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CHRISTIAN LARA: RECONCILING VISION AND EXECUTION IN *SUCRE AMER* (BITTER SUGAR, 1997) AND *1802, L'ÉPOPÉE GUADELOUPÉENNE* (1802, THE GUADELOUPEAN EPIC, 2005)

MEREDITH ROBINSON

Résumé

Evoquer le passé dans un film, c'est un geste politique. Ce geste permet que le passé soit lu et interprété dans une nouvelle façon selon les choix du réalisateur. Christian Lara, le réalisateur guadeloupéen étudié dans cet article, représente la rébellion de 1803 dans ses deux films. Dans ses propres mots, il construit « une fresque historique » des événements, foisonnée des changements fréquents des scènes, des costumes élaborés et une gamme de personnages. À travers ses éléments, Lara expose des méfaits coloniaux et il interroge l'engagement métropolitain dans son île. Cet article démontre que l'effort de Lara, malgré sa théâtralité, souligne un désir urgent de corriger et de confirmer l'histoire distinctive et inspirante de Guadeloupe.

Abstract

Invoking the past in film is a political gesture because it suggests new interpretations of historical events. French Caribbean director Christian Lara portrays the Guadeloupean rebellion of 1803 in two of his films. In his own words, he builds “a historical fresco” of the events, abounding with frequent changes of scenery, elaborate period costumes, and a wide range of minor and major characters through which he exposes France's colonial wrongdoings. He further questions present French involvement in Guadeloupe. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that his cinematic efforts, though criticized for their theatricality, underscore an urgency to correct and confirm the islands' distinctive and inspiring local history.

Christian Lara is inarguably the most prolific French-Caribbean director alive. He was the first French-Caribbean director and created the first film set in the Antilles, *Coco la fleur, candidat* (1979). Already 24 feature films to his name, he is currently in post-production on his latest film, *The Legend*, which takes place in French Polynesia. With an earnest ambition to promote and dignify Black culture, specifically of the Caribbean, he is also referred to as the Father of French-Caribbean cinema¹. Despite having such a vast, aspirational body of work in a field that requires more scholarly attention,² Lara has not received favourable reviews in academic film criticism. In my view, this negative criticism³ highlights an acute conflict between rhetoric and aesthetic. That is to say, Lara has articulated his desire to revisit and valorize Guadeloupean history and to inspire political change, but critics have not lauded the ways in which he has carried out these objectives. As a result, this Guadeloupean director continues to straddle a precarious position in French-Caribbean filmmaking.

We must unpack this severe criticism: can negative reviews be taken at face value or is there another angle from which to examine the films so as to shed light on the concerns over Lara's vision and choices? Although his research subject is different, film scholar Bill Nichols offers relevant insight into this question. In his article on Iranian film, he examines the critical expectations of non-Western cinema, arguing that film critics who analyze non-Hollywood film seek to recover “the strange as familiar” (Nichols 18). In other words, one way critics make sense of non-Western films is to find commonalities in their style. To develop a common critical process to formulate generalizations about foreign films, critics establish a set of expected characteristics for any non-Western film. Evidence of these characteristics is found in the film's formal aspects, thus solidifying the “acknowledgment of an international film style (formal innovation; psychologically complex, ambiguous, poetic, allegorical, or

restrained characterizations; rejection of Hollywood norms for the representation of time and space; lack of clear resolution or narrative closure; and so on)” (Nichols 17).

One consequence of this critical strategy is that it engenders a sphere of expectation for non-Western filmmakers. Critics have created an informal code of production, consisting of, but not limited to, the presence of didactic, allegorical, and anti-capitalist thematic material; the employment of non-professional actors to create a more authentic representation; and the dismissal of commonly deemed stalwarts of Hollywood cinema (sex, violence, expensive special effects, and the classic happy end, etc.). Regarding French-Caribbean film, one contributing factor to the precariousness of Lara’s position has been that he does not abide by this informal code. The presence of Western-influenced techniques such as professional actors, ornate costumes, and ostentatious special effects techniques in *Sucre Amer* and *1802, l’Épopée Guadeloupéenne* destabilizes assumptions about non-Western films. Scholarly work must consider the critical dilemma that the presence of these techniques creates. The present essay aims to provide a new perspective from which to analyze Lara’s filmic choices and explain his contrarian aesthetic.

***Sucre Amer* (1997)**

Rather than perpetuate criticism of Lara’s films for imitative tendencies or politically incorrect viewpoints, I aim to bring the complexities of his filmic techniques to the fore, demonstrate his fascination with memory, highlight his numerous socio-cultural references, and provide an explanation for the theatrical quality of the films. Offering a new interpretation of Lara’s films exhibits their highly polemical quality, the nuanced and intelligent attack on racism and the *béké* society, and the clear, purposeful representation of the past.

More than 20 years after the release of *Vivre libre ou mourir* (1980/81), Lara returned to its principal theme, the Guadeloupean revolt of 1802, in his two relatively recent films, *Sucre Amer* (1997) and *1802, l’Épopée Guadeloupéenne* (2005). Although Lara released these two films separately, they are stylistic replicas, with consistent lighting, dominant colors, and costumes. The films partly feature the same actors and setting and represent several

major battles, the relationships among officers, the enthusiastic participation of the Guadeloupean people, and the French decision to send troops in anticipation of Guadeloupean resistance to the reinstatement of slavery. Yet the films differ in one substantial way: *Sucre Amer*, whose title ostensibly references the entwined history of sugar production and slavery in the New World, does not focus solely on the historical period of the rebellion. The narrative alternates between three settings: the 1802 battle, the modern-day imaginary trial of Joseph Ignace, and the deliberations in the jury room. The trial involves additional historic and invented characters and a secondary plotline that delivers a scathing indictment of colonial France. The alternating depiction of these three settings creates a chronological but discontinuous and episodic narrative structure that continues for the duration of the film.

During the opening sequence of *Sucre Amer*, Lara introduces this structure and foreshadows the conflict at the very heart of the plot. First, he briefly films the Guadeloupean context preceding the revolt. He begins with a close-up tracking shot of horse legs galloping through water. As the horses pull a carriage, the slow-motion of the racing hooves, with water spraying in every direction, infuses the moment with controlled urgency and suspense. This urgency is also conveyed through sound; the extradiegetic rapid rhythm of beating drums accompanies the images of the horse and carriage. The sight of this dated means of transportation immediately transports the modern-day viewer into the past and establishes the time period of the primary plot.

To further illustrate this time period, Lara cuts several times to young Guadeloupean girls dancing the *menuet* (minuet), an elegant and formal French court dance that originated in 17th-century France. Despite the decorum and elegance, this scene evokes a controversial trend in Mulatto society. The imitation of French music and clothing suggests cooperation and support of French rule and, by extension, the enslavement of fellow Guadeloupeans. The melody of the minuet, layered over the sound of the drumbeat, also has an underlying connotation that establishes a societal division that dominates the Guadeloupean population: the drum beat establishes the Afro-Antillean cultural presence and the *menuet* gestures to the influence of colonial France.



Fig. 1. *Sucre Amer* (1997), arrival of the jurors.

Abruptly, the scene changes when a gavel strikes a judge's bench and a jury files into a modern-day jury room. The appearance of the jurors (figure 1) indicates that they belong to different eras and hail from a variety of homelands.

In the courtroom, Joseph Ignace (figure 2) is on trial for treason against France. The prosecution relates his three crimes. The man who appears before the court is called Ignace, a freed slave who has become a commander in the French army. He is accused of high treason because of his rebellion against the Republic's army after Napoleon Bonaparte restored the Code Noir, an edict dealing with slavery and related issues. He is also accused of establishing a separatist government and of fighting France's army.



Fig. 2. The accused, Joseph Ignace.

After the prosecutor makes her opening remarks, the sound chimes in as the camera hits Ignace. The next image is a close-up of Marie, emphasizing this juror's particular significance and responsibility in the ruling. The defendant's lawyer, an older distinguished Guadeloupean, states that he will present "the same events but a different story." His opening argument concludes with the statement that Ignace is the "victim of historical manipulation." This remark represents the political orientation of the film: an artistic rendering of events and figures that will right the wrongs of recorded history. The final, salient words of the scene come from the judge, who instructs the jury, "A Man's honor is at stake. You must clear his name or find him guilty. Your duty is to separate the facts from what may be imaginary to reach a unanimous verdict."

Henceforth throughout the film, Lara consistently juxtaposes past and present, designating the three key settings in the film: the reconstruction of the failed Guadeloupean rebellion, the courtroom where the trial of Ignace takes place, and the jury room where the eight jurors must reach a unanimous verdict. The first of these settings depicts the earliest emancipation of the Guadeloupean slave population, in 1794. The French shrewdly enacted the emancipation to encourage enlistment in the fight against the British. Lara's film shows the French arming and outfitting Guadeloupeans and then returns again to the courtroom where Ignace's wife begins her testimony. Describing the emancipation, she says, "Whites and Blacks made peace, then we got to work...It was like a celebration." To present the emancipation and short-lived camaraderie between French and freed Guadeloupeans, Lara inserts a scene in which Ignace defends a French soldier from a British attack and cradles the dead White man who carried the official emancipation document. The French Governor Lacrosse, who arrived in Guadeloupe with his aide-de-camp Louis Delgrès in 1801, had instructions to reinstitute slavery according to the French 1799 Constitution.

Flashbacks throughout Lara's film demonstrates his broad knowledge of Guadeloupean history. The flashbacks that constitute the reconstruction of the rebellion are atypical in a fundamental way. In classic narrative cinema, "in its most common form, flashback is signaled when an older character's memory of the past leads to a cut to a scene or series of scenes representing that past" (Satterlee 64). For example, if an older character flashes back to his/her life many years before, the director will maintain the verisimilitude of the film by ensuring that this character looks and behaves in a way that is appropriate to the younger age. In Lara's films, however, the characters that appear in flashback are the same age and wear the same attire in both settings: the 1802 rebellion and the contemporary trial. Lara's main character, Ignace, is not featured as an old man in one era and as his younger self in this film's flashbacks. In other words, although the trial seemingly takes place two hundred years after the rebellion, Ignace looks exactly the same in either setting. In fact, every character is depicted as him/herself, at one age and with one appearance, whether he/she appears during a flashback or in the contemporary scenes. All characters from Guadeloupe's past that have been integrated into the modern setting of the courtroom dress and behave as they would have during their actual lifetime.

This narrative structure enables Lara to educate the audience about the current prevalence of racism. For instance, after a psychiatrist takes the stand later in the film, Lara films the jury room where members deliberate the difference between Whites and Blacks, particularly White and Black men. The Black writer and head juror Privat D'Anglemont asks Marie (figure 3), the young French woman, to explain her opinion of the difference between White and Black men.



Fig. 3. *Sucre Amer* (1997), prevalence of racism.

Racist statements also surface in the courtroom when a self-proclaimed eyewitness named Duboyer describes the Black rebels as zombies. He accuses Louis Delgrès of commanding the rebels to burn everything and kill all the Whites. The jurors, in particular Marie, take note in the deliberation room that Duboyer could not have seen anything. As Lara adds testimony from Ignace's mother, Ignace, Rougier (the man who kills Ignace), Victor Schoelcher, and Empress Josephine, he continues to cross-cut frequently between the courtroom and jury room to convey, in quick order, the jury's responses to the witnesses' remarks. Although juries do not typically deliberate after every testimony, this narrative structure overrides realism to create a back-and-forth dialogue.

Hence, past events that come to light over the course of the trial have an immediate impact on the impressions of the various jury members. Collective memory progressively influences the opinions and attitudes of the jury. At the end of the film, the trial is almost over and the lawyers give their final arguments. The defense recounts the history of slavery and the lack of official apology from France. He demands that the past be "a clean slate...with above all a recognized importance... it's our obligation to remember."⁴ The battle scenes reach their climax and, in a flashback to the end of the rebellion, the French forces defeat the Guadeloupeans. Ignace is assassinated in battle. Immediately, Lara cuts back to the jury. The abrupt

final shot presents silence in the jury room. The imaginary trial identifies the accused as a fallen hero with a trumped up charge.

No verdict in the courtroom is ever given. Snatching Ignace's fate from the French legal system, Lara indicates that the jury, representative of Guadeloupean society, is responsible for his legacy. At its core, Lara's film engages in this retelling of the past in order to demonstrate the heroism of Guadeloupean rebels, propose a representation of major events in Guadeloupean history, condemn France for its colonialism, and challenge French involvement in modern-day Guadeloupe.

In *Sucre Amer*, the *mise-en-scène* varies depending on context of the two time periods the film depicts. In all of the scenes involving the rebellion, the *mise-en-scène* is a studied application of factual elements—from locations to clothing, hair, accessories, and weapons—in a closely replicated timeline of verifiable events and probable interactions. In both the courtroom and the deliberation room, the appearance of the characters takes precedence over the background. Costumes dominate this invented space, an authentic and lackluster replication of a judicial environment. In every context, Lara purposefully configures each image in order to lay bare his political reading of Guadeloupean past and current culture.

From the onset of the beginning of the film, Lara's careful construction is evident. The racing carriage, *menuet* music, and the appearance of the characters comprising the audience of the small outdoor concert establish the first setting of the film: Guadeloupe prior to the arrival of colonial administrator Richepance. The elegance of the costumes, the peacefulness and seclusion of the setting, the choice of music, and the composed behavior of the audience strongly suggest the Mulatto population's French tastes.

The film also verbally articulates and visually expresses the contemporary relevance of the rebellion. During a recess from the trial, Ignace and his anonymous lawyer stand face-to-face in a prison. With only two men in the scene, this image serves to define their private interaction and the significance of this moment. In a tense conversation, the lawyer encourages Ignace to take the stand. Ignace resists, saying, "I am not a hero. I am a Black man from Guadeloupe, that's all."⁵ The lawyer responds: "For us, your trial is important."⁶ In this statement, Lara expresses the idea that Ignace's heroism resonates with living Guadeloupeans because it satisfies a desire for self-knowledge, cultural pride, and historic preservation. Essentially, the lawyer is urging Ignace to testify because it brings this heroism to life.

Yet, despite the noble message of the lawyer and the favorable and detailed portrayal of the rebellion, multiple techniques of the *mise-en-scène* could detract from a positive impression of this film. For instance, there are repeated instances of endless death scenes, exaggerated dialogue, grandiose personalities, and overt symbolism. We must address the manifestation of these choices in order to make sense of Lara's project as a whole. A critical viewer must question the role and effectiveness of such commonplace techniques in the innovative and intellectual framework established by *Sucre Amer*'s narrative progression. There are two possible interpretations for these types of techniques. Arguably, in attempting to bolster the emotional impact of the film, Lara has been caught in the trap of relying too heavily on clichés. However, a second interpretation of the epic battle scenes and dramatic acting views such intensification and excess as unmistakably conveying the heroism of the Guadeloupean figures, elevating the stakes of combat, condemning the French colonial empire, and attacking the continued prevalence of racism and colonial ideals.

When weighing the differences between these two interpretations, we cannot overlook one important factor. Lara has been outspoken and explicit about his objectives in the film,⁷ seeing film as a way to influence history and shape Guadeloupean identity. The principal actor in both *Sucre Amer* and *1802*, Luc Saint-Eloy, supports this agenda in a comment on his own motivation to participate in Lara's films. In his statement, he underscores the connection between the films and the contemporary social concern of continued oppression in Guadeloupe:

*We are proud of our past and it is for that reason that we want to revisit it in order to build the foundation that we are missing. We do not want the foundation that was established for us, but on the contrary to construct our own. The fight we lead is in their heads and ours. It's a veritable power struggle between the colonizers and the colonized. We are obliged to speak about oppression and the rediscovered freedom.*⁸

These remarks underscore how deliberate Lara's choices in filmmaking have been. They suggest that Lara is perfectly cognizant of clichés and their exploitation, but has decided to use them to his advantage. Lara creates film with a deliberately theatrical *mise-en-scène*.

The theatricality in the film also emphasizes the trauma of slavery and the violence of the rebellion. In a series of scenes toward the end of *Sucre Amer*, Lara films an encampment of rebels. Pivoting the camera, he depicts women crying and moaning while others dance and eat. The film then cuts to Ignace's wife, who confesses, "I hate my color."⁹ She exposes her back, horribly scarred from lashings inflicted during her enslavement. Against the dark backdrop of night, her back is illuminated by firelight—a painful sight meant to convey the suffering of the Guadeloupean people and rationalize their decision to rebel.

On the eve of Ignace's final battle, Lara features a group of individuals who exhibit a range of emotional responses to their distressing condition. Ignace's preparation for battle involves the decision to paint his face white, following tradition. Within earshot of Ignace, another soldier reproaches

Ignace's reliance on tradition, stating, "Africa is long gone." In this mini-dialogue, Lara exposes the tension between the reliance on African roots and the damage to these beliefs as a result of generations of struggle and failing revolt. To ensure that Ignace's opinion overrides this cynical attitude, Lara films him as he quickly retorts, "Today we are reborn!"¹¹ By depicting a protagonist who asserts the value of tradition, Lara demonstrates the way in which he imagines and configures the presence and significance of African beliefs amongst the rebels. This face painting is another example of how Lara uses the appearance of the characters to create meaningful visual symbols in the film. When the battle begins, many of the fighting men and women have painted their faces like Ignace, proving the significance of African cultural influence.

Over the course of the fighting, a woman is decapitated. Her body convulses as her head rolls to face the camera in close-up. Sparing no gruesome corporeal detail, Lara purposefully highlights the sacrifice of the Guadeloupean rebels. Ignace dies during this battle and Lara then ends the film with a shot of the very somber jury. The usually animated cast sits silent and dejected, clearly conveying their understanding of Ignace's sacrifice. The *mise-en-scène* of this shot epitomizes the political implications of the entire film. Lara effectively establishes that the rebellion continues to have direct and undeniable effects on modern-day Guadeloupe.

In addition, Lara adeptly evokes the spirit of the French Revolution in the Antillean context. One example of this influence is apparent in the decision of certain Guadeloupean soldiers to continue to wear the *tricorne*, or three-corner hat, long after their break from the French army. Other Guadeloupeans sport the *bonnet phrygien*, a headpiece popularized by French Revolutionaries, though its first documented use was in Ancient Greece to distinguish manumitted slaves. The Guadeloupean soldiers even sing the *Marseillaise*,

the French national anthem. The presentation of these customs and symbols serves to solidify that the Guadeloupean rebels have adopted the ideology of the French Revolution. This co-opting is possible because they interpret revolutionary ideology as separate and distinct from the French state. Akin to a similar phenomenon in Haiti, the main principles of the French Revolution were a unifying rhetoric amongst the colonized, despite the nation being at war with the French state.

Hence, when Lara captures a *tricorne* floating abandoned in the water after Ignace's defeat, the *mise-en-scène* drives home a key point about the rebellion and the French Revolution, the style of the shot uncovering a message about the relationship between Guadeloupe and France. Instead of using an eye-level shot, the camera is held in a dominant position over the water and floating hat. High-angle shots often emphasize the weakness or dependence of the figure featured in the image. In this case, the high angle calls attention to the failure of the rebellion, represented by the hat. Furthermore, because the hat serves as a double metonymy for the French Revolution as well as the Guadeloupean uprising, this shot accentuates the failure of ideals of the French Revolution in the Guadeloupean context. Because the French army defeated the Guadeloupean rebels, this shot also exposes the irony of the entire conflict. By selecting very noticeable symbols of the French Revolution and incorporating them in the appearance of Guadeloupeans, Lara highlights the unique blend of French Revolutionary and traditional African elements. The face paint adds to this effect.

1802, *L'Épopée Guadeloupéenne*

The film *1802, L'Épopée Guadeloupéenne* does not include Ignace's trial. Instead, the narrative is a causal, chronological account that remains strictly within the bounds of the 1802 battle. Lara does not insert any contemporary scenes, but rather chooses to explore the events of the past in greater depth. His focus is on the leadership of the Guadeloupean rebels—particularly Louis Delgrès—the colonial anticipation of a rebellion, the arrival and involvement of French forces, several key battles, and the mass suicide organized by Delgrès.

The film begins with the soundtrack of instrumental string music accompanying a widescreen shot of fields and open road. Superimposed on the image of the fields are giant golden numbers indicating the year “1802,” followed by blood-drenched letters spelling “L'Épopée guadeloupéenne.” In a caption, Lara then briefly introduces the historical context: the abolition of slavery in 1794 and Napoleon's later reinstatement. The first two scenes stage the opposing players: the Guadeloupean rebels gathering in a large home versus Napoleon and Josephine discussing the colonies in Paris, November 1801. In the latter scene, Lara presents a dialogue in which Josephine pleads with Napoleon to return to Martinique. When the question of slavery arises, Napoleon quickly states that the emancipation was never actually legitimate. Napoleon's dismissive remarks convey his notorious arrogance and highlight the fundamentally conflicting positions regarding the emancipation. The alternation between the Guadeloupean and Parisian settings raises the significance of the revolt, placing it in a wider historical context and justifying the Guadeloupean resistance to the reinstatement of slavery.

When Richepance arrives in Guadeloupe, he immediately purports his mission to “re-establish order,” a euphemism for reinstating slavery. Richepance begins by disarming the Guadeloupeans. As the Guadeloupeans shed their uniforms, White soldiers laugh and point at their vulnerable, disrobed figures. Order, then, is actually a demeaning process that reflects the racial hierarchy. Fully aware that this disarmament is the first step in re-enslaving the local population, several Guadeloupeans attempt

to run away. Lara films vicious dogs and French soldiers chasing these men until he cuts to portray Ignace informing Delgrès of the recent events. The film continues to follow the chronology of the rebellion with the enlistment of Guadeloupean men and women followed by Delgrès' rousing speech at Fort St-Charles (now known as Fort Louis Delgrès) in which he states: “We will fight this oppression to our death.”¹² Subsequently, the Guadeloupean leadership crafts a proclamation outlining their grievances and strategizes late into the night; Lara represents these figures as resourceful, contemplative tacticians who fight only as a last resort.

Significantly, *1802* includes scenes involving British interest in Guadeloupe. Lara depicts the White English governor of Dominica receiving a letter from the French requesting help to counter the Guadeloupean slave rebellion. To convey the outside involvement in Guadeloupean affairs, the Governor discusses the French request with an American Army Major present at the Governor's mansion. The two men discuss how neither the French General Leclerc nor Richepance are succeeding in quelling the rebellions in Haiti and Guadeloupe. They admonish the preceding lack of consultation. Following this meeting, Richepance receives munitions from the English and rearms the Guadeloupeans who have chosen to fight against Delgrès' men. With the inclusion of American and British involvement, Lara again raises the stakes of the Guadeloupean rebellion by highlighting its international effects. Moreover, Lara implicates other powerful countries in the history of slavery and the casual, dismissive way they address the topic. In his decision to bring the colonial context forward, Lara denounces the colonial powers and their self-serving agenda.

In what remains of the film, Delgrès continues to evolve into the more prominent protagonist. After the next bloody battle between Delgrès and Richepance, Delgrès decides he must evacuate the fort and descend into Point-à-Pitre to fight. During a meeting, the rebel leaders express their hope for munitions from Toussaint L'Ouverture. This meeting contrasts with the previous scenes involving the colonists and their loyalty to one another.

The next day, Ignace and Delgrès lead different groups into battle. Lara films Ignace's death on May 25th, 1802 in Baimbridge, at a fort outside of Point-à-Pitre. Viewers also see Delgrès as he receives news that Ignace's head is on display at Place de la Victoire in Point-à-Pitre. Lara then depicts the violent battle of Matouba at the Danglemont plantation on May 28th, 1802. After losing this battle, Delgrès counts the wounded in the rebel camp. With no more munitions, he announces defeat. In the final scene, Delgrès looks upon the losing Guadeloupean forces. The film does not overtly announce the suicide. Instead, Delgrès sits upon a rocking chair on the veranda of a Creole-style home. Smoking a pipe, he observes his fellow rebels. Suddenly, the home explodes. As the credits roll, Lara lists all known names of those who lost their lives in the rebellion. The closing quotation is from Oruno Lara (1879-1924), Lara's grandfather and a prominent historian: "Each day of our progress is due to each day of their sacrifice." The statement reinforces the film's indictment of colonial France and its effort to recuperate the courage and endurance of Louis Delgrès.¹³

Comparative Analysis of *Sucre Amer* and *1802, l'Épopée Guadeloupéenne*.

The general characteristics of the *mise-en-scène* of *1802* are identical to *Sucre Amer*. Lara does not manipulate the setting through lighting in either film. The color appears with low contrast; thus, by using a small ratio of dark to light, the colors are more naturalistic. Furthermore, Lara refrains from the digital alteration of the images. Unlike Euhzan Palcy in the opening sequences of an earlier French-Caribbean film *Rue Cases-Nègres* (1983), Lara does not use sepia tones to stylize the environment and signal a bygone era. Another cinematic technique common to *Sucre Amer* and *1802* is the specific choice of shots. As Martine Beugnet explains, "choice of shot can be stylistically experimental. Shots can be motivated by style or by narrative" (99). Lara does not shoot either film in an experimental or radical manner. Rather, Lara chooses shots that allow the narrative to take precedence over style; he uses common shots in traditional ways. Given the naturalistic lighting and familiar shots, the *mise-en-scène* suggests a certain realism.

Nevertheless, the alternating settings in *Sucre Amer* disturb this illusion of realism. The appearance of the characters in *1802*, on the other hand, always corresponds to the time period. As a result, the period attire and bold colors in this film do not stand out as they do in the drab courtroom of *Sucre Amer*. What makes accessories (*tricorne* or *bonnet phrygien*) and weapons of the Guadeloupean soldiers visually striking in *1802* is that the uniforms were supplied by the French. Instead of serving as evidence of juxtaposition between past and present, the uniforms are significant because they are a central part of the *mise-en-scène*, always acting as visual reminders of the fluctuating demands of the colonizer. Hence, in the battle scenes that monopolize *1802*, the costumes do not always distinguish the opposing sides as much as racialized skin color does.

In addition to the open fields where fighting took place, Lara also features another more rugged natural environment that plays a significant role in *1802*. Both Guadeloupean and French forces trek through the tropical forest at different points in the narrative. Because Guadeloupe is covered in thick, lush vegetation that presses in on civilization, the dense greenery surrounds and almost swallows these groups as they make their way through the jungle. This *mise-en-scène* demonstrates how the natural environment dominates humankind. In the jungle, the French colonial soldiers march without the same certainty and composure of the Guadeloupans. The Guadeloupans navigate more easily, cutting through the forest at a swifter, more confident pace.

Apart from the additional battle scenes, the narrative of *1802* focuses more on the colonial involvement. Early in the film Lara constructs a scene in which Napoleon and Josephine conspire at the bureau. To correspond with historical accounts and portraits, Lara dresses them each in their signature apparel: Napoleon appears in a scarlet and gold embellished uniform and Josephine wears a flowing ivory gown. The *mise-en-scène* of this room is distinctive: brightly lit, filled with large wooden furniture and vividly colored fabrics. To emphasize their exuberant flirtation, Lara films them intermittently in close-up. Their voices constitute the primary sound of the scene and are at times boisterous, then soft, playful, and coy. Josephine is more active, filling



Fig. 4. 1802, *l'Épopée Guadeloupéenne* (2005), Delgrès' organizational meeting with rebel leaders

the screen with her coquettish movements. The excessive, luxuriant *mise-en-scène* conveyed through the colors, shots, and movement creates a portrayal of an indulgent lifestyle far removed from the realities of slavery and slave revolts.

As a counterpoint to the visual excess surrounding Napoleon and Josephine, the leader of the Guadeloupean revolution, Delgrès, often appears in the more austere environments of the 1802 rebellion. The *mise-en-scène* of an organizational meeting between Delgrès and his subordinates exemplifies this type of setting (figure 4). Seated at a round table that occupies nearly the entire room, Delgrès receives preferential treatment in the images, enabling Lara to exhibit his immaculate dress, calculated mannerisms, and visible authority.

Nonetheless, the circular arrangement of the men also suggests collaboration, focus, and order. The soundtrack of the scene consists of steady, medium-tempo orchestral music and infuses the

room with a refined, somber quality. The men decide collectively at this moment, "If we do not act, history will condemn us."¹⁴ One by one the men (among them Ignace, Commander Alain, Captain Dephin) swear to defend their freedom.

The slow pace of the action maintains the solemn atmosphere. The music then stops as they determine the title of their manifesto. Working late into the night, the candles dripping with wax and the sound of hooves in the background, the final line of the manifesto is written at last: "We will die, satisfied."¹⁵ The document is then passed from one leader to the next to be signed and the screen fades to black.

Lara portrays Delgrès as a man playing for the highest stakes, aware of what his contribution would mean to future Guadeloupanans

Unlike in *Sucre Amer*, the main characters of 1802 all play a role in the revolt. Despite their historical significance within the context of Guadeloupean culture, however, the manner in which Lara represents these characters has been cause for controversy; the characters, more so in this film than in *Sucre Amer*, employ acting techniques more commonly seen on stage. On stage, louder voices, greater articulation, and a wider range of movement are tools that enable an actor to emphasize his character's emotional composition for the benefit of the entire audience. On film, however, a character's voice, pronunciation, and gestures can be more understated.

Rather than over-direction, the theatricality of the performances in 1802 is a deliberate choice. Emotional acting manufactures the intensity of the era and magnifies certain personalities to expose either the flaws or the courage of these individuals. The most noticeable example of a character exhibiting such behavior is Saint-Eloy's performance of Louis Delgrès. He delivers his lines slowly, enunciating fully and often pausing between each word. Dialogue also forms a part of this kind of theatrical performance: for example, Delgrès' statement upon the writing of the manifesto, "I, Louis Delgrès, swear to defend our freedom even if it means I must sacrifice my life," and when he makes the following announcement at the fort, "We will fight this oppression to the death."¹⁶ When speaking of death, liberty, and freedom, as he frequently does, his facial expression is markedly somber, his gestures controlled, his body stiff and unmovable. His interactions with Ignace are also unmistakably intense. Before they split their forces, they stare directly into each other's eyes and slowly shake hands. Delgrès confesses, "I'm counting on you, Ignace."¹⁷

Lara portrays Delgrès as a man playing for the highest stakes, aware of what his contribution would mean to future Guadeloupanans, and possessing a strong bond with the other rebels, especially Ignace. Lara clearly directs Saint-Eloy to represent Delgrès as the embodiment of a great hero (figure 5) driven by a single, momentous cause. By giving such weight to his performance, Lara elevates the importance of his sacrifice.

To emphasize the dichotomy between the Guadeloupean heroes and the colonial leadership, the representations of Napoleon and Richepance are immensely unflattering. Rather than representing Napoleon as a master tactician, Lara repeatedly shows him in the presence of Josephine.

The French colonials are also dismissive of the rebellion and its cause. During the fighting, wealthy Whites and Mulattos gather for a ball at Demeure de M. de La Brunerie, a plantation in Basse-Terre. Richepance struts haughtily around the home, dancing with chic, arrogant women.



Fig. 5. Luc Saint-Eloy's performance as Delgrès.

Their flirtation continues in a scene in which they return to their extravagant home. In a caption at the bottom of the screen, Lara indicates the date is May 20th, the height of the Guadeloupean rebellion and just days before the deaths of Ignace and Delgrès. In an ornate carriage, the two flirt ostentatiously, Napoleon affectionately (and inaccurately) calling Josephine his “câpresse.”¹⁸ Their laughter and boisterous behavior underscore their lack of concern for the ongoing rebellions in the French Antilles. At one point, Napoleon even mispronounces “Guadeloupe”: “gag...gag.”

Filming the group from above in an overhead shot, Lara underscores how the opulent lifestyle of the colonials is uninterrupted by the revolt. The women carry on superficial conversation, joking about infidelity as merely “a question of organization.”¹⁹ This evening affair in 1802 maintains the portrayal of Richepance from *Sucre Amer* as a hedonistic commander.

Richepance's soldiers, on the other hand, do not enjoy any of these pleasures. Similar to the character's portrayal in *Sucre Amer*, Lara depicts the French soldiers in a positive manner. For example, he cuts repeatedly to a platoon of French soldiers hiking in the forest while attempting to track down the insurgents; in any given altercation with Delgrès' troops, and particularly in this scene, the French soldiers are nearly always shown as scared, battle-scarred, and fatigued. Such sympathetic portrayal shows men who find themselves fighting against the rebellion but who are also victims of the war, not vicious colonizers.

In a later instance, the French soldiers discuss the fact that political matters are responsible for this fight in Guadeloupe. This conversation displays their humanity and reinforces the absurdity of their role in the reinstatement of slavery. After this conversation, the soldiers continue marching until they decide to rest and set up a camp. Suddenly, they discover a French soldier hanging from a tree. When they bring his dead body down to the ground, he wears a sign in blood that reads "Français...retrez chez vous (Frenchmen... go home)." Reacting to this sight, the young Lieutenant in charge informs them that if they want to return to France one day "vous devez tuer! Amen (you have to kill! Amen)." At the mercy of events beyond their control, the Lieutenant calls upon the men to kill not to enact a colonial agenda but for personal survival.

Immediately after this incident, Lara films a group of Guadeloupean women bathing in a secluded grotto. To the sounds of string instruments, whistles, and laughter, the women entice the dirty, fatigued White soldiers to join them. The soldiers give in instantly, demonstrating their incredible naïveté. As soon as the soldiers drop their weapons and disrobe, the women grab hidden weapons and ambush the soldiers. Mulâtresse Solitude, the most famous female participant in the rebellion, slices a White soldier's throat, yelling out the rebellion's trademark motto "Vive la liberté! (Long live freedom!)." Caught literally with their pants down, the men scamper away, dodging bullets. With the French soldiers defeated, the women cheer and shout, intensely proud of their successful ploy.

There are two important aspects of this scene. First, rather than abide by the common trope of historical dramas to feature the dominance of powerful male figures over the women of the opposing group—usually in the form of rape or murder—this scene reinforces the notion that the French soldiers frequently function as victims rather than aggressors. Lara represents the French soldier as another cog in the colonial machine, similar to the average Guadeloupean. Secondly, this scene is one of the most memorable instances of the cunning and sacrifice of the women. Historical evidence confirms the prominent role of the women in the rebellion. As Bernard Moitt explains, "During the wars in Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe, women demonstrated a striking strength of character: slave women also transported ammunition, food, and supplies, served as messengers, cared for the sick, acted as cover for men under fire, and chanted revolutionary slogans which kept spirits high in the insurrectionary forces of Delgrès, Palerme, and Ignace" (130). Ensuring that the film represents historically documented actions, Lara replicates nearly all of these contributions in the film.

The main female figure in the film, Mulâtresse Solitude, exemplifies the zealous participation of the women in the struggle. When she appears in the enlistment scene, for example, a soldier inquires whether she can actually fight. In response, she snatches his gun and with a loud bang shoots off his *tricorne*. The soldier's mouth gapes open, astonished at Mulâtresse Solitude's accuracy. In 1802, Mulâtresse Solitude is a strong-willed, able-bodied force whose theatrical behavior enhances Lara's positive, exuberant representation of the Guadeloupean rebels.



MEREDITH ROBINSON

Conclusion

Sheila Petty articulates the stakes of both *Sucre Amer* and *1802, l'Épopée Guadeloupéenne* in her work on Black Diasporic cinema, explaining the relationship between memory and history: “memory, valorization of oral history, and the challenging of racist precepts become driving forces in reassembling and reconceiving fractured histories” (3). Petty’s insight highlights the role of memory in rehabilitating the fragmented identities and histories that resulted from the cycle of slavery, colonization, and neocolonialism in the French Caribbean and other Black Diasporic communities. In *Sucre Amer*, the act of remembering and the memories recalled immediately inform and affect the contemporary scenes. This film therefore provides a convincing example of how cultural production relies upon both memory and spectatorship to reassemble fractured histories.



In fact, the present representation of historical events is so intensely important in contemporary Guadeloupean culture because it allows the public, the Guadeloupean audience most notably, to “reassemble” and “reconceive” of fractured histories, to use Petty’s terms. Lara’s films have a calculated purpose of bringing the past to light. Lara envisions film as a means to revisit the past in order to reconstruct a missing historical foundation. Both *Sucre Amor* and *1802, L’Épopée Guadeloupéenne* are part of a cultural effort to pay tribute to the Guadeloupean rebels, condemn colonial France, and overcome the lasting tangible and intangible effects of colonialism by (re)awakening Guadeloupeans to painful moments of their past.

Fig. 6. Film posters; *Sucre Amer* (1997) and *1802, l'Épopée Guadeloupéenne* (2005).

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Notes

1. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=705GIlo2Wm4>

2. For a genealogy of French-Caribbean cinema, see my article in *small axe* (November 2010): "Ciné woulé, ciné en progrès."

3. For examples of criticism of Lara's work, see Audé, Boukman, Cham, and Spaas.

4. "une table rase...avec surtout une dignité reconnue...C'est notre devoir de mémoire." Translations are mine.

5. "Je ne suis pas un héros, Je suis un nègre de la Guadeloupe c'est tout."

6. "Pour nous, votre procès est important."

7. http://www.guadeloupe-informations.com/article.php?id_article=45 Active reference: July 21, 2006 - Dec. 12, 2008. Accessed: August 20, 2008

8. "Nous sommes fiers de notre passé et c'est pour cela que nous voulons le faire ressurgir pour bâtir le socle qui nous manque. Nous ne voulons pas du socle qu'on a établi pour nous, mais au contraire bâtir nos propres repères. Le combat à mener est dans leurs têtes et dans nos têtes. C'est un véritable rapport de force entre colonisateurs et colonisés. Nous sommes obligés de parler d'oppression, de liberté à retrouver." <http://www.fluctuat.net/cinema/interview/eloy.htm> Active reference: Dec. 4, 2000 - Sept. 7, 2009. Accessed: June 15, 2009

9. "Je hais ma couleur."

10. "Afrique, c'est fini."

11. "Aujourd'hui nous renaissions!"

12. "Nous combattons cette oppression jusqu'à la mort."

13. "Chaque jour de notre progrès est fait de chaque jour de leur sacrifice."

14. "Si nous réagissons pas, l'histoire nous condamnera."

15. "Nous mourons, satisfaits."

16. "Moi, Louis Delgrès, je jure de défendre notre liberté même si je dois pour cela sacrifier ma vie." "Nous combattons cette oppression jusqu'à la mort."

17. "Je compte sur toi Ignace."

18. Female inhabitant of the French Antilles, daughter of a White and a Mulatto. <http://www.esclavage-martinique.com/uk/def/capre.htm>

19. "une question d'organisation"

Image Notes

Figures 1-3: screenshots *Sucre Amer* (1997)

Figure 4-5: screenshots *1802, l'Épopée Guadeloupéenne* (2005)

Figure 6: film posters for *Sucre Amer* (1997) and *1802, l'Épopée Guadeloupéenne* (2005)