

Book Reviews

Show Us as We Are, by Rachel Moseley-Wood.
Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press,
2019. 268 pages

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ONE OF THE BIGGEST ISSUES FACING CARIBBEAN FILM studies is the dearth of good critical analysis. There is also a serious lack of genuine research. Rachel Moseley-Wood's book is well researched and provides a compelling account of the context of present-day Jamaican film and the theoretical avenues through which that filmmaking and production might be explored.

The work is divided into easily identifiable chapters which are segments of the history of Jamaican encounters with its representation on screen. The analysis begins with the ideological intentions of the Colonial Film Unit and later the Jamaican Film Unit and two Independence documentaries. Jamaican filmmaking is placed within the context of postcolonial and nationalist ideals and the failures of successive governments to live up to that promise. Jamaicans' insistence on the right to be seen as they are, is traced to the very first decades of cinema. The gap between ideal and reality and the chasm that exists between what Moseley-Wood calls two Jamaicas has in part led to this cinema's focus on the poor and the marginalised.

As a teacher of film and as a person whose concern with the arts has always been political and ideological, I find that this book has a particular resonance for me. It notes how cinema shapes the way Jamaica is seen and the aesthetic strategies that filmmakers use to complicate that perception. There is a clear, politically engaged analysis of how violence, race and poverty are constituted – and indeed constructed – out of and along class and power lines, and how these

films negotiate these structures and do so within the context of a need to sell films. Filmmaking, as Moseley-Wood points out, has to take account of economics and marketing, and that often if not always, means looking at the world outside the Caribbean for an audience.

Having said this, it is interesting that one of the first issues discussed is not foreign accolades or acceptance, but the impact of films on Jamaican audiences and their desire and their demand to see themselves. This concern with seeing leads to a second question: What is the prism through which the filmmaker, no matter what his or her stated intentions are, sees?

The work relentlessly queries any single perception of Jamaican society and instead views the representation of the ordinary Black Jamaican – who is in the main the subject of Jamaican filmmaking – through multifaceted lens. This means taking into account what has happened, and what is happening, and marking the infiltration of the outside into what society insists, according to the author, are the clearly defined demarcations of ghetto life and living.

The questions posed here, and the political contestations and power struggles outlined in relation to the post-independence period are relevant to many other Caribbean nations, as parties seek to consolidate lines of support and mark their territory. They certainly speak to the creation and continued existence of ghettos in Trinidad and Jamaica. The creation of a downtown space, this work suggests, is managed and maintained despite the affirmation of a myth of unity that “All ah we is one”. From the very first chapter this work argues that hegemonic interests work to silence dissent and to uphold power structures. The promise of independence is never fulfilled.

Moseley-Wood supplies a theoretical basis for examining meanings that attach to place and in support of an idea that there are no fixed ways of looking. She examines how “third cinema”, to quote a term used by the late Paul Willemen, may be conceptualised. She asks what is the project of Caribbean filmmaking, and **why** the popularity of films such as *The Harder They Come*, which, despite its imperfections, retains its fascination and freshness. Moseley-Wood proposes that its power derives from the fact that it is a resistance film and it also uses Jamaican folk heroes, such as Rhygin (Ivan). Like Robin Hood, Ivan speaks to those who yearn for visibility and empowerment. In a world of engineered powerlessness, violence and badness become badges of fame and the means to the construction of identity.

The Harder They Come is read as a filmmaker’s close analysis of those condi-

tions that continuously maintain inequality in Jamaica and that dehumanise the black individual. It uses montage techniques to effect that pointed interrogation – and I can hear Chappy St Juste in the overtones talking about the film’s use of Soviet montage. The film creatively rewrites the story of Rhygin and media representations of this bandit, and foregrounds cinema’s creative capacity to reconstruct segments of the real to change audience perspective. Ivan’s fantasy bears a relation to this transforming magic of the screen and also foregrounds the theft of his creativity and his resistance to this thievery. His embrace of the role of badman and outlaw becomes inextricably connected to his imaginative output, both in terms of his song and of his identity. Moseley-Wood uses the trope of transformation: the transformation by writers Perry Henzell and Trevor Rhone of an original cultural text, the capacity for transformation of the hero, Ivan: his constant renewing of self; and the transformative function of the film on the bodies of ensuing audiences.

The assemblage of an imagined identity is also interrogated through *Smile Orange*. Here the author introduces the idea of the black man, in the character of Ringo, as “cocks man” or sexual object. However, while citing Fanon, Moseley-Wood complicates the ways in which this figure is explored by Trevor Rhone, while also admitting that the film is not of the same standard as the play. Ringo is both Anancy the trickster of folklore and internalised sexual object. He is an ambivalent figure whose success or survival strategy is never straightforward. According to Moseley-Wood the deceptions of the trickster figure suggest Rhone’s definition of “the postcolonial moment as one in which the pressing demands of economic survival in the developing nation support the retention of the politics of the plantation and maintain a form of psychological bondage.” And, “the declaration of a thief and liar as hero signals the moral and spiritual decay of the community” (81). And again, “Rhone leaves the viewer trapped in an Anancy web of discomfort and amusement, complicity and critique” (82). All are implicated here, including both the tourist and the Jamaican.

For some, the focus of Jamaican cinema may be seen as a perpetuation of stereotypes of black Jamaicans. The chapter on *Rockers* focuses on the positive portrayal of Rastafari and also enables an interrogation of questions central to Caribbean film criticism, in particular that vexed question: What exactly is a Caribbean film? Does the director have to be a Caribbean person? Moseley-Wood’s analysis of *Rockers* muddles that question for good. Given that cinema and filmmaking as a whole needs capital and there is little funding within our Caribbean states,

should we demand that the director or the producer be of Caribbean lineage? Is the definition Caribbean film perhaps something more? A use of language for example? Language in its fullest sense as song and sound as Kamau Brathwaite would say, is key to the analysis. *Rockers* is a tribute to reggae. Dread talk is an 'oppositional' language and connotes 'resistance to perceived oppression' (91). There is also a strategy that Moseley-Wood calls 'translation' in that the actors were given free rein to 'translate' from an original standard English script, thereby opening up areas of both creativity and agency. This question of language in the making of a Jamaican film and in the film industry as a whole finds its way into the epilogue where Moseley-Wood asks whether the recent call for standard English films will mean the demise of films in Jamaican Creole. The question of language is a serious and complicated one, if we want to be seen as we are.

There is one chapter that I eagerly anticipated if only because it deals with a film that arouses very complex reactions depending on the gender, the class, and even the race of the viewer. Moseley-Wood uses this complexity as the basis for her analysis and extends her interrogation to the use of film techniques and film equipment. The eye of the camera, its angle and its focus can, in *Dance Hall Queen*, she says, serve to entice and act as the purveyor of male desire as we see in Hollywood cinema, and that camera and its positioning and privileging can equally become a vehicle for the liberation of woman. In this analysis Moseley-Wood extends the theory of scopophilia made famous by Laura Mulvey. In *Dance Hall Queen*, women also gaze. The male gaze may equally be used to negotiate patriarchy and may become a route to empowerment. The use of montage enables the complexity of this negotiation by both filmmaker and black female to unfold, leaving the viewer with no stable point of view.

The chapter on *Dance Hall Queen* is followed very fittingly by a discourse on the differences between the real and the reel and the ways in which the reel often comes to replace the real. Moseley-Wood is concerned here as she says with the 'politics of definition' and how they operate within specific films (150). More than anywhere else, here in her discussion of the use of realism in *Ghett'a Life* and *Third World Cop*, Moseley-Wood's voice sounds a political note of activism. Both films are evoked as works that shore up a singular view of Jamaican life that avoids its multiple realities. Both films in their realist pursuit of narrative coherence make invisible those forces that work to retain marginalisation and poverty. The capacity of the filmmaker to understand how audiences react to specific conventions and the reliance on well-known tropes turn illusion into truth. Violence is cordoned

off and contained within the confines of ghetto reality with no responsibility attributed elsewhere, by the very construction and focus of these films.

If the 'white and middle class' (148) Chris Browne may be read as upholding a fantasy of political and power structures despite the appearance of authenticity, Storm Saulter's film *Better Mus Come* achieves an adherence to truth through his imaginative animation of the past. This film is read as an experiment that takes a real event and historical narratives and opens them up to scrutiny through film's ability to combine reality and fantasy and to recreate space and time. Through these specific filmic vehicles, the audience is made to see the intricate connections between power, politics, poverty and violence. Moseley-Wood sees Saulter's film as an extraordinary achievement, that through reinvention and strategic filmic techniques such as the use of dream sequences and slow motion allows a visceral experience of a moment in history and its bearing on contemporary identity formation and community. His strategies refuse any one account of past events and open them up to scrutiny.

The chapters of this book offer clear and vigorous analyses of particular films and ask whether these films see Jamaican reality as it really is. Is the early claim to Jamaican unity an ongoing falsehood? *Children of Babylon*, by Lennie Little-White, for example, explores this potential for unity and seeks ostensibly to move away from stereotypical images of the ghetto life. However, Moseley-Wood points to the film's failure to give any voice or autonomy to the poor and also draws attention to its characterisation of the Rastafari as abusive and controlling.

Many filmmakers in the uneven world of Caribbean filmmaking have tried to show us as we are. But given the lack of funding, the need to sell to the very audience that these films may wish to criticise, and the very structures of ideological control, the nature of that representation is nuanced and complex. So too must be its critical commentary. What emerges from this reading of Jamaican film is a richly textured analysis that is of interest to all who love film and Jamaican and Caribbean culture. It is also essential reading for those who wish to challenge the status quo.