



Miriam Lies

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Part of ¡Viva! Spanish & Latin
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Directors: Natalia Cabral and Oriol Estrada
Country: Dominican Republic, Spain
Date: 2018

A review by Sophie Willard for *The London Film Festival*:

Spoiler warning: This article gives away plot details

One of the hidden gems at this year's London Film Festival, *Miriam Lies* (*Miriam mente*) is the first narrative feature from filmmaking duo Natalia Cabral and Oriol Estrada, who previously cut their teeth on documentaries *You and Me* (2014) and *Site of Sites* (2016). The film hails from Cabral's native Dominican Republic, and like the pair's documentary work, it astutely observes the social realities of life in the island nation – in this case, how societal perceptions of race and class impact an adolescent girl as she comes of age.



Miriam (Dulce Rodríguez) is a biracial 14-year-old who lives with her white mother's family, though still makes semi-regular visits to her black father. She's preparing for her quinceañera, the traditional Latin American celebration of coming into young womanhood. She plans to invite new internet boyfriend, Jean-Louis, to be her dance partner at the joint party she's having with her best friend, Jennifer (Carolina Rohana), who is from an affluent white family.

In a stand-out, dream-like sequence that deviates from the film's pastel hues, Miriam explores a dark space at the aquarium where she has arranged to meet Jean-Louis. Bathed in the deep blue lighting emanating from the low-lit floor-to-ceiling fish tanks, she's mesmerised watching a scuba diver performing a strange dance of their own as they clean the tank. For a moment, Miriam is on another plane, the calming space of the aquarium offering respite. But when she later discovers Jean-Louis is black, she quickly leaves, telling her mother that he was too ill to meet her – a lie that leads to more lies as she tries to explain Jean-Louis' absence from dance rehearsals. It's not immediately clear in the moment why she avoids him, but the rest of the film makes it all too apparent.



At home, she's exposed daily to her uncle's derogatory comments about black women, and pressure from her mother and grandmother to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards. When her natural hair is relaxed and straightened for the quinceañera, her mother tells her it "finally" looks beautiful. The only other black people Miriam encounters are the domestic staff at Jennifer's house, who carry the shopping, tend to the grounds and are publicly berated when deemed to have done something wrong.

Around her friends, Miriam's natural, tight curls are a constant source of fascination. They stroke and prod at her hair, scold one another for doing so, and then resume. "Doesn't it bother you?" one of them asks her. Miriam doesn't respond.

Much of the time she simply observes. With the camera so frequently focused on Miriam's face, we're left to eavesdrop on conversations as she hears them – whether from another room, coming from all sides around the dinner table, or simply between characters out-of-shot. We hear Miriam being talked about, but rarely directly addressed, adding to an immersive, stifling atmosphere.



You get the sense that she's still articulating to herself how she feels about the microaggressions and attitudes she's exposed to. Every facet of her life is dictated by the systemic racism that permeates her society, teaching her only to feel shame. Her father doesn't explain why he was shunned by her mother's family, and so the shy but always watchful Miriam is left to navigate these matters by herself.

In Rodríguez, the filmmakers have found a remarkable young actor who capably conveys this complex internal narrative through body language and deceptively impassive facial expressions. She speaks little, but her eyes follow every movement. Cinematographer Israel Cárdenas heavily favours tight close-ups of her face to the extent that all of her external pressures feel progressively more keenly and claustrophobically felt.

A number of films at this year's festival focused on the interior lives of adolescent black girls, including Josephine Decker's *Madeline's Madeline* and Nijla Mu'min's *Jinn*, though *Miriam Lies*' understated, documentary-like attention to its protagonist's daily life equally calls to mind the observational style of Arantxa Echevarría's *Carmen & Lola* (also a first dramatic feature from a former documentarian).

Yet where *Carmen & Lola* sometimes leans on dramatic storytelling, *Miriam Lies* smartly avoids melodrama, instead matter-of-factly unfolding the details of this chapter in Miriam's life. While a running joke about the presumed identity of Jean-Louis provides some comic relief, the overall tone is decidedly sombre.

Certainly the film's resolution doesn't offer Miriam any easy answers – primarily because there are none.

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