

REVIEWS



Questions of Third Cinema

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As part of the search for a critical language for postcolonial culture, the past decade has seen a widespread re-engagement with the texts and writings of the third-world liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in cinema, where the pressing need to articulate concepts of race, representation, and cultural identity almost completely absent from 1970s film culture has led to a revival of interest in the films, manifestos, and analyses of politically engaged third-world filmmaking, especially the classic texts of the New Latin American Cinema.

Taken from Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's 1969 manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema,"¹ the notion of a "third cinema" refers to an alternative cinematic practice based neither on Hollywood-industrial (first cinema) nor on European-autourist (second cinema) models. Not just "political" in context but strategically engaged in deconstructing conventional narrative forms, Solanas and Getino's model of "third cinema," like Julio Garcia Espinosa's "imperfect cinema," implied an ongoing process of cinematic experimentation—appropriate to the material, cultural, and political conditions of the decolonizing world. *Questions of Third Cinema* (1989), a richly varied and polemical collection of essays by filmmakers and writers, explores the relevance of this concept to contemporary cinema from both first- and third-world locales.

The 1986 Edinburgh Film Festival conference from which the book derives was controversial. Yet the plethora of reviews and responses it generated² marked it as a watershed event, a turning point in the contemporary critical engagement with third-world films and theories that seeks to rethink the boundaries between Western and non-Western filmmaking. Unlike traditional studies of "third-world" film, which locate their subject within clearly defined geopolitical boundaries, *Questions of Third Cinema* situates its object within the messy spaces and indistinct boundaries of post-colonial culture that are fundamentally structured by forces of displacement, syncretism, and cultural hybridization.

The rationale for the conference is outlined succinctly in co-organizer Paul Willemen's introductory essay, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections" (first published in *Framework*, no. 34).

The notion of Third Cinema (and most emphatically not Third World Cinema) was selected as the central concept for a conference in Edinburgh in 1986, partly to re-raise the question of the relation between the cultural and the political, and

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partly to discuss whether there is indeed a kind of international cinematic tradition which exceeds the limits of both the national-industrial cinemas and those of Euro-American as well as English cultural theories.

Willemen outlines some of the conditions under which "third cinema" has currently been reformulated in British postcolonial discourses as a tool for "this politically indispensable and urgent task of expelling Euro-American conceptions of cinema from the centre of film history and critical theory." Working through the classic Latin American texts, Willemen relates them to the European cultural theory of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Mikhail Bakhtin, considering the spaces, interchanges, and tensions within and between cultures, the in-between positions where social intelligibility and an awareness of historical change are often most acute.

Rather than move toward any univocal theory of "third cinema," *Questions of Third Cinema* offers a productive space where diverse views and approaches can be read off and against each other. Teshome H. Gabriel, author of the landmark book *Third Cinema in the Third World: Towards an Aesthetics of Liberation* (1984), is represented by two essays, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" (reprinted from *Third World Affairs*) and the paper he presented at the conference, "Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics." In the first the Los Angeles-based Ethiopian film scholar outlines some of the common formal characteristics of non-Western filmmaking, demonstrating that they are related more to the structures of folk traditions and oral cultures than to the print-based forms of Western cultures.

An effort to identify "those essential qualities third world films possess rather than those they may seem to lack," Gabriel's formulations have been critiqued by some as "essentialist" or overgeneralized. Yet such schematizations are extremely useful, as long as they are not abused or used prescriptively. They offer a starting point for considering third-world films within their own cultural and historical contexts, rather than—as is still all too common in the West—as inadequate replicas of first-world filmmaking. Gabriel identifies a set of tendencies—the long take, situation of the individual within landscape or collective context, use of nonactors and location sets, etc.—that particularly reflect African filmmaking (and may be less relevant to Latin American or Asian films, or, for instance, more hybrid contemporary forms).

Grounded in different aesthetic traditions, these non-Western films frequently subordinate narrative elements of setting and music to the development of plot and character. Gabriel's schematic outline provokes an understanding of how such narrative hierarchies are themselves choices that reflect profound cultural (and political) assumptions. This approach facilitates a comparison of oppositional third-world filmmaking strategies to Western practices of deconstructing dominant narrative conventions. It also underlines the importance of the skills, knowledges, and perceptual patterns brought by the viewer to a film, stressing how specific modes of filmic reception are historically and culturally produced. Such cross-cultural comparison helps both to make clear and to problematize some of the basic assumptions in Western theories of spectatorship and identification—and opens the door to a consideration of how these may be located in specifically Western experiences and structures of reception.

Gabriel's second essay probes how narrative can function in relation to popular memory—how films respond to, and remake, the vernacular cultural practices within which they are situated. His model for an interactive relationship between filmmaker and viewer, "a sharing of responsibility in the construction of the text," deserves to be

read alongside Washington, DC-based Ethiopian filmmaker Halle Gerima's triangular model of audience/community, filmmaker/storyteller, and activist/critic proposed in "Triangular Cinema, Breaking Toys, and Dinkesh vs. Lucy." Integral to Gerima's argument is the insight that films cannot function without a material context—in particular, that African American independent filmmaking cannot engage in a dialogue with its intended audience without appropriate structures of exhibition and distribution.

While some critics, such as Gabriel, tend to emphasize continuity with the indigenous forms and structures of oral cultures, other contributors stress discontinuity, self-conscious questioning of tradition, or hybridization with colonial forms. Responding to the tendency to see third-world films as an outgrowth of traditional forms such as the griot or storyteller, Manthia Diawara uses a structural analysis of Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (1983) to explicate how the filmmaker has used and decisively transformed traditional folk narratives to produce a distinctly modern text. In "Oral Literature and African Film: Narratology in *Wend Kuuni*" the Malian film scholar (now based in Santa Barbara) goes beyond previous analyses documenting the traces of oral literature in African films to stress the transformation of these forms and the subversion of traditional narratives through their selective and complex redeployment.

A debate over the legacies of cultural nationalism, aesthetics, and the role of "Western" theory emerges between black American film scholar Clyde Taylor's "Black Cinema in the Post-aesthetic Era" and Indian-British theorist Homi K. Bhabha's "The Commitment to Theory." Identifying post-Enlightenment "aesthetics" as a technology of Western cultural superiority, Taylor calls for the articulation of other frameworks for interpreting and evaluating creative production. While Taylor's formulation of a "post-aesthetics" is an interesting effort to locate black cinema within and against the contemporary Western crisis of knowledge, it has been read by many as simply collapsing aesthetics into the political. Yet Taylor's premise seems sound—that emerging and hybrid forms of black cinema decisively challenge existing critical vocabularies and aesthetic canons. His model of a "reconstructed modernism" situates such media within a greatly expanded cultural landscape, one that would "embrace without rigorous classification expression as diverse as ex-slave narratives, documentary films, Calypso, critical essays, graffiti, autobiographies."

Written in response to arguments that "theory" is inherently elitist or pro-Western, Bhabha's "Commitment to Theory" draws from the work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and others to elaborate a postcolonial perspective on writing and politics:

I want to take my stand on the shifting margins of cultural displacement—that confounds any profound or "authentic" sense of a "national" culture or an "organic" intellectual—and ask what the function of a committed theoretical perspective might be, once the cultural and historical hybridity of the post-colonial world is taken as the paradigmatic place of departure.

Arguing against liberal or empiricist models of "cultural diversity," Bhabha proposes a dynamic understanding of cultural difference as precisely "the process of the enunciation of culture as knowledgeable." While too densely argued to be accurately accounted for here, Bhabha's exploration of what he terms a "third space" of enunciation, a mobile and "in-between" space of hybridity eluding polarization, deeply resonates with the work of Berkeley-based, Vietnamese-born filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha. Trinh's "Outside In Inside Out" probes the ambiguous relations of power embedded in any attempt to "reveal one society to another." Questioning the privileged position of the "cultural insider" in ethnographic and

documentary discourse and the assumptions about truth and authenticity such practices entail, Trinh explores other ways that "otherness" and subjectivity can be incorporated into filmmaking—while simultaneously resisting the codified gestures of "subjectivity" and "self-reflexivity" in documentary film that problematize only the most visible and superficial levels of representation.

Other contributors include Australian-based Sri Lankan filmmaker Laleen Jayamanne, black American filmmaker Charles Burnett, Indian film scholars Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Geeta Kapur, Black Audio Film Collective's Reece Auguste on "Black Independents and Third Cinema: the British Context," and Los Angeles-based scholar Hamid Naficy on the U.S. media's representation of Iran. The displaced locations and compound identities of the individual contributors says a lot about the complex and rapidly changing cultural space *Questions of Third Cinema* seeks to address and articulate. It works to locate the study of film within an ongoing international discourse in which the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, and Indian filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak all represent major shared references. I need not emphasize how distant this world remains from most film study in the U.S., which is caught up in the twin isolationisms of nation and discipline. The shilling density of the book, which ranges from tightly argued theoretical essays to more personal and poetic reflections, contributes to its dialogic character. From activists to academics, filmmakers to students, from the geopolitical space of the third world to its vast metropolitan diasporas, the differently located contributors have profoundly different ways of making sense of their materials. It is such a relief—and these days, such a rarity—to read a film theory book whose contributors are not all professional academics.

Yet *Questions of Third Cinema* does have its limitations. Because it lacks Latin American contributors, in particular, the book avoids examining the ways in which the current fascination with the classic texts of the 1960s risks dehistoricizing Latin American cinema—and continues an established and very problematic tendency in scholarship and criticism to ignore films made both before and since that period. A historical perspective would perhaps provoke discussion on several issues missing from the book—from the roles of video and television to the institutionalization of previously "militant" cinemas (such as the case of cinema novo in Brazil). Ironically, it is perhaps in Latin America that the discourse of "third cinema" may currently be least relevant, given its far more localizable associations—particularly Solanas's affiliation with Peronism's "third path"—which make it less useful and less open to re-fashioning in that context.

NOTES

1. Originally published as "Hacia un Tercer Cine," *Tricontinental*, no. 13 (1969); reprinted in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Los Angeles/Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) and *Revolving Histories: Selections from New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Coco Fusco and Glauber Rocha (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1987).
2. These include Kobena Mercer, "Third Cinema at Edinburgh: Reflections on a Pioneering Event," *Screen* 27, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1986); Clyde Taylor, "Quick Takes from Edinburgh," *Black Film Review* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1986) and "Eurocentricity vs. new thoughts at Edinburgh," *Framework*, no. 34 (1987); David Will, "Edinburgh Film Festival," *Framework*, nos. 32/33 (1986); and Chuck Kleinhans, "Third World Media: Introduction," *Jump Cut*, no. 32 (1987), as well as a number of conferences and exhibitions including the 1988 and 1989 Birmingham Third Cinema Focus events. The papers presented at the 1988 conference, entitled "Third Scenario: Theory and Politics of Location," are collected in *Framework*, no. 36 (1989); they represent an extended and critical meditation on the concept of "third cinema," focused on the questioning of place, location, and subjectivity.