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Film Review: *Burning an Illusion* (1981)

Pamela Crawford

NB: This review gives away the film's storyline.

The black women's hairdresser – that site of cultural expression and social debate – makes a fitting backdrop to the opening titles of Menelik Shabazz's 1981 film *Burning an Illusion*. The film centres on the personal and political awakening of Shabazz's main characters Pat (Cassie McFarlane) and Del (Victor Romero) and the circumstances in which they find themselves as a young black couple living in the London of the early 1980s.

The film charts Pat's political awakening into black consciousness when she and those closest to her experience violence and discrimination on the streets of the capital. The film's narrative develops through Pat's on/off relationship with her boyfriend Del and the changes in her attitude and physical appearance as contrasted with those of her friends Cynthia and Sonia.

Burning an Illusion is set in London's urban landscape amidst covered markets, the high rise where Pat lives, the Underground, and black house parties. References to inner city living are maintained throughout the film. In Pat's bedroom one still hears the wail of sirens from outside. Pat is an independent woman with a steady job and her own flat. When she meets Del at a house party it seems that her hopes of a settled down future may start to take shape too. Things go well for a while, even when Del moves in following an argument with his father. But when he loses his job as a tool maker and fails to find new work, relations begin to deteriorate. The bedroom (the site of many of their arguments) is claustrophobic and atmospherically tense, and adds to a sense of violation of what was for Pat a personal and safe space of her own. Pat's domestic décor and her state of mind are seen to undergo a correlative transition from a neat aspirational apartment to a bachelorised gambling den replete with crowded ashtrays and empty Red Stripe cans (the point at which for a time she relinquishes control of her own domain).

The relationship quickly descends into violence culminating in a scene where Pat pulls a knife on Del to stop him from attacking her. The camera stays in close-up on the terrified Pat as we hear Del raging from the small distance of a nearby room. Life returns to relative normality for Pat when a regretful Del appears and the relationship redevelops with a renewed strength.

Relations between Pat's closest female confidantes, the unsophisticated Sonia and the worldly wise Cynthia, are interwoven into the plot through their 'girlie' chats in parks, in front rooms and at the tube station as well as when hairdressing on porch stoops. Pat's voice-over is too sporadic to pull the piece together, but (like the lovers rock and reggae tunes that punctuate the narrative) the women's conversations, through their intermittent placement, provide the film with a strong, cohesive momentum.

Sonia's misguided affections for her feckless boyfriend Chamberlain and her dreams of a 'white wedding', romance and materialistic ostentation are contrasted with Cynthia's self-assured community activism. Pat's outlook gradually traverses the two. From initially sharing Sonia's naive vision of post-marital economic dependence, Pat is forced into a position (not uncommon to black women) of having to deal with an absent partner and unforeseen economic self-sufficiency. Thus, Pat's situation in the film is both similar and dissimilar to those of white women fighting for occupational choice and benefiting from the debates raised by second-wave feminism. Pat's subsequent politicisation brings to the fore an attitude increasingly in sympathy with Cynthia's character as the film progresses.

Pat and Del's happy state of affairs is short lived. When a jealous and controlling Chamberlain picks a fight with Sonia at a black nightclub, it spills out onto the street and the police are called. Onlookers are arrested and when Del intervenes to stop a friend being roughed up, he himself becomes a target, drawing his flick knife and injuring a police officer in the process. Del is beaten, hospitalised and sentenced to four years in prison. Pat feels humiliated by the prison visits and begins to question her resolve to remain loyal to Del during his incarceration. This is further tested when Del's appeal for a lighter sentence is overturned: in Shabazz's court room scene the camera passes along the row of black heads of African wraps, braids, Afros and dreads whilst a booming, disembodied voice of the white, male judge passes sentence, declaring that an example should be made of 'those who have no regard for law and order.'

Shabazz does not allow the spectator to escape into moments of simplistic moralisation. Whilst the film clearly shows Del as subject to several instances of racial injustice, his tardiness makes him complicit to his dismissal from work and his claim to be a victim of racial discrimination is undermined by the visibility of his fellow black workers who are present when he arrives late and presumably remain in employment. Nor are we offered a diet of non-relativistic racial bias. Representations like that of the 'out of work' black male peering at job advertisements in windows before wandering on, and the unsympathetic white desk sergeant at the police station, are countered by others which suggest that Shabazz is attuned to expressing the black experience as a far more ambiguous manifestation. When the fight erupts outside the club, Pat is restrained by a *black* policeman. Pat's *white* work colleague offers her a shoulder to cry on when Del upsets her.

Shabazz defines Pat's movement towards Black consciousness in conspicuously feminine terms. In an earlier scene, Pat's enraged disposal of a plate of Del's food signifies her abandonment of the domestic *illusion* of the contented, wifely, cook. The lifestyle trajectory favoured by romantic novels is similarly discarded when Pat tosses out her old Mills and Boon novels. Pat's throwing off of her jewellery and wiping away her lipstick is the final obliteration of female objectification and materialistic values. The film differentiates between Pat's physical economic freedom and independent living and the psychological freedom she develops during the course of the film. Apart from rejecting traditional gender roles, she also opts for 'Africanisation' to express the embrace of her ethnicity. This is indicated through her choice of hairstyle from straightened and pinned at the beginning of the film to wrapped, sectioned and plaited (now worn publicly) at the film's climax. Africanised hair styling was an articulation of radical politicisation within the British black community of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Additionally, the African women's dress when adopted by African Caribbean women was an indicator in the community of self-respect, not only on the grounds of being a declaration of pride in one's African heritage, but also because of its rejection of western immodesty. Pat also remakes her interior décor, the space she had made her own prior to Del's arrival, by putting up African carvings and posters similar to those displayed in Cynthia's and her partner Tony's home.

Shabazz manages to embed familiar evocations of black cultural identity within this work. Del eats with a spoon, and takes great pride in his vinyl collection of Black music. His equation of rules and regulations with slavery both at his work and in prison, his frequent and sometimes misguided references to his dignity as a black man, and his need for (literal and sexual) freedom, make frequent appearances. The switch from Patois to cut glass English when Del meets Pat's parents is nicely placed. Such culturally specific references provide further layers of meaning more easily decodable by African Caribbean viewers than white British audiences.

Shabazz acknowledges the cultural openness of black, male sexual (verbal) advances. They are depicted in daylight and always where Pat is with her friends or in a busy, public thoroughfare. Shabazz reframes the 'threat' by placing a group of innocent black men alongside a lone Pat walking home at night. The *illusion* of the predatory black male is destabilised, the 'real' threat being a white man who guns down Pat only a few seconds later in a racially motivated drive-by shooting.

At the time of the film's making, recession and unemployment in the inner cities was blighting the lives of young black people who often faced the additional burden of racial prejudice in their interactions with white society. Unsurprising then that the Black Power movement which emerged from the United States of the 1960s and 70s, was still impacting upon young black British identity, underscored as it was by positive identifications with Jamaica's Rastafarian movement. The Black Power ethos was made more accessible to young people through specialist music and bookshops as portrayed in the film. Pat and Del were the generation whose parents (African Caribbean émigrés) had responded to the British labour recruitment drive of the 1950s. Cross generational opinion sometimes diverged where parental expectation of the 'better life' hoped for whilst living in the Caribbean, conflicted with the children's negative experiences of education and employment within British society. Families could also become fiercely conflicted where approaches to tackling discrimination were disputed. This is aptly illustrated by Del's discussions with Pat concerning his difficult relationship with his father. Good examples of the change in intergenerational influence were evident in the naming of children. The choice of Iffe, a Yoruba, Nigerian name for Tony's and Cynthia's child, can be compared with that of Chamberlain, whose parents' generation were more likely to have venerated colonising dignitaries.

The film does well in contextualising the way in which black communities turned disenchantment to positive ends, took the initiative and formed alliances to redress anticipated inequalities (e.g. the legal representation organised by Tony and Cynthia and the prison friends/families support group). Making clear the source of black anger was especially important at a time when sympathy towards black people was unpopular and their portrayal in the media often negative. A hospital scene has Pat expressing uncontrolled rage for her injuries. Instead of vengeance, our sympathy for her is rewarded with her gradual recovery, assisted by her rededication to community activism. In addition, Del's supportive letters and the pride they both take in Pat's new appearance gives Pat a new resolve and their relationship blossoms in the face of adversity.

Burning an Illusion stands as testimony to the historically troubled relations between the British judicial system and the police force with black Britons. The film's title also references the New Cross fire which killed thirteen young black people at a house party in London. The fire occurred in January 1981, the year of the film's production, and was the trigger for much local activism and unrest owing to attacks on black people in the area and the indifference of the white public and police to the youngsters' deaths. Brixton exploded into riots only three months after the New Cross fire.

The final scene has a group of Rastafarian women on a minibus moving and swaying to their own singing with only Congo accompaniment. The Africanisation of the women's look (the rejection of white Europeanised beauty is now total) and the simplicity of the musical instrumentation celebrates the stripping away of materialist trappings to reveal the values that the film promotes: the realisation of one's black identity and the need to mobilise as a community and assert that identity in the face of disadvantage and discrimination.

The thwarted ambitions of young black people are ubiquitous in this film, but nowhere is this more poignantly realised than in the broken figure of the young man who once pestered Pat for dates and proudly proclaimed his musical ambition. Now an alcoholic, mentally disturbed and destitute, he sits playing a mouth organ unable any longer to engage with the world around him. The scene is devastating in its indictment of a society that failed to nurture young black people.

The film posits the untenability of the Eurocentred neutrality privileged by the generation raised as colonial subjects in the 'British West Indies' and the expectation they had of themselves and their children. The *illusion* is that of an unquestioned social and economic assimilation on arrival to the British Isles.

This film review was created as part of a [module on migrant and diasporic cinema](#) in Europe offered on the [MA Cultural Studies](#) at the University of Leeds (2009/10).