

Parminder Vir OBE

Vice Chancellor, Governors of the University, His Worship the Mayor of Maidstone,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Graduands:

A recent article in The Guardian asked why there are so few women filmmakers? Only six percent of film directors, and barely one quarter of film producers are women.

Parminder Vir has dedicated her career to rectifying this imbalance, as well as endeavouring to increase the range and diversity of people both behind and in front of the camera. She is an award-winning film and television producer, media consultant, and cultural diversity advocate, who has applied her expertise in Film and Media Finance to bringing marginalised talent into the mainstream of global film and television production.

One word that defines Parminder is 'connection'. Her career has been a series of trailblazing 'firsts', bridging disparate worlds and agendas. Recently, for example, her consultancy work at the ION Film Festival in Nigeria brought together Bollywood, the largest producer of movies in the world, with Nollywood, the second largest producer in terms of titles.

“Film as a culture” says Parminder, “is a meeting point. It is the only medium other than music that enables people to meet across cultures, national boundaries and languages. Film is an emotional medium and if we are telling universal stories, it doesn't matter where you are.”

Parminder's love of cinema and enthusiasm for Bollywood movies goes back to her childhood in India. She was born in the Punjab, and at the age of 10 moved to Southampton. Parminder recalls that the first film she was taken to see in the UK was *The Sound of Music*. “Despite not being able to understand a word of English, I was moved” she said “by the familiarity of the song and dance in the movie, and I remember thinking that being in England was not going to be so bad.”

Inspired in part by her father, a leader in the Sikh community and trade unionist, politics has remained integral to her life. The passion and commitment of her early street activism set the stage for her later work facilitating and enabling ethnic minority artists to become key players in mainstream creative culture.

Parminder began her career in 1978 as an Arts Administrator with the Minority Arts Advisory Service in the Midlands. She was later appointed Arts Officer at the Commonwealth Institute, programming local, national and international arts events, including the UK's first Festival of Black American Independent Cinema.

The 1981 civil disturbances and ensuing Scarman Report, highlighted the cultural marginalisation of the UK's ethnic minorities, and forced a review of funding and cultural policy towards black and ethnic minority arts practitioners. At this time Parminder moved on to head the Race Equality Unit in the Arts and Recreation Department of the Greater London Council setting up ground breaking initiatives to train ethnic minority artists, filmmakers and organizations to become, what she terms, "Investment Ready."

Jonathan Powell, Head of Drama at the BBC, aware of her GLC work commissioned Parminder to research the relationship between ethnic minorities and the media. She cut a show reel showcasing the talent of black filmmakers and directors in Britain, which received an overwhelmingly positive response from the media community at executive level. This period marked a key shift in Parminder's career into television, in which she progressed from researcher, to assistant producer, and eventually series producer before leaving to found her own production company, Formation Films.

Her film and television credits, too numerous to list in their entirety, include:

- The 1991 BBC series *Our War*, in which Middle Eastern directors were commissioned to explore the effect of the Gulf War on their different countries and people.
- Channel 4's Critical Eye season, where Parminder programmed *Women Call the Shots*, a season of films made by female directors exploring feminism and culture.

In 1996, Parminder moved to Carlton Television as their Cultural Diversity Consultant, moving on to become Executive Producer and Diversity Adviser, where she designed and managed a series of innovative initiatives, as well as co-founding the Cultural Diversity Network. "Diversity is about seeing talent, not ticking boxes" she says.

At Carlton she produced *Single Voices*, *Melting Pot*, plus Carlton's *Multicultural Achievement awards*, and the *EMMA* and *MOBO* awards. The EMMA Awards, celebrate the contribution of individuals to cultural diversity, regardless of their ethnicity - recent recipients have included David Beckham, Lucy Liu, Venus Williams and Lemar; while the MOBO awards celebrate music of black origin.

Parminder produced the 1998 feature film *Babymother*, a reggae musical capturing the vibrant black dancehall culture of Harlesden, London, and one of the first black musicals to be produced in Britain for Film Four. (Incidentally, I am delighted to welcome here today Julien Henriques, who co-wrote and directed *Babymother*).

Moving out of what she calls "hands on production" in 2004, Parminder developed her expertise in film and media finance while manager of Ingenious World Cinema, responsible for establishing a fund investing in content originating from the World's emerging economies, and is currently Managing Director of PVL Consultants.

Parminder was awarded an OBE for her services to the Broadcasting and Film industry in the Queen's birthday honours list in June 2002.

Throughout her career she has put her skill and expertise in the service of the work she cares passionately about, and the different voices represented in the work. She expressed these sentiments in a defining statement about the highly regarded 1992 film *Algeria: Women at War*:

"There are many truths, just as there are many faiths and many voices. The role of film (and the media more broadly) is to respond to these different voices. My work is to present the truth from places that are not recognised".

Parminder Vir's commitment to these different voices has generated a body of work that challenges the mainstream of Film and Broadcast Media and opens it up to perspectives that emerge from the margins, where cultural innovation so often begins.

The preparation of this all too brief tribute has been a great pleasure for me. I have been on a journey that began with discovering the CV of a remarkable woman who has excelled - not just in one field, but many ... and then, on meeting her, finding a person with passion, vision, integrity, tenacity and curiosity – qualities that lie at the heart of her achievements.

Before I close, I asked Parminder whether she had any advice for the graduands in the audience today. And she said:

“Always stay connected to your passion, and if you find yourself excited, intimidated, and challenged, all at the same time ... then you know you are in the right place.”

The University for the Creative Arts is delighted to award Parminder Vir OBE with an Honorary Master of Arts Degree.

I therefore ask the Vice Chancellor to confer the award of Master of Arts (*in honoris causa*) upon Parminder Vir.

Delivered on Friday, 9 July 2010 at the UCA Graduation Ceremony

All Saints Church Maidstone

Orator: Christy Johnson (Associate Dean, School of Fine Arts)