

# Stuart Hall, film studies and the cinema

## *Stuart Hall, os estudos fílmicos e o cinema*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between Stuart Hall and the cinema from three specific topics: 1) Hall's work on concepts of difference, identity, representation and stereotype in his relationship with the cinema; 2) the impact of his thoughts on film production, especially in movies of the 1980s that directly portrayed the multicultural society and the ethnic issues of cultural hybridity, using as a case study the film *My Beautiful Laundrette*; and 3) more direct relationships he established with audiovisual production, whether in his relationship with black British cinema or how he was portrayed in the film *The Stuart Hall Project*.

**Keywords:** Stuart Hall, cinema, identity, representation, stereotype

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### RESUMO

Este ensaio explora as relações entre Stuart Hall e o cinema a partir de três tópicos mais delimitados: 1) a articulação dos conceitos de diferença, identidade, representação e estereótipo como foram trabalhados por Hall na sua relação com o cinema; 2) o impacto do seu pensamento na produção cinematográfica, sobretudo naqueles filmes da década de 1980 que tematizaram diretamente a sociedade multicultural e as questões étnicas do hibridismo cultural, usando como estudo de caso mais direto o filme *Minha adorável lavanderia*; e 3) as relações mais diretas que estabeleceu com o audiovisual, seja nos seus vínculos com o cinema negro britânico ou nos modos a partir dos quais foi retratado no filme *The Stuart Hall Project*.

**Palavras-chave:** Stuart Hall, cinema, identidade, representação, estereótipo

**A**LTHOUGH STUART HALL has not been a theorist of the cinema in the strict sense, we may see the influence of his thoughts on film studies, especially on movements that related films to social practice and cultural studies. Hall's presence in films and film studies has different levels and many aspects, but is present mostly in ways of seeing and thinking contemporary cinema.

This article explores the relationship between Stuart Hall and the cinema from three specific topics: first, we aim to articulate Hall's work on concepts of difference, identity, representation and stereotype in his relationship with the cinema and to analyze how contemporary film studies makes use of these concepts; we will also investigate the impact of his thoughts on film production, especially in movies of the 1980s that directly portrayed the multicultural society and the ethnic issues of cultural hybridity, using as case study the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) – directed by Stephen Frears; screenplay by Hanif Kureishi; lastly, we will analyze his direct relationship with audiovisual production, whether in his relationship with the black British film (Isaac Julien, Black Audio Film Collective) or how he was portrayed in *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013) by John Akomfrah.

### REPRESENTING DIFFERENCE AND EXPOSING STEREOTYPE

In his article “Cultural identity and cinematic representation” (1989) Hall address more directly the cinema and interweave identity and representation concepts as a basis to discuss the Third Cinema and, particularly, the Afro-Caribbean cinema. More than analyzing the context or the forms of the Caribbean cinema, Hall is committed to bringing to light the concept of cinema as enunciative practice and delineate the diaspora as a strategic point to understand the discourses of the Caribbean cinema – and peripheral cinemas in general. Therefore, rather than treating films and filmmakers individually to make film reviews or using films to illustrate his theoretical argumentation, he proposes a wider dialogue between cultural identity and cinematic representation, a kind of theoretical frame that helps thinking not only the film form, but cultural forms as a whole. He starts from two positions on the notion of identity:

The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of the idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared

history and ancestry hold in common. [...] This second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’: or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. (Hall, 1989: 69-70)

Hall seems thus to discuss difference as a good starting point to analyze the Third Cinema. Throughout his work, he engaged in dialogue with the French theory, post-structuralism and postmodernism, besides contributing to consolidate other important trends in cultural studies, e.g., postcolonial theory and critical theory, which deal directly with minorities and micro-policies issues. In this sense, his importance for film studies is directly related to peripheral cultural production and its discussion. Minorities and cultural differences policies definitions (theoretical and practical) in his works give an imperative for cultural film theorists to prepare a conceptual frame to rethink and restore the role of these minorities, subordinates and peripherals, of what was called “Third Cinema”<sup>1</sup> and currently is denominated “World Cinema”<sup>2</sup>.

Cultural studies and postcolonial criticism have restated, as third world policies and theories did, but in a more articulate and systematic way, the role of periphery and diaspora in history and their respective trajectories. Periphery role in contemporary cinema (regarding production, geography, geopolitical dimension and issues addressed by the movies) and the way it criticizes, analyzes and theorizes on this cinema is very different from the traditional film theory. Hall’s works and other cultural studies may give film studies a privileged point of view regarding multiple intermediate spaces without rejecting the immanent analysis – if we think, for example, in one of the Stuart Hall’s most famous essays “Encoding/Decoding” (1993) and in how it was the basis for restructuring reception studies, even in the field of cinema – but emphasizing, developing, deepening and questioning concepts such as representation, identity, alterity, hybridism, colonization, the West and the East. In most of his work, Hall put such conceptions in a frame of references that, rather than simply inverting or discarding terms and hierarchies, sought to question their essence and network of interrelationships, always discussing the conditions of possibility, continuity and utility of their construction.

We may say, however, that in “The spectacle of the ‘Other’” (1997) Hall undertakes in a more systematic and didactic way both the conceptualization of representation related to the image and model of reading

1. The term “Third Cinema” first appeared in the manifesto “Hacia un Tercer Cine”, written by the filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in 1969. In the beginning, it was used to refer to movements from the Latin America cinema that emerged in the 1960s, but then it became to be used for the politically engaged cinema of countries not aligned with the First or Second Worlds.

2. The term “World Cinema” has emerged as a counterpoint to the American film industry, almost as foreign cinema in English speaking countries. In this sense, it has a broader meaning than “Third Cinema”, for it is not only applied to politically engaged movies, but also to European author cinema.



these products. The article deepens topics related to alterity, focusing on the way difference is portrayed and transmitted as the Other. Hall wants to understand more specifically how races and ethnic groups are represented (since the other chapters of the volume dealt with representation in a broader sense and with other more specific aspects) from the analysis of pictures, newspaper and magazine articles, TV shows and movies. From the perspective of the cinema, we may consider as particularly useful the concept of stereotype and the processes associated with it, which Hall brings from his predecessors, Richard Dyer and Homi Bhabha, among others:

*Stereotypes* get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and fix them without change or development to eternity. [...] So the first point is – *stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’*. Secondly, *stereotyping deploys a strategy of ‘splitting’*. It divides the normal acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable. It then *excludes* or *expels* everything which does not fit, which is different. [...] So, *another feature of stereotyping is its practice of ‘closure’ and exclusion*. [...] Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. [...] The third point is that *stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power*. (Hall, 1997: 258)

The concept of stereotype proposed by Hall brought obvious implications for film studies, especially regarding character analysis, criticism of negative characterization of marginalized groups of society, review of film history from new parameters and even calling attention to the social function of stereotypes in some specific cases.

Besides obvious issues related to power, in “The spectacle of the ‘Other’”, Hall (1997) articulates also parallelisms between stereotype and fetishization of the other’s body, especially the black female body – which through a mix of fantasy, desire, repulse and disavowal makes a perfect alibi to destroy alterity and at the same time enjoy it erotically:

Fetishism, as we have said, involves *disavowal*. Disavowal is the strategy by means of which a powerful fascination or desire is both *indulged* and at the same time *denied*. It is where what has been tabooed nevertheless manages to find a displaced form of representation. (Ibid.: 267)

All these topics on representation approximate Hall to the works of many cinema theoreticians, e.g., the aforementioned Richard Dyer and particularly his analysis of the actor Paul Robeson and the book on whiteness (Dyer, 1997, 2004); Graeme Turner (1988) and his delimitation of the cinema as a social practice; Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, especially in the chapters more focused on race of *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (2006); and obviously, Laura Mulvey (1975), with her pioneering approach on how the visual pleasure is built from a male point of view. We see here a two-way influence, i.e., Hall incorporated many current discussions in film studies (especially from the structuralism and post-structuralism) and the topics he worked on were gaining more and more importance in film studies all around the world. Several publications on World Cinema from the 2000s onward acknowledged in him both a relevant corpus of contemporary material objects susceptible to formal analysis, and representations (and often also practices) of subversion and subcultural resistance. Among these publications are Badley, Palmer & Schneider (2006); Dissanayake & Guneratne (2003); Grant & Kuhn (2006); Shiel & Fitzmaurice (2001); Turner (2002); Vitali & Willemsen (2006).

In this text, however, more than a simple exposition of stereotypy and fetishism in the cinema (and in other ranges of the image), there is a project of fighting a racial scheme of representation and a proposal to reverse stereotypes. After rereading Bakhtin and Voloshinov works, Hall comes to the idea of transcoding: “For they have given a powerful impetus to the practice of what has come to be known as transcoding: taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings” (HALL, 1997: 270).

Transcoding tries to reverse stereotype and neutralize negative images, also using as counterstrategy the consciousness of racial representation through stereotyped forms, contesting within the stereotype, assuming it and making it permeable to instability, strangeness and erasure:

Thus, instead of avoiding the black body, because it has been so caught up in the complexities of power and subordination within representation, this strategy positively takes the body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves.<sup>7</sup> (Ibid.: 274)

## CINEMA AND MULTICULTURALISM; RACE AND GENDER IN THE LAUNDRY

This complex and productive category of stereotypes that work against themselves was not an invention of cultural studies and not even a stylistic

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3. Free Cinema was a documentary film movement that emerged in England in the mid-1950s.

The most important filmmakers involved were Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson.

4. New Wave was a British movement inspired by the French Nouvelle Vague and by the Free Cinema documentaries. Several filmmakers who used to make documentaries started making fictional films with a strong realistic style, but adding formal experimentations inspired by the French movement. Stephen Frears started working with movies as Lindsay Anderson's assistant, one of the Angry Young Men, as the New Wave filmmakers were also called. With this movement, the colonial and imperial prevailing discourse began to be more systematically destabilized from late 1950s onwards. In the period of almost two decades, a group of young directors (Anderson, Reisz, Richardson and also Bryan Forbes, John Schlesinger, Jack Clayton, Ken Loach, among others) continued the realist tradition of British films (from documentaries and popular comedies), but at the same time radicalized the realist aesthetics and broadened the scope of themes that until that time then was related only to documentaries.

device created by Stuart Hall, nor was a classification he defined in theoretical texts to explain the films/image products that used counterstrategies. Nevertheless, it had a huge impact on recent film studies. What seems to us of great importance also to analyze Stuart Hall relationship with film theory –and, moreover, with the cinema – is the way the theory was being incorporated simultaneously by film production – as we already mentioned about theoretical production on World Cinema from the 2000s onward – and how theory (cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and of course, Stuart Hall pedagogical and political practices and ideas as one a leading figure in these fields) inspired and transformed cinema's and culture's imaginary.

The 1980s seems to us particularly rich in this mutual influence exchange. The cinema in this period deepened the reconfigured the relationship between race and representation in film culture that previous movements such as the Free Cinema<sup>3</sup> and the New Wave<sup>4</sup> had started: *My beautiful laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie get laid* (1987), by Stephen Frears; *Handsworth songs* (1986), by John Akomfrah; *Mona Lisa* (1986), by Neil Jordan; among many others that directly discussed multiculturalism, multiracial and post-colonial issues.

*My beautiful laundrette* stands out for many reasons, among them its production context and its pioneering spirit. With a low budget, it was originally shot in 16 mm for television, but it was so well received by the critics at the Edinburgh Film Festival that it was converted to 35 mm and released internationally. The film helped to consolidate Channel 4, public-service television broadcaster, as a major force in the British cinema and gave consistency to existing cooperation between cinema and television in the country. *My beautiful laundrette*<sup>5</sup> also presented to the world the work of Hanif Kureishi, British novelist of Pakistani and English descent, an influential literary source of the reflections on Great Britain in the last decades of the 20th century. His screenplay had a fundamental importance in the movie success and in establishing new insights into British society. They also did *Sammy and Rosie* in 1987, in which theory and cultural studies appear explicitly with the characters going to lectures and to the university. Thus, the Frears-Kureishi partnership opened ways to less stereotypical and more subtle representations of Anglo-Asian relations and for an intensive dialogue with the work of Stuart Hall, both in the debate on multiculturalism and in raising diaspora issues related to his work and his life story.

The film evokes certain aspects of British New Wave politics: the allusion to class issues, the search for the most accurate portrait of Thatcherite

decay of the British Welfare State and the formal restraint. It also has some similarities with films produced in the 1960s movement: the lightness, the lyricism, the refusal to political propaganda, the creation of another kind of politics engaged in small fights and minorities' issues. Kureishi and Frears appropriated of many topics of New Wave, but they expand and twist the ways of exposing them (we can see the washing machines operating in the film's opening credits and in the ending sequence like a beautiful metaphor of this process). In other words, in this twisting (which is inseparable from Hall's idea of counterstrategy) come into play some distinctions that are the greatest advance of the 1980s regarding the modes of representing cultural differences – understood in their most varied meanings. Places of speech multifaceted perspective, without a white prevalence in narration, deepens political proposals from British cinema of the 1960s through the precise and urgent remission to between-places and stereotypes that work against themselves. All characters and situations undermine our expectations, both with regard to Pakistanis, to British Pakistanis from the second or third generations, or to white people in the film, putting them all in an intermediate place, making them unfamiliar in each scene, and “This opens out into a ‘politics of representation’, a struggle over meaning which continues and is unfinished” (Hall, 1997: 277).

Problems regarding between-places, multicultural representation and the diaspora were thus complex and organically inserted and composed in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. The film narrative comprised that which lies at the heart of the immigrant's experience: ally the desire to belong and the preservation of cultural roots and identity, from the leading couple, with all their contradictions. Omar completely joins the dominant yuppie ideology, denying his father left-wing political background; Johnny, a National Front sympathizer, starts working for Omar and his family. One cannot tell who is the colonizer and who is the colonized. The subcontinent primitive superstitions emerge through sorceries made by Nasser's wife against Rachel, his British mistress. But surprisingly, Kureishi and Frears makes the witchcraft work, making this and other discretely delusional moments pervade and undermine the narrative. Violence is perpetrated by Johnny's punk friends and by Omar's cousin, Salim, henchmen. The South London suburb is taken by storm by a permanent tension, dominated by a constant state of alert and inescapable tumults. The positions are always changing, otherness pervades everything and everyone.

Among the crude realism, destined to be a register of that time with mullets, shoulder pads and pastels, with a soap opera structure in many as-

Social realism (from the documentary line of Grierson to Kitchen Sink Drama, Free Cinema, Angry Young Men and New Wave) was and still is the source and model for dealing with themes like race and desire, interracial relationships and cultural identities characterized by diversity.

5. Short plot summary: Omar, the son of a Pakistani immigrant, start a new business when he rebuilds Nasser's laundry, his successful uncle, with the help of his white childhood friend, Johnny, a former member of a fascist organization. Working together, they become lovers.

pects and the playful irony and the cynical and deluded utopianism, which owes to Fassbinder and his framings, the shot sequences preceding the laundry opening are the most emblematic. This may be *My Beautiful Laundrette*'s boldest and most expressive moment. The ambivalence in the love stories reveal once more the long distance between the modes of representation of interracial sex in mainstream cinema until the 1980s – and in somehow until today – and those that were architected from the imperatives given by cultural and social transformations that occurred in Great Britain at the end of the 20th century. Not only regarding Omar and Johnny, but also Nasser and Rachel. Also regarding Tania, cousin and engaged to Omar, who with her departure defies and rebels against the expectations of her family, gender, race and culture. This portrait and world representation polysemy gives a touch of strangeness to the interracial and homosexual affair and gives the film form an unusual structure, as Hall has already observed on representation counterstrategies: they are always more preoccupied with form than in creating new content. The romance between the neo-nazi punk and the yuppie aspiring paki happens despite all difference, violence, tradition and Margaret Thatcher, but maybe it happened even because of them.

#### EPILOGUE: THE STUART HALL PROJECT

Not only of theory and its interchangeable circuits and cinema interchangeable circuits are made Stuart Hall connections with the world of movies. His connection with the cinema and the audiovisual sector is much more straight. Since his long collaboration with the British Film Institute, where he published, among many works, one of the first serious studies of cinema as entertainment, *The popular arts* (Hall; Whannel, 1965), he gave courses and lectures, besides having his researches, both from the University of Birmingham and from the Open University, financed by the institute. Hall wrote or collaborated in the development of more than 20 screenplays for documentaries and television series, and he also participated in many of them as a presenter or narrator. He was a constant presence on television also giving interviews, participating in debates and commenting in news programs on TV.

In films, his closest partnership was with the director Isaac Julien, for whom he acted in a small role in the experimental short movie *The attendant* (1993). He collaborated with several of Julien's works, most notably narrating *Looking for Langston* (1989) – which he also analyses in “The spectacle of the ‘Other’” – and *Black and white in colour* (1992), as well as in the rese-



arch of *Frantz Fanon: black skin, white mask* (1995). Julien wrote a moving statement in the occasion of the passing of Stuart Hall, in which he declared:

By the time I began making films in the early 80s, Stuart was already a kind of hero to us in workshops and collectives like Sankofa Film and Video and Black Audio. We knew him from his work with the New Left Review, CND and at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. A renowned music lover and a man with a tremendous sense of fun, it is somehow fitting that it was not at a march, conference, screening, lecture or exhibition that I met Stuart, but at a nightclub. He is recognized for his efforts in elevating the study of popular culture to the academy, but for all his clarity and rigour in its analysis, he also took the greatest delight in it. (Julien, 2014)

Finally, we must mention Hall's influence on the Black Audio Film Collective, a multimedia project group created in the early 1980s by John Akomfrah and other film students at the University of Portsmouth:

Stuart Hall was kind of a rock star for us. For many of my generation in the 70s. He was one of the few people of colour we saw on television who wasn't crooning, dancing or running. His very iconic presence on this most public of platforms suggested all manner of 'impossible possibilities'. (Akomfrah apud Clark, 2013)

The group did not establish explicit links with Hall besides the vast theoretical and thematic proximity. Many years after the dissolution of the group, however, Akomfrah directed the installation *The unfinished conversation* in 2012 and in 2013 he released *The Stuart Hall Project*, both telling the Hall's story through his own statements, Miles Davis' music, family photos and audio and video records, a material selected from 800 hours archive. As Akomfrah himself said, *The Stuart Hall Project* at first would not even be a biography:

The initial discussion was that this would be a collaboration between Stuart and myself on the notion of the visual and how the visual organises black identity. But I think the minute I realized there was a little bit more than just a few hours of him on radio, cinema and television, we wanted to, at the very least, try and use him as much as a narrative spy as possible – particularly since the idea of *The unfinished conversation*, which is based on his writings

about identity, formed as an intersection within history. And so it became a way of looking at his life, among other things. (Akomfrah apud Korossi, 2014)

The idea of being an infiltrated narrator of the 20th century history, however, finally succeed in many ways. The film turned out to be crucial to appreciate not only Hall's trajectory, but mostly to understand the role of black identity in British culture and the importance of multicultural point of view.

A brief examination of the connections between Stuart Hall and the cinema demonstrates how this intellectual figure induced practices and thematic and esthetical choices of many filmmakers, especially those closest to ethnic, diasporic and minorities issues in the British cinema. His theoretical work, however, had greater impact on cinema. As we have already mentioned, Hall was not a film theorist *stricto sensu*, but maybe he was one of the main influences of a period when it was no longer possible to make a traditional film theory. First, because he was truly a pioneer of film studies in Great Britain – country that established a unique tradition in film studies, always marked by history, creating dialogues between film's subject matter and their production contexts and the social structure. His work paved the way for many film theorists that did not perfectly fit the models established by the film studies and the immanent critique, who were not satisfied with the conventions of pure and simple film analysis, and for those who thought the cinema was, simultaneously, an extension of the world and the way to introduce and represent it. ■

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