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TOWARDS A CRITICAL THEORY OF THIRD WORLD FILMS

Teshome H. Gabriel

Wherever there is a film-maker prepared to stand up against commercialism, exploitation, pornography and the tyranny of technique, there is to be found the living spirit of *New Cinema*. Wherever there is a film-maker, of any age or background, ready to place his cinema and his profession at the service of the great causes of his time, there will be the living spirit of *New Cinema*. This is the correct definition which sets *New Cinema* apart from the commercial industry because the commitment of industrial cinema is to untruth and exploitation.

From *The Aesthetics of Hunger*, Glauber Rocha [Brazil]

Insert the work as an original fact in the process of liberation, place it first at the service of life itself, ahead of art; *dissolve aesthetics in the life of society*: only in this way, as [Frantz] Fanon said can decolonization become possible and culture, cinema, and beauty—at least, what is of greatest importance to us—become *our culture, our films, and our sense of beauty*.

From *Towards a Third Cinema*, Fernando Salinas and Octavia Gettina [Argentina]

Frantz Fanon, in his attempt to identify the revolutionary impulse in the peasant of the Third World, accepted that culture is an act of

insemination upon history, whose product is liberation from oppression.¹ In my search for a methodological device for a critical inquiry into Third World films, I have drawn upon the historical works of this ardent proponent of liberation, whose analysis of the steps of the genealogy of Third World culture can also be used as a critical framework for the study of Third World films. This essay is, therefore, divided into two parts and focuses on those essential qualities Third World films possess rather than those they may seem to lack. The first part lays the formulation for Third World film culture and filmic institutions based on a critical and theoretical matrix applicable to Third World needs. The second part is an attempt to give material substance to the analytic constructs discussed previously.

From precolonial times to the present, the struggle for freedom from oppression has been waged by the Third World masses, who in their maintenance of a deep cultural identity have made history come alive. Just as they have moved aggressively towards independence, so has the evolution of Third World film culture followed a path from “domination” to “liberation.” This genealogy of Third World film culture moves from the First Phase in which foreign images are impressed in an alienating fashion on the audience, to the Second and Third Phases in which recognition of “consciousness of oneself” serves as the essential antecedent for national, and more significantly, international consciousness. There are, therefore, three phases in this methodological device.

PHASES OF THIRD WORLD FILMS

Phase I—The unqualified assimilation

The industry: Identification with the Western Hollywood film industry. The link is made as obvious as possible and even the names of the companies proclaim their origin. For instance, the Nigerian film company, Calpenny, whose name stands for California, Pennsylvania and New York, tries to hide behind an acronym, while the companies in India, Egypt and Hong Kong are not worried being typed the “Third World’s Hollywood,” “Hollywood-on-the-Nile,” and “Hollywood of the Orient” respectively.

The theme: Hollywood thematic concerns of “entertainment” predominate. Most of the feature films of the Third World in this phase sensationalise adventure for its own sake and concern themselves with escapist themes of romance, musicals, comedies, etc.... The sole purpose of such industries is to turn out entertainment products which will generate profits. The scope and persistence of this kind of industry in the Third World lies in its ability to provide reinvestable funds and this quadruples their staying power. Therefore, in cases where a counter-cinematic movement has occurred the existing national industry has been able to ingest it. A good example is in the incorporation of the “cinema novo” movement in the Brazilian Embrafilme.

Style: The emphasis on formal properties of cinema, technical brilliance and visual wizardry, overrides subject matter. The aim here is simply to create a “spectacle.” Aping Hollywood stylistically, more often than not, runs counter to Third World needs for a serious social art.

Phase II—The remembrance phase

The industry: Indigenisation and control of talents, production, exhibition and distribution. Many Third World film production companies are in this stage. The movement for a social

institution of cinema in the Third World such as “cinema moudjahid” in Algeria, “new wave” in India and “*engagé* or committed cinema” in Senegal and Mozambique exemplify this phase.

The theme: Return of the exile to the Third World’s source of strength, i.e., culture and history. The predominance of filmic themes such as the clash between rural and urban life, traditional versus modern value systems, folklore and mythology, identify this level. Sembene Ousmane’s early film *Mandabi* about a humble traditional man outstripped by modern ways characterises this stage. *Barravento* (The Turning Wind), a poetic Brazilian film about a member of a fishermen’s village who returns from exile in the city, is a folkloric study of mysticism. The film from Burkina Faso (Upper Volta), *Wend Kuuni* (God’s Gift) attempts to preserve the spirit of the folklore in a brilliant recreation of an old tale of a woman who is declared a witch because of her conflicts with custom when she refused to marry after the disappearance of her husband. While the most positive aspect of this phase is its break with the concepts and propositions of Phase I, the primary danger here is the uncritical acceptance or undue romanticization of ways of the past.

It needs to be stressed that there is a danger of falling into the trap of exalting traditional virtues and racialising culture without at the same time condemning faults. To accept totally the values of Third World traditional cultures without simultaneously stamping out the regressive elements can only lead to “a blind alley” as Fanon puts it, and falsification of the true nature of culture as an act or agent of liberation. Therefore, unless this phase, which predominates in Third World film practices today, is seen as a process, a moving towards the next stage, it could develop into opportunistic endeavours and create cultural confusion. This has been brilliantly pointed out by Luis Ospina of Colombia in his self-reflective

film *Picking on the People*, in which he criticises the exploitative nature of some Third World film-makers who peddle Third World poverty and misery at festival sites in Europe and North America and do not approach their craft as a tool of social transformation. An excellent case in point is the internationally acclaimed film, *Pixote* by Hector Babenco. According to a *Los Angeles Times* correspondent in Rio de Janeiro, Da Silva, the young boy who played the title role of the film was paid a mere \$320. The correspondent writes, “In a real-life drama a juvenile judge in Diadema, a suburb of Sao Paulo, last week released Da Silva, now 16, to the custody of his mother after his arrest on charges of housebreaking and theft.” According to Da Silva’s mother, who sells lottery tickets for her living, “after a trip to Rio when he got no work, he told me, ‘Mother, they have forgotten me, I am finished.’ “ In the meantime Mr. Babenco, the now famous film director is about to shoot his next feature, *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in collaboration with producers in Hollywood.²

The style: Some attempts to indigenise film style are manifest. Although the dominant stylistic conventions of the first phase still predominate here there appears to be a growing tendency to create a film style appropriate to the changed thematic concerns. In this respect, the growing insistence on spatial representation rather than temporal manipulation typifies the films in this phase. The sense of a spatial orientation in cinema in the Third World arises out of the experience of an “endless” world of the large Third World mass. This nostalgia for the vastness of nature projects itself into the film form resulting in long takes and long or wide shots. This is often done to constitute part of an overall symbolisation of a Third World thematic orientation, i.e., the landscape depicted ceases to be mere land or soil and acquires a phenomenal quality which

integrates humans with the general drama of existence itself.

Phase III—The combative phase

The industry: Film-making as a public service institution. The industry in this phase is not only owned by the nation and/or the government, it is also managed, operated and run for and by the people. It can also be called a cinema of mass participation, one enacted by members of communities speaking indigenous language, one that espouses Julio Garcia Espinosa’s polemic of “An Imperfect Cinema,”³ that in a developing world, technical and artistic perfection in the production of a film cannot be the aims in themselves. Quite a number of social institutions of cinema in the Third World, some underground like Argentina’s “Cine Liberacion” and some supported by their governments—for instance, “Chile Films” of Allende’s Popular Unity Socialist government exemplify this phase. Two industrial institutions that also exemplify this level are the Algerian L’Office National pour le Commerce et l’Industrie cinématographique (ONCIC) and Cuba’s institute of Film Art and Industry (ICAIC).

The theme: Lives and struggles of Third World peoples. This phase signals the maturity of the film-maker and is distinguishable from either Phase I or Phase II by its insistence on viewing film in its ideological ramifications. A very good example is Miguel Littin’s *The Promised Land*, a quasi-historical mythic account of power and rebellion, which can be seen as referring to events in modern-day Chile. Likewise, his latest film *Alsino and the Condor* combines realism and fantasy within the context of war-torn Nicaragua. The imagery in *One Way or Another* by the late Sara Gomez Yara, of an iron ball smashing down the old slums of Havana not only depicts the issue of women/race in present-day Cuba but also symbolises the need for a new awareness to replace the old oppressive spirits of *machismo*

which still persist in socialist Cuba. The film *Soleil 0*, by the Mauritanian film-maker, Med Hondo, aided by the process of Fanonian thesis, comes to the recognition of forgotten heritage in the display of the amalgam of ideological determinants of European “humanism,” racism and colonialism. The failure of colonialism to convert Africans into “white-thinking blacks” depicted in the film reappears in a much wider symbolic form in his latest film, *The West Indies*, where the entire pantheon of domination and liberation unfolds in a ship symbolic of the slave-ship of yesteryear.

The style: Film as an ideological tool. Here, film is equated or recognised as an ideological instrument. This particular phase also constitutes a framework of agreement between the public (or the indigenous institution of cinema) and the film-maker. A Phase III film-maker is one who is perceptive of and knowledgeable about the pulse of the Third World masses. Such a film-maker is truly in search of a Third World cinema—a cinema that has respect for the Third World peoples. One element of the style in this phase is an ideological point-of-view instead of that of a character as in dominant Western conventions. *Di Cavalcanti* by Glauber Rocha for instance, is a take-off from “Quarup,” a joyous death ritual celebrated by Amazon tribes.⁴ The celebration frees the dead from the hypocritical tragic view modern man has of death. By turning the documentary of the death of the internationally renowned Brazilian painter Di Cavalcanti into a chaotic/celebratory montage of sound and images, Rocha deftly and directly criticised the dominant documentary convention, creating in the process not only an alternative film language but also a challenging discourse on the question of existence itself. Another element of style is the use of flashback—although the reference is to past events, it is not stagnant but dynamic and developmental. In *The Promised Land*, for instance,

the flashback device dips into the past to comment on the future, so that within it a flash-forward is inscribed. Similarly, when a flashforward is used in Sembene’s *Ceddo* (1977), it is also to convey a past and future tense simultaneously to comment on two historical periods.

Since the past is necessary for the understanding of the present, and serves as a strategy for the future, this stylistic orientation seems to be ideologically suited to this particular phase.

It should, however, be noted that the three phases discussed above are not organic developments. They are enclosed in a dynamic which is dialectical in nature; for example, some Third World film-makers have taken a contradictory path. *Lucia*, a Cuban film by Humberto Solas, about the relations between the sexes belongs to Phase III, yet Solas’ latest film, *Cecilia*, which concerns an ambitious mulatto woman who tries to assimilate into a repressive Spanish aristocracy, is a regression in style (glowing in spectacle) and theme (the tragic mulatto), towards Phase I. Moving in the opposite direction, Glauber Rocha’s early Brazilian films like *Deus E O Diabo Na Terra Do Sol* (literally “God and the Devil in the land of the Sun,” but advertised in the United States as “Black God, White Devil!”) and *Terra em Transe* (The Earth Trembles) reflect a Phase II characteristic, while his last two films, *A Idade da Terra* (The Age of Earth) and *Di Cavalcanti*, both in their formal properties and subject matter manifest a Phase III characteristic in their disavowal of the conventions of dominant cinema. According to Glauber Rocha, *A Idade da Terra* (which develops the theme of *Terra em Transe*) and *Di Cavalcanti* disintegrate traditional “narrative sequences” and rupture not only the fictional and documentary cinema style of his early works, but also “the world cinematic language” under “the dictatorship

of Coppola and Godard.”⁵

The dynamic enclosure of the three phases posits the existence of grey areas between Phases I and II, and II and III. This area helps to identify a large number of important Third World films. For instance, the Indian film, *Mantban* (The Churning), the Senegalese film *Xala* (Spell of Impotence), the Bolivian film *Chuquiago* (Indian name for La Paz), the Ecuadorean film *My Aunt Nora*, the Brazilian film *They Don't Wear Black Tie* and the Tunisian film *Shadow of the Earth* occupy the grey area between Phase II and III. The importance of the grey areas cannot be over-emphasised, for not only do they concretely demonstrate the *process of becoming* but they also attest to the multifaceted nature of Third World cinema and the need for the development of new critical canons.

COMPONENTS OF CRITICAL THEORY

From the above it can be seen that the development of Third World film culture provides a critical theory particular to Third World needs. I would like to propose at this stage an analytic construct consisting of three components that would provide an integrative matrix within which to approach and interpret the Three Phases drawn out from the Third World's cultural history. The components of critical theory can be schematised as follows:

Component 1: Text The intersection of codes and sub-codes; the chief thematic and formal characteristics of existing films and the rules of that filmic grammar. And, the transformational procedures whereby new “texts” emerge from old.

Component 2: Reception The audience: the active interrogation of images versus the passive consumption

of films. The issue of alienated and non-alienated identity and the idea/inscribed or actual/empirical spectatorship illustrates this component of critical theory.

Component 3: Production The social determination where the wider context of determinants informs social history, market considerations, economy of production, state governance and regulation composes this stage of the critical constructs. Here, the larger historical perspective, the position of the institution of indigenous cinema in progressive social taste, is contexted. The overriding critical issue at this juncture is, for instance, the unavoidable ultimate choice between the classical studio system and the development of a system of production based on the lightweight 16mm or video technology. The pivotal concern and the single most significant question at this stage, therefore, is, “Precisely, what kind of institution is cinema in the Third World?”

CONFLUENCE OF PHASES AND CRITICAL THEORY

Each Phase of the Third World film culture can be described in terms of all the three components of critical theory, because each Phase is necessarily engaged in all the critical operations. For instance, Phase I is characterised by a type of film that simply mirrors, in its concepts and propositions, the *status quo*, i.e., the text and the rules of the grammar are identical to conventional practices. The consequence of this type of “mimicking” in the area of “reception” is that an alienated identity ensues from it precisely

because the spectator cannot or is unable to find or recognise himself/herself in the images. The mechanisms of the systems of “production” also acknowledge the *status quo*—the reliance is on the studio systems of controlled production and experimentation.

If we apply the components of critical theory to Phase II only a slight shift in the Text and the rules of the grammar is noticeable. Although the themes are predominantly indigenised, the film language remains trapped, woven and blotted with classical formal elements and remains stained with conventional film style. In terms of “reception” the viewer, aided by the process of memory and an amalgam of folklore and mythology, is able to locate a somewhat diluted traditional identity. The third level of critical theory also composes and marks the process of indigenisation of the institution of cinema where a position of self-determination is sought.

Finally, the three components of critical theory find their dynamic wholeness in Phase III—the Combative Phase. Here, the Text and subtexts go through a radical shift and transformation—the chief formal and thematic concerns begin to alter the rules of the grammar. Another film language, and a system of new codes begin to manifest themselves. With regards to “reception” we discover that the viewer or subject is no longer alienated because recognition is vested not only in genuine cultural grounds but also in an ideological cognition founded on the acknowledgment of the decolonisation of culture and total liberation.

The intricate relationships of the three *phases* of the evolution of African film culture and the three analytic constructs for filmic institution help to establish the stage for a confluence of a unique aesthetic exchange founded on other than traditional categories of film conventions (see fig. 1). This new Third World cinematic experience, inchoate as it is, is in the process of

creating a concurrent development of a new and throbbing social institution capable of generating a dynamic and far-reaching influence on the future socioeconomic and educational course of the Third World.

I contend that the confluence obtained from the interlocking of the *phases* and the critical *constructs* reveals underlying assumptions concerning perceptual patterns and film viewing situations. For instance, with respect to fiction film showing in Third World theatres, rejection on cultural grounds forces incomplete transmission of meaning. That is, the intended or inscribed meaning of the film is deflected and acquires a unique meaning of its own—the mode of address of the film and the spectator behaviour undergo a radical alteration. Therefore, what has been presented as a “fiction” film is received as if it were a “documentary.” The same fiction film screened in its own country of origin, however, claims an ideal spectatorship because it is firmly anchored in its own cultural references, codes and symbols. A classic example of how films from one culture can be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted by a viewer from another culture is Glauber Rocha’s *The Lion Has Seven Heads* (*Der Leone Have Sept Cabezas*). Extensively exhibited in the West, one catalogue compiled in 1974 credited Rocha with bringing:

the Cinema Novo to Africa for this Third World assault on the various imperialisms represented in its multilingual title. Characters include a black revolutionary, a Portuguese mercenary, an American CIA agent, a French missionary, and a voluptuous nude woman called the Golden Temple of Violence.⁶

Again, a most recent compendium of reviews,

SUMMARY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FILM CULTURE AND FILMIC INSTITUTIONS.

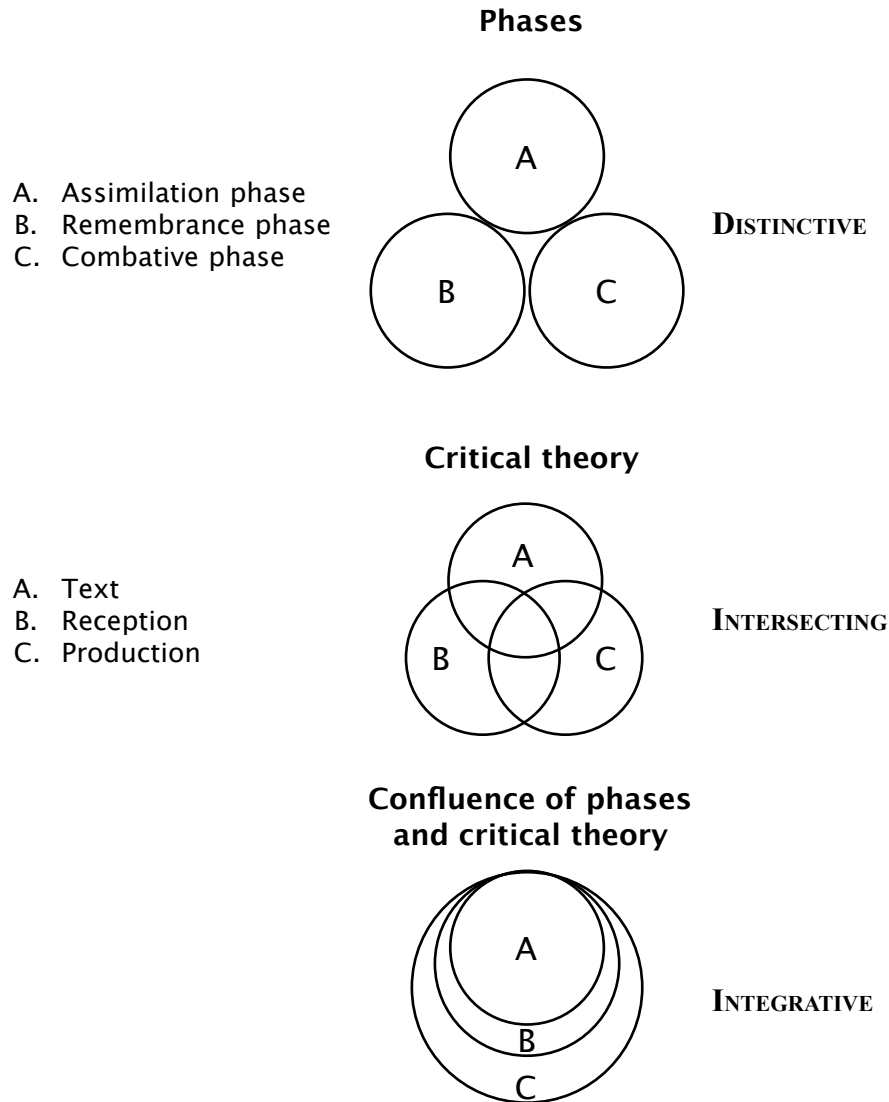


Figure 1. Here, A and B find themselves in a larger historical perspective C. It is a wider context of indigenisation and self-determination which condition both level A and B to give up their position of dominance to C, a stage which composes and marks the union of the Third World film culture and the Social institutions of cinema.

Africa on Film and Videotape, 1960-1981, dismisses the film completely with a one-liner, “An allegorical farce noting the bond between Africa and Brazil.”⁷

Yet, Glauber Rocha in an interview given to a prominent film historian, Rachel Gerber (author of *Glauber Rocha, Cinema, Política e a Estética do Inconsciente*) in Rome, February 1973, and in a discussion with this author at UCLA in 1976, said that the film is a story of Che Guevara who is magically resurrected by Blacks through the spirit of Zumbi, the spiritual name of the late Amílcar Cabral. To Rocha, the film is in fact a homage to Amílcar Cabral. Thus, while the West looks at this film as an offering of clichéd images and an object of curiosity, the film-maker is only trying to affirm the continuity of the Third World’s anti-imperialist struggle from Che to Cabral (and beyond), to initiate an awareness of their lives, and the relevance to us today, of what they struggled and died for. To the extent that we recognize a history of unequal exchanges between the South and the North, we must also recognise the unequal “symbolic” exchanges involved. The difficulty of Third World films of radical social comment to Western interpretation is the result, a) of the film’s resistance to the dominant conventions of cinema, and b) of the consequence of the Western viewers’ loss of being the privileged decoders and ultimate interpreters of meaning.

The Western experience of film viewing—dominance of the big screen and the sitting situation—have naturalised a spectator conditioning so that any communication of a film plays on such values of exhibition and reception. The Third World experience of film viewing and exhibition suggests an altogether different route and different value system. For instance, Americans and Europeans hate seeing a film on African screens, because everybody talks during the showings; similarly, African viewers of film

in America complain about the very strict code of silence and the solemn atmosphere of the American movie-theatres.

How the system of perceptual patterns and viewing situation varies with conditions of reception from one culture to another, or how changes in the rules of the grammar affect spectator viewing habits is part of a larger question which solidifies and confirms the issue of cultural relativism and identity.

The confluence of the phases and the constructs also converges on the technologically mediated factors of needed production apparatuses, productive relations and the mechanisms of industrial operations. It needs to be stated outright that “technology” as such does not in itself produce or communicate meaning; but it is equally true to say that “technology” has a dynamic which helps to create ideological carry-overs that impress discourse language, i.e., ideological discourse manifests itself in the mechanisms of film discourse. By way of an example, it is possible that a film-maker might have the idea of “filmic form” before having “a content” to go along with it. Third World films are heterogenous, employing narrative and oral discourse, folk music and songs, extended silences and gaps, moving from fictional representation to reality, to fiction—these constitute the creative part that can challenge the ideological carry-overs that technology imposes.

From the needs of Third World film criticism, contemporary film scholarship is criticised on two major fronts: first, contemporary film theory and criticism is grounded on a conception of the “viewer” (subject or citizen) derived from psychoanalytic theory where the relation between the “viewer” and the “film” is determined by a particular dynamic of “familial” matrix. To the extent that Third World culture and familial relationships are not described

through psychoanalytic theory, Third World filmic representation is open for an elaboration of the relation “viewer”/“film” on terms other than those founded on psychoanalysis. The Third World relies more on an appeal to social and political conflicts as the prime rhetorical strategy and less on the paradigm of oedipal conflict and resolution.

Second, on the semiotic front, the Western model of filmic representation is essentially based on a literary or written conception of the scenario which implies a linear, cause/effect, conception of narrative action.⁸ However, Third World oral narratives, founded on traditional culture, are held in memory by a set of formal strategies specific to, repeated, oral, face-to-face, tellings.

It is no longer satisfactory to use existing critical criteria, which may be adequate for a film practice (Western in this case) now at a plateau of relevance,⁹ to elucidate a new and dynamic film convention whose upward mobility will result in a totally new cinematic language. The Third World experience is thus raising some fundamental concerns about the methods and/or commitment of traditional film scholarship. The Third World filmic practice is, therefore, reorganising and refining the pictorial syntax and the position of the “viewer” (or spectator) with respect to film. The Third World cinematic experience is moved by the requirements of its social action and contexted and marked by the strategy of that action. We need, therefore, to begin attending to a new theoretical and analytic matrix governed by other than existing critical theories that claim specific applications for universal principles.

Cultural contamination is a deeply-rooted human fear: it smells of annihilation. Spiritual and traditional practices have a terrific hold on the Third World rural populace. This reminds us of the maxim which was enunciated by Confucius in the sixth century BC and still prevails: “I’m a

transmitter, not an inventor.” To the Third World, spirits, magic, masquerades and rituals, however flawed they may be, still constitute knowledge and provide collective security and protection from forces of evil. Unknown forces for the rural community can only be checked or controlled if they can be identified.

One way of readily understanding what Third World culture, therefore, is, is to distinguish it from what it claims not to be.¹⁰ We call at this juncture for a thorough and comparative analysis of “oral” or “folk” art form and “literate” or “print” art form to situate the foregoing discussion on critical theory into focused attention. I propose here to examine the centrifugal as well as the centripetal cultural forces that might determine not only film, but also the media, in the Third World. This dialectical, not differential or oppositional, conception of cultural forms takes into account the dynamics of their exchange.

Several factors ensue from the examination of the two modes of cultural expression. While, for instance, the community issue is at the heart of Third World traditional culture, the issue of the individual is at the base of Western or print culture. With regards to performatory stage presentation, a Western actor interacting with the audience breaks the compact or marginal boundary. Because a special kind of magic enters a playing space, Western stage performance does not allow crossover. While, therefore, a Western person feels his privacy violated with interactive drama, in the Third World context the understanding between the viewer and the performers is that their positions are interchangeable without notice.

Awe for the old in the Third World culture is very much in evidence. Several films reflect it. The old or the aged as repositories of Third World history is well documented in such films as *Emitai* from Senegal, *They Don't Wear Black Tie*, from Brazil, *Shadow of the Earth*, from Tunisia and

the *In-Laws* from the People's Republic of China. The issue of the aged in Third World culture is beautifully illustrated in Safi Faye's film *Fad Jal*, where the opening sequence of the film states: "In Africa, an old man dying, is like a library burning down."

A major area of misunderstanding (if we take into account the "Cognitive Characteristics" of the "Folk/Print Art" dichotomy in Table 1) is the definition and replacement of "man," the individual, within Third World societies. For any meaningful dialogue centering on Third World developmental schemes the issue of "man/woman" in a society must be carefully debated. As Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania puts it, "The Purpose is Man,"¹¹ and as the Wolof saying goes, "Man is the medicine of man."

A cultural orientation of "man," the individual, as changeable and capable of effecting change is a condition that reverberates in all advanced societies of the world, be they of capitalist or socialist persuasion. The idea that man, both in the singular and in the plural, has the capability of controlling his/her own destiny and effecting change by his/her own will is a dynamic force which can alter both the thought patterns and work habits of a people. This concept, it must be stated, is not the opposite of the Third World ideal of the primacy of the community over the individual. An excellent example is the film, *Beyond the Plains* (where man is born) by Michael Raeburn, in which a young man from the Masai tribe in Tanzania was able to change his peoples' negative attitude towards education by not only doggedly pursuing it to the university level, but also never losing contact with his people. As he grew up he made sure he performed all the customary rites and fulfilled all the obligations demanded by his people, thus demonstrating that Western and tribal cultural education were not incompatible. From this, it can be seen that the

major difference between the Third World and the West with regards to changing the community from a passive to a dynamic entity is one of approach. Whereas the former aims at changing the individual through the community the latter wants the community changed by the individual. Only time will tell which of the two approaches makes for sustained, beneficial social progress.

MANIPULATION OF SPACE AND TIME IN CINEMA

A child born in a Western society is encased, from the initial moments of birth, in purposive, man-made fabricated objects. The visual landscape he experiences is dominated by man-made forms. Even the child's dolls reflect the high technology of the environment. Nowadays, a child who is beginning to learn to spell can have a computer that can talk to him and interact with him in a human way. All of these developments are based on the insistence of a society that puts a high price on individualism, individual responsibility and achievement as most necessary.

A child in a rural Third World setting is born in an unrestricted natural landscape. From the day he/she is born the child is dominated by untampered natural forms. Even the interior of the dwelling where the child is born is made to look like the natural environment: it is not unusual to see fresh grass and flowers lending nature's colour to the child's initial world setting. The child grows in this vast universe where his place within the family and in nature is emphasised. A child born and raised in this situation is taught to submerge his individuality and show responsibility to his extended family and his community. His accomplishments are measured not only by his individual achievements but by the degree to which they accomplish and contribute to the social good.

Culture, the terms on which films are based,

FOLK (OR ORAL) ART FORM	PRINT (OR LITERATE) ART FORM
CONCEPTION OF THE VALUE AND EVALUATION OF ART	
<p>Deeper meaning of art held by cultural group or community. Interpretive device: one needs to belong and/or understand cultural or folk nuances.</p> <p>Recognises general level of excellence, hence, emphasis on group competence in the aesthetic judgement of art.</p> <p>Master artist concept—gifted but normal, and so conforms to the group.</p> <p>Art as occasion for collective engagement.</p> <p>Emphasis on contextual relevance.</p> <p>Art defined in terms of context.</p>	<p>Deeper meaning of art held as the sole property of the artist. Interpretive device: the artist proclaims ‘it is for me to know and for you to find, or art is what you mean it to be.’</p> <p>Recognises exceptions, hence, emphasis on individual achievement and individual responsibility.</p> <p>Master artist concept—gifted but eccentric and essentially nonconformist.</p> <p>Art as occasion for ‘escape’ from normal routine.</p> <p>Emphasis on conceptual interpretation.</p> <p>Art defined in terms of aesthetic.</p>
PERFORMATORY PRESENTATION	
<p>Held in fluid boundaries, churchyards, fields, marketplaces—operating in 360° dimension.</p> <p>A scene flows into another. Cyclical progression linked thematically.</p>	<p>Boxed-in theatres and elevated to a stage—operating in 180° dimension.</p> <p>Each scene must follow another scene in linear progression.</p>
PERFORMATORY EFFECT	
<p>Expects viewer participation, therefore, arouses activity and prepares for and allows participation.</p> <p>Multiple episodes that have their own centres.</p>	<p>Discourages viewer participation. Puts an end to activity. Inhibits participation.</p> <p>Singular episode extended through detail.</p>
COGNITIVE CHARACTERISTICS	
<p>Man defined as ‘unchangeable’ alone. Change emanates from the community.</p>	<p>Man defined as ‘man’, changeable and, by virtue of his person, capable of effecting change and progress.</p>
<p>Individual interlinked with total social fabric. Concept of human rather than concept of ‘man’ as such.</p>	<p>Individual perceived primarily as separated from general social fabric.</p>
<p>Strong tradition of suggestion in the cultural symbol and in the use of linguistic formulae.</p>	<p>Strong tradition of detail and minute (graphic) description.</p>
<p>Time assumed to be a subjective phenomenon, i.e., it is the outcome of conceptualising and experiencing movement.</p>	<p>Time is assumed to be an ‘objective’ phenomenon, dominant and ubiquitous.</p>
<p>Wisdom is a state of intellectual maturity gained by experience. Cumulative process of knowledge, derived from the past. Characterised by slowness to judgement.</p>	<p>Wisdom is characterised by high degree of specialisation in a particular field or discipline. Characterised by quickness of judgement based on a vast accumulation of data and information.</p>
<p>Earth is not a hostile world, e.g., the cult of the ancestors is an attempt at unification with the past, present and future.</p>	<p>Earth is a hostile world and has to be subdued. Paradise is in the future or elsewhere.</p>

Table I: Comparison of Folk and Print Art Forms

also naturally grows from these environmental factors. An examination of oral and literate culture in terms of film brings to light two very crucial elements of cinema, namely, the concepts of “space” and “time.” All cinema manipulates “time” and “space.” Where Western films manipulate “time” more than “space,” Third World films seem to emphasise “space” over “time.” Third World films grow from folk tradition where communication is a slow-paced phenomenon and time is not rushed but has its own pace. Western culture, on the other hand, is based on the value of “time”—time is art, time is money, time is most everything else. If time drags in a film, spectators grow bored and impatient, so that a method has to be found to cheat natural time. In film, this is achieved in the editing. It is all based on the idea that the more purely “non-dramatic” elements in film are considered “cinematic excess,” i.e., they serve no unifying purpose. What is identified as “excess” in Western cinematic experience is, therefore, precisely where we locate Third World cinema. Let me now identify those essential elements of cinematic practice that are considered cinematic excess in Western cinema but which in the Third World context seem only too natural.

The long take: It is not uncommon in Third World films to see a concentration of long takes and repetition of images and scenes. In the Third World films, the slow, leisurely pacing approximates the viewer’s sense of time and rhythm of life. In addition, the preponderance of wide-angle shots of longer duration deal with a viewer’s sense of community and how people fit in nature. Whereas, when Michelangelo Antonioni and Jean-Luc Godard use these types of shots it is to convey an existential separation and

isolation from nature and self.

Cross-cutting: Cross-cutting between antagonists shows simultaneity rather than the building of suspense. The poser of images lies, not in the expectation we develop about the mere juxtapositions or the collision itself, but rather in conveying the reasons for the imminent collision. Where, therefore, conventional cinema has too often reduced this to the collision of antagonists, on a scale of positive and negative characters, Third World films doing the same thing make it more explicitly an ideological collision.

The close-up shot: A device so much in use in the study of individual psychology in Western film-making practice is less used in Third World films. Third World films serve more of an informational purpose than a study in “psychological realism.” The isolation of an individual, in tight close-up shots, seems unnatural to the Third World film-maker because (i) it calls attention to itself; (ii) it eliminates social considerations; and (iii) it diminishes spatial integrity.

The panning shot: Since a pan shot maintains integrity of space and time, the narrative value of such a shot renders “the cut” or editing frequently unnecessary. The emphasis on space also conveys a different concept of “time,” a time which is not strictly linear or chronological but co-exists with it. My own observation indicates that while Western films tend to pan right on a left-right axis, Middle Eastern films, for instance, tend to pan generally toward the left, as in *Ayam Ayam* (Morocco)

and *Shadow of the Earth* (Tunisia). It is quite possible that the direction of panning toward left or right might be strongly influenced by the direction in which a person writes.

The concept of silence: The rich potential for the creative interpretation of sound as well as the effective use of its absence is enormous in Third World films. For instance, in *Emitai*, there are English sub-titles for drum messages, and a rooster crows as Sembene's camera registers a low-angle shot of a poster of General de Gaulle. A neat visual pun! Silence serves as an important element of the audio track of the same film. It is "a cinema of silence that speaks." Silences have meaning only in context, as in the Ethiopian film, *Gouma*, and the Cuban film, *The Last Supper*; where they contribute to the suspension of judgment which one experiences in watching a long take. Viewers wonder what will happen, accustomed as they are to the incessant sound and overload of music of dominant cinema.

Concept of "hero": Even if a Western viewer cannot help but identify and sympathise with the black labour leader in *They Don't Wear Black Tie*, the lunatic in *Harvest: 3000 Years*, the crazy poet in *The Chronicle of the Years of Ember* and the militant party member in *Sambizanga*, the films nevertheless kill those characters. This is because wish-fulfillment through identification is not the films' primary objective; rather, it is the importance of collective engagement and action that matters. The individual "hero" in the Third World context does not make

history, he/she only serves historical necessities.

In summary, Table 2 brings into sharper focus the differences between the film conventions of the Third World and the West and shows the dynamics of their cultural and ideological exchange.

CONCLUSION

The spatial concentration and minimal use of the conventions of temporal manipulation in Third World film practice suggest that Third World cinema is initiating a coexistence of film art with oral traditions. Nonlinearity, repetition of images and graphic representation have very much in common with folk customs. Time duration, though essential, is not the major issue because in the Third World context the need is for films, in context, to touch a sensitive cultural chord in a society. To achieve this, a general overhaul of the parameters of film form is required. Should the reorganisation be successful and radical enough, a rethinking of the critical and theoretical canons of cinema would be called for leading to a reconsideration of the conventions of cinematographic language and technique. The final result would tend towards a statement James Potts made in his article, "Is there any international film language?":

So, far from there being an international language of cinema, an internationally agreed UN Charter of conventions and grammatical rules, we are liable to be presented, quite suddenly, with a new national school of film-making, which may be almost wholly untouched by European conventions, and will require us to go back to square one in thinking

WESTERN DOMINANT CONVENTIONS**NON-WESTERN USE OF CONVENTIONS****LIGHTING**

High contrast and low key, mostly Rembrandt lighting in drama while comedy uses low contrast and high key lighting

Lighting as a convention in Third World films is less developed with the exception of Cuban films, whose use of lighting as a language is manifest in *Lucia* and *The Last Supper*.

CAMERA ANGLE

Mostly governed by eye-level perspective which approximates to our natural position in the world. Use of angle shots primarily for aesthetic look.

Deliberate choice of low/high-angle shots for purposes of political or social comment. Low/high-angle shots show dominance and power relations between the oppressed and oppressing classes.

CAMERA PLACEMENT

Distance varies according to the emotional content of the scene. Emotion, e.g. anger, is portrayed in close-up.

There is minimal use of the convention of close-up shots. This is perhaps due to lack of emphasis on psychological realism.

CAMERA MOVEMENT

Mostly a fixed perspective (tripod operation), promoting exposition and understanding. Often the camera moves to stay with the individual to study character development and psychological state.

Fixed perspective in African films. A moving perspective (hand-held camera) in Latin American films promotes experiential involvement and dramatic identification. If the camera moves it is to contain a scene or a sequence as a unit and not in response to individual psychology.

SET DESIGN

A studio set. Tightens manipulatory controls, enhances fictional reality.

A location set. Location shooting relaxes manipulatory controls, and enhances documentary reality.

ACTING

A Hollywood convention, actor as icon.

Mostly non-actors acting out their real-life roles.

PARALLEL MONTAGE

Shows the relations of conflicting characters/forces for dramatic and expository narratives purposes, i.e., suspense.

Cross-cutting serves an ideological purpose and denotes ironical contrast and class distinction. Consider the film, *Mexico: The Frozen Revolution*.

POINT OF VIEW

Actors avoid looking directly at the camera. Actors are usually positioned or blocked so that their emotional stare is easily observed by the camera.

It is not uncommon to see a look directed at the camera, hence a direct address to the audience. A shift to the conventions of oral narrative is evident. Consider the Algerian film, *Omar Gallala*.

The sum total of what is listed above as technique or elements of the film-making process is what expresses ideology. Films that hide the marks of production are associated with the ideology of presenting 'film as reality'. The film that announces its message as an objective reflection of the way things are: whereas, films which do exhibit the marks of production are associated with the ideology of presenting 'film as message'. Predominant aspect or point of view in Third World film is film announcing itself as a polemic comment on the way things are in their 'natural' reflection.

Films, therefore, in their point of view and stylistic choices, are structured to evoke a certain ideology in their production. A consequence of this, quite logically, is their different use of the conventions of time and space in cinema.

Table 2: A Comparison of Filmic Conventions (These are tendencies, not absolutes)

about the principle and language of cinematography.¹²

Film-makers in the Third World are beginning to produce films that try to restructure accepted filmic practices. There is now a distinct possibility of James Potts' perceptive remarks coming true and it is in anticipation of the emergence of the "new national school of film-making ... untouched by European conventions" that this paper has been written.

Already, certain reactions from film critics may be regarded as a sign of this "emergence." For example, a general criticism levelled at Third World films is that they are too graphic. This spatial factor is part of a general rhythm of pictorial representation in most Third world societies. It is, therefore, precisely because graphic art creates symbols in space that it enables Third World viewers to relate more easily to their films. In the Chinese case, for example:

The spiritual quality achieved in the supreme Chinese landscape and nature paintings is a feeling of harmony with the universe in which the inner psychic geography of the artist and the outer visual reality transcribed, are fused through brush strokes into a new totality that ... resonates with the viewer.¹³

Both the Chinese contemporary photographers and cinematographers have attempted to create similar syntax and effects to enhance the people's appreciation of their art.

Again, the most inaccessible Phase III film, the one African film that drops a curtain in front of a western audience, and at the same time a most popular and influential film in Africa is *Emitai* (The Angry God). Shot in social space

by the Senegalese film-maker Sembene, the film explores the spiritual and physical tension in a rural community. To begin with the film carries its viewers into the story without any credits, only for the entire credit to be provided some twenty-five minutes later. Spectators have been known to leave the screening room at this point conditioned to read the credits as signalling the end of the film. What Sembene has provided before the credits is essentially the preface of the story like an African folktale. In addition, the ending of the film an hour and half later is anticlimactic and this occurs at the moment the film is truly engaging—the film simply stops—what we hear is the staccato of bullet sounds against a screen gone dark. In this film the film-maker is forcing us to forget our viewing habits and attend to the film in context instead of the experienced, framed as artistic package. A lesson is thus learned; concern should be with the language of the "film text" in its own terms and not with the skeletal structure and chronology of the film.

Cinema, since its creation, has beguiled spectators by its manipulation of time—it expands, contracts, is lost and found, fragmented and reassembled. The resultant multiple time-perspectives have conditioned film appreciation as pure entertainment. There is perhaps some justification for this objective in a society whose stabilizing conditions can afford the use of the film medium solely for entertainment. The Third World, on the other hand, is still engaged in a desperate struggle for sociopolitical and economic independence and development and cannot afford to dissipate its meagre resources and/or laugh at its present political and historical situation.

The Combative Phase, in which the historical determinants of Third World culture occur, provides us with the final horizon of a cinema oriented toward a peaceful coexistence with folk-culture. That oral tradition reasserts itself in a

new medium is not only a contribution to Third World societies but to the cinematic world at large.

Film is a new language to the Third World and its grammar is only recently being charted. Its direction, however, seems to be a discursive use of the medium and an appeal for intellectual appreciation. Tomas Gutierrez Alea, perhaps, best exemplifies the new awareness when he says:

... if we want film to serve something higher, if we want it to fulfill its function more perfectly (aesthetic, social, ethical, and revolutionary), we ought to guarantee that it constitutes a *factor in spectators' development*. Film will be more fruitful to the degree that it pushes spectators toward a more profound understanding of reality and, consequently, to the degree that it helps viewers live more actively and incites them to stop being mere spectators in the face of reality. To do this, film ought to appeal not only to emotion and feeling but also to reason and intellect. In this case, both instances ought to exist indissolvably (*sic*) united, in such a way that they come to provoke, as Pascal said, authentic "shudderings and tremblings of the mind."¹⁴

NOTES

- ¹ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963, pp. 207-48. See also, A. Cabral, *Return to the Source*, New York: African Information Service, 1973, pp. 42-69.
- ² J. DeOnis, "Pixote role proves all too real," *Los Angeles Times*, Part VI, Tuesday, 5 June, 1984, p. 4.
- ³ J. Espinosa, "For an imperfect cinema," in M. Chanan (ed), *Twenty Years of the New Latin American*

Cinema, London: BFI and Channel 4 Television, 1983, pp.28-33.

- ⁴ R. Gerber, *Glauber Rocha*, Cinema, Política e a Estética do Inconsciente, Brasil: Editora Vozes, 1982, p. 34 and passim.
- ⁵ G. Rocha, *Revolução do Cinema Novo*, Rio de Janeiro: Alhambra/Embrafilme, 1981, p. 467.
- ⁶ From a film catalogue entitled, *Films about Africa Available in the Midwest*, Madison: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, 1974, p. 37.
- ⁷ *Africa on Film and Videotape, 1960-81: A Compendium of Reviews*, East Lansing, Michigan: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1982, p.219.
- ⁸ It must be freely acknowledged that the future of art criticism and appreciation no doubt lies in the domain of semiotic inquiry. Presently, while its greater virtue lies in the attention it gives to the role of the reader, its greatest weakness is its cultural fixation with Western thought. Third World aesthetics and cultures have been ignored, making it impossible to occupy its premier place in a unified human science. Since the works of Levi-Strauss and various essays and a book by Roland Barthes nothing of substance regarding semiotic inquiry into cultural studies has been offered. For a general reading on the topic, see Edith Kurzweil, *The Age of Structuralism: Levi-Strauss to Foucault*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980 and R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, New York: Hill and Wang, 1970. For the various contending factions in the semiotic camp: structuralists, deconstructionists, reader-response critics, theories of intertextuality and narratology, the following books will serve as introductions: R. Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982 and J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- ⁹ Recently Western film-makers, in a bid to revitalise their film world have made "realistic" forays into Third World themes: Gandhi on India's struggle for independence, *The Year of Living Dangerously* on Sukarno's fall from power, *Under Fire* on the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and *Circle of Deceit* on the Lebanese civil war. The statement

by one of the characters in *Circle of Deceit*: “We are defending Western civilisation,” is an ironic but true epigram for all the films. Far from being radical or new, therefore, these productions give us no more than Hollywood’s version of the Third World. For an interesting and illuminating discussion on this recent fascination with “the other,” see John Powers, “Saints and Savages,” *American Film*, January-February 1984, pp. 38-43.

- ¹⁰ Various sources were consulted, including but not limited to H. Arvon’s *Marxist Esthetics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973, p. 71 and passim and K. Gotrick, *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama*, Goteborg: Graphic Systems AB, 1984, pp. 140-163. For an elaboration of culture in the context of Third World films, see my book *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982.
- ¹¹ J. K. Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 91-105.
- ¹² J. Potts, “Is there an international film language,” *Sight and Sound* 48 (2) Spring 1979, pp. 74-81.
- ¹³ A. Goldsmith, “Picture from China: the style and scope of photography are changing as outside influences mix with traditional values,” *Popular Photography*, February 1984, pp. 45-50, 146 & 156.
- ¹⁴ T. G. Ajea, *Dialectica del Espectador*, Ciudad de la Habana: Sobre la presente edicion, 1982, p. 21. The first part of the book has been translated by Julia Lesage and appears under the title, “The Viewer’s dialectic,” in *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Cinema* (29), February 1984, pp. 18-21. This quote is from that publication.