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Reviewing Caribbean Views: An Introduction

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For my brother Carlo, film enthusiast and much more...
For Grace, a young brilliant mind, and source of inspiration...

Pretext and Contents

After about five years editing book reviews for *Caribbean Studies*, and as if I needed more work, a complex combination of factors led me to self-impose yet another scholarly task during my two years on leave from the University of Puerto Rico. Sometime early in 2007, Roselly Torres, from Third World Newsreel, enquired about the possibility of our journal reviewing some of their Caribbean films. At that point I realized that during my tenure with the journal I had not considered the possibility of commissioning reviews of films and documentaries. This seemed ironic given that I have myself done film reviews—a possibility opened by our colleagues in *New West Indian Guide* (Giovannetti 1999). But film reviews had never been a feature of *Caribbean Studies*, nor have they been common in mainstream scholarly journals of the core social science disciplines which review *printed* knowledge production. Such an absence was perhaps the reason why my interests in the scholarly analysis of film (Giovannetti 2002) never translated into the idea of fomenting, through the reviewing process, a dialogue between the audiovisual production of knowledge and scholars in the social sciences and the humanities.

In the twenty-first century, this omission was not in tune with the place films and documentaries have come to occupy in people's knowledge of history and the world that surrounds them, nor was it in accordance with the increasing space audiovisual media have gained in university classrooms—for good and problematic reasons. Scholars have called our attention to the extent to which today people's knowledge is increasingly shaped, not by peer reviewed publications, but by what they see in films and other media (Trouillot 1995:20). Historians have been specifically concerned with methodologies for the analysis of films as historical artifacts that can in turn assist in confronting the inevitable influence of movies and television in student's knowledge of the past (O'Connor 1988:1201,1208-9). The development of cultural and media

studies has obviously been central to developing scholarly sensitivity to moving images in films, documentaries, and television, and some leading journals in the social sciences have moved to include film reviews (see Rosenstone 1989).¹ Moreover, academics across the Americas are themselves venturing into audiovisual productions—from U.S. historian Jeffrey Gould's work with *1932: Scars of Memory* to that of Brazilian historians Hebe Mattos and Martha Abreu in the productions *Memórias do Cativo* and *Jongos, Calangos e Folias*, to give two examples (Gould and Henriquez Consalvi 2002; Fernandez and Castro. 2005; Mattos and Abreu 2007). Increasing awareness of and interest in films and documentary has been illustrated by the inclusion of film screenings during the annual meetings of the Caribbean Studies Association and the Latin American Studies Association.

In the hope of acknowledging the role of moving images in Caribbean knowledge production and developing critical perspectives on film and documentary, we therefore decided to devote a special section in this and the subsequent issue of the journal (volume 36, nos. 1 and 2) to review essays and reviews of films and documentaries on the Caribbean. Starting with a selection of the films provided by Third World Newsreel, I contacted other film distributors and independent filmmakers in an attempt to include films and documentaries that could represent Caribbean diversity as much as possible. Simultaneously, I invited a group of distinguished specialists to review these productions. The response on both sides was enthusiastic and supportive, and the project developed into what we present to our readers in this and the forthcoming issue of the journal. The reviews commissioned for the two parts touch upon the social and historical realities of Belize, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Martinique, Puerto Rico, Caribbean diasporas and wider Atlantic socio-historical and economic connections of the region (whether through banana markets, international world conflicts, or slavery). In Part I, we group those reviews dealing with Caribbean diasporas in North America (reviewed by Gilberto Blasini, Jorge Duany, Camille Hernández-Ramdwar, and Linden Lewis), and also those dealing with the impact of international war conflicts in the Caribbean region (reviewed by Silvia Álvarez Curbelo and Richard Smith). They are joined by reviews of cinematic works that deal with the political economy and history of the banana production and trade (by Peter Clegg), the contests over memory and culture in Martinique (by Richard Price), racial politics and memory in Cuban history (by Alejandro de la Fuente), the culture and history of vodou in Haiti (by Laurent Dubois), and a documentary that records past labor struggles of Jamaican women (by Jean Antoine-Dunne).

Assessing Visual Knowledge Production

In academia, printed knowledge, as in books and peer review articles, holds a privileged position in comparison with other forms of knowledge production that are nonetheless very influential. Filmic representations of history and social phenomena are often ignored (or mocked) by scholars in academic environments that prefer books as the prime example of knowledge production. Often, the very fact that we *see* such works on the screen (as opposed to on the printed page) and the type of (fictional?) distance that such medium generates, does not allow one to perceive them as useful illustrations of realities that are nonetheless representative of the places (or worlds) we inhabit. Yet, for years filmmakers throughout the Caribbean have portrayed their interpretation of the region's realities and history. In the process, they produce knowledge in different ways, whether by documenting complex ritual ceremonies that challenge the anthropologist's descriptive skills, or by portraying the realities of the slave trade in ways only matched by writing styles such as those of C.L.R. James's and Saidiya Hartman (James 1989 [1938]:8; Hartman 2007:136-153).² An image, it is sometimes true, is worth a thousand words, and such visual representations become inscribed in people's minds and become part and parcel of their descriptions and narratives of the Caribbean societies in which they live.

In that sense, the purpose of our modest effort with these two issues is twofold. First, we seek to create awareness of the existence of films and documentaries that are "out there," as it were, and that have been exhibited in local cinemas and television in the Caribbean as well as sometimes being used by school and university teachers. Some of these productions and their independent filmmakers do not have access to the promotional resources of large Hollywood corporations. We are therefore also providing with the second part of these two issues the respective contact information for the distributors, organizations, and individuals responsible for the films and documentaries reviewed. The works being reviewed do not pretend to be exhaustive or representative of the universe of productions in (and about) the region, and clearly there are many more feature and independent films, and even clandestine productions being made and circulating within the region. The attempt is simply to open a door and a space for debate. We were selective trying to cover all the "Caribbeans" (as the list of countries above shows), including the region's diasporas, and also a diversity of topics—from migration, to religion and culture, history, and human rights. I was also selective in the choice of reviewers that would have the expertise and responsibility for a project of this nature. I tried not to discriminate much by age (not of the reviewers, but of the year of production of the films and

documentaries), because I thought that given the fact that film reviews had not been done before in *Caribbean Studies*, we could amend that “wrong” by doing it right, and in the process, review some productions that while not recent and not widely known, are nonetheless still relevant for the understanding of Caribbean realities and histories. This did not mean that we would again go over “older” films such as Perry Henzell’s *The Harder they Come* or Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *La última cena* since they are already well-known and have been the subject of several studies (see Collins 2003; Gaztambide-Fernández 2002; Davis 2000; Lieber 1974; Mraz 1997).

Most of the reviewers in this project are strictly speaking academics, and while often advising or participating in documentaries (or other non-“strictly academic” ventures), they are not “scholar-filmmakers” in their training. This certainly serves the purpose of starting the dialogue between what could be seen as two seemingly separate camps of knowledge production and dissemination—visual and print. In some cases, this encounter will uncover the existing gaps between scholars on the one hand, and filmmakers on the other—either by the nature of the critiques made or the question raised about the films. This questioning will reveal the differences in aims, purpose, and practice existing when a scholar and a filmmaker approach a particular subject matter in (and for) printed and visual knowledge productions, and the advantages and shortcomings of either mode of dissemination.³ Whatever the outcome of such debate, I hope this initiative will lead our readers to search for these films, use them, *read* them critically, and cross-examine the different *views* on the subject matter being presented on screen.

A second purpose of this project relates precisely to the counterposing of these two ways of knowledge production, in light of the fact that audiovisual resources have become a common resource for higher education. Whether this is happening because of scholars’ genuine discovery of the moving image as an educational resource, the decrease in reading culture among our students, or (as sadly happens) because of lazy professors who cannot be bothered to update their lectures, film and television are in our classrooms to stay. More widely, whether through the History Channel, Discovery Channel or Cuba’s *Canal Educativo*, people with no access to or contact with traditional education systems have long accessed knowledge through the screen. “While many educators would prefer that our students be less attuned to video sources of learning,” it has been argued, “the reality is that film and video are a major influence, and the best approach for teachers may well be to instruct students in the techniques of visual literacy and critical viewing skills” (Briley 1998:390). From the discipline of history in particular, some time ago John O’Connor outlined several responses to the chal-

lenge of film and television in today's day and age. Among the things he pointed out was the need of historians-filmmakers (or scholar-filmmakers, I would qualify) should be more outspoken about their experiences,⁴ and also that film reviews were an important step in facing the challenge presented by the moving image (O'Connor 1988:1207-1208). In doing the film reviews, I hope we have open the door for someone in the future to propose a special issue of our journal (or any other journal) where Caribbean filmmakers, and the scholars collaborating with them, write about their experience. Additionally, we hope that the reviews in this "production" and its "sequel" (vol. 36:2) will promote a critically constructive engagement, that they could clarify aspects of these productions, locate the films and documentaries in a wider context, and perhaps, even serve as complementary materials for teachers using these films in their classrooms. If the exercise of this two-part reviewing endeavor at least contributes in some of these areas, if it helps students to develop their visual literacy and critical viewing skills, as well as an understanding of the virtues of visual knowledge production, and its differences with other more traditional ways, I will be satisfied. Finally, I want to acknowledge the collaboration of all of those involved in the project, their collegiality, responsibility, and more than anything, their patience. With no more to say: "Presses ready, ACTION!"

Notes

- ¹ Of course, specialized journals of media and cultural studies have analyzed film and documentaries for some time now, but mainstream peer review journals in the core social sciences –history, economics, political sciences, sociology, anthropology- have been slower in the process. To this day, I have not seen economists or political scientists rushing to review Eugene Jarecky's *Why We Fight* in mainstream disciplinary journals (but, in other periodicals, see Kozeluh 2006), nor have I seen medical doctors or sociologists critically dismembering Michael Moore's *Sicko* in journals in their respective fields.
- ² Of course, anthropologists specialized in the Caribbean in particular have not only done great research but also provided wonderfully written ethnographies such as the writings of Richard and Sally Price, and also the captivating ritual descriptions presented in Kenneth Bilby's study of maroons in Jamaica (Bilby 1997: 669-677).
- ³ It is evident that there are scholars that are filmmakers and vice-versa, and that the division between these two camps is not so clear

cut at times, with people crossing-over from one way of knowledge production to the other. But the very real distinctions between scholars and filmmakers that I am trying to highlight regarding the way they disseminate their knowledge are no less valid because of the cross-over.

- ⁴ I referred earlier to “scholar-filmmakers” to include other disciplines.

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