

# Questions of Third Cinema

An interview with Mike Wayne

By Redaksiyon Kollektifi

**Keywords** Third Cinema, *Political Film*, class, subMedia, tv, Ken Loach, *The People Are Rising*, *The Battle of Algiers*, Venezuela



Interview

Mike Wayne is the author of *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (Pluto Press, 2001). He has written widely on politics and film and Marxist cultural theory. He has also co-directed (with Deirdre O'Neill) a number of feature documentaries. He works at Brunel University, UK.

**Redaksiyon Kollektifi (RK): What kind of cinema is Third Cinema and is it only a cinema for the Third World?**

**Mike Wayne (MW):** Third Cinema emerged out of specific historical circumstances that definitely has a distinct geographical dimension – namely the struggle against imperialism and the remnants of European colonialism. This struggle had a very strong cultural dimension to it – the struggle to decolonise consciousness, culture, institutions and policies whose templates were set predominantly by the capitalist west. Within that broader cultural struggle, film emerged to play a significant role. It's main centres were Africa and Latin America and to some extent Asia.

Third Cinema posed all the questions that decolonisation was posing more broadly, within its own specific sector. It developed new modes of production, distribution and consumption and enormously expanded the social, educational and political role of film. It was a broadly Marxist filmmaking practice because its various cadres were generally closely linked to the various revolutionary and anti-imperialist parties of the left that were then in the ascendancy. The filmmakers applied the broader political and cultural questions to their specific mode of intervention (film) and produced remarkable results. They also of course

produced some significant theoretical work where they reflected on the implications of their filmmaking practice and drew more general conclusions that are still extremely relevant to us today.

One of the most important arguments that people like Fernando Birri in Argentina and Julio Garcia Espinosa in Cuba made was that the cultural models of the 'overdeveloped' west were inappropriate to the people and needs of the under-developed regions. Instead they should positively embrace low-cost production that made a creative virtue from minimal resources, since this was a cinema that spoke to the real conditions of life for the audience. Yet while Third Cinema emerged in the context of decolonising struggles that does not mean it is restricted in its practice or implications to only those zones where it had its most spectacular breakthroughs. There has been a complex cross-fertilization between the main geography of Third Cinema and the West, this is what I called in my book, *Political Film*, 'the dialectics of Third Cinema'. After all, the model for low-budget filmmaking was really founded by the Italians in the aftermath of the Second World War and of course many Latin American filmmakers studied at the Centro Sperimentale School in Rome. There was motivating the 1960s generation of filmmakers a desire to engage with and even live with the 'forgotten' communities within the uneven development of capitalism. In Britain, Amber films was founded in Newcastle to establish a long-term engagement with the working class community of the north. In Bolivia, Jorge Sanjinés and the Ukamau group worked with the Quechua Indians struggling against racism while in Japan the Ogawa Pro group set up a long-term commitment to doc-



ument the struggles of small rural farmers. So there are reasons why Third Cinema emerged where it did in its most fully developed forms, but it is certainly more universal in its implications, possibilities and relevance.

**RK: What is the legacy of Third Cinema today?**

**MW:** Third Cinema was a very multi-faceted phenomenon with many initiatives and characteristics and it is not hard to see its legacy today in many radical filmmaking practices. It continues to provide a historical example of a mode of filmmaking not content with either commercial models or art house cinema models – hence it is a third type of film practice. In its democratization of the production process, in which filmmakers from privileged backgrounds with

specialist expertise and knowledge about their medium, opened themselves up to learn from the people and communities they were representing, it was very important. The educator must be educated as Marx said in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). On the other hand, both the political situation and the cultural situation has changed and this shapes, not so much the relevance of Third Cinema, but the people who make radical films. Firstly, the political parties of the left that shaped the culture within which radical filmmakers worked have shrunk significantly. There is a strong anti-party mood amongst the left and a preference for social movements, networks and ‘liquid’ protests. This is understandable in many ways, although not unproblematic. Not only parties have declined, but linked to that,

broad-based working class struggles have also diminished and more broadly with that the sense that there is a coherent alternative to capitalism (what we used to call socialism).

In 1971 the American radical filmmaking organization Third-World Newsreel made *The People Are Rising* about the Puerto Rican community in East Harlem organizing themselves into the Puerto Rican equivalent of the Black Panthers. The film could only be made because *the people were rising*. And not just in America but internationally. The film is shot through with an international perspective which political struggle had made possible. When that is no longer there this inevitably changes what films are made, their subject matter, their sense of the audience, what the possibilities are, what they are strug-

**In 1971 the American radical filmmaking organization Third World Newsreel made *The People Are Rising* about the Puerto Rican community in East Harlem organizing themselves into the Puerto Rican equivalent of the Black Panthers. The film could only be made because the *people were rising*.**

gling for and so forth. This is very much, I think, about the context that forms the filmmakers. When you look at the work of those who emerged from the original Third Cinema context and who continued working after it – filmmakers such as Patricio Guzman or Ousmane Sembène – their work remains infused with the politics of that original moment. But for those who were formed outside that moment, the subjectivity is typically different. In the United Kingdom we have Ken Loach who has now made what he says will be his final full-length fiction film – *I Daniel Blake*. One wonders where the new Ken Loachs are? The conditions which formed Ken Loach and that whole generation of British film and television directors, such as Peter Watkins, who could also be thought of as a British Third Cinema film-

maker – are no longer there. But is Loach's work an example of Third Cinema? That really depends on how you define Third Cinema and how cinema gets defined by the institutions and political contexts in which it is made and seen. A film isn't fixed as Third Cinema or not Third Cinema. Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) was criticized in some academic circles when it came out because it was felt that it did not sufficiently deconstruct the language, imagery and narrative structure of dominant cinema. I was critical of it myself in *Political Film*. But Pontecorvo's film was avidly watched by the Black Panthers in America for whom it obviously had an urgent political meaning. Still, contexts of reception aside, films do have their own properties and what we can see in Loach's films is that they are

more able to represent collective struggles – so important for Third Cinema – when they are located in past moments than when they are located in the contemporary moment. And that is because the politics of today are less conducive for collective struggles.

**RK: Has the democratisation of filmmaking, with easier access to the means of production, diminished the aesthetic quality of Third Cinema today?**

**MW:** Has there been a diminishing of the aesthetic power of contemporary films that are trying to be radical? Perhaps. It may be that cinema is now a much older medium than it was and it will never again have that same sense of exploring new boundaries and inventing new purposes and forms that it did in the original







Third Cinema moment. It may be that with digital filmmaking widening access to the means of production, people are making films who have not been through the film school pathway and who perhaps do not have the same extensive knowledge of film history and movements that previous generations of filmmakers did. It may be, as I said above, that the original political and cultural conditions which fostered a political modernism are not in place and so that sense of formal risk and political commitment has once again separated so that more typically political commitment in filmmaking sticks to the tried and tested while formal experiment shies away from political commitment.

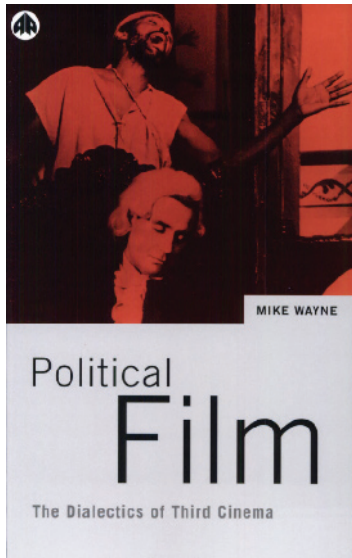
Still, we do see some filmmakers consciously trying to link their work back to Third Cinema to make sense of the contemporary

moment. Göran Hugo Olsson's two recent films, *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1965* (2011) and *Concerning Violence* (2014) are powerful examples of a historical and cinematic memory-work in action. I would stress the importance of historical knowledge, in relation to cinema as well as of history more broadly, in infusing our practices with radical ambitions. Today what we even mean by 'film' (as a 100-minute feature watched in a cinema) is open to question given the diversity of formats and ways of watching 'film' or videos have proliferated. I think though that the filmic experience – the collective watching is still something that people want to engage in despite the high levels of atomization they are subjected to. And I think what 'film' also means is a body of cultural forms that retain a compelling

way of speaking about the world and 'documentary' is one of those forms that is most conducive to staging an aesthetic-political experience beyond the mere routine journalism.

**RK: What is the future of political cinema in relation to the Internet and digital media?**

**MW:** When the original Third Cineastes were making films and they wanted to distribute them outside the commercial distribution networks and cinemas, they had to take reels of films and large mobile projectors around the city or countryside. This was known as developing 'parallel circuits' of distribution and exhibition. After the 1959 revolution the Cubans did this very effectively, taking film out into remote areas of the country. Today, it is much easier



to develop parallel circuits of distribution. Today many sites have the multi-function ability to show films even though they are cafes, libraries, museums, community centres, independent cinemas and so forth. DVD production and distribution is now more affordable. My co-director and I raised £2000 using a crowdfunding platform so that we could produce DVDs of our latest film, *The Acting Class* (2017), about class stratification in the UK acting industry. That's a modest sum – people who are better at this crowdfunding business than us have raised far more and for political filmmaking projects. There is certainly a hunger out there for films that are outside the mainstream. On the Internet, there are many examples of short films in particular that could be said to carry on the Third Cinema tradition in one form or another. Many filmmakers remain explicitly connected to activist campaigns or movements. subMedia.tv is an anarchist-orientated Internet-based activist video organization that has been running since 1994. They have built up enough of a fan base to survive on donations from their

audience. Their work has a nice vein of humour running through it, which is important. So the Internet and digital technology open up some important possibilities.

Of course precarity is a constant feature of radical filmmaking. In the age of neo-liberalism, public funding also threatens to reduce the spaces for alternative and radical conversations. A few years ago, when we were distributing our film *The Condition of the Working Class* (2012), it was easier to get venues to show the film by sharing the revenues generated by ticket sales. Today there is more pressure to hire the venue and take all the risk of recovering your costs yourself. To some extent one may wonder if the volume of material out there reduces the impact which any one film can make. On the other hand there are a lot of seeds being planted which may germinate into political offensives at some time in the future.

**RK: The last sentence of your book *Political Film* is parallel to Lenin's question 'What is to be done?'. What should political filmmakers be doing in relation to the current situation of the working class?**

**MW:** Political filmmakers need to do what the original Third Cinema filmmakers did. They need to document, testify, witness and discover the lives of the people that lies buried beneath the mountain of propaganda churned out by state organs and the billion-dollar budgets of the advertising, marketing and PR industries. That was the initial impetus of the Italian neorealist filmmakers and in a world of corporate and state dissimulation, discovering the real country and the real conditions is a fundamental political act. Political filmmakers need to continue

to do what the best of them have been doing and that is producing work that encourages initiative, self-representation, recognition, affirmation and debate in order to build-up the reserves of confidence and the sense of collective identity so that people recognize that the problems they are facing are not peculiar to themselves but are part of a wider system of power relations. Depending on who your audience is, depending on the political conditions of a country or struggle, political films are going to be marked by the level and quality of the political struggle and by the cultural traditions and resources which filmmakers and their audiences or social actors are immersed in and can draw on. I think historical perspectives are very important here to help revivify our sense of possibilities and break through the apparent limits of our empirical moment. There is no automatic connection between a rising political struggle and a rising quality of filmmaking. In Venezuela a more than decade-long genuinely popular revolution did not produce an equivalent explosion of filmmaking gems. Perhaps in that sector the old models continued to predominate? So while a rising political struggle will not guarantee a renewal of Third Cinema in that classic form we saw in the past, it is an essential precondition for something new and powerful and politically relevant to emerge.

---

### Contributor's details

---

Redaksiyon Kollektifi runs workshops and is involved in several publications such as *RedPolitik* magazine, *RedSista* from the Women's Solidarity Network, *Monthly Review Turkey* and the *Journal of Critical Pedagogy*.

---