



Alanis Obomsawin, keynote speaker at Shooting the System

"As an editorial strategy and as a mode of address, the logic of the 'special issue' tends to reinforce rather than ameliorate, the perceived otherness and marginality of the subject itself."

Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer

Screen, "The Last 'Special Issue' on Race?"

THE PROBLEM WITH RACE as special event is that like all specials – lunch special, special of the day, flavour of the month – they are, by definition, not the staple, not the norm. On the other hand, without such events, the issue may never be raised at all.

What is this word, race? Most Canadians think of race in pre-destined terms, as what we were born with, biologically. But the Euro-American idea of distinct racial groups with discrete characteristics and different human potential is a relatively modern phenomenon, having developed during the Enlightenment. Although the concept of "races" has been rejected by science, how we look and the categories of race we're assigned to still have profound effects on the way we're treated in society. Though "race" doesn't exist, racism does.

I have been involved in organizing two special events on race, representation and cinema: Shooting the System and

Race to the Screen, both held in Toronto in the early 90s. Shooting the System was a two-day conference for emerging (and aspiring) film and videomakers of Aboriginal, African, Asian and Latin American backgrounds. Other events such as *Desh Pardesh*, *Dreamspeakers* in Edmonton, and *Racy Sexy* in Vancouver have cropped up since then, some on an annual basis.

In 1990, Shooting the System emerged from a pattern that was developing in Toronto, and I suspect in other parts of Canada. Gains for people of colour and Native people in independent media were being won in exhibition – experienced producers were screening their work more – but the doors were still closed to many younger or inexperienced people. Those few non-white filmmakers and video producers who already had production credits (including myself) found increased opportunities to exhibit. Nevertheless, there was still little done to make the systems of support more accessible to the young or inexperienced.

Organized by an adhoc committee called Full Screen, the weekend gathering brought together over 50 participants for screenings and discussions about grant writing, lobbying and the

political issues of race and racism, especially related to the infrastructure of film and video production. Guests included Alanis Obomsawin, Midi Onodera, Claire Prieto, scriptwriter Drew Taylor, and New York-based producer, director and critic Renee Tajima. Also invited were representatives of different funding agencies.

In my mind, Shooting the System had three tasks: first, to impart otherwise inaccessible information to these potential and emerging producers, orienting them to the resources available and sharing precisely the kind of anecdotal

information that remains trapped within a narrow circle of successful (and mostly white) producers – about how juries assess an application, for instance; second, the conference was to bring together those individuals so that they could meet and draw strength from each other; finally, the event was to educate, dialogue with, and in some cases, challenge, the funding agencies.

Shooting the System was fairly successful in accomplishing those aims, and Full Screen continues as an organization. As an event, however, Shooting the System was narrowly focused, geared mainly to issues of production. This point stuck with me when I was asked to program *Race to the Screen*, an event initiated by Euclid Theatre staff (Terry Guerriero, Ian Rashid and Gillian Morton), and developed with an advisory committee (including Cameron Bailey, Marjorie Beaucage, Betty Julian, Yasmin Karim, Chet Singh and Lloyd Wong).

Race to the Screen was meant to help develop a critical discourse around race and representation in Canada that, hopefully, would inform new work by non-white directors. This was a huge mandate. I was very aware that a program like this might never happen again

Conference Calls: Race As Special Event

— and it hasn't so far — so I packed the week with a dense array of screenings, lectures and discussions (perhaps too much). The offerings were necessarily diverse and sometimes uneven as we attempted to cross many conceptual and political borders, mixing readings of mass cinema and video art, and placing scholarly lectures side by side with presentations by grassroots activists. Participants included Atom Egoyan, Molly Shinhat, Jamelie Hassan, among others.

Race to the Screen placed gender and sexuality at the centre of discussions of race, closing with a lecture by Kobena Mercer on Black gay men in independent cinema. The program also attempted to deconstruct many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about race and racism. But not all forms of non-white identities are organized around discourses of "invisibility," as was pointed out by Native actor Cat Cayuga. Further, with the Gulf War (which was occurring at that time), how could one ignore the representations of Arabs in North American media? And what about anti-Semitism, one of the oldest and most virulent forms of racism in Euro-American discourse? Jews are rarely invited to the table of "race." But racism operates differently for different groups, including those "of colour." On this

score, *Race to the Screen* featured a lecture by British film historian Richard Dyer, on the construction of "whiteness" in Hollywood cinema.

In breaking out of many of the traditional frameworks for discussing race and racism in representation, *Race to the Screen* broke new ground. But in so

grated, race wouldn't be such an issue. But until we have such a society, special events based on race will continue to be both tokenistic and necessary. These events will also continue to bear the burden of representation, since audiences will not necessarily overlap from event to event — *Race to the Screen* was felt by

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doing, it opened itself up to several questions. For instance, did its foregrounding of feminist and queer issues and its emphasis on the social construction of race make the event less attractive to a more traditional community of anti-racist activists, especially those with more nationalist leanings? The attention to inclusivity also meant less focus.

If the studios, editing suites and board rooms of this country were racially inte-

some to be lacking because it did not include issues of production, precisely those covered in *Shooting the System*. Special events can give the discussion of race and racism a necessary jump start. Among the challenges, however, is that of keeping the issue running afterward • *Richard Fung is a Toronto-based video-maker, writer and activist whose daily diet of sexuality, race and representation has become a local favourite.*



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