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STEVE MCQUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY AND GEORGIAN SLOW CINEMA

STEVE MCQUEEN'S *SMALL AXE* (2020) is commonly described as an "anthology," as it is a collection of five films that are all directed and co-written by McQueen, that are all set between the 1960s and the 1980s, and that all centre on London's Black communities. For Canadian purposes, it's available via Amazon Prime, which is part of its hybrid status in terms of medium. Is it TV (yes, being produced in part by the BBC, which aired it in November 2020), is it a series of films (also yes, each running from 70-130 minutes and two of which opened the New York Film Festival in 2020), or is it basically made for streaming (yes again, as Amazon Studios was a co-producer)? Given its hybrid nature, it should perhaps come as no surprise that two seeming irreconcilable thinkers seem to float over the work.

The first is John Reith, latterly known as 1st Baron Reith but better known as the first Director-General of the BBC and the architect of public-service media in the Anglophone world. To speak of a "Reithian" approach to radio and television is to invoke the status of broadcasting as a public service and to emphasize those who do that work to educate, inform, and serve the public. This is the spirit of the BBC, even if it is obscured by shows like *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004-). *Small Axe* takes its public-service mandate seriously, providing highly detailed portrayals of the criminal justice system (in "Mangrove"), popular culture (in "Lover's Rock"), policing (in "Red, White, and Blue"), incarceration (in "Alex Wheatle"), and the school system (in "Education"). In this way, McQueen's organization strongly recalls the American television series *The Wire* (2002-2008), whose five seasons were each defined by some key social institution (the police, the port, the city council, the schools, and the newspaper). The key difference is that whereas *The Wire* was geographically sprawling but basically about a few years at the turn of the century, *Small Axe* focuses on a specific series of communities,

trading a macro view of urban decay for a highly detailed and historically sprawling presentation of the mores and patterns of everyday life across three decades that were key for the Black British community, especially in London. In terms of civically minded historical television, this is as ambitious as it gets.

The second thinker, seemingly so different from Reith but equally indispensable to understanding *Small Axe*, is Paul Gilroy. He is listed in the credits of each film as a "consultant," but his influence on the anthology as a whole is unmistakable. Along with Stuart Hall, Gilroy was the key founding figure of Black cultural studies in the UK, and his book *The Black Atlantic* (1993) is a classic that traced a line of Black cultural history that ran from Africa to Europe to the Caribbean and North America, dislodging the US-centric vision of such matters that was coming to prominence at the time. The specificity of Black British culture is a key element of Gilroy's thought; it may be, to invoke the title of his 1987 book, that *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, but that doesn't mean there isn't anything about the lives of Black Britons that is specific to the UK. I can sense in *Small Axe* (a title that invokes both Bob Marley's 1973 song "Small Axe" and Gilroy's 1993 book *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*) McQueen returning to these insights of his old mentor. (McQueen studied with Gilroy at the University of London, and they have remained close ever since.)

It may seem surprising that this is the first time McQueen has created feature-length narratives set in Britain's Black communities, but he hasn't actually made a whole lot of feature films: one about Northern Ireland (2008's *Hunger*), one where Michael Fassbinder plays a sex addict (2011's *Shame*), and two about the United States (2013's *Twelve Years a Slave* and 2018's *Windows*). What this small body of work hides is McQueen's long career as a video artist, some of which entailed making short films, several of which dealt with Blackness. Furthermore, a lot of his work reflects an avant-garde sensibility, including *Small Axe*. About halfway through the first film, "Mangrove," there is a long, stationary take lasting about three and a half minutes that depicts a conversation between Frank, the owner of a restaurant that is the subject of constant police harassment, and Darcus, a student of C. L. R. James (a minor character in the narrative) and something of a young radical. Those who have seen *Hunger* will recall a similarly long take in which Bobby Sands speaks to a priest in prison (although that shot lasted about 17 minutes). In the third film, "Red, White, and Blue," the pursuit of

a criminal through a warehouse is also visualized via a series of complex Steadicam and tracking shots whose duration and windingness recall the flogging scene in *Twelve Years a Slave*.

All of this formal sophistication recalls the degree to which McQueen was a strange sort of video artist: one who was unmistakably part of the avant-garde but who was just as unmistakably a classicist. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that his work has always borne the mark of old-school high modernism. His most famous video, *Deadpan* (1997), was patterned after a famous moment in Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) when the side of a house collapses onto him but he's spared because he is standing where the window frame falls. His earlier work *Five Easy Pieces* (1995) has exactly nothing to do with the Jack Nicholson vehicle but is rather a near-explicit remaking of some classic, extreme-angle photographs by Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Hunger*, *Twelve Years a Slave*, and *Small Axe* can thus be seen as part of a decades-long project to visualize communities defined by colonialist violence and domination, but in a way that mixes a certain didacticism with imagery that speaks of desire, longing, pain, and the extremities that we put bodies through—especially the bodies of dominated people.

This talk of high modernism should not minimize the didacticism of McQueen's overall body of work. One key scene in *Twelve Years a Slave* has a grizzled Quaker (played by Brad Pitt) telling an evil plantation owner (played by Michael Fassbinder) that "if this conversation concerns what is factual and what is not, then it must be said that there is no justice, and no righteousness, in slavery. . . . Laws change, but universal truths are constant. It is a fact, a plain and simple fact, that what is true and right is true and right for all, white and Black alike." I hear echoes of that monologue in a sequence in the third film when, during a police academy training session in a courtroom, police officer Leroy Logan (played by John Boyega) says, "I think we need to get back into the community, don't we? You know, find 'em where they live. Build genuine trust. To quote Robert Peel, 'the police are the public, and the public are the police.' You can't see it no other way." Quoting this father of British policing clearly comes with the same sense of irony as the Quaker's invocation of "simple fact" and carries the same punch: to illustrate the ultimate falseness of the myths that countries spin about themselves. And yet, in both monologues, that irony is leavened with a sense of hope, as these countries did indeed choose *these* myths to tell about themselves: that some universal truths are constant and that the po-

lice and the public must be as one. McQueen, in fine high modernist fashion, is haunted by the knowledge that these metanarratives are false. Unlike the postmodernists with whom he is sometimes erroneously placed, however, there is still something in him that wants—*really wants*—to believe.

We get other kinds of didactic monologues in *Small Axe* too, such as the aforementioned scene at the table in the first film when Darcus says, "Trinidad has been remade, Frank. I saw it, I heard it. It has changed the very rudiment of people's speech. They are talking with greater deliberation. They are pausing before speaking and such." These moments demand a genuine emotional engagement and a genuine sense of the rhythms of the British everyday, which is completely true to Reith's well-known principle that public broadcasting needs to be true to "information, education, and entertainment," just as it is true to Gilroy's argument in *The Black Atlantic* that "the concentrated intensity of the slave experience is something that marks out blacks as the first truly modern people, handling the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which would become the substance of everyday life in Europe a century later."

Given the amount of time that everyone has been spending in their homes over the last year and a bit, it might seem like the moment of "slow cinema" has well and truly arrived. This is a somewhat flippant term that, depending on who is deploying it, is meant to refer to anything from a ten-hour video of a train trip up Norway to the Arctic circle to the brooding, formally demanding, and religiously inflected films of Mexican director Carlos Reygadas. Georgian cinema of the post-independence period is notable for a number of films by young directors that could be seen as part of this emerging trend. Rati Oneli's poetic environmental documentary *City of the Sun* (2017) is one of the key examples, as it was shown widely on the festival circuit and was a key part of the retrospective of Georgian cinema staged at Montreal's Cinémethèque Québécoise in 2018 (it is easily rented on Vimeo).

So perhaps it is no surprise that the Georgian film of the moment, Déa Kulumbegashvili's *Beginning* (2020), was co-written and co-produced by Oneli (who also co-stars) and executive-produced by Reygadas. It has brought Georgian cinema some much-needed recognition on the really big-time festival circuit, winning the Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique (FIPRESCI) prize at the 2020 Toronto Film Festival before

going on to play the ultra-prestigious New York Film Festival a few weeks later. It is no doubt the "slow cinema" aspect that led Kulumbegashvili's feature debut to these kinds of audiences, but it is equally part of a "troubled women" stream of recent Georgian cinema, which also includes examples of *jeune cinéma* like Ana Urushadze's *Scary Mother* (2017) and Nana Ekvtimishvili and Simon Gross' *My Happy Family* (2017), both of which played at New Directors / New Films (another seriously prestigious New York film festival, which I have previously written about in this chronicle).

My Happy Family is by far the best of these films, as it is a delicate and beautifully shot portrait of a middle-aged woman trying to find some autonomy among competing demands of extended family, husband, and Georgian patriarchy. *Scary Mother* covers some of the same territory but is a far darker vision, as a middle-aged woman who wants to be a writer steadily loses her mind and allows herself to be consumed by a desire for fairly banal creativity. There is a violent, nasty component to Urushadze's slow psychological drama—something that is also true in spades of *Beginning*. The Kulumbegashvili-Oneli-Reygadas collaboration tells the story of a community of Jehovah's Witnesses somewhere in out-of-the-way Georgia that finds itself under attack on numerous fronts. As in *Scary Mother*, the alienating violence of Georgian modernity is expressed here via horrifying violence done to the female lead (played by the luminous actress Ia Sukhitashvili). The sequence where she is raped in a field has a cold, unblinking quality that would not be entirety out of place in a film by Steve McQueen. What is different is the aftertaste of nihilism with which sequences like these (and, indeed, the film overall) leave the viewer; such genuine emptiness, however intellectually inflected, is hard to imagine *chez McQueen*. This is an intellectualized nihilism that I remember from the French "cinema of extremes" that marked that national cinema in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with films like Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1999) and Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002). I strongly disliked those films when they were first released, for reasons that, looking back, feel suspiciously moralistic. I had a similar response to *Beginning*—a film that I was quite ready to like because I consider myself a champion of Georgian cinema but that, like *Scary Mother*, I ended up strongly disliking for reasons that also feel a bit moralistic. So I feel especially keenly that I should encourage viewers to check the film out for themselves. Its non-festival premiere was on the invaluable streaming site Mubi.com, where it is still easily available.