

CINEMA FROM THREE CONTINENTS

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Though well over half the world's films have been made in Asia, Latin America and the Arab states for the past 30 years or more, we are allowed only a distorted view of all this production by the Western dominated media of distribution. Last November saw two contrasting cultural initiatives designed to combat this imbalance: the London Third Eye Festival and the Nantes Festival des Trois Continents.

The Third Eye's collection of films was frankly eclectic. On the one hand there were classics like Youssef Chahine's 1963 *Saladin* (interesting in its reversal of Hollywood casting, in that here all the crusaders are played by Egyptians in wigs) and the Chilean Manuel Littin's compelling 1969 study of the contradictions of justice in a reactionary state, *The Jackal of Nahueltoro*. On the other hand Third Eye offered a sprinkling of newly completed movies, such as the Indian drama

Phaniyamma, which opened the festival, and the Ghanaian *Kukuratumi*, a tale of the corrupting influence of the big city, which was receiving its world premiere. But the overall standard was variable and the Third Eye festival's symposium on issues in Third World cinema was of greater interest, not least in the problems of definition which it raised.

The term 'Third World' can be defined in a number of ways and, as the organisers rightly observed in the material prepared for the symposium, a mere geographical delimitation is inadequate. Obviously there is a unity of interest as well as an instinctive sympathy linking representatives of, say, the black community here with the Third World. But the precise nature of this unity with regard to cinema needs to be explored, since, as the symposium material recognises, the content of films, the issues they raised and the format they adopt may all

differ. The necessary starting point for a politically orientated London-based festival must surely be an exploration of these differences, so that local participants and representatives from abroad can define their position and devise ways of acting in practical unison. Instead, the beguilingly neat but treacherously ambiguous title 'Third Eye' tended to blur crucial distinctions and proclaim a spurious unity of purpose. This led to constant confusion



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in the symposium, where speakers often referred to 'Third World cinema' when they really meant socially and politically committed cinema carried on anywhere in the world.

Links between activist film-makers throughout the developed and underdeveloped world are one thing and demand a certain vocabulary; Third World cinema is quite another and demands its own definitions. As it turned out, a gathering which had never considered the contradiction of a Third World festival in a traditional capital of imperialism was aggravated by some narrowly sectarian position-taking, and the drafting of the final symposium declaration led to such absurdities as a small group of largely London-based representatives *demanding* that *all* Third World film makers 'should critically assess the representation of women in the films they produce'.

It is instructive to contrast the Third Eye approach with that adopted by the organisers of Europe's festival of Third World cinema, the Festival des Trois Continents in Nantes, which this year celebrated its fifth anniversary. Nantes is in no way a model of what a festival in London should ideally be, but its complementary strengths and weaknesses do highlight some of the problems of presenting Third World cinema in the West. Though its selection of films was as wide ranging as that of the Third Eye — with films from 20 countries and works by Chinese, Chicano and Black Americans — the Nantes Festival defines its position in quite different terms. 'It is the discovery and re-discovery of film makers and national cinemas — outside any political, sociological or other considerations — which guides us', proclaims the programme. The films themselves, rather than debates about issues in Third World cinema, are the central focus and these are presented in various categories: a director retrospective (the Chinese director, Xie Jin), the panorama of a national cinema (Mexico) and a selection of thirty or so films from the 1980s. Certainly the Festival's strength lies in its ability to find large and enthusiastic audiences of local people for this wide range of film-making in the five local cinemas chosen for screenings. The Festival has achieved the status of an event: it receives wide coverage in the local press and on local radio and television, and over the years it has established its reputation with the Paris-based specialist film critics. The ability to set up a dialogue



between film-makers, specialist critics and ordinary spectators is one of the most valuable aspects of Nantes's success. Even if its focal point — the Olympia Cinema — reverts to screenings of James Bond on December 30, during the whole previous week Third World films have been seen by an enthusiastic popular audience.

Nantes's overtly non-political stance has been valuable in allowing the Festival to survive a change in municipal party control from a supportive left-wing administration to a right-wing one. But this stance seems to go hand-in-hand with a retreat from all questions of a critical nature. Obviously the retrospective and historical panorama both offer unique opportunities for viewing works rarely available in Europe, but the effect is very much like similar seasons at our own National Film Theatre. Underlying both are critical assumptions which any concern with Third World cinema ought to demolish: the notions of the autonomous national cinema and the primacy of the director's personality as the key organising principle of his or her work. As far as the Mexican films shown this year at Nantes are concerned, the presence of a 1950s Mexican star, Ninon Sevilla, in no way compensated for the lack of discussion and documentation on the context of US economic and cultural dominance, which alone makes the history of Mexican cinema comprehensible. Similarly, the Chinese director Xie Jin was not treated as a film-maker whose work can throw light on the achievements and contradictions of Chinese society over the past 25 years, but as a celebrity 'author' to be feted and interviewed incessantly (a process he found totally bewildering on this, his first trip to Europe).

Though there were few really outstanding films from the past year or so on display at Nantes, the competition and information sections did offer a view of Third World cinema in all its diversity. From a moving Thai epic, *Son of the North East*, based on a novelist's autobiographical account of his peasant childhood, and a coy South Korean tale of charcoal burners, *Son of the Cuckoo*, to the Indonesian domestic drama, *Behind the Mosquito Net*, and a suicidal tale of the disintegration of a black African facing racist pressures in Japan, *L'Homme D'ailleurs*, these films offer a heterogeneous reflection of Third World society in all its contradictory uneven development. The internal difficulties triggered off by attempts at modernisation indeed formed the explicit background to two of the films on display: the Upper Voltan *Jours de Tourmentes*, dealing with the project to build a well in a rural community, and *Derman* which focusses on an Ankara-born midwife sent to a remote Turkish mountain community. These films offer uniquely accessible insights into the countries in which they were produced through the conception of entertainment which they display as much as through the shaping of their narrative.

Of even greater interest in this respect are those films sponsored by official state film production organisations. A willingness on the part of the Brazilian authorities to bring into focus (if only obliquely through a 1940s setting) issues directly relevant to the years of military rule seems to be shown by the unrelenting look at the perpetrators of political violence, focussing on a police sergeant in the arid Nordeste, in *Sergento Getulio*. The films from India vividly reveal the contradictions in its film

policy. Though wielding enormous power through its monopoly of film importation, the National Film Development Corporation makes no attempt to force its own productions on Indian exhibitors through a quota scheme. As a result many of its productions exist only in a sort of cultural limbo, denied an audience in India and receiving at best occasional screenings at festivals or Indian Film Weeks abroad. An example here is Sirander Nath Dhir's austere study of an intransigent bureaucracy, *Pratishodh*, shaped by the influence of Bresson and Straub so typical of the graduates of the Indian Film Institute at Pune. More striking still was the Algerian offering, *Les Folks Annees du Twist*,

produced by the state monopoly, ONCIC. What is one to make of an Algerian government which sponsors this view of the FLN struggle as a mindless, cultureless farce (an Arab *Carry On Up the Revolution*)? Or of its director, Mahmoud Zemmouri, who justifies it as a true reflection of the boredom and indifference of the young Algerians of today towards the ideals of their revolution?

Unlike *Third Eye*, which chooses its films fairly indiscriminately from 20 years of Third World production, Nantes is a competitive festival awarding a prize each year to a film not previously screened in France. Clearly this can be advantageous both in attracting a high level of films and in

offering some tangible help (however small) to a struggling Third World film maker. But the experience this year showed strikingly the need to have clear social and political criteria for selection. Lacking such criteria, the serious and worthwhile Nantes Festival plunged into absurdity by awarding its top prize to Lino Brocka's three year old *Angela Markado*. While one can feel solidarity with Brocka's efforts in the political opposition to the Markos regime in the Philippines, there can be no excuse for selecting this film, which is no more than a slickly made vigilante movie of the most sickeningly exploitative kind, a Filipino equivalent of Michael Winner's *Death Wish*.