



Julien, Isaac (b. 1960)

by Jim Ellis

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Filmmaker, artist, and cultural critic Isaac Julien is the most prominent member of a new wave of black artists and filmmakers involved in examining black and gay representation.

Born in London in 1960 to parents from St. Lucia, Julien studied painting at St. Martin's School of Art in London.

Julien's first film, *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), made at St. Martin's, shows many of the distinguishing features of the works that would follow, particularly a concern with the politics of representation. The film investigates the suspicious death of a black youth on the council estate where Julien lived. It draws upon the British tradition of documentary filmmaking, but abandons any pretence to objectivity in order to make a strong political statement.

Films that followed include *Territories* (1984) and *Passion of Remembrance* (co-directed with Maureen Blackwood, 1986), which explore the history and representation of blacks in Britain. Both of these films were made with the groundbreaking black film and video collective Sankofa, which Julien co-founded.

Julien's first film to explore gay themes, *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (1987), attempted to counter the anti-sex rhetoric of the 1980s and to promote more diverse representations of gay men on the screen.

Julien's next film is perhaps his best known, *Looking for Langston* (1989), produced for British television. This work, a lush and evocative meditation on the life of the black American poet Langston Hughes, is at the same time a sensuous portrayal of the black male body and black homosexuality.

Young Soul Rebels (1991), Julien's first feature film, is aimed at a younger and more mainstream audience than his previous works. Although not a commercial success, it won the Critics Prize at Cannes.

Set during the patriotic fervor of the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, the film uses the explosion of punk and soul into the British music scene to deal with a series of controversial issues, including racism, interracial sex, and homophobia in the black community. It intertwines the narrative of the murder of a black man in a cruising park with the story of two black youths, one gay and one straight, who run a pirate radio station.

The disagreement between the two about how best to increase the station's profile can be seen as a debate about the most productive relation of minority groups to the nation. Criticizing those who insist on the purity of minority identity categories and minority politics, the film uses the space of the dance floor to argue for an intermixing of identities and for a coalitional approach to oppositional politics.

In 1993, Julien established--with friends singer Jimmy Somerville, filmmaker Steve McLean, and writer/producer Mark Nash--a production company they named Normal films. The company is dedicated to producing queer documentaries and films. Among their productions are Julien's *The Attendant* (1993) and *A*



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Darker Side of Black (1994).

The Attendant portrays the interracial, sadomasochistic fantasies of a black museum guard, while *The Darker Side of Black* is a documentary about homophobia in the music of dance hall star Shabba Ranks and others.

Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask (1996) is once again a blend of documentary and fiction, looking at the life and works of the seminal theorist of colonial resistance.

Julien was also the senior producer of the four-part documentary series, *The Question of Equality*, a history of the gay and lesbian movement in America.

In 2000, Julien collaborated with Venezuelan choreographer Javier de Frutos on *Cinerama*, a gallery installation, with the main feature a video entitled *The Road to Mazatlan*, which gives a stylized view of the cowboy. The title of the video is from a line in Tennessee Williams' *Night of the Iguana*.

For almost as long as he has been making films, Julien has been a prominent cultural theorist in Britain and has for some years also worked as a visual artist. Since 1995, he has taught film and cultural theory, most recently at Harvard.

Throughout his career, Julien has experimented with fictional and nonfictional forms in order to challenge the dominant representations of both black men and homosexuality, as well as the dividing lines between various identity categories.

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About the Author

Jim Ellis is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Calgary, where he also teaches in the film program. He has published essays on gender and sexuality in early modern literature and a series of essays on the work of Derek Jarman and his contemporaries.