



Research Article

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Black British Women Filmmakers in the Digital Era: New Production Strategies and Re-presentations of Black Womanhood

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Abstract: The story of Black women in British mainstream cinema is certainly one of invisibility and misrepresentations, and Black women filmmakers have historically been placed at the margins of British film history. Up until the mid-1980s, there were no Black female directors in Britain. Pioneers like Maureen Blackwood, Martina Attille and Ngozi Onwurah have actively challenged stereotypical representations of Black womanhood, whilst asserting their presence in Black British cinema, often viewed as a male territory. In the 2010s, it seems that the British film industry remains mostly white and masculine. But the new millennium has brought a digital revolution that has enabled a new generation of Black women filmmakers to work within alternative circuits of production and distribution. New strategies of production have emerged through the use of online crowdfunding, social media and video-sharing websites. These shifts have opened new opportunities for Black women filmmakers who were until then often excluded from traditional means of exhibition and distribution. I will examine these strategies through the work of Moyin Saka, Jaha Browne and Cecile Emeke, whose films have primarily contributed to the re-presentation of Black womanhood in popular culture.

Keywords: Black British women filmmakers, independent cinema, digital film production, crowdfunding, smartphone filmmaking

Introduction

In May 2017, the Institute of Contemporary Art in London hosted for the second time the *Black Film, British Cinema* conference. Whilst this second edition focused on post-cinematic practice, the first conference, which in 1988 brought together film practitioners, critics, media professionals and scholars such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, highlighted the need to secure funding for Black filmmaking, partly through the increasing financial support offered by television. During his presentation, Alan Fountain underlined how Channel4 (of which he was then commissioning editor) could represent “the possibility of a source of money to enable black work in the independent sector to develop and also, as importantly, to find another means of exhibition—namely, television—for black work to reach wider audiences” (Fountain 42). Although technology was rapidly evolving (with the arrival of high-definition video cameras, digital editing software and computer-generated imagery) no one could really imagine the digital revolution that was to arrive with the new millennium and the democratization of the internet—alongside the new ways it established of not only producing and making film but also consuming it. New digital media are associated with the “post-cinema era” (Keeling), a term which usually encompasses the variety of formats, devices and networks

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that compose our contemporary digital media landscape (Denson and Leyda). But the concept of post-cinema evolves not only around the issue of medium specificity but also of ontology (Hagner et al.): the post-cinema era has introduced a new “cultural-technological” regime (Grisham et al. 847) where cinema is not so much outdated but rather reconfigured. With media contents being available on a broad spectrum of small screens (television screens, but also laptops, smartphones, PDAs...) the 2010s are now described as a “renaissance” (Keeling) for a new generation of Black filmmakers who in turn were swiftly renamed “digital natives” (Clarke). New strategies of production have indeed emerged through the use of online crowdfunding, social media and video-sharing websites such as YouTube and Vimeo. These shifts have opened up new opportunities for Black filmmakers who were until then often excluded from traditional means of exhibition and distribution in Britain, and have “altered various power relations involved in producing and accessing on-screen images of Black people” (Sobande, *Watching Me Watching You* 656). But how do these alterations specifically affect and challenge mainstream representations of Black womanhood that have historically stereotyped Black women either as exotic/erotic figures or “without agency, without self-determination, a passive victim, waiting to be inscribed with meaning from those who wish to gaze upon her and name her” (Mirza 6)? Up until the mid-1980s, there were no Black female filmmakers in Britain and in the 2010s, it seems that the British film industry remains largely white—as has been regularly criticised by public figures such as Sir Lenny Henry and Steve McQueen (*Post-Black - Raising the Bar*)—but also male. I will therefore first discuss how Black women in Britain have reclaimed the medium of cinema in order to tell their own stories, whilst still being largely excluded from mainstream circles. I will interrogate the possibilities and limits for them to enter the mainstream British film and television industries, and how major shifts in the media landscape have prompted them to create new strategies and tactics to develop narratives that blur the lines between independent and popular cinema. By pointing to the ways in which the development of new processes of production and distribution have restructured the politics of representation, I will, therefore, attempt to examine how new digital media have opened up more democratic, pluralistic and popular channels of representing Black womanhood. But the emancipatory potential of digital media should not prevent mainstream film and television industries from being held accountable for their lack of inclusion both on and off-screen—particularly towards Black women, who often have to break two glass ceilings. This article will therefore also argue that negotiating the gap between dominant mainstream media and this independent digital “renaissance” may help normalise and enhance alternative and more diverse representations of Black Womanhood

Black British Women Filmmakers: Talking from the Margins

As Francesca Sobande points out: “the experiences of Black women in Britain, as both producers and spectators of media, remain an often overlooked area of academic enquiry” (Sobande, *Beyond Black*). In fact, the paucity of research on Black British women filmmakers is such that one might wonder if they even exist. With their films often being perceived as “small, anomalous works of interest to a small circle of intimate friends” (Bobo xi), they eventually find themselves largely written out by film historians (Bourne). The fact that Black British cinema was an exclusively masculine area before the middle of the 1980s (and still remain extensively so in the present) can in part explain—yet in no way justify—the invisibilisation of the Black women who have worked within it. Black British cinema was born in the 1960s with the arrival of a wave of self-taught (and often self-funded) filmmakers coming from the West Indies (Edric Connor, Lloyd Reckord, Horace Ové) and Africa (Lionel Ngakane). If race relations was a hot topic in mainstream British cinema at the time,¹ the first Black British films offered a more authentic depiction of the everyday experiences (of racism, displacement or rejection) of the Black community in Britain. But for 25 years, Black British cinema remained a male territory, and up to 1986, Black women in film existed only as objects of an often voyeuristic male gaze (Young, *Fear of the Dark*). The creation in the early 1980s of the new public television channel Channel4 and the development of subsidised film workshops enabled Black collectives

¹ With films such as *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959); *Flames in the Street* (Roy Ward Baker, 1961); *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1961); *The L-Shaped Room* (Bryan Forbes, 1961) or *To Sir With Love* (James Clavell, 1967).

to emerge,² and within a few years, budgets devoted to “ethnic arts” went from 30,000£ to more than 2m£ (Brunow 132). The films of the Black collectives evoked issues of racism, migration, national identity, but also of homosexuality and feminism in a narrative frenzy that was justified by Sankofa member Martina Attille in that “sometimes, one can’t afford to hold anything back for another time, another conversation or another film” (Mercer, *Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation* 12). Between 1986 and 1989, Black women had directed a handful of films (five short films and one feature: *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), co-directed by Maureen Blackwood and the male director Isaac Julien), all shaped by a strong diasporic identity and visual aesthetic.

In the following decades, despite a scarcity of public fundings, Black women continued to make films. But, as the British journalist Tiffany Kizito noted in January 2018, their work remains surprisingly marginalised even though “many have made films that have received international audience and critical acclaim and have also gone on to be nominated for and win multiple awards” (Kizito). In fact, if the number of Black British women filmmakers has only increased in the past thirty years, their common use of alternative circuits of production and distribution could account for their invisibility in mainstream film criticism. As of 2018, there are only four Black British women in the UK who have had a feature film released in cinemas (Ngozi Onwurah, Amma Asante, Debbie Tucker Green and Destiny Ekaragha) and therefore have had access to larger media coverage of their work. Ngozi Onwurah was the very first Black British woman to direct and release a long feature film in cinemas in 1995 with her dystopia *Welcome to the Terrordome*. But the film took only 5,000£ at the box-office and received very mixed-reviews (with a violent article from Paul Gilroy in *Sight and Sound* calling the film “politically repugnant”, “fascist” and “anti-feminis[t]” (Gilroy 19).³ Answering her critics, Onwurah declared: “What they expect a Black woman film-maker to be making is definitely not the kind of movies I want to make” (Foster 38), adding in an interview that she prided herself on the fact that her films featured “Black women with guns” (Foster 38). With this straightforward answer, Onwurah challenges the essentialist assumption that women’s cinema, in particular, might display a “true” feminine essence (Lapsley and Westlake 2006 25)—a characteristic best found in the genre of the melodrama, traditionally associated with femininity (Hurd 2007 76). It is only in 2004 that a second Black British woman, Amma Asante, released her debut film: *A Way of Life*, a drama set in South Wales and portraying the life of a white teenage mother living in precarious conditions. Asante returned almost a decade later with *Belle* in 2013, a year which saw two other Black British women release their first long-feature film: Debbie Tucker Green with *Second Coming* and Destiny Ekaragha with *Gone Too Far!* Asante’s *Belle* is a fascinating take on the genre of the period drama, recalling the true story of the illegitimate mixed-race daughter of a Royal Navy admiral; whilst *Second Coming* is an intimate family drama about a modern-day Black couple who are expecting a miracle baby and *Gone Too Far!* is a comedy about the reunion of two brothers (one born and bred in London, the other arriving from his native Nigeria). These four films illustrate the rich and diverse body of work Black women directors have been creating within mainstream circuits and show how they have tackled various genres of filmmaking whilst subverting a dominant white male gaze. But apart from Asante who now enjoys a celebrated international career and is about to release her fourth film, none of these filmmakers has so far done another long-feature—and the fact that no other Black women have joined this highly exclusive club remains baffling. If the number of films made by Black women in Britain within the mainstream film industry remains extremely low, that does not, however, mean that Black female directors have not made films at all: indeed, most of them have worked within the independent sector since the 1980s. But the fact that the British film industry has ostensibly shown such little desire to accommodate Black female perspectives remains quite alarming.

² Collectives like Ceddo, Black Audio Film Collective, Sankofa, or the less known Liverpool Black Media Group, Wales Black Film and Video Workshop or Macro Collective.

³ Anne Ciecko incidentally offers an insightful response to Gilroy’s attack against the film - especially regarding its supposed anti-feminism, which she finds “an unreasonably exaggerated appraisal” (Ciecko 83).

Bidding for the Mainstream

To enter the mainstream market is apparently an important process for a lot of filmmakers who want to see their work recognised on a bigger scale. Being able to direct a long-feature film with relative financial security, and to see one's film released in cinemas around the country (or even internationally) and celebrated as such is the goal of many directors. Ghanaian-British director Amma Asante, whose films *Belle* (2013), *A United Kingdom* (2016) and *Where Hands Touch* (2018) interestingly manage to appropriate the sacrosanct (at least in Britain) genre of the period drama and offer a critique of gender, race and interracial relationships in a mainstream fashion, is a good example of a successful filmmaking career.⁴ Yet, Asante herself stresses the importance of seeing other Black women follow her path (*The Power of Defining Yourself*). Although few Black women directors have so far managed to break the double glass-ceiling of the British film industry, several of them have been offered occasional opportunities within mainstream television: Destiny Ekaragha⁵ and Afia Nkrumah⁶ have directed several shows for the BBC, whereas Lovinsa Kavuma⁷ and Cecile Emeke⁸ have been hired in the USA by Fox Sports and HBO respectively (although Emeke later accused the producers of the show she was working on of not paying her (Alemoru). If television seems to be a good opportunity for Black female filmmakers to enter the mainstream, it is probably because a series of action plans in favour of cultural diversity have been implemented in the industry these past two decades or so. Because it is a mass medium that can act as a relatively powerful ideological tool, television has a considerable degree of responsibility when it comes to representing those who actually compose its audience. For this reason, these types of initiatives for diversity are particularly demanded and monitored in the television industry. But Anamik Saha, whose recent book *Race and the Cultural Industries* examines the limits of these action plans, notes that “even though the cultural industries are as diverse as ever, with some people of colour even holding senior positions in key institutions... this has not translated into a more varied, diverse range of depictions of human life” (Saha 28). Saha in fact posits that even though the work done to tackle the lack of diversity in the cultural industries through these action plans is by all means useful, it does not prevent the fact that ideas and assumptions about race are *embedded* within industry practices, and are often internalised by minority staff (whether they are commissioners, writers, directors, or else) (Smith). If we take a closer look at the participation of Black British women filmmakers in the mainstream film and television industries since the 2000s, we can see that the projects they have been involved in do not indeed necessarily imply a greater number of Black women as main protagonists. Regardless of their gender and race, filmmakers should obviously be free to work on as various projects as they wish, and therefore avoid what Kobena Mercer names the “burden of representation”—in this case, the expectation that Black women artists should make work about an “essential black [female] identity or experience” (Mercer, *Black Art and the Burden of Representation* 65). The following chart shows that Black life is furthermore a recurring topic for Black female directors working within the mainstream. But if we listen to Emma Dabiri's plea (backed by Black British feminist pioneer Heidi Safia Mirza (Mirza and Gunartnam) that “the visibility of black women in representations of mainstream Black British culture is such that you might be forgiven for thinking we are an endangered species” (Dabiri), this quite low correlation between the presence of Black female filmmakers in the mainstream film and television industries and quantitative/qualitative representations of Black womanhood is at the very least puzzling.

⁴ The filmmaker has been rightfully celebrated by both critics and audience alike; and Queen Elizabeth II herself awarded her with an MBE in 2017.

⁵ With *Lolly Adefope's Christmas* (2015); *Danny and the Human Zoo* (2015); *Silent Witness* (2018) and *Desiree Burch's Valentine* (2017).

⁶ With eight episodes of the classic TV show *East Enders* between 2016 and 2018.

⁷ With three episodes of *Phenoms* (2017).

⁸ With *Insecure* (2016), and later *In the Long Run* (2018) on Sky.

Table 1. List of mainstream films/television shows directed by Black British women since the 2000s

Title	Director	Year of production	Length	Type of distribution	Race & Gender of the main protagonist(s)	Genre	Main country of production
<i>A Way of Life</i>	Amma Asante	2004	91'	Cinema	White Woman	Drama	UK
<i>Shoot the Messenger</i>	Ngozi Onwurah	2006	90'	TV (BBC2)	Black Man	Drama	UK
Belle	Amma Asante	2013	104'	Cinema	Mixed-Race Woman	Period Drama	UK
<i>Gone Too Far</i>	Destiny Ekaragha	2013	98'	Cinema	Black man	Comedy	UK
Second Coming	Debbie Tucker Green	2014	105'	Cinema	Black Woman	Drama	UK
Lolly Adefope's Christmas	Destiny Ekaragha	2015	6'	TV (Sky Arts)	Black Woman	Comedy	UK
<i>Danny and the Human Zoo</i>	Destiny Ekaragha	2015	77'	TV (BBC1)	Black Man	Comedy Drama	UK
<i>Eastenders</i>	Afia Nkrumah	2016-2018	8X30'	TV (BBC1)	White Men & women	Soap Opera	UK
<i>A United Kingdom</i>	Amma Asante	2016	111'	Cinema	Black Man/White Woman	Biographical Drama	UK
Insecure	Cecile Emeke	2016	28'	TV (HBO)	Black Woman	Comedy Drama	USA
Ackee&Saltfish	Cecile Emeke	2016	12'	TV (BBC3)	Black Women	Comedy	UK
Desiree Burch's Valentine	Destiny Ekaragha	2017	11'	TV (Sky Arts)	Black Woman	Comedy	UK
<i>Silent Witness</i>	Destiny Ekaragha	2018	2X60'	TV (BBC1)	White Men & women	Crime drama	UK
<i>In the Long Run</i>	Cecile Emeke	2018	2X20'	TV (Sky One)	Black Man	Comedy	UK
<i>Phenoms</i>	Lovinsa Kavuma	2018	3X44	TV	Black Men	Documentary	USA

Films and television shows highlighted in bold print feature Black/mixed-race women as the main protagonist of the story. These productions are generally shorter (with an average format of 44 minutes per program) than those which focus on male and/or white characters. Black characters (both male and female) in mainstream television seem too often make an appearance in comedy programs, which suggests that portrayals of race and gender within commercially viable content might be easier to achieve through this genre (Marx 2015). This also shows that Black women are surprisingly investing a genre where women directors are usually otherwise poorly represented (Directors UK). The film *A Way of Life* as well as the TV series *Eastenders*, *Silent Witness* and *Phenoms* do not offer any substantial representation of Black womanhood. The other programs do feature at least one Black female character, but their interventions do not appear to be central to the narrative.

Emma Dabiri notices that in the more general media landscape (including film and television), “the symbols of ‘Urban’ or Black British youth culture are routinely Black men and their white female partners” (Dabiri). In fact, it often seems that the mainstream cultural industries fear that accommodating multiple intersectional visible identities might put off their audience, and Dabiri’s remark points to the fact that they tend to implement on-screen diversity in minimal ways, ticking only one box at a time. Indeed, even if diversity plans and affirmative actions can prove to effectively improve equal opportunities for women, people of colour, the disabled and other marginalised groups, the economic imperatives that the British film and television industries face in a globalised neoliberal world often lead to a use of these plans in a tokenistic manner. As such, the representations of Black women might not automatically be improved by an occasional hiring of Black female directors, but the ongoing structural and institutional marginalisation that lies within these structures should be more thoroughly addressed. In other words, inclusion is not merely enough, as it does not necessarily involve any fundamental changes in the power relations at play. This is particularly important because I will argue that film and television remain strong reference points for most aspiring filmmakers—and cinema, in particular, has not, to my opinion, entirely lost its cultural prestige as

Steven Shapiro otherwise supports (Grisham et al. 846). But a few Black creative artists have in the recent years successfully proved that independent minority filmmaking could also enter the mainstream market by the back door: the critically-acclaimed HBO TV show *Insecure* is in fact partially based on a YouTube web series entitled *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*; the low-budget American independent feature-film *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins 2017) went on to win critical and public acclaim through a promotion strategy partly based on social media (Bernazzani); and the rights of the French Black feminist documentary *Speak Up* (Amandine Gay 2017) were eventually acquired in 2017 by the major sales company MK2 Films, after years of self-production (through online crowdfunding) and self-distribution organized by the filmmaker herself. In a similar way, the latest venture of Black British female director Campbell X (one of the pioneer of Black British filmmaking who has successfully turned towards the possibilities of digital media), *Different for Girls*, was put in the spotlight in March 2017 when it was announced that it would be the first ever web series screened at the BFI Flare LGBTQ film festival in London. The main reason invoked by the British Film Institute to premiere the show during the festival was to encourage alternative storylines to find the widest possible audiences and access mainstream channels of distribution (Mayer). These examples show how in some cases, usually through the pressure of a craving audience and a word-of-mouth strategy (or what Simon Ruschmeyer calls the “logic of recommendation” (37), some cultural productions (here offering alternative representations of Black womanhood and homosexuality) can enter mainstream circles without suffering from often marginalizing processes of production and marketization. But they also show how traditional, mainstream entities are actually becoming increasingly aware and attentive to the developments of digital media.

New Production Strategies and Re-presentations of Black Womanhood

These developments have unfolded after the dominant media of the 20th century have given way to more interactive, networked and mobile forms of communication (Denson and Leyda). Mia Mask has identified three major shifts in the media landscape of the new millennium: firstly, “the technology for recording visual imagery (from handheld cameras to mobile phones) has democratized and globalized access to motion picture making” (2); secondly, the internet, and its myriad of social media platforms and blogs, “enable participants to broadcast their own short, homemade product and distribute it amongst a targeted demographic” (2); thirdly, “the proliferation of tablets, smartphones, compact laptop computers, BlackBerries, GPS devices and interactive video games has meant that growing numbers of people regularly interact with some form of video screen” (2). I will argue that problems of accessibility and media literacy might still prevent some of the work produced within these circuits to successfully reach a broader audience, who might rather turn towards more familiar dominant media. Yet, I support Mask’s overarching argument that the rapid changes we have recently witnessed in technology and media platforms have radically changed the contemporary cinematic landscape and have made filmmaking somehow more accessible for marginalised groups such as Black women. It is interesting to note that the access to lighter, cheaper filming equipment has always enabled alternative voices to emerge through the medium of film: Menelik Shabazz, for example, cites the discovery of the Sony Portapak video camera at eighteen as a key element in the beginning of his career as a filmmaker in the 1970s (Bourne). Handheld cameras and even mobile phones have proved to be accessible alternatives for budding filmmakers such as Cecile Emeke who filmed her web series *Strolling* (2014-2016) with what appears to be a Canon camera and Moyin Saka who has filmed her short film *Too Wide* (2016) with a smartphone. The latter was produced within the context of an ‘Eye Want Change’ workshop. Created in 2016, this organisation trains young aspiring directors to ‘smartphone filmmaking’ and creates a space where “creativity [is] placed over formal education, access to equipment, large budgets and technical expertise” (Jackman). More specifically, the Black feminist journal *Gal-Dem* emphasises that Eye Want Change enables “anyone who isn’t white, cishet, male and able-bodied” (Kirwan-Ashman) to tell their own narratives while avoiding the elitism of the film industry. *Too Wide* is a fascinating short film about a transgender Black woman and evokes the power of an oppressive surveillance society,

which the filmmaker associates with the feeling of surveillance transphobia can evoke. By focusing her film on the transformation from male to female of a young transgender Black woman, Saka shows the seemingly mundane daily routine of getting oneself ready for the outside world as “a daily act of resistance and survival for a trans-feminine person of colour” (*Eye Want Change*). In the second part of the film, her distressed character is seen removing her make-up, her face appearing within the frame of a software application (“Photo Booth”) for taking photos and videos. The overlapping of different screens creates a *mise en abyme* that invites the spectator into an intimate deconstruction of femininity. Saka contributes to the pluralisation of the representations of (trans-feminine) Black womanhood by using tools that are at the same time accessible to the filmmaker and relatable to her audience. Black womanhood is presented as something that is both constructed (the act of dressing up and the removal of make-up evoke the beginning and end of a performance) and judged (as the “scary, scrutinising, scopic regime of the public” (Bhattacharya 45) establishES and legitimateS hegemonic definitions of femininity).

Various adapters and applications are now being developed in order to follow this growing market of smartphone filmmaking, but handheld cameras more generally have in fact been a common feature in the field of documentary. In *Roots* (2009), a self-portrait documentary about race and identity, Jaha Browne uses a small camera to question her own sense of belonging to the Black diasporic community. By talking directly to the fixed camera she creates a feeling of intimacy with the viewer, and this technique evokes video calling platforms like Skype or FaceTime. Browne uses here the autobiographic tool of the (video) diary in order to share her discomfort in establishing her own identity as a young adult. In this intimate yet openly shared place emergeS a self-discovery process that has been vividly encouraged by Black British feminists in the past. In her contribution to the seminal publication *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (Mirza), Sara Ahmed praises autobiography as a way for Black women to reclaim their subjectivity. Recalling past individual experiences enables her to understand what she names “the discourse on the personal” (Ahmed 154) as a disruptive force “which discloses the truth of the individual subject in terms of its withdrawal from the realm of sociality” (Ahmed 154). As such, Jaha Browne explores her sense of self as a young Black British woman, an identity she is not quite sure of as she states in one of the first scenes of the film: “Some people say I act like a white girl and talk like a white girl, so I want to know: what is it to be black?” By sharing personal pictures of herself, from childhood to present day, and interviewing friends, family members and school teachers, she brings the audience with her on this exploratory journey. Her representation of Black womanhood is therefore extremely intimate and personal whilst offering at the same time a relatable alternative to common stereotypical images of young Black girls as hyper-sexualised or, as Emma Dabiri laments, too “ghetto” (Dabiri). In a scene where she confronts her (white) best friend on their racial differences, the intellectual development that will lead to Browne’s recognition of her own Afro-centric identity is embodied through her facial expression. The young woman indeed seems disoriented when her friend affirms that the colour of her skin is of no importance to her and that one should not “go by what you’ve been through as a culture.” This dialogue is followed by a new personal testimony in which Browne admits her discomfort and, in fact, the importance of acknowledging her own cultural Black history. Although *Roots* is formally conventional (in terms of narrative construction and editing), it raises issues around identity and belonging that echo earlier short films by directors such as Ngozi Onwurah.⁹ *Too Wide* on the other hand displays a strong sense of aesthetics that is not without recalling Maureen Blackwood’s *Dreaming Rivers* (1988) in its experiment with editing, visual/sound effects, and the way in which both films centre on the Black female body as a site of identity struggles. New technology does not therefore necessarily imply a complete caesura with earlier analogue films, and the cinema of younger Black British women filmmakers is connected in important ways to previous aesthetic and political positions and practices.

But it could be argued that if the evolution of audio-visual technologies has probably been one of the main shifts towards the democratisation of filmmaking (when only few Black women could access analogue production in the 1980s and 1990s), it nonetheless remains restrained by specific economic factors. For

⁹ See for example *The Flight of the Swan* (1994), in which a little girl leaves her native Nigeria to attend a ballet school in England, where she is forced to face her own confusion regarding her racial identity.

example, whilst being a low-budget film in comparison to Hollywood standards, the production budget of the renowned American director Steven Soderbergh's *Unsane* (2018)—entirely shot with an iPhone 7 Plus with the application FiLMiC Pro—rocketed to 1,5 million dollars, a significant amount of money that most young directors interested in smartphone filmmaking could not easily accumulate. Financial limitations may have an impact on the technical quality of the work of minority cultural filmmakers (especially if their work is fictional) and aesthetic decisions can be dependent from extra-textual factors such as budgets and material possibilities. In the case of Moyin Saka's *Too Wide*, the video quality of the mobile phone fits perfectly well with the aim of the filmmaker to evoke the surveillance system of CCTV cameras. Saka challenges here the austerity of such artistic means into an assumed aesthetic choice, navigating around what Malte Hagener et al. name the “issue of scalability” (Hagener et al. 8), inherent in post-cinematic production. Other young Black British women filmmakers manage to keep up with at least semi-professional technical standards: Sade Adeniran's crowd-funded short film *A Mother's Journey* (a dark and raw film about a young mother suffering from postnatal depression) has a lighting work of surprisingly high quality given the description of the film by the director herself as a “no-budget project” (Adeniran) and Campbell X's *Different for Girls* “look[s] a million dollars, despite a rather modest budget” (Lyell). Although aesthetic vision does not necessarily have to be compromised by these kinds of DIY strategies, the bigger production budgets found within the mainstream cultural industries could nonetheless allow these filmmakers to reach higher technical standards.

A second major shift after the access to new filming equipment is the internet which, as a source of production and distribution, has been a major development in the way people make and consume films. In terms of production, needless to say, that online crowdfunding has proved to be a highly effective tool to find or complete a film budget. Various forms of crowdfunding have in fact been used throughout the history of Black British cinema: Lionel Ngakane took an entire year to gather the budget he needed to make his first short film *Jemima and Johnny* (1963)—the actor Peter Sellers even helping out at the last minute with a 1000£ donation (Bourne); Menelik Shabazz directed *Step Forward Youth* (1977) thanks to the contribution of the rich Nigerian uncle of one of his school friend (Bourne); and in 1995 Ngozi Onwurah did also finance a third of her first feature film *Welcome II the Terrordome* thanks to money coming from friends and family (Wambu and Arnold). But online crowdfunding takes this process a step further: not only can loved ones contribute to one's creative endeavours, complete strangers but also a potential future audience can help build a budget sometimes from scratch. Annetta Laufer has for example successfully funded several short films thanks to crowdfunding and actively posts news online of their development—as of April 2018, she regularly shares on the social medium platform Twitter news about the post-production completion of her latest short *The Arrival*, a female perspective on the Caribbean migration of the 1960s. Cecile Emeke is also well known for her recourse to online crowdfunding, something she has done with most of her projects “because of the many closed doors and partly because [she is] not willing to compromise [her] vision for money” (Wortham), adding that knowing the “layers of bureaucracy and discrimination that one has to trench through” (Wortham) to receive support from investors and more formal institutions, she prefers not to rely on them. Because her films often include radical discussions around gender and race, topics that are not necessarily the easiest to “sell” to mainstream production companies, Emeke has heavily relied on a community of generous online followers. But she is catering in fact for an audience who has been craving for these new representations of Black womanhood. *Fake Deep* (2014) for example, is a cry against misogyny, held collectively on screen by a group of young Black women and which starts with this outspoken statement: “If I hear one more poem written by a man telling women how to live their lives by policing their clothes, bodies, sexuality, make up use, reading habits, exercise regimes and cooking skills... I'm going to slap somebody.” The film portrays six women, sitting in a minimalist white setting consisting of an armchair, a large flower arrangement and an elegant living-room lamp at the forefront. All three objects are placed at the same level, so that the position of each woman in the armchair seems to be a direct confrontation of their actual position within society as objects of a misogynistic gaze—a confrontation emphasized by the fact that they speak directly into the camera, therefore symbolically gazing back at the imaginary oppressor. But Emeke also confronts mainstream representations of Black womanhood through the voice of her actresses: “Born to bear the burden. That's why we only win Oscars as whores, victims,

maids and servants....” The women presented in the film challenge and contradict such stereotypes by their mere presence, and reclaim their agency by both their words and assertive physical postures. Written by the filmmaker herself, the poem-turned-into-film seems to have found a deep echo online, from young Black female web users who felt that the film has “strongly resonated” (Gilbert) with them, had “perfectly express[ed their] frustration” (KazzleDazz), and is praised for “representing a spectrum of millennial black women here” (Constellations). Other crowdfunded projects such as *Ackee and Saltfish* (2014, and later broadcasted on the BBC) and the *Strolling* series (2014-2016) were also acclaimed and have helped Emeke to earn international recognition. Using alternative ways of production, these films have nonetheless gained critical and popular success. Following this example, many other Black British women filmmakers have used and continue to use crowdfunding as a way to partially or entirely finance their projects (Juliet Ellis has raised almost 15.000£ for her film *Morning* (2017) and Campbell X almost 13.000£ for *Different for Girls* (2017) on the platform IndieGogo; Sade Adeniran, Paulette James and Dionne Edwards have also relied on online crowdfunding for several of their projects).

The internet can also turn out to be a great tool of distribution—through the use of video-sharing websites such as YouTube and Vimeo—and marketing—through social media. In her study of Black British women as video bloggers (vloggers), Francesca Sobande notes that YouTube videos can provide “young Black women viewers with a stronger sense of ownership over their media spectator experiences” (*Watching Me Watching You* 665). This is supported by some of her interviewees who as spectators and creators of online content see in these video-sharing platforms a way to actively reclaim their representations: “We don’t want to have to wait for Lenny Henry to be like, ‘we need to hire more Black people’ [laughs] like, we’re making our own spaces, being DIY savvy with our iPhones, doing our own iconography and making our own content” (Sobande, *Watching Me Watching You* 666). By gently criticising the Black British actor Lenny Henry’s tireless campaign for Black representation in mainstream media, this young woman points to the possibilities of using alternative routes while still being of appeal to a vastly popular audience. Not only do video-sharing platforms enable young Black British women filmmakers to easily share their work with a transnational crowd, but some websites do now even reoffer films made by older generations online. Short films like Ngozi Onwurah’s *The Body Beautiful* (1991), *White Men Are Cracking Up* (1994) or Campbell X’s *B.D. Women* (1994) can be watched on websites like Distrify or the British Film Institute’s BFIPlayer, while many other (like D.Elmina Davis’ *Omega Rising* (1988); Maureen Blackwood’s *Perfect Image?* (1989); Ngozi Onwurah’s *I Bring You Frankincense* (1996); Avril E. Russell’s *Distinction* and *Revolver* (1996)) are available on YouTube or Vimeo. Accessibility to this kind of artwork isn’t therefore necessarily constrained anymore within the traditional frameworks of film culture (“festivals, cinemas, and magazines such as *Cahiers du cinéma* and other print media” (Hagener et al. 7). As an “audiovisual memory of our culture” (Ruschmeyer 36), internet can prove to be particularly efficient in democratising marginalised minority culture. Although the work of some Black British female pioneers can remain difficult to access,¹⁰ the online availability of a large number of their films is vital because it proves, as Lola Young has underlined, that if “there have been repeated attempts to silence, to render invisible, black British women and their perspectives, insights and experiences, this has not been uniformly or seamlessly successful because we have spoken, written and made images” (Young, *What is Black British Feminism* 57). But in terms of audience accessibility, internet distribution requires a certain level of digital media literacy,¹¹ something that is usually taken for granted in younger generations but might exclude some people who feel more comfortable with the media of television and film, despite their lack of representativity.

As for social media, websites such as Facebook and Twitter can prove to be very cheap yet effective tools for marketing short films. Using hashtags to promote themselves as both female and Black filmmakers (#femalefilmmakerfriday; #womeninfilm; #Directedbywomen; #BlackTwitter; #DiversityUrgency have for example been found on Annetta Laufer, Destiny Ekaragha and Sade Adeniran’s twitter accounts), some Black British women filmmakers unashamedly put identity politics at the forefront of their work,

¹⁰ Being only visible for a fee at the BFI archives in central London, when it has not simply disappeared, like Karen Alexander’s *Mothers, Lovers and Others* (1989).

¹¹ Which can be defined as “The ability to access, understand and create content using digital media” (Park 87).

where mainstream media usually asks for assimilation (Malik et al.). Through social media, they have the opportunity to freely engage with their potential audience and thus nurture a sense of community and belonging.

The development of increasingly democratised digital tools such as social media, video-sharing and online crowdfunding platforms form a fertile ground for any aspiring filmmaker in the new millennium whose work, by conscious choice or lack of opportunity, remains at the margins of the mainstream. What is particularly exciting about the reclaiming of these possibilities is that it challenges cultural industries which remain at large white and male (Carey). Just like dominant media, however, digital channels of production and distribution remain often constrained within neoliberal economic models and similarly white-dominated industries. Therefore, to conceive of digital technology “as innocent or neutral misunderstands the social relations of technology and its very real material consequences in our social world” (Emejulu and McGregor 3). The material use of digital tools might not *per se* challenge the systemic marginalisation of Black women from cultural industries unless forms of critical distance towards the non-neutrality of (most of) these internet platforms find ways to emerge. But this argument should not foreclose the disruptive potential of digital media: these new forms of production—but also of consumption—of media content underpin the idea that Black women filmmakers actually take greater control of their own representations, whereas the post-racial discourse of dominant media oftentimes commodify both race and gender in ways that in fact reproduce existing power and social relations. By bypassing conventional circuits of production and distribution, “digital natives” create representations of Black womanhood that are otherwise almost nonexistent in mainstream cinema and television. As Stuart Hall underlines, representations are always *re*-presentations: this added hyphen points to the socially, politically and culturally constructed nature of representations, which are never innocent or innate. As such, “the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role” (Hall 254). Hall argues that the question of the *access* to the rights of representation is of paramount importance to the pluralisation of Black experiences, on-screen as well as in the constitution of social and political life. By re-presenting Black womanhood, Black British women filmmakers of the digital era challenge often stereotypical existing representations of Black women and create visibility, asserting that Black women’s lives are valuable too. They also attempt to make their mark into popular culture without having to necessarily comply with the rules of the mainstream cultural industries. In fact, even though most of them continue to work within the margins of mainstream film and television industries, their work seem increasingly focused on a search for popularity, and the blurring of the aesthetic boundaries between independent art-house and mainstream film contribute to render the location of Blackness in British 21st century media content and cinematic representation more hybrid and fluid than ever, as “different forms of visual production engender different modes of constructing the other” (Benson-Allot 350). Discourses on race and gender become therefore shaped through these new paradigms.

Conclusion

Although Black women filmmakers have historically been placed at the margins of British film history, pioneers such as Maureen Blackwood, Martina Attille and Ngozi Onwurah have since the late 1980s actively sought out to challenge stereotypical representations of Black women found in mainstream white cinema, whilst asserting their presence in Black British cinema, often viewed as a male territory. We have seen that if it remains difficult for Black British women filmmakers to enter the mainstream British film industry, those who have succeeded do not necessarily find opportunities to develop narratives centred around Black womanhood. If it is certain that these filmmakers should not have to bear a burden of representation, the fact that Black women remain scarce in mainstream media is ultimately problematic. In terms of representativity, dominant media continue to lag behind society itself and tend to commodify black vernacular culture (Saha). Yet dominant media still constitute a source of legitimacy and have the potential to both unlock bigger marketing budgets and reach large audiences. On the other hand, the new millennium has fostered a digital revolution that has enabled a new generation of Black women filmmakers to work within alternative

circuits of production and distribution. The development of visual technology and the democratisation of the internet are major shifts in the way filmmaking is now being developed. Although production budgets remain tight and online spaces have certain limitations, creative freedom has been broadened, and a new sense of community and belonging has emerged from online interactivity between filmmakers and their audience. The exploration of the work of Moyin Saka, Jaha Browne and Cecile Emeke has highlighted the variety of genres and topics Black women directors have so far explored, whilst mainly contributing to the pluralisation and re-presentation of Black womanhood. Black British women filmmakers are increasingly popularising their concerns, and perhaps minority cultural production would benefit from a merging between these two modes—in similar ways some works cited in this article have managed to infiltrate mainstream circles “by the back door.” There might not be one ideal production setting for Black British female filmmaking, yet I think that the potential of new digital media in normalizing and radically affirming Black womanhood as a positive identity should not be overlooked, neither by mainstream film critics who could, in fact, support this convergence, nor by academics working within the field of film studies.

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