

Stuart Hall on television

Article (Accepted Version)

Waters, Rob (2018) Stuart Hall on television. *African and Black Diaspora*, 11 (3). pp. 315-317. ISSN 1752-8631

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/75291/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in African and Black Diaspora on 20.04.18 , available online :

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17528631.2018.1465254>

Rob Waters, “Stuart Hall on Television”

Stuart Hall was a public intellectual of the television age. Famously, he was a critic of television as a mass-communication medium. Like his sometime-mentor Raymond Williams, he was particularly alive to the ways in which television became thoroughly integrated into the textures of everyday life, repackaging it, and changing how it was lived. This concern was acute as Hall turned to questions of race. The rise of television, as he noted in his preface to Sarita Malik’s (2002) study of black Britain on screen, coincided with Britain’s rise as a mass-multicultural society, and television “played a critical role in how that issue came to be defined, understood and interpreted” (vii). He worked alongside those aiming to promote a black and Asian presence on British television, and to challenge television’s racialized regime of representation (Schaffer 2014, 143–77). Some of the most enjoyable footage of Hall is his wry cutting-down of television race comedies of the 1970s in the Campaign Against Racism in the Media’s BBC show *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum* (1979).

Such programs, though, are testament also to Hall’s role as a public intellectual *on* television. I want to underline the significance of Hall on television, drawing attention to how his public appearances not only attempted to explain and contest television’s racialized regime of representation, but played a key role in offering other ways of thinking about race, and being black, for his viewers. Our way in is John Akomfrah’s *Stuart Hall Project* (2013a). Akomfrah’s film, a homage to his friendship with Hall, is a montage of existing footage of Hall, running from the 1950s to the 2000s. It is a reconstitution of the “Stuart Hall archive,” though Hall may well have disliked this term. What it calls to our attention is that, bar the occasional intervention of home Ciné film, the visual archive of Stuart Hall is a televisual archive of a public intellectual. Akomfrah picked through eight-hundred hours of Hall’s media appearances to make the film. The Hall that he gives us is comfortable in front of the camera, comfortable in a television or radio interview, on a television panel, as a talking head, or as a presenter; and, of course, he is keenly aware of the power of this medium.

Hall is perhaps more commonly remembered as an essayist. For many politically or intellectually minded people in 1970s and 1980s Britain, when Hall was in his prime, he might

have been first encountered through his great essays. Like the English historian James Vernon (2017), who first encountered Hall through “The Great Moving Right Show,” many would have read Hall before they saw him. Vernon assumed—innocently enough—that Hall was white. “Growing up in the countryside as a white middle-class boy,” as he recalls, “people of color were almost completely absent from my life.” Vernon wasn’t alone, and as Hall (2017, 12) remarks, irony-heavy, in his memoir, “Some Caribbean people in media studies who refer to my essay on ‘Encoding/Decoding’ still don’t know I am black.” Such presumptions have their own racial histories, of course. And for those who want to trace it, there is plenty of scope for reading a “Caribbean reasoning” (Meeks 2007) back into even these apparently least-located of essays. But for those who caught him on television, Hall’s blackness could be striking.

Akomfrah (2013b) gives us a wonderful account of watching television in the 1970s—*staying up late*, because these things always were on late—and coming across Stuart Hall. “This black guy comes on TV [...] and I remember looking at him and thinking, you know, when I grow up, I want to be just like this guy. You know, that cool, that hip.” Akomfrah grew up in an era of Black Power and black rebellion. For his generation, as his contemporary Keith Piper (1991, 1) remembered, “it appeared to take the flight of petrol bombs to place any reference to these new constituencies of ‘Black Britishness’ onto the local and national political agenda.” Linton Kwesi Johnson’s (Harris and White 2009, 1) “rebel generation,” also the generation of *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al 1978), Akomfrah and his contemporaries, as he later recalled, carried “a weight of expectation or accusation. Basically, the spotlight was going to be on you” (2008). If they were not to take on the distorted image of criminalized muggers offered in the mainstream media, then the other options for forming oneself and one’s politics that this young generation held were—at that time—through the public cultures of blackness offered through black America and, primarily, Jamaica. It was a culture dominated by images of revolutionary black masculinity that Akomfrah found hard to identify with. For Akomfrah, Stuart Hall on television offered other ways of being black. “Both by his charismatic example and the form in which he addressed things,” Akomfrah recounts, Hall “helped my generation to accommodate [...] a certain form of masculinity beyond a revolutionary ‘let’s all go and kill judges’ kind of position” (2013a). At a moment when, fixed by the burdens of expectation and accusation, Akomfrah’s generation were searching “for models essentially, blueprints of what one could do,” Hall “was a compelling and charismatic example” (2013b).

It is heartening to relive Akomfrah’s first encounter with Hall, but it is also instructive. British television in the 1970s was a dismal place for black Britons, in which they were either

largely invisible, or visible as figures for fun or panic. Hall's late-night broadcasts were a counterpoint to these figurations. For Akomfrah, the revelation of finding Hall, calm, cool, receptively generous (Scott 2017), must have been profound. Akomfrah's memory, and his memorial work in *The Stuart Hall Project*, reminds us of the importance of *this* Hall of the television archive, and the weight that is contained in those eight-hundred hours of footage. In some of his most famous essays, such as his classic "New Ethnicities," Hall identified how, in the 1980s, a new generation of British artists were pushing at the limits of blackness, forcing it into new positions that refused to be limited by the kinds of unbending politics that Akomfrah and others found stultifying. Akomfrah's film, and his memory of encountering Hall on television, reminds us that Hall did not just discover or narrate this new moment; he was a part of its formation.

References

- Akomfrah, John, dir. 2013a. *The Stuart Hall Project*. British Film Institute.
- Akomfrah, John, 2013b. *The Stuart Hall Project: A Beyond Cinema Original Interview*. Beyond Cinema <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59-Hrn6IrE4>>.
- Akomfrah, John, in conversation with Alan Marcus. 2008. University of Aberdeen, March 11 <<https://vimeo.com/830033>>.
- Hall, Stuart, with Bill Schwarz. 2017. *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*. London: Allen Lane.
- Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Harris, Roxy, and Sarah White, eds. 2009. *Building Britannia: Life Experience with Britain*. London: New Beacon Books.
- It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*. 1979. BBC.
- Malik, Sarita. 2002. *Representing Black Britain: A History of Black and Asian Images on British Television*. London: Sage.
- Meeks, Brian. 2007. *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall*. Kingston: Randle Publishers.
- Piper, Keith. 1991. *Step into the Arena: Notes on Black Masculinity & the Contest of Territory*. Rochdale: Rochdale Art Gallery.

- Schaffer, Gavin. *The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television, 1960–80*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, David. 2017. *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Vernon, James. 2017. "When Stuart Hall was White." *Public Books*, 23 January.