

## VISIONS AND REVISIONS: FILM/IN(G) THE CARIBBEAN

Guest edited by Jean Antoine-Dunne

### ABSTRACTS

#### **Recent Developments in Caribbean Francophone Literature: Creating an ‘Internal Gaze’ in Francophone Caribbean Film – Louise Hardwick**

Louise Hardwick first contextualises three Francophone films within the context of the relationship that exists between the French speaking islands and the colonies and the problem of differing languages within the Caribbean region itself. She then examines elements of crime and catastrophe as these are represented in films by Guadeloupian Jean-Claude Flamand-Barny, Martiniquan Guy deslauriers and Patrick Chamoiseau, and Guadeloupian-Armenian comic and actor Pascal Légitimus. Her theoretical frame is *créolité* based on the literary manifesto *Eloge de la Créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*, 1989.

Louise extracts from this manifesto an important idea, which calls on writers to direct their attention to creating an internal gaze to counteract the external effects of French hegemony. This also involves working towards the creation of close bonds between writer and reader. She applies this principle to film and the director/viewer relationship.

Before beginning her analysis of the selected films, Hardwick provides a brief history of Francophone cinema. In particular, she focuses on attempts by Aimé Césaire, Suzy Landeau and more recently, individuals such as Jean-Marc Césaire, and Osange Silou to create an indigenous industry in tune with its Caribbean audiences and reflecting this ‘internal gaze’. *Nèg maron* is seen as film that benefitted from new strategies for developing a Francophone cinema industry and one that strives to connect to its Antillean audiences. This film deals with the violence that surrounds the deprived young men of an unnamed Caribbean island. In this it focuses on the interior traumas of the marginalised. The film then ‘skilfully blends the present-day era with references to the slave past – the title alone (the maroon) forges this connection – by passing comment on the ways in which this past continues to inflect the present.’

However, in its lack of subtitles and its use of Guadeloupian creole, the film poses a problem for those not versed in this language. But as a film of the people, the work in its non-patronising tone and its featuring of a reggae/dancehall star and other well-known figures in the world of popular music, maintains close bonds with its Caribbean audiences who relate also to its exploration of the interrelationships between individual, family and community and its fearless examination of the resilient racial tensions and inequalities that continue to exist between *békés* who have retained power and marginalised blacks. The film is didactic and moves towards the idea that despite the continuing oppressive remnants of slavery, freedom of mind and person is attainable.

Deslauriers and Chamoiseau’s *Biguine* (2005) is more overtly influenced by the *créoliste* authors’ desire for cultural products which would ‘turn the gaze inwards,’ and the film enacts a very different form of interiority than that found in *Nèg maron*. It uses the historic story of the

eruption of the volcano in Saint-Pierre to probe the many small narratives that constitute Martiniquan history, privileging in the first instance the personal narrative of a young couple, musicians, who seek to make their lives in Saint-Pierre, but who soon recognise that their particular music has no currency in the face of European culture. They then develop the *biguine-bèlair*. The film uses Martinican creole song lyrics throughout. The work speaks specifically to the difficulty of Martiniquan filmmakers who are both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ of dominant culture and who despite poor funding are determined to produce works on themes that are intrinsically of the people.

Pascal Légitimus’s *Antilles-sur-Seine* attempts to harness the potential of the diaspora. Légitimus deliberately used black actors despite opposition, and framed the film within the context of slavery. This, despite the fact that it is a comedy, makes it a clear interrogation of the effects of racism on black diasporic communities in Paris. It in fact creates strong parallels between the power structures of slavery and the present day. Hardwick concludes that the blend of humour and satire has, however, led to the grotesque and the film does a disservice to black communities by caricaturing them. The plurality of approaches by these three directors and scriptwriters is in itself a significant factor, demonstrating the various perspectives from which the Caribbean can see itself. All three films share a desire to speak to social and historical issues from Caribbean perspectives and to connect directly to their Caribbean audiences.

### **Filmic Autobiography in the Caribbean Diaspora – Elspeth Kydd**

In *Caribbean Autobiography* Sandra Pouchet Paquet claims that “the radical instability of the Caribbean as a cultural domain coincides with the radical instability of autobiography as a genre.” Her study foregrounds the role of autobiography in the literature of the Caribbean and its migratory diasporas. This essay extends that interest by exploring autobiographical practices within Caribbean diaspora film and video practice. The work of artists such as Richard Fung and Campbell Ex use the first person documentary form to explore the complexity and fragmentation of Caribbean diaspora identities.

Recent film theorists have noted a subjective turn in documentary practice in the wake of the celebration of objectivity that characterised the direct cinema movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Renov, Lebow, Dovey, Bruzzi). Mainly developing out of US experimentation with documentary style, the work of filmmakers such as Ross McElwee, Camille Billops and Marlon Riggs marks a shift towards a practice based in exploring documentary style through a first person voice and inclusion of the filmmaker as both subject and object.

Given Paquet’s claim about the relation between Caribbean culture and autobiographical practice, the work of diaspora filmmakers explores the complex and fragmented nature of Caribbean identity on a number of levels. Autobiographical film and video often functions to destabilise fixed notions of identity, by its focus on subjectivities that are unfixed and under construction. This fragmentation and instability of identities correlates to the understanding of Caribbeanness as explored by writers such as Hall, Glissant, Benitez-Rojo. First person practise is reflexive, aware of its status as representation, and thus embodies Stuart Hall’s understanding of the constructed nature of Caribbean identity that is in the process of ‘becoming’: a construct born as much through the practises of representation as through any fixed notion of “cultural

identity” or tradition. First person narration raises issues of how Caribbean diaspora documentaries position an ambiguous subjective voice in order to question issues of identity in the face of migration and the on-going history of oppression.

Further, as an autobiographical practise, Caribbean first person films often view the past through the elusiveness of memory, thus creating a narrative or a historical record through the visualisation of memory and the fragments of memory’s props in the form of reminiscences, archival images, and home mode representations. Memory in these works can function politically as a counter-discourse to the commemorations of official history. Thus, as reflexive and subjective practise, autobiographical film from the Caribbean diaspora marks a shift away from the authoritative voice evident in conventional documentaries to a first person voice: a voice that mediates its political position through personalisation. In sum, these first person films present the contingent and conflicting identities of the migrant, formed in the multiple migrations that make up the Caribbean experience of diaspora.

### **Stillness in Motion: *Todos los Caminos Conducen al Mar* – Gabrielle A. Hezekiah**

The interface between still and moving images has received increased attention in recent discussions within film studies. Such discussions have offered a means of analysing the inclusion of photographs and freeze frames within film and video and the opportunity that this presents for reflection on our experience of the photograph as the basic unit of film. These discussions typically refer to formal considerations within narrative cinema rather than the broader field of contemporary art in which artists might utilize the still and moving image within a gallery setting. In this essay, Hezekiah focuses on a video installation by Cuban artists Liudmila & Nelson and points to the ways in which this work might allow us to reflect on our experience of the photographic as an experience of time and space – in addition to motion – facilitated both by the character of the still/moving interface and by the sculptural environment of the installation itself. Drawing on the insights of Raymond Bellour, she suggests that *Todos los Caminos Conducen al Mar* (All Roads Lead to the Sea) offers an experience of the photographic, rather than the photograph, in the midst of the moving image installation. She suggests further, with the aid of Kate Mondloch and Henri Bergson, that notions of the photographic in this installation – together with the physical structure of the installation – allow viewers two possible modes of experiencing stillness, motion and time.

### **Colour, Spirit and Sex in *Desiree*, *Almacita* and *Ava and Gabriel* – Jean Antoine-Dunne**

Felix de Rooy and Norman de Palm’s groundbreaking film *Ava and Gabriel: Histoire de Amor* speaks to several issues in Caribbean history and culture. It examines the layers of bigotry in Dutch Antillean governance including colonial and religious hegemonic systems including the army, and explores issues such as racism and homophobia. This film continues the examination of such matters already to be found in de Rooy’s two earlier works, in particular *Almacita*. In each part of this trilogy de Rooy uses the specific belief systems of the Caribbean to posit an overarching philosophy that acts to resist strategies of dominance.

De Rooy as filmmaker and painter uses colour as symbolic of spirit and equally of racial division and gay rights. His filmmaking techniques also take on the force of resistance strategies in their use of shot levels, in particular as he plays with ideas of dominance and subservience. He deploys the tools and techniques of his twin arts (painting and filmmaking) to frame a discourse on Caribbean identity that suggests that there is a long and resilient tradition waiting to be uncovered if only the artist has faith in his endeavor. Art becomes a vehicle for uncovering the power that resides in people and place.

The traditions he finds there are deeply infused with spirit belief, in particular Santería. This profound spiritual presence suffuses every aspect of his work. The work of art becomes then a sign of the concrete manifestation of this power. But it is the body that is the site of both trauma and resistance and the ground upon which the drama is set in the early twentieth century and are played out. The body is depicted in three primary ways:

1. The female body is the place of dominance and repression.
2. The male body is the site of desire and violence.
3. The colonial body, exemplified in the governor's wife, is the scene of the spiritual forces enacting and showing their power. This is symbolised in the sign of the iguana.

### **The Other Jamaica: Music and the Construction of the City in Jamaican Film – Rachel Moseley Wood**

This essay poses crucial questions about Jamaican cinema's role in the construction of the idea of Jamaica. Are cinematic representations of the city of Kingston, which arguably shape its image in the world, so layered by class distinctions and prejudices that one must unpin the very class structures that hide behind popular representations of place?

In her essay Moseley Wood looks at the ways in which Jamaican films attempt to construct the local environment as sites that reflect the lived experiences of its residents. While the essay comments on Jamaican film in general, it specifically addresses a grouping within that body of work which is referred to as "the city films," where the author suggests that the process of reclaiming place is particularly intense.

Moseley Wood identifies the use of popular forms of Jamaican music in this group of films as key components in the articulation of a local cinematic voice in which the project of reclaiming place is a major concern. She argues that although the extensive use of popular music plays an important role in the films' commercial viability in overseas markets, it also endows the films with "transformative, counterhegemonic potential" (Stolzoff, 227) and plays a significant role in articulating a perspective that is local and which privileges the experiences of marginalised Jamaicans.

The essay examines the interplay between power and status and resilient colonial stereotypes on the one hand, and the desire for representation that is of the people, on the other. This tension may be found in particular in the use of music and creole language within cinematic forms that cater to commercial interests. In constructing this argument Moseley Wood explores the contradictions in representations of violence within local home grown cinema. She claims that it

is not enough to argue that these images are generated from the outside by those who see the Caribbean as an “any place whatever” site of sea, sex, sand and exoticism. Instead, this use of place is a reclamation by Jamaican filmmakers of space – so that these sites become ‘inscribed with history’ and lived experience.

This focus on lived experience marks a difference from the history-saturated films of say Cuba or Martinique. Instead Jamaican cinema foregrounds current socio-economic conditions and focuses frequently on how issues of class and race, that have their origin in the past, affect the struggle for survival in the contemporary city, in particular those individuals she describes as the ‘sufferahs’.

The focus on marginalised peoples who live in the city means that the use of Jamaican creole is an important vehicle of representation, since it ensures a historic weight through language and gives authenticity, but also secures a particular point of view. This use of language also shores up the fact of Kingston as a city deeply divided between ‘Uptown’ and ‘Downtown’ and within cinema this verbal language becomes an intense mechanism for identifying and then analysing deep-seated social divisions. These tensions find expression in violence since as she argues “Kingston [is] a literal war zone” in which its poorer residents become the pawns of the political parties in their ruthless bid for power.

Moseley Wood argues, then, for the validity of scenes of crime and catastrophe as almost permanent images within local cinema while differentiating very clearly between these images and the exoticism of stereotypical Hollywood depictions. The city space, for her, is a site of contestation between emerging groups within contemporary Jamaica; and language and song are the primary means of depicting these current conflicts and the constant desire to improve one’s lot in life despite the pressure of historically determined hegemonic forces.

These ideas are found in all the films discussed (*The Harder They Come*, *Dancehall Queen*, *Third World Cop*, *Better Mus’ Come*, and *Ghett’ a Life*). The struggle within modernity is captured in reggae and dancehall sound tracks and in the presence of artistes whose performances are synonymous with ghetto life and the downtown struggles for survival (Beanie Man, Jimmy Cliff, Ninja Man and Rockers as examples). The music and performance fulfill several functions that Woods sums up succinctly after analysis in her comment that aesthetically, reggae and dancehall help to define the city films as Jamaican, bringing to these texts a distinctive Jamaican sensibility and quality: a sound that creates an immediate connection with the country, and which endows the text with an instantly recognised cultural marker that grounds it in a local context. As popular music forms, reggae and dancehall are important oppositional cultural practices, and they have the potential to intensify the films’ counter-hegemonic intentions. (10)

Noting that Jamaican filmmakers combine hardheaded business sense with ideological objectives, she suggests that cinematic practise must seek to avoid alienating audiences while reclaiming place. Reggae in particular has succeeded in achieving a balance between market forces and cultural autonomy. Cinema follows this lead. Music and language as cultural markers also enable the accessing and mobilising of diaspora markets through recognition and even nostalgia that create ‘alternative’ ways of disseminating knowledge. This aids in challenging the

dominant force that is Hollywood. This challenge results in part because Jamaica, through its music and the performance of international figures, has achieved a certain “brand” name that facilitates dissemination of its products; this despite Gilroy’s claim that *The Harder They Come* alienated the music from its origins. In this regard Moseley Wood argues that Gilroy has not situated himself within Jamaica nor does he see the film and indeed the music from inside. In fact she goes further and sees the multi-dimensional effects of global dissemination and local desire as providing part of the excitement of a film such as *The Harder They Come*, and indeed its iconic and defining status.

### **Songs for an Open Road: Humberto Solás’s *Miel para Oshún* (2001) and *Barrio Cuba* (2005) – A Legacy Lives On – Diane Accaria-Zavala**

Diane Accaria-Zavala’s examination of the road movie and in particular two films of this genre by Humberto Solás focuses attention on the political dimensions and potential of Cuban revolutionary cinema.

She begins by citing Humberto Solás as a source of cultural unity as a filmmaker and a figure whose films disrupted the antagonisms between America and Cuba. Solás’s use of the road movie then becomes symbolic of a desire for pathways and connections. Using a combination of new technology, various modes of filming, experimentation, culturally specific forms and conventional Hollywood narrative, Solás managed to create a form of filmmaking that both appealed to popular tastes, ensured a specific Cuban spirit and crossed political and cultural barriers. He demonstrated the efficacy of film in developing a global language.

Moreover he solved the problem of maintaining artistic integrity while satisfying market concerns as well as the controlling resources of the state, all of which were necessary for the Cuban film industry to exist. In maneuvering between various fiscal and political and aesthetic forces Solás created what Accaria-Zavala calls a “hybrid film aesthetic” that asserted a “post-national identity” for Cuba.

Accaria-Zavala links the road movie to the “Ulysses syndrome” which forms an integral part of the tradition of novel writing and which fuses the interior with exterior life of individual and nation. In her reading, the road movie, as with the picaresque, allows a connection between those who travel (or go into exile) and the land of origin providing a fluid yet tangible gateway of interaction. Given the several departures from Cuba, this form represents a psychic and cultural gateway and bridge.

This arc of communication is created through film’s seductive qualities and its capacity to weld together audience and character. It thus seduces the viewer into a sense of community and collective identity that we find ably exploited in the film *Miel para Oshún*. This film, Accaria-Zavala argues, challenges and redefines “many notions of nationhood previously defined by the state.” Its status as a film about the collective is to be found in the demolition of the borders between the exile and the worker; the incorporation of Santería, though this practise is denied by the state; “in fact all clandestine actions that go on while the official discourse denies them, ranging from the innocuous existence of independent *paladares* [eateries] to tourist-related

prostitution,” are overtly incorporated in this film. They are, in fact, “offered the normalcy they truly have within the national landscape.”

The film creates a hybrid using the Latin American model of non-actors alongside professional actors to insert the reality of lived experiences. Further it reconstructs the past through the insertion of fragments of childhood memories of migration that intersect with the nostalgia of return to a lost homeland. These fragments are bound together by the trope of travel fundamental to the road movie. The film therefore stitches together the aspirations of imperfect cinema and the longings of those who have gone beyond the borders of Latin America. In this way the filmmaker is able to question the interference of bureaucracy while staying close to the ideals of the revolution. Art, it is argued, must be free to express its dissenting voice and its own vision. All those who undertake the journey on the road share a faith and a destiny based on the original vision of revolution, despite their differing circumstances. What they also share is a synthesising system of belief shaped by multiple historic incursions that have led to cultural diversity and this has remained despite official attempts to construct a homogenous doctrine. The film, Accaria-Zavala theorises, calls and envisions re-unification, despite the failure of America to recognise Cuba’s status as one nation that includes its residents and its diaspora. Essentially the film embraces the diversity of the Cuban people, “including those Cuban Americans who dream of returning and perhaps re-inserting themselves into the national context.”

*Barrio Cuba* as the second part of a projected trilogy uses what might be described as an anti-aesthetic approach to the chronicling of poverty and hardship in Cuba. Once again “a road is taken, a voyage is set upon (either out of Havana or out of Cuba), for the seeking of economic betterment and the elusive idea of happiness, and the tribulation and pain of separation become an intrinsic part of each of the stories told.”

The stories here are metaphors of nation narrated through the trope of journeying. The roads offered represent escape, but also the possibility of return. Religious syncretism is also seen here as a form of Cuban reconciliation – an underlying belief in the possibility of a unity evolved from diverse paths and differences.

The author concludes that *Miel para Oshún* and *Barrio Cuba* show that communication is possible between disparate, and at times even desperate, people. Both films are about finding one’s place in the world, and seeing it all anew. As it exposes the ‘One’ into endless encounters with the ‘Other,’ the transforming factor in these films is the road. Far from privileging the ‘authenticity’ of the national, these films refer to the culturally specific but only to re-address, renegotiate, and transcend its parameters to effectively move from a national ‘I’ to a continental collective, and more globally effective, ‘We.’

### **Interview with Yao Ramesar – Dina Poon Chong**

This section includes an interview with Yao Ramesar by Dina Poon Chong in which the filmmaker further elaborates on his theory of Caribbeing. Poon Chong and Ramesar discuss several illustrations by the artist including the recent *Haiti Bride*. In this Ramesar provides a manifesto of his use of natural lighting and situates this as a resistance strategy aimed at making Caribbean people the centre of filmmaking. He suggests that the natural light of the Caribbean

enables a depiction of the people of the region beyond exotica. He further suggests that he has developed forms of lighting the black skin that move black people from the peripheries of the frame to which they have been previously delegated.