

THIRD CINEMA IN
LATIN AMERICA:
Critical Theory in Recent Works*

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AREITO. Special issue, "Nuevo cine latinoamericano." Volume 10, Number 37 (1984). (Pp. 68.)

THE CUBAN IMAGE: CINEMA AND CULTURAL POLITICS IN CUBA. By MICHAEL CHANAN. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. Pp. 314. \$35.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)

DIALECTICA DEL ESPECTADOR. By TOMAS GUTIERREZ ALEA. (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1982. Pp. 75).

THIRD CINEMA IN THE THIRD WORLD: THE AESTHETICS OF LIBERATION. By TESHOME GABRIEL. *Studies in Cinema*, Number 21. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982. Pp. 160. \$39.95.)

Marx considered religion to be the opium of the people, but had he witnessed the mass appeal of Hollywood movies, he would have rated these "sugarcoated pills" as an equally powerful drug. Just as new interpretations of the Gospel have made religion in Latin America a weapon in the class struggle, so new interpretations of cinema have liberated popular perceptions by explaining how cultural forms are used by the ruling class to maintain the exploitation of the oppressed. The concept of Third Cinema is built on a rejection of Hollywood's retrograde commercialism that stimulates the consumer's interest in order to create greater demand. Commercial film formulas make money. Third Cinema films make revolution on the ideological level with a new film style.

This essay will present a critical overview of four recent works assessing Third Cinema with a focus on Latin America. Of the works written on the New Latin American Cinema in the last five years, these four permit an in-depth evaluation of critical approaches to the "new" art that is now almost thirty years old. On 24 March 1989, the Instituto

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Cubano del Arte e Industrias Cinematográficas (ICAIC) will mark its thirtieth year.

In an *Areíto* interview entitled “Por un cine nacional, realista, crítico y popular,” filmmaker Fernando Birri states that the new cinematic form was born in Cuba with the mid-1950s film entitled *El megano*, the work of Julio García Espinoza, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Alfredo Guevara, and Pepe Massip (*Areíto*, 6–7). Other works of new cinema were simultaneously being produced elsewhere (such as the Brazilian films of Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Birri’s “escuela documental de Santa Fe” in Argentina) because, as Birri describes it, the new artistic wave was simply “en el aire del continente.”

Dennis West’s review of recent anthologies for Latin American film studies appealed to radical critics to undertake a sort of applied criticism relating theory to specific films (West 1983). West concluded his review essay with the observation that “Latin American film studies have not drawn significantly on feminism, structuralism, and semiology,” even though such methodologies are appropriate to the study of cinema, as evidenced by their use in American and European film studies (p. 187).

My purpose here is to extend the critical debate around Third Cinema and its counterpart, “el nuevo cine Latinoamericano.” Although each of the works discussed covers a range of topics, including the historical development of Third Cinema and its socioeconomic and political context, the focus here will be to analyze the choices of criticism for Third Cinema. As Michael Chanan argues in *The Cuban Image*, film criticism should take as its point of departure the writings belonging to the same movement as the films themselves. He cites the work of the Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui, who rejects European Marxist classifications of feudal or aristocratic, bourgeois, and proletarian art because none of these systems “is appropriate to Peru itself or to Latin America as a whole” (p. 38).

Of the four works under review, two are products of the Third Cinema movement, Teshome Gabriel’s *Third Cinema in the Third World* and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *La dialéctica del espectador*. *The Cuban Image* by British filmmaker and critic Chanan technically lies outside the writings of the Third Cinema filmmakers. But Chanan’s Marxist analysis allies him critically and ideologically with Third Cinema in the role of a committed writer successfully mediating between the Latin American filmmakers whose works he interprets and the audience from the metropolis. The special edition of the Cuban journal *Areíto* dedicated to “el nuevo cine latinoamericano” is included as an additional source of information in discussing the other three works.¹

Teshome Gabriel is a director and professor of film at UCLA. His *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* provides a

welcome overview of Third Cinema's revolutionary goals and the stylistic approaches necessary for achieving those goals. It is a useful comparative study of the different national cinemas comprising the Third Cinema movement, especially those in Latin America and Africa. A revised version of Gabriel's doctoral thesis, the work also includes interviews, manifestos, and an excellent filmography.² The first four chapters offer a comprehensive introduction to the theoretical context of Third Cinema and its basic themes as well as an attempt to define revolutionary film. The last two chapters provide an in-depth analysis of style and ideology, with examples of critical readings from different national cinemas.

In the beginning section on the conceptual framework of Third Cinema, Gabriel introduces the theme that ideology is the prime target of Third Cinema and occupies the central stage of current film scholarship (p. 8). Throughout the book, Gabriel emphasizes ideology to delineate the parameters of the debate around this multifaceted subject. He traces this concept in Marxist theory, using Louis Althusser's writings to describe the nature of ideology as a system of representation that plays a role within a given society and that is endowed with a historical existence (Althusser, the French neo-Marxist theoretician, provided the ideological inspiration for the film criticism most relevant to Third Cinema). Gabriel observes that Marxist thought largely depends on the postindustrial development of the urban proletariat, an experience very different from that of the Third World (p. 12).

Gabriel points out that Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral speak to that Third World experience: "The two have developed a body of work which informs the political and cultural practices of the Third World in a more radical way than the theories expounded and advanced by the establishment Left of Eastern and Western countries" (p. 12). It is important to Third Cinema criticism to evaluate the role of formal methods that developed out of European and U.S. criticism.

A key point emphasized in all the works reviewed is that Third Cinema itself will decide what that role is, not critics from the Left or from established academic circles outside of the Third World. Gabriel too refers to contemporary critical methods, including Marxist-oriented deconstructive criticism, but does not imply that these methods will displace the theoretical direction of Third Cinema, which emphasizes social transformation over textual readings.

West's claim that "in Latin American film studies, formal criticism in general has been largely ignored" (West 1983, 187) must be placed in the historical context of the Third Cinema's liberation from European cultural forces. According to Fanon and Amilcar, Europe was created by the Third World, therefore it "cannot claim to inspire and assist colonial people towards their liberation" (p. 12). Gabriel cites

Fanon and Amílcar on this point to indict cultural imperialism rather than progressive critics from the East and West, whose works offer useful insights into film theory. Third Cinema practitioners actually share common goals with progressive and Left groups. Both seek to decolonize minds, contribute to the development of radical consciousness, foster a revolutionary transformation of society, and develop a new film language to accomplish these tasks (p. 3).

An example of Gabriel's integration of formal European criticism with Third Cinema writings is his analysis of Miguel Littín's *La tierra prometida*. Gabriel refers to a deconstructionist reading of the film by Robert Scott (1978), an essay of virtuoso deconstructive criticism that raises significant questions for textual analysis. An important commentary on the film comes from the filmmaker himself. Gabriel quotes Littín as stating that "we have to find the images and words which will make the people understand how imperialism affects their daily lives" (p. 33). Littín disavows any interest in speaking an elitist language: "I want to reach the people" (p. 33). Gabriel's study seeks to illuminate Third Cinema from the point of view of the Third World, a goal he makes clear in framing his context in terms of such writers as Amílcar and Fanon. He further demonstrates the limitations of formal criticism when applied to a cinema whose urgent concern is social transformation, not "elitist language."

What is new about Third Cinema is its focus on class struggle within the context of national consciousness. Gabriel observes that "a film cannot be revolutionary if it does not provide a clearcut class and national perspective or aim towards greater consciousness" (p. 37). But debate continues within Third Cinema as to what makes a film revolutionary. Gabriel illustrates this polemic in Latin American cinema by contrasting the views of Chilean filmmaker Littín and Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés. Basically, Sanjinés envisions a film as autonomous and a "summons for action" whereas Littín believes that a film must first be internalized by its audience before it can be revolutionary (p. 21). The spectator is therefore problematic in Third Cinema.

Third Cinema in the Third World provides a general outline of Third Cinema as well as an in-depth criticism of Third Cinema films. His reading of the Cuban film *Lucía* as a "canon" of revolutionary film is a good example of the integration of theory with specific examples. This discussion more than fulfills West's call for an applied criticism that relates Third Cinema theoretical writings to specific films. Gabriel points the way to a deeper understanding of the role of criticism in Third Cinema. His study raises important issues regarding choice of critical method and a possible coexistence of not only Freud and Marx but Third Cinema writers and progressive leftist critics.

The question of the viewer is the focus of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's

La dialéctica del espectador. He provides few examples of films to illustrate his discourse, with the notable exception of an appendix on his own *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Cuba, 1968). In an interview in the special issue of *Areíto*, he offers an additional example to illustrate his thesis on the dialectics of the spectator, his latest film entitled *Hasta cierto punto* (pp. 44–47).

The questions Alea raises are relevant to the postrevolutionary conditions of Cuba. Alea believes that interpreting the reality of that revolution translates into arming the viewer with the means to carry out an ideological struggle, a suitable task for cinema. To discover the social function of Cuban cinema for these times, Alea frames his essay with a series of questions and speculations on fundamental problems for the New Latin American Cinema, such as the relationship between spectacle and viewer, how to enable the viewer to participate in social change, how to get the viewer to think critically about the problems facing post-revolutionary society, and the relationship between reason and emotions as expressed in film.

Alea offers a brief historical overview of Cuban cinema and its origins in documentary filmmaking followed by a summary of general film history as a context for discussing popular cinema. The term *popular*, used in its authentic sense, can only exist where the interests of the people are the same as those of the state. According to Alea, this congruence implies socialism. The people are those who best embody the desire to improve social conditions (p. 15).

Although the term *dialectics* is not defined as such in *Dialéctica del espectador*, Alea's interest in the way reason and emotion interact to produce an outcome of higher consciousness or *toma de conciencia* is perhaps the dialectical opposition that receives most attention in the work. Alea's concern as a filmmaker has been to juxtapose different levels of reading (*Areíto*, p. 44). Levels may refer to a juxtaposition of documentary and fiction, for example. Neither level by itself can exhaust the full expressive potential of film, but the two levels together more fully approximate the reality that Alea is attempting to communicate.

In the section entitled "Identificación y distanciamiento, Aristóteles y Brecht," Alea raises the issue of Brechtian "distancing" as an answer to Aristotelian "identification." This section is the most contradictory in the book, primarily due to Brecht's interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Alea is here reproducing a polemic that Brecht wrestled with based on the assumption that Aristotle claimed that "catharsis" is achieved through absolute identification with actors. The element of absolute identification keeps the spectator from considering what the hero really represents because he stands for the "good guy."

The example Alea chooses is the series of Tarzan movies. He asks

how Tarzan movies work so that the deeper meaning does not rise to consciousness. Identification draws the spectator into a false reality, therefore Aristotelian drama is reactionary. By contrast, the non-Aristotelian drama of Brecht, which is based on "distancing" that makes familiar reality appear strange, is progressive.

Paradoxically, in following Brecht's polemic, Alea defines "distancing" in terms of emotion, which is also the way Aristotle defines "catharsis," according to a recent translation of the *Poetics* (1981). Alea states that distancing is not a simple, cold detachment but something more complex: "el efecto de distanciamiento debe sustituir una emoción cualquiera por la emoción específica de *descubrir* algo . . ." (p. 38, emphasis in original). A particular emotion and not emotion in general, then, is involved in distancing, and this emotion leads to discovery (cognition and learning).

According to the recent translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* by Leon Golden (with commentaries by O. B. Hardison), the term *catharsis* is the most controversial term to appear in Aristotle's sixth chapter of the work. The usual interpretations of *catharsis* have been *purgation* and *purification*. According to Hardison, Golden is the first to translate *catharsis* as *clarification*. Golden bases his translation on Aristotle's prior arguments explaining the function of tragedy as a "catharsis" of the emotions of pity and fear. "Catharsis" as "clarification" is close to the Brechtian meaning of distancing because both enhance understanding of the events presented. Thus Golden's translation, according to Hardison, places Aristotle in the same league with writers of modern aesthetic theory such as James Joyce, who used the term *epiphany* to describe a vision of truth (Aristotle 1981, 117). By extension, *catharsis*, *epiphany*, and *toma de conciencia* could be considered related terms.

But one must analyze complex relationships in Aristotelian drama before reducing the *Poetics* to a reactionary theory of drama. It is possible that Hollywood films exploit emotions in order to escape reality through a reactionary use of spectacle, and not through faithful adherence to Aristotle's *Poetics*.

It is true that Hollywood spectacle exploits emotion, but according to Golden, this approach is not the process that Aristotle describes. On the contrary, Hollywood is perhaps closer to Platonic mystification. Plato opposed poets who exposed the way rulers really are, whereas Aristotle advocated poets (like Homer) who exposed the gods' true character as vindictive rather than benign.

Golden argues that the spectator of Greek tragedy described by Aristotle could not leave the drama feeling that all is right with the world (Aristotle 1981, 118). If this characterization is accurate, then elements of Aristotelian thought are closer to the goals of Third Cinema than Brecht indicated. Alea also acknowledges that dramatic devices

not used for reactionary ends can be used for other purposes. Filmmakers of the New Latin American Cinema are refining this synthesis between the devices used by Hollywood and the needs of Third Cinema.

The reactionary cinema from Hollywood that employs sensational spectacle to produce normative behavior runs counter to Aristotle's description of tragedy. A play relying on spectacle has little to do with Aristotle's art because the search for spectacular scenes leads to sensationalism. The no-frills "imperfect cinema" of Latin America is closer to the pared-down structure of a carefully plotted tragedy that does not rely on special effects. West recalls Julio García Espinoza's essay "Por un cine imperfecto" (1969), which warns that a "perfect cinema" (one artistically realized to perfection) is reactionary (West 1983, 186). A rereading of Aristotle's *Poetics* in light of Golden's and Hardison's edition is needed. Alea admits that the process of distancing still has not been fully explained in film (p. 38). The "bad press" that Aristotle received from Brecht may be an obstacle to considering this theory of tragedy in a more progressive light.

European paradigms are not accepted uncritically in the New Latin American Cinema, according to Michael Chanan in *The Cuban Image*. Yet many of the models that inspired the Cuban revolutionary cinema were European. Chanan's work is a superlative chronicle from a Marxist perspective of the Cuban film movement consolidated under the collective workings of the ICAIC. Chanan details the Cuban film movement from its beginnings in footage of the Spanish-Cuban-American War through the influences of European and U.S. cultural dominance and beyond to the alternative film movement of the 1950s. The film club movement of this time was the direct precursor of ICAIC.

Chanan's approach is thorough and scholarly, yet personal and often poetic, especially in his interpretations of the films used to illustrate historical and theoretical points. He rarely repeats himself, yet his cumulative style of drawing on what comes before involves some reflecting back over prior material. This approach is helpful when Chanan summarizes major points worked out detail by detail because it is easy to get lost in the vast evidence used to depict the Cuban cinema as a movement of artistic freedom.

One challenge is understanding the complex relations between artistic groups that offered a counterculture to Batista's regime before the revolution and continued to influence the direction of art after the revolution. The currents and debates between factions were finally resolved when Castro intervened in a dispute over the ICAIC's censorship of the film *P.M.* (pp. 101–9). The outcome of the dispute was Castro's speech entitled "Words to the Intellectuals" (June 1961) that identified the issue as "the problem of artistic freedom." The context was the environment of fear over "prohibitions, regulations, limita-

tions, rules and authorities" (p. 106). Chanan compares the speech to its antecedent in *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* (1983) signed by Diego Rivera and André Breton, which held that "true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstitution of society" (p. 106).

The Cuban Image is a case study in radical-cultural aesthetics within a political and historical context. The philosophy of liberation of Paulo Freire and liberation theology of opposing cultural imperialism in Latin America is shared by Cuban cinema. Argentinian filmmaker Fernando Birri's thinking has been influenced by Freire's concept of *conscientização*, which argues that because human beings can reflect on their condition, they can liberate themselves (p. 167). In Cuba the aesthetic approach to *conscientização* has become the social documentary. The primary artistic force behind revolutionary documentary in Cuba is Santiago Alvarez. Chanan's article in the special issue of *Areíto*, "Toward a Systematic Classification of Cuban Documentary: cine testimonio and cine didáctico," appeared prior to *The Cuban Image* and previews much of the book's chapter on documentary film (*Areíto*, pp. 26–31). Chanan observes that it is difficult to speak of Alvarez as having a theory and style, "if by style is meant anything like the conscious pursuit of a set of rationalized aesthetic aims." Filmmakers in revolutionary situations must adapt to the needs of the moment and use everything at their disposal, thus Alvarez's style is one "of constant evolution and change" (p. 185). Chanan's chapter on Alvarez describes his style of exploding the image as "something very much more than theoretical deconstruction" (p. 201).

Chanan is aware that formalist critics from Anglo-European circles tend to translate Third Cinema styles into their own critical language. But for Chanan, Alvarez is not "theorized," meaning that his work is in process and therefore is not forced into a preconceived theoretical framework. Alvarez's approach is "the product of the aesthetic logic he has been working out from one film to the next; it answers to expressive, not theoretical needs" (p. 201). Deconstruction is a European critical technique that defines the signifier in a way that does not exactly fit the reality of Third Cinema.³ Ironically, Alvarez "seems to know more about deconstruction than the most eloquent theorist" (p. 201).

The works discussed here make it clear that Third Cinema is not opposed to Anglo-European critical theories. Third Cinema filmmakers have drawn on these models from the beginning and remain well-versed in applying different models in filmmaking and in critical writings. Chanan has put his finger on the pulse of Third Cinema criticism in explaining that the difference between the reality of Anglo-European and Latin American thought is the difference between the reified world of the metropolis and the emerging world of underdevelopment.

Parallel principles exist in New Latin American Cinema and radical film practices in Europe and North America, but significant differences are found in their thinking (p. 173). This divergence explains the resistance of Third Cinema to accepting uncritically the methods of textual analysis in such disciplines as structuralism and poststructuralism. But Third Cinema filmmakers as well as Anglo-European critics acknowledge the contributions of semiotics, the philosophical theory of signs. The trouble starts in defining the sign, according to Chanan. To simplify his analysis, truth is a redundant idea for Anglo-European criticism, as is explained in the writings of the North American Marxist Frederic Jameson. In the reality of underdevelopment, according to Chanan, truth is more immediate. The filmmaker is directly involved in the process of conscientização in the style called "cine imperfecto."

Criticism through "Old World" eyes runs the risk of distorting the reality of Third Cinema, which must speak for itself in a new language. Critics must learn that language as well as its "imperfect" way of representing itself. What may seem imperfect to Old World eyes makes sense to a Third Cinema audience. Chanan gives the example of the "syncretistic" style of Latin American cinema that seemingly displays formlessness but represents the fluid style now characteristic of that cinema. This development is explained by historical circumstances. Revolutionary cinema is moving toward a new reality as a result of a social transformation, and the Latin American audience displays a much higher tolerance than Europeans for visual disorder (p. 268).

Imperfect cinema has its counterpart in the radical film culture of the metropolis, but each cinema addresses a separate reality. The works reviewed offer critical discussions on different film styles in addressing the particular historical circumstances of Third Cinema communities.

NOTES

1. Back issues are available from Areito Inc., GPO Box 2174, New York, NY 10116.
2. The dissertation, originally entitled "Third Cinema and Third World: Dynamics of Style and Ideology," was completed at UCLA in 1979.
3. For a more thorough analysis of the relations of Marxism and deconstruction, see Michael Ryan's *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); and Terry Eagleton's review of Ryan's work in *Against the Grain: Essays, 1975-1985* (Norfolk, Engl.: Thetford Press, 1986).

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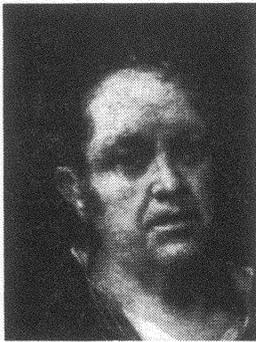
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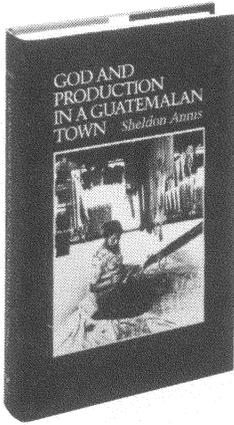
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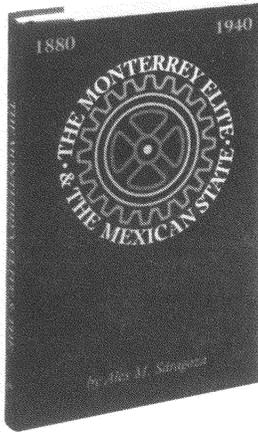
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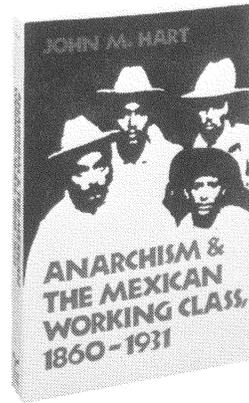
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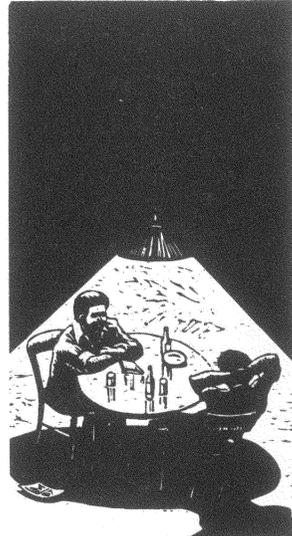
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