

Film Review

- *Sun, sea, and science: Trinidad after oil*, directed by Raymond Ramchiritar, Trinidad & Tobago, 2018¹

Sun, sea, and science: Trinidad after oil is a 40-minute documentary that highlights the problematic relationship that the Caribbean “oil nation” of Trinidad & Tobago (T&T) has with the petroleum industry. Despite the fact that Trinidad has generated wealth through its oil exports, this industry has, the film argues, not been beneficial to the long-term development of the island and its people. According to *Sun, sea, and science*, this is not only due to an unequal distribution of the fossil fuel revenues, but also, significantly, to the country’s political failure and cultural apathy. While this main thrust is both thoughtful and thought-provoking, the film’s promotional elements undermine its critical potential.

In *Sun, sea, and science*, director Raymond Ramchiritar, a Trinidadian academic, journalist and cultural critic, interviews Terrence Farrell, the former chairman of the Economic Development Advisory Board, Thackwray Driver, the CEO of the Energy Chamber of Trinidad and Tobago, and three T&T scientists: microbiologist Adesh Ramsubhag, computer scientist Patrick Hosein, and medical researcher Paul Teelucksingh. Their stories, as well as the voice-over by Ramchiritar, guide the audience through contemporary Trinidad. They all stress the need for diversification of the island’s oil-dependent economy and greater integration of science and innovation in national development. Now that the end of the oil reserves comes closer, Trinidad faces the urgency to develop more durable energy solutions and new avenues of revenue for its economic survival.

However, as the documentary shows, Trinidad needs to tackle various obstacles in order to do so, notably the lack of political and cultural prioritizing. While the government and business community should invest in science, technology and, ultimately, human capital, public and private funding largely keeps going to oil and, to a lesser extent, carnival. In so doing, Ramchiritar explains, Trinidad is looking for “economic salvation in all the wrong places”, remaining “unprepared for the post-petroleum economy.” Though less prominent in the film, the critique on carnival as a diversification strategy is particularly intri-

guing. In his voice-over, the director candidly questions the continuous investment in the annual event: “Why is every government Trinidad has had since 2000 happy to spend millions of dollars on a non-performing asset?”

In *Sun, sea, and science*, carnival seems to represent a wider prioritizing problem in Trinidad, namely that of conspicuous and uncritical consumption: “Being an oil nation has affected the way Trinidadians approach life: extravagant, factless and entitled.” Throughout the documentary, the T&T government is similarly characterized as “apathic energy hawks,” an expression borrowed from David Hughes’ *Energy without Conscience* (2017). Farrell explains that successive governments have used the revenues of the petroleum sector – which mainly come from the rent foreign oil companies pay – to subsidize non-energy industries, “not with the view to increasing investment for diversification, but essentially to support current consumption.” According to Farrell, the government is chiefly doing this to sustain their voter base, preventing any genuine commitment to diversify the economy.

Apart from interviews, the documentary contains several television appearances of the country’s current Prime Minister, Keith Rowley, which seek to confirm the government’s conservative and even antagonistic attitude towards diversification. Instead, the T&T government, as the film argues, almost solely focuses on foreign investment in the energy sector, particularly from China. *Sun, sea, and science* suggests that political haste and economic opportunism stand in the way of long-term support for innovative scientists. However, the emphasis on individual innovators also brings to the fore another agenda: the promotion of the Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Awards for Excellence (ANSCAFE). Essentially, the film is sponsored content, a production commissioned by the ANSA McAL Foundation. Created by the late Trinidadian entrepreneur Anthony N. Sabga to support research and development in Trinidad and the wider Caribbean, it annually awards money prizes to scientific pioneers and outstanding innovators. While the first part of the documentary largely concentrates on the historically grown problems Trinidad is facing, its promotional elements increasingly come to the surface as the film progresses.

This first becomes noticeable after ten minutes in the film, when Sabga is presented as “probably the most successful businessman the country has ever seen” and ANSCAFE as a programme that “has gone further than any other to solve the problem of economic and social underdevelopment.” After this commercial-like break, Ramsubhag, Hosein, and Teelucksingh are introduced, who all three happen to be ANSCAFE laureates. Although their work is interesting and innovative, their individual pitches – which, like much of the film, contain PowerPoint-like images and transitions, and annoyingly loud instrumental background music – do not really fit the investigative documentary format the film opens with. Moreover, the final part of *Sun, sea, and science*, which is fully devoted to the philanthropy of Sabga and ANSCAFE, compromises its critical message due to its overt promotional nature. In fact, at times the documentary comes across as political propaganda, since it so blatantly attacks the

agenda of Trinidad's current serving party, Rowley's People's National Movement, and seemingly represents the interests of the opposition party, the United National Congress.

While the film aims to "tie the award into our original question", it would have been better if these two formats – a promotional propaganda video and a critical investigative documentary – had been kept separated. This would have allowed for a more in-depth investigation of the problematic history and current landscape of Trinidad's petroleum economy, including a more comprehensive understanding of the foreign interferences and development paradigms "inherited from colonial times," which are now only briefly mentioned. At the same time, the diversification potential of tourism, at which the *sun* and *sea* of the film's title seem to hint, could then have been taken into account as well. This discussion is now strangely missing.

Still, *Sun, sea, and science* is worth the watch. Despite its promotional and even propagandist design, the anti-status quo message the documentary tries to get across about Trinidad's oil dependency (and carnival hype) is daring, urgent and needed. The film breaks some enduring myths about the rosy prospects of oil (and carnival) and takes up the cudgels for the diversification of the country's economy after – and actually already before – "the oil runs dry" in its territorial lands and waters.

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Notes

- 1 Available at online streaming platform YardVibes: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/sunseascience>