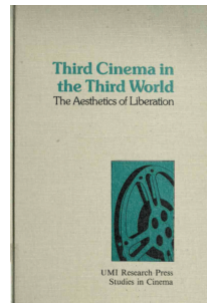


The “Inescapable Need and Possibility” of Third Cinema



While accepting an Honorary Oscar this past November, the great film director Charles Burnett spent some time reflecting on his formative years as a film student at UCLA. It was there that he and his colleagues not only learned their craft, but also laid the foundations for what would become known as the “L.A. Rebellion” – a radically independent, alternative Black Cinema movement that produced such remarkable filmmakers as Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, Billy Woodberry, Jamaa Fanaka, and Larry Clark. “We talked about ‘What is a black film?’ continuously,” Burnett [explained](#). “‘What is our responsibility?’ ‘What do we have to do?’... We were interested in making a difference, and using film as a means for social change.”

These conversations were no doubt informed by the life experiences and artistic inclinations of Burnett and his fellow students, but also the influence of a prior insurgency: the revolutionary, global film movement known as “Third Cinema.” UCLA faculty member Teshome Gabriel, an Ethiopian historian and proponent of the tradition, used it as a touchstone in his work helping the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers articulate their concerns and develop their aesthetics. Although Third Cinema began as a movement of, by, and for the colonized, Gabriel argued passionately for its transnationalist possibilities. In his seminal work *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, for example, he [writes](#) that “the principal characteristic of Third Cinema is really not so much where it is made, or even who

makes it, but, rather, the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays.”

Not only is Gabriel on solid theoretical ground here vis-à-vis the movement’s founding proclamations, but he is far from alone in this belief: the L.A. Rebellion is just one of many instances of Third Cinema impacting on the history and development of cinema outside the regions in which it was developed (and continues to flourish). In fact, it’s far from the only example of its influence in just the United States! As we enter the second year of Trump’s presidency, it might be wise, then, to give some special attention to these American contributions to Third Cinema. For filmmakers looking to affect meaningful change, these efforts provide crucial food for thought. In addition, there’s also much we can learn from the critical feedback these works have received.

However, we should first clarify the nature of the movement and its origins. Though a great deal of work now considered to be canon preceded it, the term was first used by Argentina-based filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their 1969 [manifesto](#) “Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World.” With their statement, the authors, who were part of the left-wing Peronist filmmaking collective known as Grupo Cine Liberación, shored up the foundations of an emerging film practice. The work they were creating was distinct from both “First Cinema,” the products of entertainment industries like Hollywood, and “Second Cinema,” which usually refers to the arthouse fare operating at the peripheries of corporate moviemaking. (In some sources, Second Cinema is also interpreted as inclusive of or even synonymous with state propaganda, which helps to make an important point: as scholar Mike Wayne has [noted](#), a characteristic of Third Cinema is its suggestion that “[social and cultural] emancipations cannot be achieved merely in the political realm of the state.”)

But regardless of what is or is not included when we speak of

First and Second Cinema, Third Cinema is distinguished first and foremost by its politically radical content: generally speaking, the imperative of revolution in response to colonialism and neocolonialism is boldly underscored in these works. Film form, though, is another story; here, things are far less easy to spell out clearly. As scholars Robert Stam, Richard Porton, and Leo Goldsmith [put it](#), “[Works of Third Cinema are] aesthetically eclectic, [drawing] on currents as diverse as Soviet montage, Surrealism, Italian neo-realism, Brechtian epic theater, cinéma vérité, and the French New Wave, all alongside the rich legacies of national cultural practices.”

By way of an example, we can do no better than Solanas and Getino’s own pioneering 1968 documentary *The Hour of the Furnaces* – unquestionably the most famous and oft-referenced work of Third Cinema. Covertly produced and surreptitiously screened, the 260-minute, two-part film takes up the legacy of colonialism both in and outside Argentina. Organized into fourteen distinct chapters, with subjects ranging from “The Country” to “Daily Violence” to “The System” to “Ideological Welfare,” it offers, in [the words](#) of critic Nicole Brenez, “a comprehensive analysis of the history, geography, economy, sociology, ideology, culture, religion and daily life of Latin America. Each dimension and source of oppression is documented and pondered, as is each link between determinations and their consequences.” In so doing, the film’s style necessarily becomes as wide-ranging as its subject matter, veering between many of the “currents” reference by Stam, Porton, and Goldsmith – often in quite exhilarating fashion.

As important as *The Hour of the Furnaces* was and continues to be, however, it’s probably the case that Solanas and Getino’s “Towards a Third Cinema” has ultimately been far more consequential in the long run. To be sure, as scholar-filmmaker Michael Chanan has [pointed out](#), “the manifesto [has been] much more widely diffused than the film.” Considering

this fact as well as the nature of the document, it's little wonder that Third Cinema not only spread throughout Latin America, Africa, and South Asia, but in the "First World" as well. As Ponzanesi and Waller elucidate, Solanas and Getino "[position Third Cinema] as a 'guerilla cinema'...explicitly urging that it not be collapsed into 'Third World,' thereby challenging the persistent dichotomy between the West and the Rest. Third Cinema could be made anywhere."

In fact, as Solanas and Getino saw it, works of Third Cinema were already being made elsewhere in the world – even in the United States. Among others, "Towards a Third Cinema" name-checks the storied Newsreel (now called [Third World Newsreel](#)). The self-described "activist filmmaker collective" began in New York but "grew to become a network with chapters across the U.S." It produced and distributed 16mm educational films on "anti-war and women's movements, civil and human rights movements, getting unique access to such groups as the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party." Though Solanas and Getino saw Newsreel as a parallel movement, it was actually deeply informed by those same Latin American documentaries of the early 1960s that they considered works of proto-Third Cinema. As [articulated](#) by Charles Musser, "the polemical montage juxtapositions of Cuban documentarist Santiago Álvarez" as well as "other Cuban shorts, such as Octavio Cortázar's enchanting *Por Primera Vez* (*For the First Time*, 1967), recording the reactions of country people seeing the cinema for the first time" were especially inspirational to Newsreel's leadership.

By 1973, though, that leadership had shifted rather dramatically. As activist media maker and scholar Alexandra Juhasz [explains](#), this was preceded by "debates within Newsreel" about the fact that many chapters were "led largely by females and people of color within the cooperative who felt that the critique of society expressed by the collective was not holding true within the collective." (Newsreel's evolution

into Third World Newsreel is instructive today, as the film industry struggles to address institutional sexism and racism.) The shakeup brought not only new personnel and a name change, but also a “[redirection] to represent international communities of color.”

In a similar vein, the L.A. Rebellion borrowed elements of Third Cinema (as well as other influences) in service of a larger political project: what scholars Allyson Field, Jan-Chrisopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart [call](#) the “project of resistance and self-determination.” By offering a microscopic view of black lives in southern California, the L.A. Rebellion managed to make incredibly meaningful contributions to the worldwide cinema of the oppressed. In these films, “local issues are presented as part of a larger international struggle against systemic oppression,” write Field, Horak, and Stewart. “The role of filmmaking, then, is to visualize these concerns and put them in terms that are relatable and transformative for Black audiences.”

As the late scholar Chuck Kleinhans has [pointed out](#), though, the L.A. Rebellion diverges from Third Cinema in that the latter “presumed both a specific political movement and a coherent community that the makers and films were speaking from and to” while “these conditions were not really in place in the United States in the 1970s” for the former, as “the unity of the civil rights movement had fractured into the Black Power era with different and often competing organizations and agendas.” As a result, individual L.A. Rebellion films like Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1979), Woodberry’s *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984), Burnett’s *To Sleep With Anger* (1990), and Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) differ from one another in terms of their priorities, politics, and aesthetics. Kleinhans further notes that “in critical discourse, the L.A. Rebellion is best known for developing an auteurist dramatic-feature Second Cinema for the arthouse and niche market.” (The fact that directors such as Reginald

Hudlin, Ava DuVernay, and Sean Baker were all on hand to pay tribute to Burnett at the Governor's Awards attests to this.) Field, Horak, and Stewart may be right, then, when they say that, more than anything and not for nothing, "these filmmakers translated Third Cinema's emphasis on film as social practice to the social practice of filmmaking – collaborating on shooting, editing, and exhibition."

Conversely, one individual American filmmaker whose content is often much more closely aligned with the Third Cinema tradition is Travis Wilkerson. On his website's ["Bio"](#) page, we learn that "a chance meeting in Havana with legendary Cuban film propagandist Santiago Álvarez" led him to Third Cinema. The aforementioned Álvarez directed such "found footage" classics of the tradition as *Now* (1965) and *LBJ* (1968), and was an influence on Solanas and Getino, as well as Newsreel. He was, in [the words](#) of film critic Derek Malcolm, "a committed son of Castro's revolution and a natural successor to the great Russian Dziga Vertov," whose "methodology as a socialist was to attempt to use images as powerfully as they are used in the west to sell goods." It was Wilkerson's meeting with this seminal figure that "changed the course of [his] life," and accounts for his "now [making] films in the tradition of the 'Third Cinema,' wedding politics to form in an indivisible manner." (So much so that Álvarez became the subject of Wilkerson's very first film, 1999's *Accelerated Development: A Film in the Idiom of Santiago Álvarez*.)

Wilkerson's best-known work, *An Injury to One* (2002), recounts the 1917 lynching of the Industrial Workers of the World's Frank Little in Butte, Montana, where the labor leader had come to organize a strike at the infamous Anaconda Mining Company. Much of the rhapsodic praise that greeted the film testifies to Wilkerson's success at working in the Third Cinema tradition on American soil. Critic Saul Austerlitz may well have been thinking of Solanas and Getino's manifesto when he penned his review for *Reverse Shot*, [saying](#) that

“Wilkerson’s mournful, empathetic, angry, politically astute film is an elegy to the lost political radicalism of early 20th century American life; it is also a blueprint for a future American art that looks to reclaim the political.” Indeed, by tapping into “Wobbly” slogans (such as the one from which the film takes its title) and songs (performed throughout by Will Oldham and others), *An Injury to One* is able to breathe powerful new life into some well-used methods for radicalizing and organizing the working class – it’s old-fashioned, tried-and-true IWW soapboxing reworked by a visionary 21st century film artist.

Though he has made many others in the interim, Wilkerson’s upcoming feature *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* is receiving the most attention of any film of his since *An Injury to One*: the autobiographical documentary, which investigates a racially-motivated murder committed by his great-grandfather, screened at this year’s New York Film Festival and was acquired for distribution by Grasshopper Films (the company behind this year’s Oscar-nominated documentary *Last Men in Aleppo*, among others). In her capsule review for the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis [praises](#) it as “an urgent, often corrosive look at America’s past and present through the prism of family, patriarchy, white supremacy and black resistance.”

There have been some early criticisms as well: *Variety*’s Jay Weissberg, for instance, [calls](#) *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* “well-intentioned yet maddeningly self-focused,” and the Celluloid Liberation Front [suggests](#) that its “insistence on identity politics” is “problematic, as it distracts us from the structural nature of racism and the historical necessity of slavery for a system based on exploitation and economic growth” in their review for *Cinema Scope*. These critiques point to an important question about Wilkerson’s work as it relates to the goals of Third Cinema: Does his status as a “resolutely independent American filmmaker” (Dargis’s words)

put his work more into the general category that scholar Alisa Lebow [calls](#) “first-person political” cinema? With so much of Third Cinema’s history having what Kleinhans refers to as “a specific political movement and a coherent community that the makers and films were speaking from and to,” as well as what scholar Glen M. Mimura [calls](#) “democratic, participatory” aspects, we might further ask: Is one contributing to Third Cinema if they are operating outside of a movement and community of committed practitioners?

On the other end of the spectrum, we have the aforementioned Alexandra Juhasz, whose work as a media maker and scholar [aims](#) to “contribute to political change and individual and community growth.” In her pursuit of change and growth, Juhasz has not only worked closely with marginalized groups, relevant organizations, and social movements, but also looked to Third Cinema as a guiding light. “Filmmakers and theorists described the making and viewing of the Third Cinema in terms similar to those I have used for the alternative AIDS media,” she observes in her book *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video*. “Making and viewing politically motivated film is a revolutionary act which can help to construct ‘liberated personalities’.”

Of special note, though, is Juhasz’s more recent work on the video medium’s move into internet. She has responded to these dramatic changes with essential reflections for those of us interested in how Third Cinema might inform filmmaking in the digital age. For example, in a [conversation](#) with fellow scholar Henry Jenkins, she cites the influence of “early soviet cinema, Third Cinema, feminist film, AIDS activist video, and a great deal of new media” on her own work, and explains the impetus for her Pitzer College course “Learning from YouTube”: “I continue to be concerned about why I am not seeing more on [YouTube] that is influenced by, and furthering this tradition, and my orientation in the course was to push the students to consider why serious, non-industrial,

political uses of the media were not better modeled or supported on the site.” Questioning the idea that the internet has leveled the playing field and democratized filmmaking, she continues: “I believe that for engagements with the media to be truly transformative, the fact of expanded access to its production and exhibition is only one in a set of necessary conditions that also include a critique, a goal, a community, and a context.”

In [proactive response](#) to her concerns, Juhasz has begun to “attend to ‘Third-Tube,’” or online video content that she describes as “people-made, simple-in-form, complex in thought, media about the material of daily life that is not beholden to corporate culture and products.” For her, this type of content would be that which is “neither the vlog [or, video-log] nor the music video,” but also not too great a departure from that which can be found on YouTube either. “This kind of video formally marks the hand of its DIY producer (with ‘bad’ production) while also signaling the seriousness of her mind, vision, goals or politics (with ‘big’ ideas),” she explains.

Juhasz is careful to qualify her critique of vlogging, however, and in doing so offers useful insights from her other social and political commitments to complement the template set by Third Cinema. For her as a feminist, it would be problematic to suggest that “the ‘personal’ nature of the vlog disqualifies it from Third-Tube.” In an addition that is also relevant to the conversation about Wilkerson, Juhasz suggests that Third-Tube must grapple with the second-wave feminist truth that “the personal is the political.” She continues: “When vlogs move to the next step, which is making systematic (theoretical) and communal (political) claims grounded in personal experience, then they move into what I am calling Third-Tube.”

Juhasz’s thoughts here recall critical takes from feminists elsewhere in the world. As Ponzanesi and Waller point out, academics like Ella Shohat and Ranjana Khanna “have called

attention to the ways in which gender politics and Third Cinema sometimes missed each other.” Shoat, they mention, has suggested that there might be a need for “Post-Thirdism,” while Khanna has gone so far as to call for a “‘Fourth Cinema,’ in which women’s gazes and voices would not be assimilated to the political programs of their male protagonists.” For her part, Juhasz has continued to develop her ideas through both [her online video work](#), and also her MIT Press video-book [Learning from YouTube](#) – based in part on her eponymous Pitzer course.

Of course, the material referenced here predates National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden’s 2013 disclosures about the extent of digital surveillance around the globe. Following these revelations, there have arisen salient questions about doing truly radical work in the online space beyond just those raised by Juhasz. For instance, what are the implications here in terms of privacy? If someone streams a radical work online, who then knows about it? In addition, the lack of encryption in professional cameras has raised the hackles of activist filmmakers: in late 2016, over 150 documentary filmmakers and photojournalists [formally petitioned](#) Canon, Sony, Nikon, Fuji, and Olympus to “build encryption features into [their] still photo and video camera products,” as they are “needed to protect our safety and security, as well as that of our sources and subjects worldwide.” The lengths that filmmakers must go to now in order to ensure safety and security call to mind the necessity of “underground” distribution strategies employed in the early days of Third Cinema, such as those screenings that writer Nicola Marzano [remind](#) us “had to be protected by militant armed guards to avoid the risk of government retaliation.” There is a pressing need for further work on the matter of distributing radical films safely and securely in the twenty-first century, and revisiting this history might provide some useful ideas.

Fortunately, as Burnett's Honorary Oscar would suggest, for American filmmakers in 2017, looking ahead also seems to involve some productive measure of looking back. For example, the Film Society of Lincoln Center put Third Cinema even more directly in the spotlight not long ago: the tradition was frequently [invoked](#) during their post-election event "Film and Media in a Time of Repression." Scholar Chris Robé's new book [Breaking the Spell: A History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Videotape Guerrillas, and Digital Ninjas](#) also begins with a lengthy discussion of Third Cinema, and the significant debt his subjects owe to it. With all this attention, perhaps, then, there's a chance that Third Cinema practice in the United States will be reinvigorated and expanded. To paraphrase Solanas and Getino, the filmmakers, organizations, and movements discussed above have already helped show that "what appeared yesterday as a preposterous adventure" has been "posed today as an inescapable need and possibility."