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Actions Speak Louder: Women in Caribbean Documentaries of Everyday Life

By Ian Craig

Introduction

This paper focuses particularly on two recent documentaries of everyday life featuring Haitian women, Claudette Coulanges's *Chercher la vie* and Rigoberto López's *Puerto Príncipe mío*.¹ The contribution of these works to the existing corpus of documentaries on Haiti is assessed. Gender differences in patterns of discourse and activity are analysed in order to clarify the social situation of women in contemporary Port-au-Prince. The films corroborate other cited evidence that women are the backbone of Haitian daily life, sustaining activity in market places, the factory floor and the home. However, their discourse and activities suggest that their constant struggle for subsistence and lower levels of education, together with persistent prejudices within society, constrain Haitian women to the present moment and prevent them from acquiring a wider consciousness of their reality. The validity and relevance of this type of documentary, in which the viewer is brought into close contact with individual subjects going about their daily business, is endorsed and, finally, other aspects of Haitian women's struggle are identified.

Haiti in documentary films

The substantial existing body of documentaries on Haiti focuses overwhelmingly on the three areas of politics, voodoo and the creative arts (see Corbett for an annotated filmography on Haiti). Whilst these are valid subject matters in themselves, it could be argued that, taken together as a corpus of work on a particular country, these documentaries tend to offer a somewhat partial view. The image conveyed by this corpus is summarised as follows by John Stewart:

From early on, the documentary interest has been on the difference that is Haiti and the implicit replication of that difference as a survival of primitive forces alien to the rest of the hemisphere. . . . to the popular perception, Haiti is a fragment of "the dark continent", which means that, at its best, it is a land that is quaintly primitive with a touch of mystical intrigue, at its worst, a land of grinding poverty and irrational brutality. (128)

Thus, according to Stewart, the scholarly documentary takes an "anthropological perspective" that "flows with the argument for the legitimacy of the exotic, the primacy of folklore in cultural investigations, and the unorthodox as an essential aspect of culture" (129). In the case of Maya Deren's celebrated documentary *The Divine Horsemen*, for example, "there is no mention of the context within which Vodou survives" (130).² If this "scholarly, curatorial approach" has been blind to social realities, another type of documentary, "closely linked to the practice of investigative journalism", has been partial at the other extreme: "Haitians appear in these documentaries as a brutalised and powerless people totally at the mercy of corrupt government and corporate practices" (130).

The existing corpus of documentaries on Haiti has thus tended to leave unanswered many questions regarding the functioning of Haitian society on a day-to-day basis. If a Haitian was not an artist, an immigrant abroad, an active political agent,

or a *houngan* or *mambo* – all subjects of previous documentaries – but merely a Haitian in Haiti, how did they survive and what were their lives like? What becomes immediately clear from both *Chercher la vie* and *Puerto Príncipe mío* is that this everyday Haitian is, typically, a woman:

In voodoo terms, the Haitian woman might be called the Potomitan, which is the pole erected in the middle of the area where voodoo ceremonies are performed. This Potomitan is the centre of gravity of the entire culture. The mother is the Potomitan of the Haitian family: the influence she has on the family, on her children, is crucial. Women are those who suffer most the daily grind of life in Haiti. They work selling bits and pieces in Port-au-Prince, or sowing, they raise the children, they find food for the family, they do the housework. . . . They are the day-to-day heroines of the Haitian odyssey and all the elements of the situation in Haiti are intimately related to their experience, which is why they are so prominent in the documentary (López).

Both of the documentaries examined here are testimony to women's pre-eminent role in the struggle to sustain daily life in Haiti, but as we shall see, they also point up some of the reasons why that struggle has not as yet translated into full equality and political participation by women in Haiti.

Discourse and gender roles

López's documentary, commissioned to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Port au Prince, was not intended to be a work about women in particular. Narratives of women inevitably emerged, however, from the director's determination to include testimony and images of everyday life in the city, avoiding the blandness of a mere municipal history or a purely demographic perspective. López describes the film as a "choral chant" in which multiple voices combine to form a complex, variegated narrative of life in contemporary Port-au-Prince.

Various levels of prestige are discernible amongst the interlocutors. Authoritative information is dispensed by representatives of institutions – only one is a woman – whilst other prestigious but unofficial figures, namely artists and intellectuals, supply historical or sociological context and suggest solutions in the form of civic art projects and solidarity initiatives. Again, the artists and intellectuals are mainly male. It is at the level of everyday life that women predominate in *Puerto Príncipe mío*, though the nature of their testimony is significant. The male interlocutors at this everyday level tend to supply historical information about themselves: "I have lived in the area since I was little. I was born here and now I'm forty-five"; "I am twenty-five and I was born here. When we arrived in the zone there were coffee beans". The women's testimony differs in a number of telling ways. Firstly, it centres on family rather than self, and on work, scarcely mentioned by any male interlocutor at the everyday level. Secondly, it is riddled with numbers, revealing women's constant preoccupation with resource management. One woman explains that "eight people live in this house. . . . I sell rice, beans, cornmeal, whatever I find. I put it on my head and sell it all over the country, and

when I finish I return. . . . I bought five gourdes-worth of spaghetti to give to the boy". Later, another describes her life in greater detail:

I came here with Manuelita, my aunt. She brought me from Okay because my Mom had nine kids. I arrived and met Louines, we fell in love and had six kids, but we lost one. My husband does not find work so you have to borrow. We do not live comfortably. Life is hard. . . . But that is what we have and it's not our fault. There are nine of us living in this room. . . . No, we are ten!

Some of the most eloquent scenes in the film are those in which there is no speech at all. This is precisely because many of these scenes involve women, who engage in proportionally much less discourse than men, but unlike most of the men are involved in almost constant activity throughout both films studied here. Inevitably in the case of Port-au-Prince, many of these scenes of activity also involve water. The city is awash with brackish pools and garbage-bearing streams caused by erosion on the surrounding hillsides, turning it into a kind of grotesque anti-Venice. As well as treacherously hiding the potholes that pit the capital's streets, the uncontrolled flow of water also generates widespread sanitation difficulties (one official interlocutor alludes to a 1994 study showing that 48.5% of the city's air contains faecal material, for example). It is a cruel irony that the most acute practical consequence of this problem is the shortage of easily accessible drinking water; as one elderly citizen remarks, "L'eau, c'est la vie". It falls to women to resolve the daily problem of "looking for life" in this practical sense. In a five-minute sequence, we follow two young women as they descend from their hillside *bidonville* (shantytown) to collect water from the communal supply pipes further down. They hand over their coins and fill their buckets. One is helped by the other to get the awkwardly sloshing load balanced on her head, and off they go again, leaving us to imagine their fraught ascent through the slippery, crowded alleys.

The opening subtitle of *Chercher la vie* establishes that this film, unlike López's, focuses specifically on women: "In Haiti, on Hispaniola, situated in the Caribbean sea, it is mainly the women who are responsible for daily life and the survival of the family". Nevertheless, the opening sequence shows men making cooking vessels out of metal. These men are self-employed small-scale manufacturers, shaping local raw materials into products for sale and use in the domestic economy. As becomes clear later, women's only role in manufacturing is as very cheap and malleable labour in factories owned by foreign investors, producing goods made from imported materials and almost never sold locally.

After we have seen a cooking pot made from scratch, one of the two protagonists of the film, Anne-Rose Trèjuste, arrives on the scene. Following a cursory attempt at haggling, she buys a pot for 250 gourdes. "I've got no choice", she remarks. Like many women, Anne-Rose is a small-scale trader, selling meals outside the factory where the film's other protagonist, Rosèmene Marcelin, works stitching clothes for export. Anne-Rose's job is perhaps not as typical as the women market-traders from whom she buys food every morning, but it relies on the same mechanisms of trust and solidarity: "I buy everything I need", she says, "even without money. . . . Even the retailer sometimes buys on credit".

The scenes at the Croix des Bossales marketplace – formerly the main slave market – are some of the most revealing. The overwhelming predominance of women in

market trading is instantly evident. Most of the males present appear to be assistants to the women, others are ambulant peddlers loudly hawking their wares, a man grinding the blade of a cutlass, or an evangelist with an amplifier offering salvation (perhaps from an imminent flood, for here too the traders and their customers are forced to negotiate knee-deep pools full of rotting produce). Many of these male occupations are either peripatetic or arbitrarily and temporarily located on the geography of the market. By contrast, the women are anchored to their stalls, designated as their own territory not only by civic licence, but also in many cases through ties of family and kinship that have traditionally obtained in this area of commercial activity (Legerman). Whilst women have territorial control of the market, however, it is difficult not to form the impression that men are making most of the noise. Just as the male artists and intellectuals in *Puerto Príncipe mío* provide creative future alternatives to the grim reality of the present, so the evangelist in the marketplace offers release through spiritual sublimation. Men are the purveyors of public discourse, of hope and fantasy, in Port-au-Prince, whilst it falls to women to alleviate the hardships of the present through toil. To achieve this monumental task, solidarity networks are an essential rather than merely desirable factor. Just as Anne-Rose frequently buys on credit from the market traders, so Rosèmene sends her children to school and survives ill health only because a predominantly female support network exists to provide her with low-interest credit. The picture of female-dominated cooperative trading that emerges from *Chercher la vie* is remarkably similar to the situation in Dominica portrayed in the 1988 documentary *God Give Us the Talent: The Hucksters of Dominica*.³ Similar mechanisms of revolving loans and means-tested repayment operate – a Dominican woman trader is shown taking out her tenth loan – with the difference that the Dominican cooperative also organises boat-trips to neighbouring islands to sell produce. A comparative study of the way such systems function in different Caribbean territories, with particular attention to the significance and social repercussions of female dominance in the establishment and management of such systems, would be a valuable contribution to greater understanding of this phenomenon.

Female predominance in market trading, at least in the French West Indies, has its origins in slavery. Whilst women performed a disproportionate amount of hard labour during the slavery era, it is also true that domestic slaves designated as hucksters acquired a degree of independence not enjoyed by any other category of slave (Moitt 157-70). These hucksters were almost always women. In the case of Saint Domingue, all such trading during the slavery era would have involved shuttling between a series of rural markets.⁴ With rural areas becoming increasingly uninhabitable because of poor land management, Port-au-Prince has mushroomed grotesquely: *Puerto Príncipe mío* documents figures of around 10,000 inhabitants at the end of the eighteenth century, around 60,000 at the end of the nineteenth century, some 150,000 in 1950, and approximately 2,500,000 in the year 2000. This demographic shift has both made women more independent and increased the social burden placed on them:

As more and more people have been forced off the family land, away from the rural and extended families and toward the greater autonomy of city life, women have generally fared better than men. Their adaptable, small-scale market skills are one reason. The preference for piecework factories for women, who are thought to be steadier workers and less likely to cause problems, is another. Women have become breadwinners and their relationships with men, many of whom have significantly less earning power, have become more unstable as a result. Women in the

cities have found themselves the heads of their own houses, as they were to some extent in the country, but with no supporting (or confining) extended family to back up that household unit (McCarthy Brown 125).

At present, it would seem the increased burden often outweighs the advantages of greater independence. In one of the most pathetic scenes of *Chercher la vie*, Rosèmene reveals that her children live with her mother in the country. They visit occasionally – particularly when they require medical attention – but this year she has not saved enough money to put them up in her house. She feels she might be able to raise some more if she could sublet two rooms, but her salary doesn't allow her to finish "decorating" to a standard acceptable to a paying tenant.

On the face of it, it would seem that Anne-Rose is better off than Rosèmene. She is married to a man who works and they have managed to build a small dwelling. She is also self-employed, apparently affording her greater autonomy and capacity to expand her operations. She is categorical on this matter, however: "Business is a form of slavery". She only takes a day off when she has "a serious problem". Maintaining customer loyalty and ensuring payment constitute invisible shackles: "When you have customers, you have responsibilities towards them. It's like having children to feed. You have to feed the customer, so that he pays you when he has his money". Later, we see her keeping an all-night vigil in the factory yard in order to be present throughout the clothes-finishers' bimonthly payday. If she is not there to collect her dues, the money is immediately spent defraying more pressing costs and she is simply not paid.

The question of money management is dealt with in great detail in *Chercher la vie*, giving a clear insight into the exact scale of women's daily struggle to reconcile income with expenses. Rosèmene explains that for an eight- to eight-and-a-half-hour day, a factory worker earns 36 gourdes (US \$1 = approx. 17 gourdes). By doing piecework, however, employees can make 42.5 gourdes per day. Even if workers felt they could survive on the miserable basic wage, a printed sign in the factory reveals that there is pressure from above to take the piecework route: "Workers who work for 36 gourdes are lazy people". To achieve the piecework bonus, workers must reach a production quota that puts their health at risk and impinges on their equally demanding lives outside the factory: "By slaving away like that, you end up getting ill. . . . You really have to work like a maniac. . . . Once you're home, you're not fit for anything".

Rosèmene then details typical daily expenses: 5 gourdes for breakfast, 10 for lunch, 3 more for a drink, 8 for travel costs. A total of 26 gourdes out of a basic wage of 36, then, goes on the daily subsistence of the worker alone. As a result, the meal Rosèmene is cooking is comprised exclusively of imported products. A single fish caught in Haitian waters might cost between 15 and 20 gourdes, whilst imported fish cost 10 gourdes for three. We have already seen the marketplace strewn with sacks marked "USA" and heard the local rice-traders acknowledge that they cannot compete with low-cost rice imported from Miami. The imported fish is less nutritious, Rosèmene concedes, but she has no choice. Like the rice-traders, Rosèmene is clear as to the root cause of this situation: "It's the people running the country who are doing a bad job".

Rosèmene's careful detailing of prices continues the tendency toward a female discourse replete with numbers. There is one scene, nonetheless, in which a male figure gives a numerical account of Haitian reality. Significantly, however, the analysis offered by Anne-Rose's husband refers not to his own daily life or that of his family, but to Haitian society in general. This reinforces the sense of men as analysts of broad social phenomena, whilst women are constrained to the minutiae of daily subsistence. The husband explains that the highest earners in Haiti can make as much as 25,000 gourdes

a month, whilst the majority of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers make between 400 and 1,000 gourdes. Anne-Rose and Rosèmene's earlier comparison of their jobs to slavery is echoed in the husband's use of another dehumanising image to describe the lowest paid tasks: "Your head works like a machine". In the light of the women's discourse examined so far, replete with feverish calculations and numerical allusions, it is not hard to surmise which sector of the population this image is most likely to describe.

The husband then tells his own story as a worker in the Hotel National, how he met Anne-Rose when he lived with his parents. He then gives her history also, as a market-trader, a factory pieceworker and finally selling meals in the factory yard. This scene points up more than any other the designation of gender roles, with men as the purveyors of discourse, history and analysis, and women as sites of constant activity in the present moment. For as the husband speaks, sitting still at a table, the camera follows Anne-Rose, first as she applies relaxing treatment to her hair – the only female activity in either film that might be described as "recreational" – and then performing household chores. Disparity in levels of education is undoubtedly at the root of the relative female reticence to engage in discourse. The insecurity this disparity generates is exploited by factory owners, as noted by McCarthy Brown in the quotation above and endorsed by the husband in this scene: "In Haiti, even though equality is gradually coming, women do not go to school as often". Women are thus "more docile, more frightened".

After the husband's account, Coulanges coaxes Anne-Rose into giving some details of her past. The first scene in which her only activity is speaking to the interviewer about herself – the conventional mode of presentation in this type of documentary – therefore comes some thirty-five minutes into the film, over half way through. After Anne-Rose has explained that she came to the capital in 1975, aged six, with her aunt, and then lived on her own, Coulanges tackles the education question head-on, asking her what grade she reached in school. Anne-Rose persistently evades the question, insisting only that "I'm uneducated. I didn't learn anything". She says she can understand French, but not speak it, and can only write her name. She plans to go back to school and was about to do so last year, but got pregnant, she says pointing a jocularly accusing finger at her husband.

Point of view in the documentary of everyday life

Various elements combine to make the domestic scene described above gently amusing: the suggestion of irony as Anne-Rose's husband discourses on women's role in the economy whilst she calmly goes about the housework; Anne-Rose's coy evasions regarding her education; and her chiding as she accuses him of thwarting her plans to return to school by making her pregnant. The visual irony works only for the viewer's benefit, of course, but Anne-Rose's amused coyness and all parties, including herself, share her joke. The inclusion of this scene, in which complicity between viewer and subject is invited, is important because it opens up a modest but significant ludic space amidst the drudgery portrayed elsewhere. In accordance with the generally humanising and "subjectifying" intent of both these documentaries, this scene, particularly, goes some way to counteracting the tendency towards portrayals of Haitians as utterly brutalised by their circumstances, and thus constitutes a critique of the anthropological, objectifying perspective of much third-world documentary cinema in the past. In such documentaries, as suggested above, the subject is portrayed in ways that point up his or her primitive otherness or difference from a putative viewer whose very access to the

film presupposes a detached viewpoint consonant with that of the objectifying lens. Here, the low-budget documentary of everyday life comes into its own: despite the dehumanising toil of Anne-Rose's life, in developmental terms a world apart from that of most of the viewers who will see the film in universities and film festivals, her self-irony and gentle dig at her husband in this scene provide a fleeting moment of shared amusement between viewer and subject.

In this regard, it is no doubt significant that the person directing the camera in *Chercher la vie* is herself a Haitian woman. In the case of *The Hucksters of Dominica*, one also senses that the shared Caribbean identity of the production company and the subjects facilitated the project. In any event, the film was re-edited after the hucksters expressed the view that an earlier version painted an unduly harsh portrait of their existence (Paddington). Whilst they acknowledged their hardships – nobody denies or plays down the tragedy of poverty in these documentaries – they were anxious that the focus of attention should be on their committed collective endeavours to overcome those hardships by organising themselves into a mutual support network. The very fact that the hucksters were given the opportunity to influence the content of the film being made about them shows a rejection of the anthropological documentary's assumption of objectivity, and a recognition that the subjects' self-image is a valid factor, particularly when a work purports to characterise a category of people.⁵

Returning to *Puerto Príncipe mío*, the fact that López is from neighbouring Cuba and worked with a partly Haitian crew, once again, clearly facilitated his intention to make a documentary that would incorporate the viewpoint of its subjects:

Sometimes we would arrive somewhere, say, the market, and people would hide their faces with their hands, or object, or get aggressive. But this has a simple explanation: they are sick of being treated as objects, of foreigners showing up with cameras and filming them as if they were exotic animals or items to be displayed in a museum. They protest against what they regard as offensive. But when one of our field researchers would speak to them in Kreyol and explain the purpose of what we were doing, and that we were Cuban, everything changed. They became receptive and even enthusiastic. I felt a very real sense of patriotic pride, because they have great admiration, respect and affection for Cuba. Don't forget there have long been cultural and historical links between the two countries, and large numbers of Haitians emigrated to Cuba to cut cane there, settling in the eastern provinces, in Camagüey Today also, there are many Cuban doctors working in Haiti, where they are much respected for the excellent job they do.

Like Coulanges and Paddington, López avoids the pitfall of merely soliciting the viewer's compassion through an exclusive focus on hardship. His method, as we have seen, is to contrast scenes of drudgery with the remarkably philosophical oral testimony of some Haitians, who appear to have developed effective strategies against the emotional consequences of overwhelming material poverty and social instability. Elsewhere, he shows artists struggling against the odds to humanise the urban landscape and create a sense of belonging amongst the teeming *bidonvilles*, where thousands of households with essentially rural customs inhabit an anarchic urban space.

Both *Chercher la vie* and *Puerto Príncipe mío*, then, take great pains to present the human face of a city described in the latter as "a beast", "a monster" and a place in which "people are not considered human beings". Some may be tempted to ask,

however, whether this determination to humanise risks presenting a dishonestly gilded image of Haitian reality. In both films, however, the often upbeat testimony of the characters when they speak is set against what we are *seeing*: it is not so much that Haitian reality appears less brutal in these documentaries, their value lies rather in showing the energy and grace of at least some of its inhabitants as they eke out an existence *despite* the very evident brutality of their surroundings. López feels this is why this type of documentary is particularly apt for providing a nuanced but credible account of contemporary Port-au-Prince: “For me this project brought home once again, rhetoric aside, the value of the image, of documentaries, for showing reality as it is. I ask myself: how could you describe in writing a situation like the one this documentary allows you to see? I think it is only believable, plausible when you see it”.

The Future for Haitian Women

It can be no coincidence that documentary filmmakers have focused on women in an attempt to offer a humanised image of contemporary Haiti.⁶ In a country plagued by tyranny and violence perpetrated overwhelmingly by men, this is nothing more than a logical step. In taking this step, they have gone some way to answering for the outside world the riddle of how life in a city such as Port-au-Prince is sustainable at all, showing how the strength and solidarity of Haitian women, particularly, counteracts the venality and egotism of local powerbrokers, and the indifference of the world at large.

There is one factor not touched on in these films, but which must be borne in mind if the hardships faced by Haitian women are to be fully comprehended: that they themselves are the victims of much of the violence present in their society. Estimates suggest that over ten thousand women may have been raped as direct result of the 1991 coup d'état, stalling a growing movement for full equality that had seen fifty thousand women join a demonstration in Port-au-Prince in 1986 (Fourcand 237-40). To the initial injury of rape was added the insult of impunity for the perpetrators imposed by the subsequent amnesty, forcing victims to share the sidewalk with their attackers under the watchful gaze of UN peacekeepers (241). Outside the directly political context, violence against women is anyway commonplace in Haiti, constituting “an ancestral heritage, rooted in our customs as a people and therefore not determined by the social or marital status, religious convictions or level of education of the victims” (245).

Neither of the films focused on here sets out to address this thorny issue, which is a problematic area of study in any medium because powerful taboos heavily condition local responses to any enquiry on the subject (245-46). It is likely that the only solution to this problem, as elsewhere, is education. And in Haiti as elsewhere, socio-political stability leading to tolerable economic conditions must be regarded as a prerequisite for any concerted and effective campaign to educate men regarding their responsibilities and women regarding their rights. Increased female participation in politics is also necessary if society at large is to afford due recognition and respect to women for their role in sustaining both the economy and family life in Haiti. The establishment by President Aristide of a ministry for women in 1994 is a vital first step in this process, which will allow women's participation in Haitian society to extend beyond their heroic but thus far largely mute role in sustaining daily life, and to populate arenas of public discourse that have thus far been overwhelmingly dominated by men. In its way, *Chercher la vie* shows that this has already begun to happen, for as Anne-Rose's husband remarks to Claudette Coulanges, “[women] are ever more present in all domains . . . the work you're doing, [making] this film, was reserved for men before”.

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Notes

- ¹ The English-subtitled version of *Chercher la vie* (*Looking for Life*) can be purchased or rented online from ArtMattan Productions, e-mail: ArtMattan@aol.com; web site: www.africanfilm.com. Outside North America and the English-speaking Caribbean it is distributed by Amber Film, e-mail: ambercine@compuserve.com.
- ² Coulanges remarks that, "Foreign filmmakers always try to integrate a Vodoo sequence into their films even when the subject of their film has nothing to do with Vodoo. It never occurred to me to do this" (Coulanges).
- ³ *God Give Us the Talent* is available from Banyan, 3 Adam Smith Square, Woodbrook, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; tel: 868 623 9756; fax: 868 627 6808; e-mail: banyan@pancaribbean.com; web site: www.pancaribbean.com/banyan.
- ⁴ Coulanges in fact initially intended to make a film about the modern-day *Madan Sara*, Haitian women traders who travel from marketplace to marketplace and in some cases, like the hucksters of Dominica, take trips abroad to buy and sell produce. Budget constraints prevented her from venturing beyond Port-au-Prince (Coulanges).
- ⁵ Coulanges also planned to show her two protagonists the film in Germany, but neither woman could be found in time to make the trip (Coulanges).
- ⁶ Women are in fact celebrated in a large proportion of Haiti's own cinematic production. Rassoul Labuchin, director of the acclaimed *Anita*, asserts that this tendency is a conscious attempt to express "our disapproval of the negative image of women offered by the bourgeois cinema of the decadent world" (Labuchin 145).