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The Art of Weaving Emotional Truths

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***Haiti Chérie*. Directed by Claudio Del Punta. Esperia Film, Arethusa Film, 2007. 99 minutes.**

Haiti Chérie, a movie made by the Italian filmmaker, Claudio Del Punta, portrays the travails of a Haitian couple—the beautiful youth, Magdeleine, and the gruff, hard-working, Jean-Baptiste—who live on a privately-leased sugar estate in the Dominican Republic. The film follows the couple's efforts to escape the desperate conditions of the *bateyes* (sugar company compounds, pronounced “bah-TAY-yess”), in the company of a teenage Haitian neighbor, Pierre. Filmed with a Haitian and Dominican cast, on site in the province of Barahona in the Dominican Republic, *Haiti Chérie* is plainly political art, a fiction that seeks to portray injustice accurately. Noting that human rights organizations have likened the plight of the cane cutters to slave labor, the film's promotional literature observes, “It is the director's hope that by drawing public attention to ... serious human rights abuses, more effective pressure can be applied to the Dominican Republic and the plantation companies to end this exploitation.” Though visually compelling and poignantly acted, this film falls short when held to the higher standard of excellence that I think should apply to political art: anachronisms and cultural missteps jump to this viewer's eye. (My assessment, it bears adding, is informed by my close familiarity with the plight of the Haitian *braceros*—migrant sugarcane workers—developed through repeated stints of field research over the past 25 years as well as from my having consulted closely in more recent years with Haitian-Dominican rights advocates and community organizing professionals.) The film's inaccuracies are all the more regrettable considering the high levels of artistic talent and imaginativeness that the filmmakers pair with evident concern for the *braceros*.

Certain of the filmmakers' production choices make it clear that they place a high premium on accurate portrayal of the *batey* milieu, even if it means making it marginally more challenging for non-Haitian audiences to establish emotional engagement. Of the film's four main protagonists, for example, three speak their parts mainly in Haitian Creole; Spanish is the only other language spoken. The vast majority of viewers among interna-

tional audiences will therefore rely heavily on subtitles to follow the action and gauge the actors' emotions. Most of the players are not professional actors but live and work in the *bateyes*. Their understated performances make the action look closer to real than what could have been achieved with professional actors possessing a wider and more audience-pleasing palette of acting registers. Also, as anyone who has spent time on the Barahona sugar estate will recognize, much of the film was shot on site, including indisputably authentic footage of the cane cutters and cart drivers at work, dwarfed at times by the plantation's tractors and other heavy machinery, imbuing the film at times with the gritty verisimilitude of documentary.

The film's portrayal of life in the *bateyes* falls easily in step with allegations, made by certain (but not all) international and Dominican-based migrant rights advocates, that the Haitian *braceros* are held as slaves on the sugar estates. Private plantation security personnel (referred to in the film as "*guardias*," the Dominican Spanish name for soldiers) keep a tyrannical grip on the Haitians, not only maintaining constant surveillance over the workers and impeding their right to leave the sugar estate (in the film's opening scenes a *guardia* prohibits Magdeleine and Jean-Baptiste from accompanying the coffin containing their recently-deceased only child to the cemetery); the *guardias* also target the workers' wives and daughters for sexual exploitation. It is only after a *guardia*'s attempt to rape Magdeleine in public has been repulsed by Jean-Baptiste and Pierre in a bloody fist fight that the three muster the determination to flee this place of repression.

Even uninformed but critical viewers should by this point in the film have reason to suspect that the reality of the *bateyes* must be somewhat more complex. If Haitians are truly being held as slaves and if the domination of the plantation security personnel is that absolute, how is it then that the film-makers could have possibly been permitted to film in the open for days on a sugar estate? From my standpoint as a seasoned observer of the situation, perhaps the most serious of the film's anachronisms is uncritical acceptance of the line that a "new slavery" is still being perpetrated in the Dominican Republic. The image formerly propagated by human rights monitors, of near-total domination by company bosses and security personnel, was never entirely accurate, but that old mechanism of control largely crumbled after 1990, as sugar production plummeted and the state-owned estates of the Consejo Estatal del Azúcar (CEA) were all leased to private companies, a number of which have abandoned sugar production altogether. Over the same span of years, the majority of Haitian immigrants gradually moved off the sugar estates (an increasing number have never set foot on them at all), instead taking up the bottom-most rungs of other branches of agricultural labor and of urban informal commerce, street vending, construction, and domestic service. Gone are the days of near-total isolation of the Haitians

on the sugar estates, when a company boss could prey virtually without resistance on the Haitian women in his *bateyes*, confident that for lack of any economic alternatives these women would accede to his sexual demands. Among the most respected international human rights monitors and lawyers as well as the rights groups founded by Haitian-Dominicans themselves, the leading issues today are no longer neo-slavery but the repatriation without due process of undocumented Haitian nationals (which often ensnares even Haitian-Dominicans) and the denial of citizenship and an attendant suite of rights to the Dominican-born children and grandchildren of Haitian immigrants. Placing the plot element of virtual enslavement at the film's heart, then, is an anachronism that severely limits the potential of the film to shed light on the pressing human rights challenges confronting Dominican Haitians today.

A much truer note is struck when Jean-Baptiste and Magdeleine, while on their way to the Haitian frontier, stumble into an Army round-up of Haitian workers from a construction site. The building contractor, rather than paying the workers, has called in some troops, who for a modest sum rid him of his inconvenient payroll by chasing the workers down and goading them onto a truck for immediate repatriation to Haiti. Further along their journey, the travelers also spend time with a Haitian woman forced by poverty to remain with an abusive partner. Without explanation this woman refuses Magdeleine's invitation to join them in returning to Haiti. One senses that this woman fears worse in Haiti than the vile treatment she is experiencing in the Dominican Republic, a fear that will prove all too true for Magdeleine and Jean-Baptiste once they cross the border. The journey scenes provide a more varied and subtle scan of Haitian lives in the Dominican Republic than is given by the film's first half, set on the sugar plantation, and thus proves to be a more reliable, if less dramatically vivid, reflection of the immigrant community's condition. While the focus on one evil-doer, in the form of the abusive *guardia* back on the plantation, cast Magdeleine and Jean-Baptiste's plight in simple and clear light, more true-to-life and up-to-date scenarios come forward in the less obvious nets of oppression that have trapped those unfortunate construction workers and the abused wife.

The film's fourth main protagonist is the Spanish-speaking (but foreign-accented) plantation doctor, Ernesto. Styled perhaps after the real-life social-justice militants and expatriate priests, Christopher Hartley and Pierre Ruquoy, who for years acted as catalysts for community organizing among sugar workers, Ernesto mixes his medicine with activism for systemic change, such as using his spare time to proselytize the workers to join independent labor unions (much to the displeasure of the *guardias*). Both an idealist and an experienced man of the world, Ernesto is a character with whom it will be easy for foreign audiences to empathize. It is he who makes it possible ultimately for Magdeleine and Jean-Baptiste to escape

the *batey*, giving them and Pierre (badly wounded in defending Magdeleine from the *guardia*) a ride to the border in his tiny old pickup truck. Yet that magnanimous act of rescue is to my eyes a second major false step in film's plot development, standing totally at odds with the major emphasis of the leading Haitian-Dominican rights organizations. These have for more than twenty years now focused on assisting Haitian nationals and their Dominican-born children to gain consciousness of their own rights and attain skills needed to stand up for their rights individually and collectively. That community empowerment agenda is obscured or distorted by rescue stories (of which this film is not the first). Set against the *guardias*' domination, Magdeleine and Jean-Baptiste's scope of choice is limited to two forms of passivity, either to be carried away by Ernesto or stay and face worse humiliation. The lesson for the viewing public is regrettable: the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from *Haiti Chérie* is that Haitians in the Dominican Republic stand in need of rescue by outsiders, being incapable of militating for their own rights due to the oppressive slave-like condition in which they are mired. Until that paternalistic starting assumption can be overcome, the quality of our solidarity with their struggle will inevitably be limited. And again, a misperception is perpetuated that could have been rethought early on by taking the film's plot synopsis for discussion with a wide range of the community's own representatives.

Further mischaracterizations swirl around the film's take on Haitian culture. Early in the film, the teenage boy, Pierre, stricken with love for Magdeleine, follows her into a cane field where, for lack of a latrine, she must go out to relieve her bladder. To students of Haitian culture it will seem odd that, when he confronts her silently in the fields, she does not send the young man packing with a good earful of expletives for being up to no good, as any self-respecting married Haitian woman would, but instead consents to bring Pierre to orgasm with her hand! That seems like a gratuitous sex act on several counts. First, it ethnocentrically blurs a distinction fundamental to Haitian mating patterns: Magdeleine, a married woman who has already borne one child, would consider the childless, unmarried Pierre only a boy, even if he is almost fully grown, is only a year or two younger than she is and already works full time in the cane fields. Secondly, this lurid hand-job in the cane fields seems like a wasted opportunity to draw attention to the added vulnerability to sexual assault that women endure in those *bateyes* that have no working sanitary facilities. Women are raped in the cane fields under circumstances like these. Many viewers may instead come away with the mistaken impression that Haitian women dispense sexual gratification in the bush with animalistic alacrity, and both Magdeleine and Pierre will seem less human as a consequence. Lastly, this sex scene seems to me an artistic as well as cultural and political misstep: it is strangely detached from dialogue and character development in the rest of the movie, as if

both characters forgot that they had ever had a sexual encounter with each other. If Magdeleine had instead stymied Pierre's sexual advances, that cane-field encounter might have been a more effective basis dramatically for the two to establish a trusting and more culturally-appropriate mother-son or sibling type of bond, by having to find a way of overcoming the tension sown by Pierre's clumsy aggressiveness.

The non-professional actors who play the roles of Magdeleine, Pierre and Jean-Baptiste generally strike dignified postures by understating their lines and avoiding overly expressive movements. These actors, together with the subtle, you-are-there realism created by inventive camera work and the alternation of authentic exterior sites with dark interiors that always look naturally lit, all establish a tone of mourning for home places, lives and hopes lost to the cane fields. Yet their understatement becomes monotonous when sustained without interruption; emotional release fails to emerge in situations when anger or grief would be expected to pour out in torrents in just about any Caribbean locale. And just as grief is not expressed emphatically in this film, so, too, and even more strangely is humor never present. Somewhere, there may be a group of humans who have not coped with oppression by poking fun at their oppressors (the Swiss?) but I dare say that nowhere in the African Diaspora will you find such unremittingly dour faces as are on display in *Haïti Chérie*. On uncounted occasions, I have heard *batey* residents tell stories about hunger and mistreatment; it is done most often in ways that aim to elicit laughter. And these stories' listeners do laugh, expressing thus a determination not to let themselves be ground down and a recognition of the storyteller's pain in their own experience.

I sense that *Haïti Chérie* could have benefited from bringing forward the *batey* residents' own stories and styles of story-telling, rather than letting human rights monitors' allegations of new slavery command the development of setting, character and plot. Perhaps if *Haïti Chérie* had gone even further down the road of creative community participation, by pairing the filmmakers' talent and concern with the *batey* residents' own stories, it might have been the shining example of political art that Del Punta wished it to be. When art comes to the service of human rights, creative license ideally pairs with the accurate portrayal of injustice to create not just emotion but emotional truths, embracing pain and harrowing experiences that generally are understated in social research and are only fleetingly sketched and thinly contextualized in human rights reportage. Even if political art excels in artistically, as *Haïti Chérie* does, inaccuracies subtract from its emotional truth. For that reason, I cannot recommend *Haïti Chérie* either as political art or as an accurate portrayal of the many human rights challenges facing Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic.