

SPOTLIGHT ON HAITI

1990 Images Caraibes Festival

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This year's Images Caraibes Festival, held on the Caribbean island of Martinique during the first week of June, was dedicated to the Trinidadian writer and political activist C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins*, his account of the Haitian Revolution, is considered a classic, but James is mainly known for his political theory. James, who died last year at the age of 89, was a visionary, the first to speak about a pan-Caribbean unity and identity which would transcend the petty individualisms that have separated the Caribbean nations.



Miss Amy and Miss May, produced by the Sistren collective in Jamaica, mixes past and present, documentary and fiction in its portrayal of two women's roles in the Jamaican labor movement.

Courtesy filmmakers

The opening night of the festival featured a videotape on James, produced by Howard Johnson. The tape consisted of Stuart Hall, the British cultural theorist, interviewing James about his life, work, and ideas. In a discussion after the screening, Johnson, a Jamaican now living in London, explained that he had originally wanted to produce a 10-part series about the history of the Caribbean. When funding this venture proved difficult, he decided to produce a one-hour tape on the person whom he believed best embodied the history and identity of the region. The tape turned out to be a strong opener for the festival.

Twenty-seven different countries were represented at this year's event, as opposed to 17 at the

inaugural festival held two years ago. The filmmakers were broadly representative of a range of backgrounds, nationalities, ages, filmmaking styles, sexual orientation, and expertise. Short independent first films made with skeleton crews received as much attention as lavish productions. With the exception of the Cubans, who work within their country's own film industry, many of the filmmakers represented live outside the Caribbean. But all the films screened related to Caribbean cultures in some form.

For example, the film *Miss Amy and Miss May*, produced by the Sistren collective in Jamaica, reflects upon the lives of two elderly women (now in their nineties), one black, one white, who fought for the women's labor movement in Jamaica. This remarkable film combined live interviews with dramatic representations and old footage. The director, 70-year-old Cynthia Wilson, has been collecting historical information about Jamaican women for over 40 years. When many of the documents she had gathered were tragically destroyed several years ago during Hurricane Gilbert, she decided to quickly turn the material that survived into a film. Aside from the importance of the subject, what is memorable about the film (which won a special jury prize) was the way it played with form, deftly mixing past and present, documentary and fictional portrayal.

Another film at the festival that also plays with form and is principally about two women is Maureen Blackwood's *Perfect Image?* Using a variety of dramatic techniques, two black women (one dark-skinned, the other light-skinned) offer a series of contrasting descriptions of qualities which constitute beauty. Director Blackwood told the audience in Fort-de-France that she believed this theme could be expanded to include all women, since women everywhere internalize images of themselves based upon external standards. Blackwood, a daughter of Jamaican parents, lives in London, where she is a member of the Sankofa Film and Video Collective.

The films at Images Caraibes ranged from very simple, personal themes, to global and historic feature-length projects. Erik Knight, a young US filmmaker, showed his nine-minute *Baobab*, a personal, poetic work which explores the heritages and problems of a child born to a Norwegian mother and a Barbadian father. At the other end of the spectrum, Menelik Shabazz' *Time and Judgement* considered several years of contemporary history from a Rastafarian point of view. This powerful film (which also won a jury prize)



employed the figure of the griot, or African storyteller, to move the film's narrative along. In *Time and Judgement*, the griot in question lives in London and waits endlessly on a street corner for money owed to him by a friend, but which never arrives. The film interweaves archival footage, Biblical prophesy, storytelling, poems, and the music of Bob Marley with shots from Jamaica, England, Africa, and the US.

Another ambitious film screened at the festival was Brazilian Raquel Gerber's *Ori*, which was 10 years in the making. *Ori* follows the progress of black cultural and political movements in Brazil since 1977, linking these to African communities and traditions. Gerber uses the historical research of sociologist Beatriz Nascimento as connecting tissue for this otherwise eclectic film. Nascimento's narration for *Ori* is historical and scholarly, but it is also poetic. Gerber complements this with a poetic shooting and editing style, as well as an imaginative use of music, which gives the impression of a mosaic to the entire piece.

In its short history, the Images Caraibes Festival has focused on specific themes. This year, along with the homage to C.L.R. James, the spotlight was on the island of Haiti. Festival director Suzy Landau explained her decision to feature Haitian media and culture: "Haiti has difficulties in terms of economics, but they have so much richness in terms of other things that we are giving homage to it this year." A series of photographs by Haitian photographer Jean-Guy Cauvert graced the upstairs gallery of the Martinique Cultural Center, where the screenings took place. The festival poster and t-shirts were designed by the Haitian painter Tiga and his students.

At least 10 films and videotapes concerning Haiti were screened throughout the week. An especially strong film in this series is *Se Met Ko (Master of the Body)*, by Patricia Benoit and Allan Siegel, which deals with AIDS in the Haitian community in Brooklyn, New York. Rather than a preachy statistic-laden approach, the *Se Met Ko*

Combining poetic images and scholarly research, Brazilian director Raquel Gerber looks at her country's culture and politics in *Ori*, shown at the Images Caraibes festival.

Courtesy filmmaker

producers weave information into a clever dramatic story of everyday life. Strong images from community institutions, such as the barber shop where men meet to play dominoes, a dance hall, and an apartment where several generations live together, become the backdrop for various discussions about how AIDS is and isn't transmitted.

In a related festival section, Creole films were shown, not just those made by or about Haitians but from other Francophone Caribbean cultures as well. The Haitian writer Rodney St. Eloi told audiences that he preferred the term Creolite to Creole, adding that it was not a language but a total way of life. "It's the way we see the world, the way we live, the way we bury our dead, the way we make love, everything," said St. Eloi. "It's the hot colors and the cool colors and love and hate and the sacred and the profane all together. And this can be expressed in films as a way of life."

Although technical problems occasionally plagued the festival, and often films, meals, and discussion groups were scheduled at the same time, there was a general feeling of optimism for this event, which is still in its infancy. Perhaps the greatest strength of Images Caraibes is its commitment to bringing together filmmakers who come from Caribbean backgrounds or who are drawn to Caribbean themes and to screening this vast array of work in all its various forms. This, then, is a fitting homage to the vision of C.L.R. James.

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