

Using Films to Study the Past, to Contemplate the Future

RACHEL MOSELEY-WOOD

THERE IS AN OLD DOCUMENTARY THAT PLAYS IN A CORNER of the room at The University of the West Indies Museum. The subject of this film is the University College of the West Indies (UCWI), as the University was known in the first 14 years of its existence. Both the content of the UCWI film and its mode of production are evidence of the University's long association with filmmaking in Jamaica and its recognition of the importance of the visual image. I usually discuss with my students the fascinating story of how the UCWI film arrived at the museum. According to Dr. Suzanne Francis-Brown, curator of the UWI Museum, the film was rescued from a garbage heap at the Mona campus and many years later a digital copy was presented to the museum, where it is now safely preserved for posterity.

The UCWI film then, is important as an early representation of the University and is also significant to the history of filmmaking in Jamaica. Indeed, the emergence of local filmmaking is intertwined with the history of the University. In 1950 when the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) in London explored setting up a temporary film training school in Jamaica to facilitate local production, then principal of the UCWI, Sir Thomas Taylor, provided a building on the campus to house the programme. Three Jamaicans are credited in the *Gleaner* article with making the UCWI film: M.A. Rennalls, director and script writer; M.S. Wheeler, editor; and F.A. Walsh, cinematographer. This might be an error, however. Martin Rennalls, Milton Weller and Trevor Welch were the Jamaicans who attended the West Indies Film Training School and who would have worked on the film. On completion of the programme, they, along with the other participants (one man each from Trinidad and Tobago,

Barbados and British Guiana), went on to help establish film units in their respective territories. Rennalls became the first director of the JFU and was assisted by Weller and Welch in carrying out the mandate of the unit to make films for Jamaicans, by Jamaicans, with Jamaicans. The UCWI film was a product of this intention. Started as a student project at the training school, it was later completed by the JFU.

The Colonial Film Unit played an important role in the colonial project. Responsible for making films that circulated around the globe and which were used throughout the British empire in visual education programmes, the CFU promoted and disseminated British attitudes, values and perspectives. Despite the Jamaican unit's nationalistic motto, the JFU films were not made entirely by Jamaicans; throughout the first decade of the unit's existence, films were sent to London to complete the production process. Nevertheless, these films represent the first sustained effort to create films which explicitly drew on Jamaican culture and in which Jamaicans (and in the case of the UCWI film, Caribbean people) could readily see reflected, aspects of their lived experience. Thus, the UCWI film and the JFU, can be understood as important pieces of the story of Jamaica's journey to nationhood.

The UCWI film provides a window to the past, but it also facilitates contemplation of contemporary society and the future. After we watch the film, I often ask my students what story they would tell if they had to make a film about the University: what would they focus on and how would their film differ from the UCWI film? The responses are as varied as the students themselves, but these questions often prompt a discussion about the legacy of the University and students' role in its unfolding history. We also reflect on a central paradox of documentary filmmaking, that is, the attempt to creatively represent reality. This is not merely an esoteric intellectual exercise; it has, I believe, deep relevance to my students' lives. More than ever, information about the world we live in is conveyed visually: from You Tube, Instagram and Facebook, to documentaries, narrative films and television programmes, we draw on visual texts to help us make sense of the social world and the structures of power that support it. As a teacher of film studies, therefore, I see my overarching task as that of using the audio visual text to help students develop critical thinking and analytical skills which they can apply to future careers and also to their daily

lives, in order to become more thoughtful, more aware and thus, more informed citizens – of the country in which they reside – and of the world.

As the University celebrates its 70th anniversary, its contribution to filmmaking in Jamaica continues to grow and evolve. In September, the Department of Literatures in English will introduce a Bachelor of Arts in Film Studies, a new interdisciplinary programme that has at its core, the critical analysis of the visual image and the development of advanced visual literacy skills that will help students to compete in an increasingly visual world. Cinema and film represent one of the largest creative economies globally, and the new BA in Film Studies will offer students a deeper understanding of cinema as a cultural industry as well as help prepare them to become key players in the local and regional film industry, film culture, and supporting industries. As ever, the Faculty of Humanities and Education continues to demonstrate the usefulness of its offerings and the relevance of its programmes to the development and growth of the region.