing him, the event is depicted in detached, perfunctory fashion.

The National Front in 1971 was a small, marginal, neo-Nazi organization not yet engaged in the confrontational, mass street-marching that would follow. In fact, the early 1970s marked the height of working-class struggle in the UK, when workers were increasingly militant, in particular on questions of race and internationalism, and anti-racists marched together with their ethnic minority neighbors.

Such protest was not always respected by the authorities, of course. On August 9, 1970, approximately 150 people linked to the British Black Panthers massed at local police stations to protest daily police raids on the Mangrove restaurant in Notting Hill, but were met by a heavy-handed police presence of more than 700 police officers. In the resulting skirmishes, nineteen British Black Panthers were arrested, although charges against ten were later dropped and the other nine (including Howe and Jones-LeCointe) were eventually acquitted of the main charge of incitement to riot, following a ten-week trial at the Old Bailey in 1971 where they represented themselves. The momentous victory is well documented in Rosso’s *The Mangrove Nine* (1979), produced by Ové, a film so uncompromising in its indictment of police racism that the BBC again delayed its transmission.

 There is no record, despite *Guerilla*’s depiction, of the Metropolitan Police murdering protesters in cold blood in front of the general public. By the same token, the British Black Panthers, who were focused on integration on their own terms, did not carry guns or plant bombs in the style of the U.S. Black Panther Party, even though some members agreed with Malcolm X that self-defense was legitimate by any means necessary, tactics already employed by the Angry Brigade, the UK’s first urban guerrilla group, which started a bombing campaign in August 1970 designed to aggravate growing industrial unrest.[[13]](#endnote-13) Overall, the British story of race relations was one of continued community activism and social responsibility rather than guns, and Darcus Howe in particular championed the importance of the working-class as the agents of change.

What distinguishes the treatment of violence in *Guerrilla* is precisely its visible omnipresence and inevitability, and Ridley’s comfort in staging it, for the series comes most dynamically alive in its visually stunning set-pieces showcasing the dangerous attraction and contagion of violence. Yet Fallon tells Jas, invoking her experience of Northern Ireland, “I come from violence—all it does is more of the same, till everyone chokes on it.” She is right: violence begets violence in *Guerrilla*, notably in the penultimate episode where it escalates scene by scene. Even a small protest in a council office for equal rights and social security is quickly transformed into a space of panic and revenge, with Jas pointing a gun at a white male worker while commanding “Look at me! Apologize!.” In the final episode, immediately following the successful bombing of Scotland Yard, Kent is ruthlessly stabbed to death on the street by Dhari, who gives Marcus the bloodstained shirt as a trophy, a proof of love -- as if he had murdered Jas’s over-protective former lover essentially for him in a perverse expression of male brotherhood.

One of the strengths of *Guerrilla* is the way it obliges its audience consider the desensitizing and dehumanizing effects of violence. For example, after Jas knifes Jiverly in the stomach before strangling him to death, the camera remains on his inert body, forcing the viewer to confront a moral dilemma: whether to condemn this murderous violence or justify it politically? Too often, though, the viewer is invited simply to revel in visceral shock. It is in the addictive energy and excitement of committing violence that the real passion is found in *Guerrilla*, tying its characters together and sustaining them in the absence of sexual desire.

It raises the question: is this fabricated tale of British radical black politics of a bygone era merely a convenient hook for a contemporary immersion in “real” violence? *Guerrilla* trades in an implicit nostalgia for a time when violence was experienced in its full enormity, unmediated by social media, and when terrorism had an identifiable human face and a more noble aim (social justice, equality), however misplaced, than today’s nihilistic religious fundamentalism. Moreover, in succumbing to the spectacle of violence, *Guerrilla* seems to parallel Kathryn Bigelow’s contemporaneous *Detroit* (2017), which, although very different in its use of archival materials and reconstruction of actual events, revisits the Detroit riots of July 1967 through the lens of today’s Iraq with an unremitting insistence on brutality, notably in the hour-long sequence of graphic violation and killings by the police in the torture chamber of the Algiers Motel. This is a kind of terror porn where nothing is left to the imagination, as if physical violence and the spectatorial imperative to see and witness it were the marker and guarantee of cinematic authenticity, instead of merely Bigelow’s signature.

Although initially a morality tale about what happens if one alienates oneself from the very community one is fighting for, *Guerrilla* leaves open the possibility of redemptive change through the matrix of militant violence and never definitively condemns it. Its black, white, and brown coalition of renegades will live to fight another day of violence in a new promised land. “This is how it begins […] We will strike again,” intones Marcus in the final Black Army Faction communiqué. In the closing sequence where the cell heads off triumphantly in a boat arranged by the IRA, a final interracial sequence of images celebrates yet again different skin tones and gradations of black, brown, and white, culminating in a two-shot of Jas and Marcus, her face behind his in close-up, that reverses the order of the end of the first episode. The epigraph of this final episode is a quotation from the Weather Underground: “The time is now. Political power grows out of a gun, a Molotov, a riot, a commune … and from the soul of the people.”

*Guerrilla* wants it all ways: it is a plea for interracial harmony, an exposure of the consequences of physical violence, but also a promotion of personal self-expression and transcendence through violence. Films like *Pressure* and *Burning an Illusion*, responding to the hopes and fears of the communities for which, and in which, they were made, would never have allowed themselves the dubious luxury of such ambivalence.

**When “What if?” Becomes “Why Not?”**

What is the point ultimately of Ridley’s counter-historical fictionalization of events which profoundly rewrites Black British radical cinema by projecting revolutionary violence to a time and place where it didn’t exist? Sadly, *Guerrilla* has nothing particularly new or interesting to say about black relations and the black community. It blithely reproduces some disturbing tropes, notably that of blacks who feel no natural mutual solidarity and are happy to betray other blacks (more blacks die in *Guerrilla* at the hands of other blacks than whites, at least among those deaths that are depicted). *Guerrilla* might be viewed by some as an audacious and justifiable form of projection onto a foreign past of contemporary American concerns about violence, above all the current crisis of the police persecution, assault and killing of young black men. In such a reading, the film would constitute a possible allegory of Ferguson, with the distance of time and place affording Ridley a freer authorial hand and the advantage of not getting bogged down in the specifics of an ongoing and volatile instance.

The truth, I wager, lies elsewhere. On the extra included on the DVD of *Guerrilla*, “Voices of *Guerrilla*,” when Idris Elba, who also executive-produced the series, states that it concerns the clash between black and white Britain in the 1970s, Ridley stresses instead that it is about revolution -- as if what counts most is the function of violence and its potential for cultural and political redemption. The superbly taut final episode does indeed allow the viewer to experience some kind of emotional release and catharsis through the spectacular bombing of Scotland Yard, when Fallon suddenly stops running and turns back to observe the results of her handiwork, replying to Marcus’s question “What are you doing?” with “I’m enjoying it!” A brief glimpse in monochrome long shot of the destruction inside the building, as Cullen and another man are thrown backwards by the blast (not long enough to establish whether they are fatally wounded), conveys no critique of sadistic elation. Nor is the sense of justice delivered complicated by casualty figures. Violence, it seems, in the right form and circumstances, has finally been put to good use.

At such moments, Ridley’s espousal of an aesthetics of terror feels more like an attack on the perceived pessimism and passivity of current black radical politics in the United States, according to which violence is more to be endured than waged. Ridley’s reverse projection of historical violence reveals itself ironically as a utopian forward projection, a literal, incendiary message for these times inspired by the original Black Panthers: assume your human rights, defend yourself, mobilize, actively resist, and be truly woke. (The theme music employed at the end of each episode is an electronically synthesized song in a Negro Spiritual style: “Wake up! How long will it take you to realize I’m a man.”)

By reclaiming an economy of terroristic violence, *Guerrilla* constitutes a pointed intervention in the #BlackLivesMatter debate over strategies of non-violence. The recent harsh words of Elaine Brown, former chairwoman of the Black Panther Party, on the new movement and its “die-in” protests are well known: “They [#BlackLivesMatter] will protest but they will not rise up in an organized fashion, with an agenda, to create revolutionary change […] This to me is a plantation mentality. It smacks of ‘master, if you would just treat me right.’”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Is Ridley really saying that the ends justify the means, and that a new multiracial, militant vanguard offers a way forward? *Guerrilla* doesn’t do enough to prove otherwise, by suggesting, for example, that it was a vital blessing for Britain that acts of black terrorism and armed insurrection did not occur on home soil. However, the film seems at least implicitly to acknowledge that the relatively integrated, postcolonial society that the country “enjoys” today, however threatened by Brexit, is owed to the overall stability of civil society maintained during the dark days of the 1970s in the face of fomenting unrest, poverty, marginalization and racist oppression that continued into the Thatcher era.

History has proved *Pressure* right in its stubborn belief in the political process and peaceful protest as displayed in the closing scene. Ové’s film was epoch-defining in its examination of community and resistance, an engagement which Ridley often spectacularly inverts with his film’s contentious, flawed approach to violence. Yet paradoxically, despite their acute differences, the two works share a fundamental common understanding and ethos of progressive political cinema: an awareness that the personal and political cannot be neatly collapsed together, and that the task of harnessing the raw energy of idealism for collective action is always entangled by the subjective world of fantasy and emotion; a critique of the present infused by the notion that blackness (in its broadest sense) offers the potential to bring the future into being and enact a potential break with the innately violent structures of Western culture; and, finally, the assumption that such concerns are inextricably matters of aesthetic form.

By insisting, as Baldwin put it, that history is not in the past but in the present, *Guerrilla* proves that the series format of television can challenge viewers to think inventively through and across time and culture. If *Guerrilla* does indeed return for a second series (it was presented as “series one”), Ridley could either stick with protagonists Jas and Marcus as they retool for global terrorism, or he could plot a very different course and tell a more ambitious, true story about the continuing fight for civil rights and justice.

In the particular case of British black experience, there is still a great deal of urgent cinematic reclamation to be done for the crucial social and political period of the 1970s and early 1980s. With radical figures like Ové, Rosso and Howe who helped shape the initial post-Windrush generation now gradually passing away (Rosso died in December 2016, Howe in August 2017), their outstanding legacy needs to be built upon and extended into the future. Ové has himself contributed to this process by honoring the late Trinidad-born writer and political and cultural activist John La Rose (founder of The Caribbean Artists’ Movement) in a tribute documentary, *Dream to Change the World* (2003), which explores the role of artistic activity in social transformation.

Such a process also means engaging in fresh and enterprising ways with the heroism of the black everyday portrayed in visionary works like *Pressure* which dare to say the unsaid. In this regard, an earnest, well-meaning film like *Generation Revolution* (2016) by young black British filmmakers Usayd Younis and Cassie Quarless, which dutifully chronicles in objective, *vox pop* fashion events such as die-ins or symbolic shutdowns staged in London by groups connected to the British #BlackLivesMatter movement, allows grand, often naïve, claims of radicalism to pass by unchallenged and represents a failure to commit creatively to its own historical moment. As the current Windrush scandal emphasizes, this is not a time for remaining neutral and impartial, but instead for engaging imaginatively and passionately with the theme of radical change and assuming fully the risks of aesthetic speculation and experimentation.

1. Among Ové’s most iconic photographs are those dating from 1967, including of the British Black Panther figure Michael X and his entourage at Paddington Station. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. An extract from Ové’s film featured prominently in Raoul Peck’s fine documentary on Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Such sweeping – and for many observers inherently racist -- measures are directly linked to the Home Office’s “hostile environment” immigration policy that came into effect in 2010 and was designed expressly to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible for those living illegally in the hope they would “self-deport.” Confusion remains about the precise number of citizens who may have been wrongly deported or removed. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In fact, there was another: the notable and little-known [*Death May Be Your Santa Claus*](http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6a895091) (1969), an experimental underground short made in Techniscope by Frankie Dymon Jr. This collage of speeches about slavery and colonialism, footage of confrontations at Hyde Park’s Speakers’ Corner, references to Fidel Castro, and hippy sequences of naked white nymphs, looks curiously like a series of outtakes from Jean-Luc Godard’s *One plus One* (*Sympathy for the Devil,* 1968), in which Dymon himself played one of the armed black militants reciting Black Power and anti-imperialist slogans in a Battersea junk-yard. A fascinating, iconoclastic work of counterculture cinema, *Death May Be Your Santa* remains a private journey of self-discovery conducted in a purple avant-garde haze and with no clear message. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Tunde Ikoli’s simple, 43-minute drama, *Tunde’s Film* (1973), shot in neorealist style in the East End, had explored the daily lives of both black and white teenagers attempting to find work while constantly harassed by the police. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Jim Pines, “The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema,” in Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema* (MIT Press, 1988), 26-36 (30). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. From David Wilson’s review of *Pressure* in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (April 1978), as reproduced in the booklet issued with the 2005 BFI DVD of *Pressure*/*Baldwin’s Nigger*. The DVD includes a filmed interview with Ové. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The series was broadcast simultaneously on Showtime in the United States and Sky Atlantic in the U.K. in April and May 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Farrukh Dhondy, “*Guerrilla*: A British Black Panther’s View,” *Huffington Post* *UK*, April 12, 2017. [*www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/farrukh-dhondy/guerrilla-a-british-black\_b\_15956986.html*](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/farrukh-dhondy/guerrilla-a-british-black_b_15956986.html) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Shabazz also directed *Step Forward Youth* (1977), a 30-minute documentary about black youths in Brixton; the television documentary, *Breaking Point – The Sus Law Controversy* (1978); and (with Imruh Bakari) the documentary short, *Blood Ah Go Run* (1982), on the momentous London demonstration following the New Cross Fire disaster in January 1981. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The same commitment to place is visible in Ové’s only other major feature film, *Playing Away* (1986), scripted by Caryl Phillips. Although it unfolds as a satire of class as much as of race (the local South London cricket team “Caribbean British Conquistadors” play away against an all-white English village team), the drama is embedded in the reality of Brixton which is signposted literally by road signs. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Over the last five years there have been major photographic surveys charting black and Asian diaspora, immigration and integration: *The British Black Panthers* (Photofusion Gallery, Brixton, 2013), featuring photographs by British Black Panthers member Neil Kenlock; Staying Power: Photographs of Black British Experience, 1950s-1990s (Brixton Black Cultural Archive and the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015); and *Stan Firm Inna Inglan: Black Diaspora in London 1960-1970s* (Tate Britain, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The range of terrorist targets in *Guerrilla* is clearly influenced by the activities of the Angry Brigade which favored symbolic militant actions against property such as police stations, banks, army bases, embassies, the travel offices of repressive regimes, and the London Post Office Tower (in October 1971). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Latifah Muhammad, “Former Black Panther Party Chairwoman Says Black Lives Matter Has A ‘Plantation Mentality’,” *Vibe*, October 23, 2016. [*www.vibe.com/2016/10/elaine-brown-black-lives-matter-plantation-mentality/*](https://www.vibe.com/2016/10/elaine-brown-black-lives-matter-plantation-mentality/)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)