

## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 7. Providing Needed Space for Caribbean and Diaspora Filmmakers in Miami

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**Abstract:** The Third Horizon Film Festival was founded with the aim of providing a space in Miami to screen films by filmmakers from and about the Caribbean and its diaspora. Since it began in 2016, the festival has grown to encompass both radical and conventional forms of politically committed filmmaking, as well as cinema from other Global South spaces and their diasporas. This chapter argues for Third Horizon as a particular type of event: a film festival that is both identity-based (screening work made by people of a specific identity) and carefully curated (not screening work merely because of the identity of its makers).

**Keywords:** Film Festivals, Caribbean film festivals, Caribbean cinema, Caribbean diaspora cinema

As a small festival, Third Horizon is, to use a term we pointedly and repeatedly use, carefully curated. Curated, as opposed to programmed. I make a distinction. I see a similarity between us and several other relatively small US festivals—Art of the Real, Black Star, Doc Fortnight, Prismatic Ground—that are screening some excellent work that larger festivals like Sundance and Tribeca often overlook. Curatorially speaking then, Third Horizon seeks to punch above its weight in some ways. This has led to increasing audience numbers as well as critical success. Third Horizon has as its focus Caribbean cinema, and functions as a festival to provide needed space for Caribbean and diaspora filmmakers to exhibit their work. The distinction should be made

between Caribbean and Black or Afro: while the majority of Caribbean people are of African descent, the region and its diaspora are made up of people representing a range of ethnicities and backgrounds, and the films reflect this. Miami, Florida, where *Third Horizon* takes place, is home to a significant Caribbean diaspora community, which has largely been underserved when it comes to seeing cinematic content from the region. *Third Horizon* therefore gave us the opportunity to program for this audience—as well as Miami cinephiles in general—not only the latest films by Caribbean filmmakers, from the Caribbean diaspora and non-Caribbeans at work in the region, but also older, even classic films that had never been screened in Miami. We're looking both to bring together an audience (an underserved Caribbean community in Florida) and create an audience (cinephiles interested in seeing good cinema that happens to come from the Caribbean).

The diversity of the Caribbean is, paradoxically, both its greatest asset and its most divisive factor. The islands, historical sites of great exploitation and unfathomable cruelty, were never envisioned as anyone's utopia, but they contain within their infinite variety of races, cultures, languages, and beliefs, endless human possibility. Cinema, itself a hybrid of other art forms, has a potential in this regard that the Caribbean itself, I believe, is yet scarcely aware of. As Stuart Hall, the quintessential Caribbean man, said of an emergent Caribbean cinema, it is “that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are” (1989, 80). I couldn’t put it any better than that. As we work to bring cinema to a complex population whose artistic relations cannot be easily defined, we’ve come across other examples of unique challenges posed to us as an island festival. In 2017 one such challenge was hurricanes Irma and Maria, which hit the Caribbean and south Florida mere weeks before the festival was set to begin. Irma, in particular, had severely affected Miami, and there was speculation that the festival might not come off or that if it did, many potential audience members still recovering from the hurricane’s effects would not turn out. Thankfully, the festival was held and still had a lively audience, but that same year *Third Horizon* was also suffering from decreased sponsorship. In a move sadly indicative of the political climate in the United States, the festival’s two major corporate sponsors from 2016 did not come back on board in 2017. This further complicated the ever-present hurdle of securing titles in a timely fashion given the issue of premiere status and festivals in competition with one another for that honor. *Third Horizon* has a loose South Florida premiere requirement, but even so we’ve been on occasion unable to secure films within one festival year of their premiere given where we are on the festival totem pole.

As a Caribbean film festival we sometimes encounter the expectation that we will program a film merely because it's Caribbean. This is not the case and has in some instances led to notable omissions. The question of trauma porn, poverty porn, violence porn...that voyeuristic lens...it's not restricted to only outsider filmmakers. We routinely turn down films by Caribbean filmmakers because we feel like these films are recycling tropes picked up from Hollywood in telling Caribbean stories. We want the films we program, even if they are genre films, to have a certain ethical integrity about them, and to go beyond clichés of the Caribbean as an exotic, sun-drenched tourists' paradise, a place made up largely of bikinis and beaches. We are committed to our mission of subverting stereotypes, and to presenting the Caribbean region as so much more than just sun, sea, and sand. Our aim is to show that the thing that we extol as "Caribbean cinema" is as multifaceted, dynamic, and surprising as the region itself. Concerning festivals of years past, one criterion was that all of the region's major groupings in terms of colonial heritage—English, Spanish, French, and Dutch—had to be represented. An ideal film program reflects the diversity of the region in terms of geography (both countries within the region and the diaspora), language, thematic concerns, style, and the gender and sexuality of the filmmakers concerned.

Outside of our Caribbean focus, given the fractured political moment we continue to find ourselves in globally, we've also decided to foreground radical and empathetic filmmaking voices. These kinds of films focus on the struggles of the marginalized against traditional structures of power. Now is the most inclusive we've ever been in our selection, with the most countries we've ever had represented in our lineups. We deliberately mix fiction, non-fiction, hybrid, and experimental work, reflecting an outlook of global solidarity in this moment of precarity and potential. We want work that is challenging and pushes boundaries both in terms of content and form. In selecting films for *Third Horizon*, format matters as much as content. We seek to celebrate films that go beyond mere representation, reflecting an imaginative, resourceful, and politically aware use of the medium.

What can be said is that the Caribbean is the last region of the globe whose films and filmmakers are yet to be—if I may use a contentious word—discovered. Yes, there's Cuba, and there have been individual filmmakers like Haiti's Raoul Peck who have achieved international acclaim, but the region as a whole remains largely unknown. That's partly due to the fact that, for decades, there was really no industry: a lack of resources and institutional support conspired to keep potential filmmakers from making work. But with the digital revolution, and a concomitant (if inconsistent)

show of support at a state level, the infrastructure has begun to be put in place for an industry to develop and hopefully thrive. We see short film-making as a way for filmmakers to hone their craft, find their voice, and get a toehold within the vast ecosystem of the international film industry. The hope is that these filmmakers—all very talented, potential auteurs in the making—will go on to establish themselves and the Caribbean as a force to be reckoned with in the near future. And we're seeing the results: filmmakers are beginning to emerge onto the international film festival circuit and beyond. Third Horizon, of course, is an ideal place to see some of this work. As the steady increase in its attendance illustrates, the festival, despite several challenges, is succeeding in its mission to increase the diversity of Miami's film exhibition landscape, and in particular bring Caribbean films not only to Miami's community of cinephiles, but also to its significant Caribbean population.

## Bibliography

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## About the Author

**Jonathan Ali** is Director of Programming at Miami's Third Horizon Film Festival. He also holds roles at Open City Documentary Festival in London, Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival in Hawick, Scotland, and the Open Doors program at Locarno Film Festival. He is Caribbean advisor for the Criterion Channel.