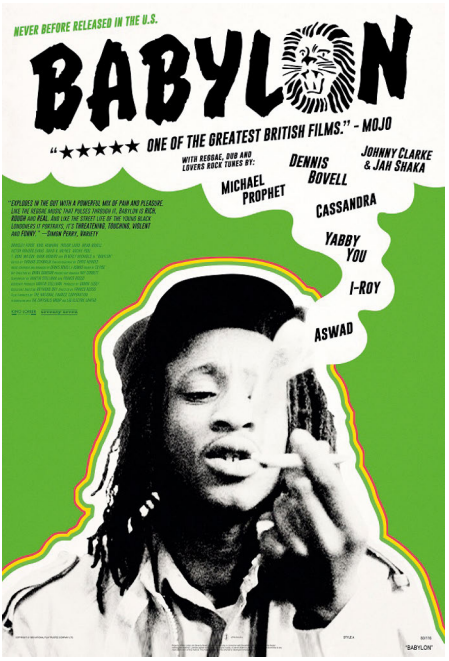
Babylon (1980)

Nathaniel Weisberg

dir. Franco Rosso; prod. Gavrik Losey; screenplay Franco Rosso, Martin Stellman; photography Chris Menges; music Dennis Bovell, Aswad. 35mm, color, 95 mins. National Film Finance Corporation, distrib. Kino Lorber.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

»This *is* my fucking country lady. And it's never been fucking lovely.« These words come from a beat-up garage in Thatcher-era South London. Beefy (played by Trevor Laird) and the Ital Lions, an upstart sound system based in Brixton, have just been told to »fuck off back to your own countries« by a white neighbor. This sentiment would echo nearly four decades later in Trump-era America. Re-released in the U.S. in 2019, *Babylon* was lauded for its timely relevance in the context of a race-baiting U.S. president who had recently told Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley to »go back« to their own countries. First released in 1980, a time when dub and reggae were central to West Indian identity in Britain, *Babylon*'s plot portrays the Lions' attempt to face off against a rival sound system led by the renowned Jah Shaka. They haggle with producers, argue with parents and partners, and spread posters advertising the contest on street corners. The film's emotional and dramatic thrust, however, arises from the plot's margins. The resistance the Lions face from corrupt police, racist employers, and bigoted community members provides the stage for a series of conflicts over the meaning of home and moral virtue within an oppressive system. This struggle is epitomized by the film's protagonist, Blue (played by Brinsley Forde), whose steadily building inner turmoil leads him to stab an abusive National Front neighbor after the Lions' clubhouse refuge is defaced and destroyed.

Babylon's transatlantic cultural resonance was not foreordained. The film depicts the struggles faced by young Black British men under early Thatcher-era systemic racism. *Babylon*'s characters speak in a blend of patois and London slang, and its scenes

display a hyper-localized world of pool halls, railway underpasses, and abandoned houses. Consequently, the film failed to find a U.S. distributor in 1980, deemed either too controversial or culturally and linguistically unintelligible for American audiences. The New York Film Festival declined to screen *Babylon*, predicting it would be racially inflammatory, while *Variety* wrote that »cautious handling would seem advisable in markets where [the depiction of] a bunch of young rebellious immigrants as ostensible ›heroes‹ could be viewed as provocative« (Newland 100).

By 2019, such squeamishness had faded for many. Re-released in the U.S., *Babylon* was lauded in popular publications including *Pitchfork*, *Vice*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Rather than suppressed, its depictions of anti-Black racism and police violence were deemed critically relevant. As sociologist Gary Younge demonstrates, narratives of racial injustice tend to move in a unidirectional cultural current from America to Europe (Younge). *Babylon* itself had already been dismissed in the U.S. Its modern reception therefore defied the logic of inward looking and self-prioritizing American disinterest. The film's re-release and reception cease to appear unlikely, however, when viewed in the context of an altered cultural landscape that has shifted toward acknowledging discourse of race and resistance as global phenomena.

Babylon was filmed in 1979, five months after soon-to-be Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sympathized with voters whom she said were afraid that Britain would be »swamped by people with a different culture« (Thatcher). As such, the film was initially viewed through the insular lens of existential fears surrounding the fate of the British nation—incorporated into melodramatic white moral panic surrounding Black »criminality« and »un-assimilability.« Blue's stabbing a racist neighbor, Beefy's headbutting white hanger-on Ronnie (Karl Howman) for »talking Black,« and the beating of an older white man all dramatized a post-imperial anxiety in which moral legibility was inscribed onto the threatened white body as a metaphor for national decline. The British Board of Film Classification's decision to give *Babylon* an X rating was justified by the rationale that young Black viewers could feel »confused and troubled« by its depictions of institutional and public racism, a racially paternalist logic sustained by the notion that young Black Britons were »inherently emotional« and inclined to rebel »at the slightest provocation« (Nwonka 18). Reviewers interpreted the film as an »alarming […] portrait of seething frustration waiting to explode« (Newland) and a demonstration of »anti-white prejudice« showing »how piteously difficult it is for a white to enter this world« (Walker). Through such emphasis on white alienation, victimhood, and loss of virtuous innocence, Black realism became white melodrama.

It is only by extracting *Babylon* from overwrought operas of post-imperial decline that its melodramatic aspects can be understood as real, both emotionally and politically. *Babylon* calls for the moral recognition of its characters' innocence, repeatedly invoking »sympathy for the virtues of beset victims« struggling against a racially unjust system (Williams 42). Blue, for instance, is fired from his job as a mechanic, with his boss telling him »I don't like monkeys who get too clever in my garage.« The Lions' celebration of Lover Boy's (Victor Romero Evans) engagement is interrupted by bottles thrown from the balcony of National Front goons. The film's institutional critique of racist policing is framed in a conventionally suspenseful manner: Just when Blue appears to have escaped the car chasing him, it inches out again, and the white men beating him are only revealed as policemen when they tell him to »get it right, son. We

stopped you, you done a runner.« Blue's innocence is juxtaposed with the officers' immorality. His protest—»I ain't done nothing«—is futile.

The Lions' ability to claim »home« spaces is similarly at the mercy of the hostile environment in which they live. When their clubhouse is destroyed, with »GO HOME« and Nazi symbols plastered on the wall, it serves as a denial of both their legal status as British citizens and their power to carve out symbolic spaces of community. Likewise, the audience is invited to commiserate with the Lions' collective sense of despondency and anger as a white woman bursts into the garage where the crew has been euphorically dancing to »Warrior Charge,« the film's anthem, a track recorded by Brinsley Forde's reggae group, Aswad. Blue is dejected as the woman declares: »This was a lovely area before you came here. Fuck off back to your own countries.« If a melodramatic mode of excess and appeal to moral recognition characterized the scene's descent »from ecstasy to agony in one fell swoop,« as *Rolling Stone* wrote, this by no means denies its verisimilitude (Fear).

Yet, to characterize Blue and the Lions as victims only would be misleading. If in conventional melodrama the victim-hero tends to accept a fate that the audience is instructed to reject, *Babylon*'s characters inspire resistance through action rather than through passivity. Blue would rather get fired than reconcile himself with his boss' plea of »Look…you know what the system is.« And Beefy has to be restrained by Ronnie and Blue from stabbing the National Front neighbor after Lover Boy's engagement party. Of particular importance is the film's climactic scene. In the midst of battling Shaka, Blue sings »We Can't Take No More of That« and shouts »Stand firm!« as the police break down the dancehall's doors. His defiance is instructive, this attack on »home« too much to bear when placed in the context of the »brutality, hypocrisy, [and] the same immorality« perpetuated by »four hundred years« of British imperialism.

It is this element of the film's didactic emotional landscape that translated most directly into its contemporary American reception. *Babylon*'s relevance was repeatedly affirmed by reviewers, described as a »present-day metaphor for […] aspects of Donald Trump's White House« (Bradley) and a »still timely *cri de coeur*« (Fear). In an interview with *Vice*, Brinsley Forde was more explicit, declaring that »the similarities are still striking« and »the problems of bigotry, poverty, and class still keep us on the same treadmill« (Ransome). Such identification could be interpreted as bleak and timeless. White Britons histrionically lamenting the downfall of their once great nation found a successor in ethno-nationalist Trumpian rhetoric.

Yet *Babylon*'s resonance in America was more amplification than echo. Both the construction of racist discourse and the resistance against it, seen in 1987 by historian Paul Gilroy as coinciding »so precisely with national frontiers,« were now understood as global (46). Viewed outside the prism of white anxiety and national declinist drama, the film's complex portrayals of victimhood and innocent suffering, relationships with »home,« and psychological alienation could be considered on their own terms, and thus as calls for transnational solidarity. Ironically, *Babylon*'s adaptation of conventional melodramatic techniques to convey emotional, moral, and lived reality can only be fully acknowledged once the film is removed from its melodramatic political framing. Unlike previous British »social problem« films, *Babylon*'s conclusion provides no explicit pathway to reconciliation. Instead, the sounds of »Warrior Charge« and police sirens compete as Blue refuses to flee the dancehall—singing »we can't take no more of that« and »you can't fool the youth no more.« The police smash down the doors. Blue's fate is left unclear.

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