

L I M I N A

'Brixton's Aflame' Television History Workshop and the Battle for Britain

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One needs to undermine the obvious. One has to show that these are social and historical processes and that they are not written in the stars.¹

Stuart Hall

During April 1981, a *Battle for Britain* detonated on Brixton's streets. A disturbance between police and young people developed into a riot, triggering hundreds of arrests and causing considerable property damage. It was the most severe social upheaval seen on the Island since before the Second World War. This riot, and those in Toxteth, Moss Side, Southall and Bristol, was predictable and understandable, performing the racist tendencies of British colonialism. For historians researching Thatcher's first term, Brixton appears an aberrant implosion in the economic rationalist narrative. It was a moment of unravelled consensus, when violent clashes between police and protesters were the only means possible to protect the Thatcherite state. Newspaper reports and television broadcasts from 1981 framed the riots from behind police shields. Yet in 1998, with a Labour government installed in Downing Street, the cinders of Brixton's fires seem well extinguished. Discovering an alternate path through London's streets is difficult, hampered as it is by the ideologies encircling blackness through the post-war period. A river of blood has washed away divergent histories and flooded the inscription of anti-racist discourses. This paper investigates *The Brixton Tapes*, a video produced by Television History Workshop (TVHW) in the weeks after the Brixton uprising, to demonstrate how such

a text, with all its inadequacies, can intervene in the process of teaching and writing about Thatcher's early years of government.

All histories, although written about the past, forecast the future. The more politicised the topic, the more history is marinated with meaning. Effective writing, which promotes cultural difference within renderings of the past, invokes multiple textual sites and methodological approaches. Specifically, the impact of cultural studies has displaced the divisions between art and trash, credible and trivial sources. The interview has become a pivotal and significant mode of research. Historians have moved beyond Alessandro Portelli's battlecry that 'a spectre is haunting the halls of the Academy: the spectre of "oral history"'.² These debates from the early 1980s raised questions about the purpose of history and the motive for intervening in the gathering and shaping of evidence. The fear of orality and a fetish for writing is no longer articulated in starkly binarised terms.³ The impact of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and media studies has formulated networks of communication theories and national imaginings.⁴ By being conscious of power and language, historians may avoid authoritative narratives and singular paths through the past. History becomes a search for desire, imagination and meaning. This plurality of purpose, which Raphael Samuel has described as the 'Balkanization of the subject',⁵ embraces visibility, orality, corporeality and tactility to formulate new historical and cultural literacies. Through the meeting of past and present, epistemology and ontology, the authenticating discourse of lived experience is unmasked to reveal *lived ideologies*.

The politicisation of history invokes the desire to uncover origins, causes and effects. With the history of Thatcher's Britain becoming an ideological mosh pit of bodies, sweat, violence and noise, there is a need to discover and circulate other stories and truths, particularly from black youth. The struggle to operate in this alternate space has become the directive of TVHW. An independent production company that develops programmes on twentieth-century social and cultural movements, TVHW is active in the clash to control the dominant narrative. Based in London, the organisation produces tapes that circulate internationally. They distribute programmes on the 1984-1985 Miner's Strike, women's role in housing protests and peace activism, as well as documentaries on birth control, the car industry and schooling since the war. Pivotaly, the organisation also encourages their viewers to construct video and audio recordings. As the booklet accompanying their tapes suggests,

[y]ou make history ... There are no 'experts' in your history. You are the expert. All have experiences and views worth recording so that our own and future generations will understand what our lives are like now.⁶

This directive provides a space for the writing of relevant, politically active history. Similarly, the mobilising rhetoric that 'you make history' undermines the credibility of authenticating television news. The aim for TVHW's construction of *The Brixton Tapes* was to establish what Greg Lanning has termed 'an alternative archive of material about the Brixton uprising',⁷ offering testimony from black and white, women and men, young and old. It remains a concrete and significant amalgam of history, television and politics. What makes *The Brixton Tapes* significant is that the footage was recorded in the immediate aftermath of the April 1981 disturbance. One week after the riot, in a shop off Railton Road in Brixton, TVHW set up a video unit to record the residents' accounts of the previous six days.

The Brixton Tapes moved beyond television news and print reports to present testimony from those involved in the disturbance and those who had witnessed it. The division between 'us' and 'them' was clearly framed in newspaper and television reports, with the 'us' cowering behind physical and metaphoric police shields. As the narrator from the tape suggested, 'the view from the other side was generally ignored'.⁸ Certainly there were problems with the project. In the days following the riot, residents had been subjected to prying reporters and cameras. Similarly, many were worried about the circulation of the footage. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner, David McNee, said that police would be reviewing videos to identify rioters. The young men were therefore recorded in silhouette by the TVHW camera. The interview process, whereby anyone who wanted to speak was allowed to do so, resulted in fourteen statements being recorded, varying in length from ten to forty minutes. The project was developed, under tenuous circumstances, by residents or those living adjacent to the area. Lanning, who was involved in the development of *The Brixton Tapes* and had previously been involved in other London-based documentaries, lived less than two miles from Railton Road.⁹

The Brixton Riot was the trigger of much naive and inflammatory print and television reports. Obviously a political and semiotic corrective was necessary. A crucial element in the framing of Brixton and the other disturbances was the lack of explanation for the events: they were reported as mindless aberrations without a purpose or political justification. Similarly, the Scarman Report, the review of the events in Brixton, blamed television reporters and cameramen for the escalation of the riot.¹⁰ The report argued that the media incited the connection between blackness and crime, ignoring Margaret Thatcher's role in promoting that link.¹¹ Police badgering and unemployment levels were decentred from discussion. One participant in the riot, whose testimony was recorded within *The Brixton Tapes*, stressed that:

[t]here had been a lot of police harassment and things like that in Brixton for a long time, but when they come down the Friday night it was like you know, it

was just like that was it, you know. The police said we're going to have it out with you, that's how it was, I think everybody felt that way, you know, we're going to start you now, you know, we're just going to come in there and sort you lot.¹²

Unmentioned in press and televisual reports of the riot was Swamp 81, the campaign which activated a noticeable police build-up in the week preceding the riot. Similarly undiscussed was the Suspicion Law, passed in 1979, that allowed police to stop and search any member of the public behaving *strangely*. This law was targeted towards young black men.

The media does not reflect society: instead it mobilises and reinscribes already existing codes and paradigms. The ideology of *black = problem* did not arrive in Brixton in 1981, but had circulated for at least a century and was particularly virulent in the post-1960s world. The morphology of the news narrative, emphasising the 'mobs of jubilant young blacks [who] took control of the street',¹³ repeated a predictable shape. Brixton had a history: it was a reasonable response to an unreasonable situation. To understand the pressure, confusion and uncertainties involved in being black and British necessitates listening to immigrant stories and experiences. As a resident stated in *The Brixton Tapes*:

I came in this country 1960 when I came in this country I'd been working for twenty-one years and I wasn't living in Brixton till five years ago, I've not got a conviction before I income into Brixton, and I income into Brixton and I've got a conviction by the police. Innocent right. I was at work, [they] came into my house, they kicked down my door, they took away my stuff, took it to the station and they said it was drugs, send it to the lab to analyse which it wasn't no drugs, it was drinking chocolate, they said that I must come back for the result, I said I ain't coming back for no result because I know I've got no drugs in the house. If I've got drugs in my house I wouldn't be working.¹⁴

British history is scarred by violent outbursts against black communities, particularly in Nottingham and then Notting Hill in London during the August and September of 1958. The backlash against Commonwealth immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the West Indies did not acknowledge that most arrivals into Britain at this time were from Ireland and Australia. Also ignored was the long-term political and cultural contribution of West Indian people, many of whom fought for Britain in the Second World War. Yet instead of ideological, if not territorial, atonement,

immigration from the West Indies was controlled by the terms of the 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act. Clearly, racial thinking is not marginal to the configuration of Englishness. As Robert Young has argued, '[r]ace has always been culturally constructed. Culture has always been racially constructed'.¹⁵ The narratives of colonialism demand a close monitoring of theoretical interventions in the practice of historical writing.¹⁶

The Brixton Riot, as the most serious disturbance of the post-war peace, relied on rhetorical structures of war. The front page of the *Sunday Express* on April 12 featured the headline 'Brixton Riot - "It's War"'. The story that followed revealed that 'street warfare roared through London's black ghetto of Brixton last night and injured 97 policemen'.¹⁷ The signifiers of 'ghetto' and 'black' melded with ease. By the following day, the *Daily Mail* had added the final sign to the paradigm, affirming that 'an army of rioting black youths took to the streets again for the third night's battle against the Metropolitan Police'.¹⁸ The Battle of Britain was reinscribed: within the context of Brixton, the combatants were 'young blacks' and 'weary police'.¹⁹ The most important front page of the time was from the *Daily Mail*. This cover featured a photograph of 'a London bobby', hat still on head, with clotted blood smearing his face; the sloganised headline was 'Battle of Brixton'.²⁰ The positioning of the police in this discourse is crucial. As Hall *et al.* have suggested, 'they "structure" the total picture of crime'.²¹ The police involvement signalled a shift from the hegemonic to coercive maintenance of power.

Cultural qualities, like *black = problem*, are embodied as a physical presence. Representational logics imagine another place in a way that fits into familiar knowledge systems. For a person or community to be situated in discourse means that they must be depicted in the terms of that discourse, transforming the other into the same. West Indianness, or blackness,²² must be performed within white/colonial regimes of value.²³

The key concern raised by those interviewed within *The Brixton Tapes* was that the events in Brixton could not be reduced to 'a black issue'. As Ian Walker reported in the *Daily Mail*, 'young blacks emphasised time and again that their quarrel was not with the white community but with the police'.²⁴ Yet the rationale for their targeted hostility was not presented. The Monday press reports after the riot revealed journalists surveying the political damage. Sixteen years later, cultural historians can observe the rapid re-establishment of the dominant discourses of law and order:

And the police say they have mounting evidence that political extremists succeeded in stage-managing Britain's most explosive confrontation between police and young blacks on Saturday night.²⁵

Special branch detectives were trying to discover last night whether the Brixton riots were in fact controlled by outsiders.²⁶

Within days, political extremists, who *must* be outsiders, were blamed for setting Brixton alight. Yet Brixton, like all marginal places, is a site where identity and difference are negotiated in everyday life. Change is managed spatially. Residents of Brixton, to poach Meaghan Morris's phrase, are 'cruising grammarians'²⁷ who interpret the political inscriptions of their home. Like all sites, Brixton has a literacy. The urban semiotics of the riot resulted in distinct readings of the events. Brixton, as a signifier, is an urban myth that resonates with the fear of the city, crime and the crowd. While the urban landscape is a metonymy for social change, it is also, as John Short has realised, 'a metaphor for society's moral hygiene and moral welfare'.²⁸ The disruption of law and order revealed the mechanisms through which identity questions power structures. A police spokesman at the time stated that 'the only people who control the streets of London are the Met'.²⁹ Brixton is a cultural production, performed through televisual news reports, William Whitelaw's speeches and historical analysis.

The TVHW project was a semiotic guerilla campaign, maintaining a Brixton-centred frame while presenting alternative testimony and iconography. As a resident remarked in *The Brixton Tapes*:

[w]hen William Whitelaw and the others come down to Brixton they don't understand what the situation is like in Brixton or in any of the black areas. They have always lived in posh, high class areas. When they come and see things like this, it sickens their hearts to see it only because they can't stand to be in the area long enough, the smell of the place probably makes them sick ... they don't know what the majority of the people in this country are.³⁰

The most direct way to perpetuate racism is through silence, 'not knowing' or ignoring the personal and institutional oppression of others. *The Brixton Tapes*, as an oral and visual trace, provide an alternative vehicle through which to grasp the force and potency of oppression. Very quickly, the Brixton Riot was framed through white discursive structures - police shields, police casualties and police regaining control of the streets. After the weekend, 'white men with the groups'³¹ were framed as organisers and facilitators of the violence. Clearly, the white authority structures were granted pages of newspaper space and extensive coverage. Groping for answers, the *New Standard* front page asked 'Why Why Why'³² the riot had occurred. Few reporters asked residents for their answers. Black protesters, mothers, husbands and other inhabitants were deprived of their voice, becoming mute dummies to the journalistic ventriloquists. A woman stated for the TVHW camera that:

I think generally the feeling was one of the people of Brixton against the police as opposed to blacks or

black youngsters ... and I'm just fed up with the programmes, the television programmes, the clips you get in the papers about it being a black thing. That's just part of it, right. And why call it a riot, you know. It's not as if it's something that's just happened recently or they never expected it to happen.³³

Thatcherism presented itself as a defensive ideology, battling against blacks, Europe, the union movement, feminists, and the Left. More precisely, Thatcher's policies atomised the body politic. Collectives, classes and groups deflected attention (and allegiance) from the *Greatness* of Britain. Brixton's riot was not 'a black thing': it was a trace of decline.

The promotion of an individuated self is understandable during the period when any collective was framed through political hostility and fear. Brixton's television history visualised the crowd and captured the apprehension. Yet, as Harvey Kaye has suggested:

riots are 'peaks', or exceptional events, and may therefore easily give one a distorted impression about the whole life span of a popular movement and about the everyday lives of the people who take part in them.³⁴

Brixton is a moment of excess within contemporary renderings of blackness and Englishness. The configuration and inscription of race is not marginal to English culture. During the 1980s, with the clash of convictions between Britain and Europe, Britain and the Empire/Commonwealth, England and Scotland, England and Ireland, identity formations were in flux. Robert Young realised that 'fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change'.³⁵ Television is integral to the performance of a racial hierarchy.

The instability of blackness in Britain is partly grounded in the difficult process of immigration. The imagining of 'home', particularly for West Indian-born British citizens, requires a complex and reflexive narrative. Stuart Hall revealed that:

I've been puzzled by the fact that young black people in London today are marginalised, fragmented, nonfranchised, disadvantaged, and dispersed. And yet, they look as if they own the territory. Somehow, they too, in spite of everything, are centred, in place.³⁶

British colonisation is reliant on the concepts of progress, rationality, civilisation and culture, and these ideologies are used to justify the inequality of races. The activation of colonial power requires the performance of modes

of differentiation. During moments like the Brixton Riot, English power reveals its limits: the streets become saturated with signification. The Brixton Riot constructed a boundary between self and other. The TVHW project remained crucial to moving Brixton's black youth from the object to the subject of discourse. The project of constituting Jamaican-derived Britons as *other* involved the removal of their voice, visibility and subjectivity. Iain Chambers has suggested that 'representation involves repression'.³⁷ A racist discourse is a border dialogue: TVHW interrogated the mode of representation and vocalised new nodes of contestation. Two renderings of Britishness, one nostalgic and English and the other contemporary and multi-ethnic, are crawling from under the blood-soaked Union Jacks of the Victorian and Edwardian era.

Television is the public domain. The media does not reflect society - it is society. Therefore, to renegotiate the politics and meanings of Brixton, television had to be involved. TVHW explored new methodologies for the presentation of ideas within the medium. John Hartley has argued that 'studies of television always ... stand on the margin between popular culture and popular democracy'.³⁸ *The Brixton Tapes* are situated more tenuously, and tenaciously, than most historical texts. The ruptures and stretch marks within Thatcher's consensus were visible. Television history presents the potential for disempowered groups to convey their experiences and history, to perform their distinctions. Asymmetrical power relations are visible at points of tension. These differences of class, gender, race, sexuality and generation all mutually reinforce each other. If Ernest Cashmore is correct that 'television is culture today',³⁹ then *The Brixton Tapes* offer a resistive presence within Conservative imaginings of a little England.

Thinking about history becomes difficult in a presentist, televisually-saturated semiosphere. The need to incorporate television into history makes us re-evaluate the social purpose of the discipline. As Hay offered, 'television ... is a historically and socially situated *site* ... as well as a set of historical and socially situated *practices*, habits, and conventions for reproducing these processes'.⁴⁰ Problematising a national past allows the presentation of divergent patterns of dominance and marginality. Television history like *The Brixton Tapes* summons new questions about the study of cultural difference, the discipline and the effectiveness of identity politics. A *revisioning* of history allows the monitoring of belonging structures. Television is a trace of this process, as an intensely relational and volatile inter-textual field. The medium provides the space for the elaboration and presentation of non-dominant ideologies.

John Hartley asked 'what was television for?'⁴¹ *The Brixton Tapes* provide a site through which to answer his question. The undertaking by TVHW occupies the space between theory and politics, text and context, cultural studies and history. Greg Lanning, in assessing *The Brixton Tapes*, recognised that 'whatever the imperfections and limitations of our project, there is at least a better chance that the thoughts and feelings of the people of Brixton

will not be lost to history'.⁴² The workings of memory depend not only on the articulation of the teller, but the apparatus within which these renderings are placed. Memories mobilise an active and fluid interpretation of the past. History does matter, it does make a difference. From the cinders of Brixton, TVHW has maintained the spark of a resistive Englishness.

Notes

¹ S. Hall, 'Teaching Race', in M. Raleigh, J. Richmond, M. Simons, *The English Curriculum: Race*, London, ILEA English Centre, n.d., p.73.

² A. Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', *History Workshop*, vol. 12, 1981, p.96.

³ A.J.P. Taylor, quite provocatively, termed oral history 'old men drooling about their youth', cited in A. Seldon (ed.), *Contemporary History: Practice and Method*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988, p.3.

⁴ Although oral history has been embraced by the academy in the last ten years, Raphael Samuel still stated in 1994 that 'History, in the hands of the professional historian, is apt to present itself as an esoteric form of knowledge. It fetishizes archive-based research, as it has done ever since the Rankean revolution - or counter-revolution - in scholarship', *Theatres of Memory*, London, Verso, 1994, p.3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ 'Making History', *Television History Workshop* pamphlet, London, 1995.

⁷ G. Lanning, 'Television History Workshop, the Brixton Tapes', *History Workshop*, vol. 12, 1981, p.187.

⁸ *The Brixton Tapes*, Television History Workshop, London, Television and Video Post Production Services, 1981.

⁹ Lanning was also involved in the social justice campaign that protested the death of Richard Campbell, who had died in Ashford Remand Centre one year before the riot. A known schizophrenic, he died two weeks after commencing a hunger strike. The inquiry into his death pronounced death by self-neglect. Campaigners were suing for negligence. Greg Lanning explored the relationship between the Campbell campaign, the Brixton Riots and the Television History Workshop project in his 'Television History Workshop' article (see note 7).

¹⁰ The Right Honourable, The Lord Scarman, *Report of an Inquiry into the Brixton Disorders*, 10-12 April 1981, London, H.M. Stationery Office, 1981.

¹¹ Margaret Thatcher was quoted as saying: 'No one must condone the violence or the disgraceful acts which took place there ... They were criminal and they should not have occurred', in James Wightman's 'Jobless Rate "Not the Cause"', *Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday, 14 April 1981, p.1.

¹² Transcribed testimony, *The Brixton Tapes - Excerpts from the Interviews*, London, Television History Workshop, 1981, p.1.

¹³ P. Bishop, G. Brock, D. Clark, J. Hunt, G. Lean and H. Porter, 'The Night Brixton Burned', *Observer*, 12 April 1981, p.1.

¹⁴ 'C' participant, transcribed testimony, *Brixton Tapes - Excerpts*, p.4.

¹⁵ R. Young, *Colonial Desire*, London, Routledge, 1985, p.54.

¹⁶ For a careful unravelling of history/theory and colonialism, please refer to Robert Young's *White Mythologies*, London, Routledge, 1990.

¹⁷ Sunday Express Reporters, 'Brixton Riot - "It's War"', *Sunday Express*, 12 April 1981, p.1.

¹⁸ J. Walker, 'New Battles Hit Brixton', *Daily Mail*, 13 April 1981, p.1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 'Battle of Brixton', *Daily Mail*, Monday, 13 April 1981, p.1.

²¹ S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke, B. Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, New York, Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1978, p.38.

²² In Australia, press reports of Aboriginal issues also focus on the ideologies of black = problem or black = crime. As David Trigger has suggested, 'we should be sensitive to the way ideologies about race become a form of accepted commonsense which is reinforced through media treatment but does not necessarily originate from within the consciousness of those who produce media

products', in 'Everyone's Agreed, *The West Is All You Need: Ideology, Media and Aboriginality in Western Australia*', *Media Information Australia*, no. 75, February 1995, p.105.

²³ For a superb analysis of how colonial and postcolonial narratives feed into the ambiguity of post-imperial decline, please refer to Simon Gikandi's *Maps of Englishness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996.

²⁴ Walker, p.1.

²⁵ P. Burden and J. Hamshire, 'Inquiry into Disaster: Who Planned it and Why', *Daily Mail*, Monday, 13 April 1981, p.1.

²⁶ O. Summers and J. Warden, 'Detectives Probe: Who Lit the Fuse?', *Daily Express*, Monday, 13 April 1981, p.1.

²⁷ M. Morris, 'Things to do with Shopping Centres', in S. Sheridan (ed.), *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, London, Verso, 1988, p.195.

²⁸ J.R. Short, *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture, and Society*, London, Routledge, 1991, p.45.

²⁹ C. Hose and P. Dobbie, '50 Police Injured in New Brixton Battle', *Sunday Telegraph*, 12 April 1981, p.1.

³⁰ 'D' participant, *Brixton Tapes - Excerpts*, p.8.

³¹ Burden and Hamshire, p.1.

³² Standard Reporting Team, 'Why Why Why', *New Standard*, Monday 13 April 1981, p.1.

³³ Transcribed testimony, *Brixton Tapes - Excerpts*, p.13.

³⁴ H. Kaye, *The Face of the Crowd*, New York, Harvester, 1988, p.67.

³⁵ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p.4.

³⁶ S. Hall, 'Minimal Selves', in H. Baker, M. Diawara and R. Lindeborg (eds), *Black British Cultural Studies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p.114.

³⁷ I. Chambers, *Border Dialogues*, London, Routledge, 1990, p.6.

³⁸ J. Hartley, *Tele-ology*, London, Routledge, 1992, p.10.

³⁹ E. Cashmore, *And There Was Television*, London, Routledge, 1994, p.2.

⁴⁰ J. Hay, 'Afterword', in R. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourses, Reassembled*, London, Routledge, 1992, p.355.

⁴¹ Hartley, p.144.

⁴² Lanning, p.1.