

CARIBBEAN CINEMA A NEW ARRIVANT FOR CARIBBEAN STUDIES

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Film and television are key signifiers of the Caribbean in the 20th century. A study of films and videos made in, or about, the Caribbean will help to define the Caribbean as an imagined space, and provide students with fuller perspectives on issues of regional and national identity, and cultural development. Research into the work of Caribbean and Caribbean Diaspora film- and video-makers will help students and scholars to define a Caribbean aesthetic or, at least, sensibility. This article (a) provides an introduction to the early history of cinema in the Caribbean, analysing the image of the region as portrayed in Hollywood films; (b) looks at the definition of a Caribbean film; and (c) argues for a vibrant indigenous film industry. While Film and Media Studies have not yet been widely introduced into the education system in the Caribbean at the primary, secondary, or tertiary levels, either as individual courses or incorporated into the social studies, English, or creative arts curriculum, the article suggests ways in which students can be exposed to this new area of Caribbean Studies. The suggestion is that the work of such film-makers as Perry Henzel, Euzhan Palcy, and Tomás Guitiérrez Alea should be studied along with that of V. S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, and Edward Braithwaite.

The Caribbean, one of the first of the regions in the "New World" to be explored, conquered, and colonised by Europe, is one of the least known and understood areas in the world. While Caribbean students have an awareness of the writers, artists, politicians, and others who have made a contribution to the development of the region, they have little if any knowledge of Caribbean film-makers or their films. Most are unaware that the Cuban film-maker, Tomás Guitiérrez Alea, was nominated for an Academy award for best foreign film for *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993), or that Euzhan Palcy, from Martinique, was the first black woman to direct a Hollywood film, *Dry White Season* (1990). The Caribbean has had a long and rich history in film and has produced a small, yet significant, body of work.

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Film is such an important medium in defining a region's identity that it should be studied along with such other disciplines as art, music, literature, and history; all key elements in understanding a Caribbean aesthetic. It is proposed that the definition of the Caribbean should include the English-, French-, Spanish-, Dutch-, and Creole-speaking countries and dependencies. As a geographical entity, the region bridges North and South America, consisting of a number of islands from Bermuda and Bahamas in the north to Trinidad and Tobago in the south. It also includes Belize and Guyana, while several other littoral portions of Central and South America; especially parts of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua have significant Caribbean population groups. A study of Caribbean Cinema must also include an analysis of a number of films produced by film-makers of Caribbean origin living in the Caribbean Diaspora.

Film is one of the last of the major art forms to be developed. The cinema was officially born in December 28, 1895 in Paris, at a public screening of short, silent films produced by the Lumière brothers. Within a few years, audiences in major cities throughout the world enthusiastically received this new invention, and Latin America and the Caribbean were involved from the beginning of this movement. In the Caribbean and Latin American region, the very first film showings were held in July 1896 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Montevideo, Chile; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. These were soon followed by showings in Mexico City (August 1896) and Guatemala (September 1896). There were screenings in Lima in 1897 and, in that year, films made by the Lumières and Thomas Edison were screened in Havana. Films were shot for the first time in the region in Venezuela (1897), to be followed by Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico in the late 1890s, Chile in 1902, and Columbia in 1905. Film was soon to become very popular with the general public throughout the region, especially in Cuba where there were 200 cinemas established by 1910 (Armes, 1987, pp.164-166).

Trinidad and Tobago's first cinema, *The London Electric Theatre*, in London Street, Woodbrook, was opened in 1911, and the programme comprised nine shorts as well as current news and events. Part-owner of the cinema, the musician and entertainer, Lanky Belasco, provided piano accompaniment during the screenings. At first, cinema was very much a scientific novelty for an urban elite audience, however, it soon became a popular entertainment medium. Crowds flocked to *The London Electric* to watch such shows as *The Leopard Queen* and *Kidnapped Mother-in-Law* and, through the newsreels, even experienced battles from the First World War. They paid 24 cents, 16 cents, or 8 cents depending on where they sat (Anthony, 1985, pp.170-174).

The desire to capture even larger audiences was seen in Mexico, where some early exhibitors moved into the rural areas. A local

reviewer, writing in a local newspaper in 1906, recognised the increasing popularity of the cinema but questioned " ... the incessant reproduction of scenes in which the aberration, anachronisms, inverisimilitudes, are made ad hoc for a public of the lowest mental level, ignorant of the most elementary educational notions" (Armes, 1987, p. 165).

The foreign involvement in regional cinema was soon apparent. In Argentina, the first importer of film equipment was a Belgian, while a Frenchman shot the first documentary (1897) and an Italian directed the first dramatic film (1908). The French company, Pathé, distributed its films through its branches in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Havana, and Mexico City. In Trinidad, an American, George Rosenthal, opened *The City Theatre* in Oxford Street, Port of Spain in 1916, and went on to open the first tarpaulin cinema in Trinidad, that subsequently became the *Empire Theatre*, Edward Street, Port of Spain. The Hollywood company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer provided backing for the *Metro Cinema* (1933), Port of Spain, but on the condition that it only showed its films. However, local persons were involved in the cinema industry in Trinidad and Tobago as distributors of foreign films and as cinema owners, although most were wary of getting involved with production activities.

Armes (1987) estimated that 80-90% of local screening time in Latin America and the Caribbean was devoted to Hollywood films. This situation remained virtually unchanged up to the end of the 1900s. Despite this background of American and European economic and cultural dominance, there was some local production of silent feature films in a number of countries including Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, Columbia, Guatemala, Uruguay, and Cuba. The most important film-producing country was Brazil, where some 1,685 films were made between 1898 and 1930, including some avant-garde films and films with social messages.

Indigenous film-making developed much later in the English-speaking Caribbean. One of the first reported productions was in 1937 when Irene Nicolson and Brian Montegu directed a documentary about Trinidad and Tobago for the *Trinidad Guardian* newspaper. The Trinidadian actor and singer, Edric Connor, performed several songs on the sound track and wrote some of the music for the film (Bourne, 1998, pp. 93-114). In this period, the English-speaking Caribbean was the setting for a number of Hollywood-made pirate films. *Captain Blood* (1936) starred Errol Flynn, who not only won the heart of Olivia de Havilland but also became Governor of Jamaica; while Tyrone Power attempted to rid the Caribbean of piracy in *The Black Swan* (1942) and also became the Governor of Jamaica. These pirate films were all filmed in the United States, either on a Hollywood sound stage or in such places as Coronos, Laguna Beach, and Palm Canyon near Palm Springs.

Before the Second World War, Hollywood rarely used real locations for films with overseas settings because of budgetary constraints and, sometimes, a lack of imagination. The situation changed dramatically in the 1940s when films were made with larger budgets and film production equipment became less bulky. In 1940 and 1941, Orson Welles directed scenes from the ill-fated and subsequently unfinished film, *It's All True*, on location in Mexico and Brazil, using the new 35 mm Technicolor camera and colour film stock (Benamou, 1998). One of the first films to be shot on location in the Caribbean, in Key West and Martinique, was *To Have and To Have Not* (1944), starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, while *Old Man And The Sea* (1958) based on Hemingway's novel, contained scenes of Havana's busy streets and local Cuban beaches. However, the film, \$2 million over budget, had to be completed in a film studio in Hollywood using a water tank and a foam rubber shark.

Our Man in Havana (1959), directed by Carol Reed, is of interest because it was filmed in Cuba shortly after the Cuban revolution. There is a famous photograph of Fidel Castro visiting the set and meeting with the stars Maureen O' Hara and Alec Guinness. The revolutionary Cuban Government recognised the power of the media and the impact of film and radio. Castro's Government was not only concerned about changing the political, social, and economic aspects of Cuban society, but also the image of Cuba. While radio broadcasts were the key propaganda vehicle of the anti-Batista guerrilla campaign, some documentary film had been shot in the Sierra Maestra mountains. In July 1959, only months after the triumph of the revolution, the first cultural institution established by the new government was the Cuban Cinema Institute, ICAIC. It soon began to produce progressive films of an international calibre, that helped to consolidate the revolution and promote the image of a proud and sovereign independent nation, both internally and internationally. Unfortunately, the rest of the Caribbean did not accept the challenge of developing its own indigenous film industry.

Despite the emergence of the Cuban cinema, the image of the Caribbean still remains largely that of a string of exotic islands with palm-fringed beaches, populated by happy calypso-singing natives eagerly waiting to serve rum punches to the tourists. Most of the films shot in the Caribbean only used the region as a backdrop, and the location is rarely relevant to the plot. The few scenes with local people helped to perpetuate stereotypes and as Cham (1990) argues:

The Caribbean had a long acquaintance with cinema, but only as a source for foreign productions which exploit(ed) the natural/physical endowment of the tropical islands and

invented other endowments to manufacture an image of the region radically at odds with the reality of the people. (p. 2)

In the 1950s, interest centred on Trinidad and Tobago. Mickey Rooney came to Trinidad with a view to opening a film studio. American bases had been established there during the Second World War and the island had spawned a number of cinemas. Rooney felt the country had a near-perfect climate and could accommodate Hollywood's appetite for a diversity of tropical locations, from the South Pacific to the Amazon. In fact, Craig-James (1999) notes that "Tobago was the location for the filming of five well-known films in the motion picture industry. *Robinson Crusoe* was made in 1926, followed by *Piccadilly Incident* (1946), *Swiss Family Robinson* (1950), *Fire Down Below* (1956) and *Heaven Knows Mr. Allyson* (1957)" (p. 1).

A key defining film is *Island in the Sun* (1956), based on a novel by Alec Waugh (1956). Filmed almost entirely in Grenada, this film is important because the script focused on the social changes affecting a Caribbean island. This was a period in which many countries under colonial rule were demanding independence. In 1956, Trinidad and Tobago, a Caribbean neighbour of Grenada, achieved internal self-government under the nationalist leader Dr. Eric Williams, while a Federation of the British Caribbean territories was established in 1958, to be followed by the independence of Jamaica in 1961 and Trinidad and Tobago in 1962. In *Island in the Sun*, the land-owning whites played by James Mason, Michael Rennie, Stephen Boyd, and Joan Fontaine were confronted by the rising consciousness of the black electorate, personified by a young union leader and his sister played by Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge. The film is also of interest to students in the Caribbean, as in a period of rigid social stratifications of race and colour throughout the region, this was one of the first Hollywood films to deal seriously with the taboo subject of miscegenation.

Producers still use the Caribbean as an exotic set, and recent additions include *Cocktail* with Tom Cruise, *Club Paradise* with Robin Williams, and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* with Angela Bassett that were filmed in Jamaica; *Speed 2* with Sandra Bullock that had scenes shot in St. Martin; and *The Firm*, also with Tom Cruise, that was partly set in the Cayman Islands. However, the award-winning music video producer, Hype Williams, represented a different view of the Caribbean in his 1999 black gangster film, *Belly*, in which downtown Kingston, Jamaica is portrayed as a violent, impoverished, drug-infested ghetto. Whether the image of the Caribbean is one of palm-fringed beaches or crime-ridden ghettos, it is still an image that is manufactured by external agents and interests and, in isolation, bears little relation to the reality of life in the region.

Despite such stereotypical and negative portrayals, many Caribbean governments are actively promoting their countries as potential film locations, anticipating potential advantages for tourism and economic development. Internationally, many countries have recognised the contribution that film production can make to the economy. In the Caribbean, Jamaica has set up a Film Office and offers tax incentives to foreign film productions, while Puerto Rico exploits its political status with America as an added encouragement to increased film production. While such film production can generate money for the local economy, especially for local caterers, service suppliers, technicians, and extras, it does not necessarily help the development of a local film industry. In fact, it may be detrimental to such development as talented local technicians and actors would rather work for lucrative American dollars, as a third assistant or extra on a foreign production, than with one of their colleagues on a local production for little pay.

The study of Caribbean cinema will also provide a window into the importance and impact of television in the region. In the English-speaking Caribbean, the period of political self-government and independence was often accompanied by the establishment of state-owned television services such as the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation (JBC) in 1960, Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT) in 1962, and the Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1964 in Barbados. However, these developments have not resulted in a vibrant local television or video production industry, and the region is still being saturated by the all-pervasive influence of satellite television, mainly from North America. Dr. Aggrey Brown, in his 1987 study of the anglophone Caribbean, contends that "the Caribbean is the most penetrated region by foreign television content in the world" (p. 21). The relationship between the cultural and economic penetration of the Caribbean has also been researched by Rohlehr (1999), who argues that during the period of neo-colonialism there has been a 'steady erasure of anything like a Caribbean consciousness by American values, lifestyles, goods and services that are mindlessly absorbed by Caribbean people as they are resolutely marketed by American capitalism" (p. 16). The internationally renowned writer and politician from Martinique, Aimé Césaire, believes:

What we have suffered from most, more than any other people, is really alienation, in other words, the lack of knowledge of oneself. This seems fundamental to me. The Antillean being is a human being who is deprived of his own self, of his history, of his traditions, of his beliefs. In a nutshell, he is an abandoned being. I believe the types of foreign films we have been exposed

to in the Caribbean have contributed greatly to this state of affairs. (Cham, 1992, p. 360)

While the Caribbean is soaked in imported material reflecting metropolitan values, Nettleford (1993) recognised the pivotal role of those who exercise imagination and intellect in the shaping of a modern and stronger Caribbean, especially if West Indian people begin to treasure their history. Students need their Caribbean heroes in all areas of activity. Caribbean film- and video-makers are part of this body of creative artists, expressing a unique Caribbean experience and drawing on local resources. However, they find themselves up against tremendous obstacles. Short of regional facilities and capital, they still produce fine work, but most of it does not reach a mass audience even in the Caribbean, let alone internationally. Consequently, the history of Caribbean cinema and the names of leading Caribbean film- and video-makers remain unknown to most audiences, including those in the Caribbean. Incorporating the study of film and video into Caribbean cultural studies will ensure that the local population, which has internalised cinema as part of their cultural heritage, will also be able to appreciate the work of those Caribbean film- and video-makers who have made significant achievements in spite of the many problems they have to experience. Césaire has strongly advocated the need for a vibrant Caribbean cinema:

It is very important that a Caribbean cinema develop. It is a great sign of maturity. It is at the same time something that will help us reach a certain maturity. Maturity, because this cinema will allow the Antilleans to better know themselves and to better know other Antilleans. As a result there will be a confrontation of images. I am convinced that what will come out of all of this are, of course, the differences of place and, above all, a great sense of identity. Consequently through images, through cinema, I believe the Antilleans will gain self-assurance and comfort. (Cham, 1992, p. 360)

However, it is as problematic to define a Caribbean film heritage as it is to define a Caribbean identity. The Caribbean student, as producer and critic, can help to shape the consciousness of Caribbean cinema. While the African presence is a key factor in defining Caribbean film and society, one cannot afford to take an essentialist position. *The Harder They Come* (1973), arguably the archetypal Jamaican film depicting the realities of the black working class, was directed by a white Jamaican, Perry Henzel. Thus, Caribbean cinema represents the hybridity in Caribbean

creative life, with directors of European, East Indian, Chinese, and mixed backgrounds participating in the process.

The search for the definition of a Caribbean film reflects the theoretical journey that students must take, as they research and explore both the imaginary and geographical boundaries of the Caribbean. In this age of globalisation and migration, it is unwise to be as narrow in one's definition of a Caribbean identity as the Guadeloupean film-maker, Christian Lara, was in a 1982 interview. There, he stipulated five requisite conditions for a film to qualify as Antillean or Caribbean. He believed that:

the director should be from the Caribbean, the subject matter should be from the Caribbean, the subject matter should be a Caribbean story, the lead actress should be from the Caribbean, Creole should be used, the production unit should be Caribbean. (Cham, 1992, p. 10)

He stressed the last point from a legal standpoint because, for him, "each film takes the nationality of the producer" (p. 10). He also pointed out that "seldom do all five conditions obtain together in any one case" (p. 10). Many countries have a similar difficulty in defining what is a national film, and the Canadians use an elaborate points system to determine Canadian identity. If Lara's definition is accepted, there are few films that will qualify as being Caribbean. Even Lara's own first film, *Une Glace avec Deux Boules*, would be rejected as it was filmed in France. The Martiniquan critic, Alain Menil, has argued that while Lara's film, *Adieu Foulard*, may fulfill all the necessary criteria, that in itself does not define a new cinema. Menil believes it is not enough to merely colour the screen, to spice up the dialogue with a few Creole expressions, and to reproduce postcard location pieces. He argues that in Lara's films, the Caribbean is depicted "through the eyes of one who is the foreigner in his own country, unable to call himself any other name save the one bearing the seal of exoticism" (Cham, 1992, pp. 160-161). Menil, instead, has recognised the pioneering work of Euzhan Palcy's *Rue Cases-Nègres*, where he sees the concrete destiny of everyday Caribbean experience. A film that mirrors the life of Caribbean people as never before, *Rue Cases-Nègres* was able to become what he calls the "right image," not just an image of the Caribbean, and this reflection of reality has become something other than a simple reflection.

Menil's advocacy of a Caribbean ideology is significant but equally difficult to define. Guy Cabort-Masson, a Martiniquan critic attending *Images Caraïbes* (a pan-Caribbean film festival which was inaugurated in Fort-de-France, Martinique in 1988) rejected the films of Willy Rameau (born and raised in France of Martiniquan parents) and other French-

based film-makers as having nothing to do with what is called *Caribbean Images*. He labeled their films "des films negropolitains," and felt that their work belonged to the Diaspora, not to the Caribbean. Of interest, he made mention of a Canadian film that documents the capitalistic exploitation and miserable conditions of Haitian sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic, as belonging in a Caribbean festival because of its focus on the Caribbean political reality. However, it still must be asked; Who decides what is the correct Caribbean ideological position?

Caribbean film can be introduced in different ways into the curriculum. At the tertiary level, Caribbean cinema can be taught as a course in its own right, as was done at Bowling Green State University in 1999. It was one of the courses offered by the Ethnic Studies Department, and its curriculum looked at films and film-makers from the English, French, Spanish, and Dutch Caribbean, as well as films made by film-makers from the Caribbean Diaspora. This course can also be offered by a Film, Media Studies, Communications, or Caribbean Studies Department at any tertiary level institution. At the Creative Arts Centre, The University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine, Caribbean films have been part of the "Art and Society" and "Visual Communication" courses since 1994. Films that have been studied include *The Harder They Come*, *Rue Cases-Nègres*, and *Ava and Gabriel*. A second-year Film Studies course has been introduced, which includes films from the Caribbean like *Strawberry and Chocolate* as well as classics from world cinema. In the third year, students move on to take film and video production courses. Throughout the region, there are a number of other tertiary level institutions offering theory and production courses in film and video. They include the Caribbean Institute of Mass Communications (CARIMAC) at UWI, Mona; the International Film School, Cuba; and the University of Puerto Rico and the Sacred Heart University in Puerto Rico.

Two new courses have been developed at the Faculty of Humanities and Education, UWI, St Augustine: "Social and Political Issues in Contemporary Latin American Film and Narrative" and "Caribbean Film and Literature." The first uses film and literary texts to present a broader view of political, social, and cultural events and their impact on the populace of Latin America, a region that includes the Caribbean country, Cuba. The second introduces students to Caribbean films that have been based on such classics of Caribbean literature as *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, *Rue Cases-Nègres* by Joseph Zobel, and *El Siglo de las Luces* by Alejo Carpentier. It also examines the ideological and other constraints that have hampered the process of adaptation of literary works for cinema. Thematic concerns include urban, rural, and inter- and extra-regional migrations, race, gender, and identity.

At the secondary school level, Media and Film Studies are taught and examined in many countries, including Canada, the USA, and the United Kingdom, although there is little being done in the Caribbean. However, a curriculum reform initiative is underway in Trinidad and Tobago to introduce a new secondary school curriculum, and it is proposed that Media Studies (that will include an introduction to Caribbean Cinema) be introduced, either as an elective subject or as a module as part of a proposed Technology course. Another suggestion is to include the study of classic films, especially Caribbean films, in the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) English B curriculum, so that students will study novels, short stories, plays, poems, and films. Already, many enterprising English teachers show their students film versions of Shakespeare plays and other classic works, and it is proposed that this activity be extended to include the study of films that may not have been adapted from literature. Short extracts from films, videos, and television programmes can also be used for comprehension exercises, as part of English language teaching, both at secondary and primary levels.

While there are numerous contradictions and difficulties in trying to define the Caribbean cinema, and there is a great deal of research to be undertaken to document and analyse Caribbean films, there is a rich, if small, body of work and a number of pioneering film- and video-makers from the Caribbean working in the region and its Diaspora. The study of Caribbean Cinema, as with its literature, music, dance, and other cultural expressions, will help to define both the imagined and the real Caribbean.

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