

THIRD CINEMA UNDER PRESSURE: AFRICAN FILM AESTHETICS AND THE LIMITS OF REVOLUTIONARY FILM THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Third Cinema transformed global film theory by positioning cinema as a tool of revolutionary struggle, yet its assumptions—linear temporality, clear ideology, and a uniform, politically educable audience—struggle to account for contemporary African cinema. This paper argues that African film aesthetics actively test and exceed the limits of revolutionary film theory. Through narrative innovation, ritualised performance, spiritual cosmologies, and non-linear temporalities, African filmmakers demonstrate that resistance need not be immediate, overt, or ideologically prescriptive. Contemporary pressures—digital platforms, streaming economies, global festival circuits, and the rise of popular cinema, particularly Nollywood—further challenge the applicability of Third Cinema’s framework, demanding hybrid, multi-layered, and context-sensitive approaches. By foregrounding spectatorship, ethical reflection, and epistemological plurality, African cinema reveals that political engagement emerges as much from form, rhythm, and interpretive complexity as from overt ideology. This study positions Third Cinema not as a rigid blueprint but as a critical point of departure, highlighting its conceptual limits while showcasing the innovative strategies through which African films negotiate power, circulation, and audience interpretation. In doing so, it reframes resistance for the twenty-first century: reflective, relational, and aesthetically audacious, African cinema insists that revolutionary potential is as much about subtlety, multiplicity, and temporal depth as it is about immediacy or moral clarity.

Keywords: *Third Cinema, African Film Aesthetics, Postcolonial Cinema, Nollywood, Revolutionary Film Theory, Spectatorship, Cinematic Resistance.*

1. Introduction

Third Cinema at a Theoretical Crossroads

Third Cinema has long occupied a privileged position in discussions of politically committed filmmaking, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Emerging in the late 1960s as a militant response to both Hollywood commercialism and European auteurism, it framed cinema as a weapon of liberation, collective pedagogy, and ideological struggle (Solanas and Getino n. pag.). For African filmmakers navigating the aftermath of colonial domination, Third Cinema offered a compelling conceptual and aesthetic language through which cinema could align with political urgency, historical redress, and cultural affirmation. Yet the very coherence that once gave Third Cinema its force now invites scrutiny, as African cinema increasingly operates under aesthetic, industrial, and historical conditions that strain its foundational assumptions (Warner 12–14).

At its conceptual core, Third Cinema

was animated by a revolutionary imaginary premised on political clarity, ethical certainty, and oppositional visibility. Films were expected to intervene directly in struggles against imperial domination, mobilising spectators, dismantling dominant forms, and rejecting aesthetic neutrality. Political commitment was inseparable from formal experimentation, while spectatorship was imagined as active, educable, and ethically aligned in advance with the film’s ideological position (Willemsen 47–49). In this model, the filmmaker functioned less as an autonomous artist than as a cultural militant, and cinema itself was understood as an extension of revolutionary praxis rather than a space for aesthetic contemplation (Shohat and Stam 45–46).

African filmmakers engaged this revolutionary horizon with both adoption and adaptation. Early post-independence films, such as Ousmane Sembène’s *Black Girl* (1966) and Hubert Ogunde’s Yoruba dramas reveal how African cinema could embrace political

critique while simultaneously asserting cultural specificity (Diawara 23–25; Armes 51–53). These films integrated indigenous narrative forms, oral storytelling, and communal ritual into cinematic expression, demonstrating that African political cinema often resisted the didactic and linear imperatives that Third Cinema presupposed. Oral narration, ritualised performance, mythic structures, and spiritual cosmologies recur across African cinema, privileging repetition, delay, and ambiguity over conventional narrative progression. Far from obstructing political clarity, such aesthetic strategies articulate alternative modes of historical consciousness rooted in memory, ethics, and relational understanding (Dovey 33–35).

The divergence between Third Cinema and African film aesthetics has become even more pronounced in contemporary cinema. African films now circulate in a global media environment shaped by digital production technologies, transnational funding regimes, streaming platforms, and international festival economies. Power, under these conditions, rarely manifests as overt ideological repression; instead, it operates through subtler mechanisms of visibility, marketability, and algorithmic mediation. The binary opposition between dominant and resistant cinema—a core assumption of Third Cinema—becomes increasingly unstable when resistance is constrained or amplified by global platforms that reward legibility, accessibility, and translatability (Lobato 2019).

This disjuncture has provoked critical reflection within African film studies. Third Cinema remains a normative benchmark, often invoked as a measure of political seriousness or aesthetic authenticity. Yet, as Warner (15–17) and Armes (55–57) argue, rigid adherence to revolutionary frameworks risks flattening the complexity of African film, treating ambiguity, irony, and spiritual or ritual forms as deficiencies rather than deliberate epistemological strategies. Contemporary African cinema demonstrates that political engagement can be subtle, multidimensional, and mediated through aesthetic experimentation, rather than exclusively

through direct mobilisation or didactic clarity (Shohat and Stam 45–47).

The central problem this paper addresses is therefore urgent and theoretical: African cinema continues to be read through a framework—Third Cinema—whose assumptions about immediacy, clarity, and collective mobilisation no longer align with contemporary postcolonial realities. To what extent can a model premised on revolutionary immediacy account for films that embrace ambiguity, non-linear temporality, and ethical complexity? How might film theory respond to cinematic forms that refuse narrative closure, moral certainty, or a singular, uniform spectator? By placing Third Cinema under sustained critical pressure, this paper argues that African film aesthetics do not merely challenge revolutionary film theory at its margins; they expose its conceptual limits and compel a rethinking of what political cinema can mean in the twenty-first century (Shohat and Stam 45–47; Diawara 23–25; Dovey 34).

Third Cinema and the Revolutionary Imaginary

Third Cinema emerged not merely as a set of stylistic or technical conventions but as a coherent revolutionary imaginary, one in which aesthetics, politics, and spectatorship were conceived as inseparable. Its proponents assumed that cinema could operate as a site of anti-imperial struggle, awakening consciousness, and mobilising collective action. At its core, this imaginary rested on three interlocking principles: the clear identification of oppressor and oppressed, the inseparability of formal innovation from political commitment, and the presumed educability of spectators (Solanas and Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema” n. pag.; Willemsen 47–49). Every formal experiment—from non-professional actors to on-location shooting—was justified by its capacity to advance revolutionary objectives, making Third Cinema both prescriptive and aspirational (Gabriel 42–44).

This imaginary valorised immediacy and legibility. Political cinema was expected to confront injustice directly, rendering ideology comprehensible while encouraging audiences into a shared ethical horizon. Allegory, abstraction, and narrative ambiguity were

subordinated to recognisable social and political realities. Closure and linearity were preferred over disruption, reflecting the belief that cinema should instruct and mobilise rather than merely mediate experience (Gabriel 42–44; Warner 15–16). Spectators were imagined as active agents, whose moral and political faculties could be guided by cinematic form, transforming the audience into a site of ideological engagement (Shohat and Stam 46–48).

African filmmakers engaged this revolutionary imaginary with a combination of admiration, adaptation, and critique. While early post-independence works embraced the ethos of resistance, they often diverged from Third Cinema's normative prescriptions. Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1975) and Moolaade (2004) exemplify this tension: while politically engaged, these films employ cyclical narrative structures, ritualised sequences, and satirical devices that resist unambiguous ideological reading (Diawara 28–30; Dovey 33). Similarly, Hubert Ogunde's Yoruba dramas foreground communal ethics and spiritual cosmologies, showing that revolutionary cinema can coexist with indigenous epistemologies rather than erasing those (Armes 51–53). Such aesthetic strategies challenge the presumption that political cinema must convey a singular moral or political message, revealing alternative modes of historical consciousness and ethical reflection.

Temporality emerges as a central site of divergence. Third Cinema privileges linear, chronological progression to mirror revolutionary action, yet African cinema frequently adopts layered, cyclical, or non-linear temporalities. Repetition, ritualised performance, and narrative suspension are not employed to obscure meaning but to cultivate reflection, endurance, and ethical deliberation. Political resonance, in these films, emerges gradually, contingent upon attentive engagement rather than instant comprehension (Ukadike 51–53; Dovey 34). This temporal fluidity destabilises Third Cinema's assumption that revolutionary urgency requires immediacy, illustrating how African cinema envisions resistance as a

sustained, ethically mediated practice.

Spectatorship, too, is reconfigured in African cinema. Third Cinema presumes a politically homogeneous audience capable of ideological alignment, whereas African filmmakers recognise diversity among viewers—local and diasporic, popular and elite, national and transnational. Films invite multiple interpretive positions, fostering negotiation rather than passive reception. As Barlet observes, the multiplicity of postcolonial spectatorship undermines the assumption that political cinema can simultaneously achieve formal coherence, ethical clarity, and collective mobilisation (37–39). Contemporary African audiences encounter films as sites of dialogue, interpretation, and ethical reflection, not merely as instructional instruments.

African cinema's engagement with Third Cinema is thus ambivalent. While the revolutionary imaginary offers a compelling framework for thinking about politically committed filmmaking, its prescriptive assumptions—linear temporality, unambiguous ethics, and the teachable spectator—cannot fully account for the multiplicity of strategies employed by African filmmakers. Form, temporality, and spectatorship are themselves sites of resistance, demonstrating that political engagement can operate obliquely, iteratively, and contemplatively. By recognising these divergences, scholars can approach African cinema not as a derivative or secondary form of Third Cinema but as a critical interlocutor that both extends and revises its foundational claims (Gabriel 44; Diawara 29).

Thus the revolutionary imaginary of Third Cinema remains an indispensable reference point for African film scholarship, yet it must be approached critically. African cinema illustrates that political cinema can achieve impact without sacrificing cultural specificity, narrative complexity, or ethical nuance. In this way, African filmmakers engage Third Cinema in a dialogue that is both reverential and interrogative, challenging its assumptions while preserving its spirit of revolutionary aspiration (Warner 16; Dovey 34).

African Film Aesthetics as Epistemological Resistance

African cinema, while often evaluated through the lens of Third Cinema, frequently demonstrates that aesthetic choices themselves constitute forms of knowledge and resistance. Beyond narrative content or overt political messaging, films articulate epistemologies rooted in local histories, communal practices, and spiritual cosmologies. These aesthetic strategies are not ornamental; they actively reshape how audiences perceive temporality, agency, and ethical responsibility. By foregrounding form as a site of cognitive and moral engagement, African films challenge the assumption that revolutionary cinema must rely solely on ideological clarity, immediacy, or pedagogical legibility (Diawara 34–36; Dovey 33).

Orality and ritual occupy a central place in this epistemological work. Storytelling often draws on patterns derived from oral traditions, privileging repetition, rhythm, and call-and-response structures over linear cause-and-effect logic. These forms create temporalities that are cyclical, layered, or episodic, encouraging reflection rather than instantaneous reaction. Sembène's *Xala* (1975) exemplifies this, weaving ritualised sequences with social satire to cultivate both ethical deliberation and historical awareness. Similarly, Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine* (2009) uses temporal layering and suspense to mediate human desire, fate, and communal moral responsibility (Ukadike 53–55; Warner 18–20). Narrative pauses, ritualised gestures, and episodic tension do not obscure meaning; they cultivate attentiveness and relational understanding, producing knowledge through engagement rather than imposing lessons from above.

Myth and spiritual cosmology further exemplify the epistemological role of African film aesthetics. Indigenous cosmologies structure narratives to foreground relationality over individual heroism, embedding political critique within moral, ethical, and spiritual frameworks. Films such as Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* (1987) or Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Le Complot d'Aristote* (1996) illustrate how mythic narrative allows multiple interpretations while situating human action within broader

historical and cosmic orders (Barlet 41–43; Dovey 35). These strategies contest Third Cinema's presumption that political efficacy requires unambiguous ideology or immediate mobilisation, demonstrating instead that reflection, ethical tension, and ambiguity can be politically potent.

Performance and production strategies further reinforce epistemological commitments. The use of non-professional actors, improvisation, and on-location shooting privileges lived experience over polished performance, revealing the texture of daily life and communal interaction. These techniques extend beyond representational authenticity, capturing social norms, moral dilemmas, and communal tensions that invite ethical contemplation. In this way, cinema functions as a medium for understanding society's complexities, rather than solely as a vehicle for propaganda or mobilisation (Diawara 36–37; Armes 55).

Contemporary theoretical perspectives illuminate the significance of these aesthetic strategies. Drawing on Deleuze, African cinema can be read as producing "time-images," where temporality itself becomes a medium of thought. Repetition, visual rhythm, and episodic structure invite spectators to inhabit historical, ethical, and spiritual registers differently from conventional revolutionary frameworks. In effect, these films perform epistemic work, shaping understanding, affect, and ethical sensibilities, rather than merely instructing or persuading (Deleuze 65–68; Willemsen 50).

African cinema also foregrounds intertextuality and dialogue between local and global forms. For instance, filmmakers may juxtapose mythic sequences with contemporary social realities, negotiating transnational visibility while preserving epistemic specificity. This hybrid approach extends Third Cinema's revolutionary aspirations, suggesting that political engagement can operate across temporal, spatial, and cultural registers without sacrificing aesthetic sophistication (Shohat and Stam 47–49; Warner 20).

In sum, African film aesthetics resist reduction to Third Cinema's prescriptive forms.

Orality, ritual, myth, spiritual cosmology, and embodied performance exemplify how cinema articulates knowledge, ethical sensibilities, and historical consciousness. This epistemological dimension highlights a central tension: revolutionary cinema assumes immediacy, clarity, and pedagogy, whereas African cinema often prioritises reflection, ambiguity, and relational understanding. Recognising this distinction is crucial to appreciating African films as active participants in theorising resistance, not merely as illustrations of inherited frameworks (Diawara 36; Dovey 35).

Where Third Cinema Fractures: Form, Temporality, and Spectatorship

Third Cinema's revolutionary framework presumes a direct alignment between political intent, cinematic form, and spectatorship. It envisions a clear trajectory: oppression is represented, the oppressed are mobilised, and audiences' ethical faculties are guided toward collective action (Solanas and Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema" n. pag.; Gabriel 42–44). African cinema, however, exposes the limits of this prescriptive model. By experimenting with form, temporality, and audience engagement, African filmmakers frequently disrupt the straightforward correspondence between ideology, narrative, and reception, revealing a more complex terrain of cinematic resistance (Diawara 36–38; Warner 18–20).

Form, in particular, destabilises Third Cinema's pedagogical logic. Many African films embrace fragmentation, episodic narrative, and ritualised visual motifs, resisting conventional narrative closure. Sembène's *Moolaadé* (2004) and Cissé's *Yeelen* (1987) exemplify this approach: repetition, ritualised gestures, and pauses in action are deployed not as decorative flourishes but as deliberate strategies to cultivate reflection and attentiveness. These formal interventions challenge the assumption that political cinema must communicate a singular, legible message. As Barlet (42–44) and Armes (57–59) argue, ambiguity and experimentation are themselves political acts, asserting the autonomy of aesthetic experience even within contexts of social and postcolonial critique.

Temporality presents a second point of fracture. Third Cinema privileges linear, cause-and-effect progression, mirroring revolutionary action and emphasizing immediacy. In contrast, African films frequently employ cyclical, layered, or non-linear temporalities. Historical events coexist with myth, ritual, and memory, creating temporal structures that demand interpretive engagement rather than passive absorption (Ukadike 58–60). For example, Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine* (2009) alternates between past and present, merging spiritual causality with everyday ethical dilemmas. Political and ethical resonance emerges gradually, through reflection and relational engagement, demonstrating that cinematic impact can operate independently of the immediacy assumed in Third Cinema (Deleuze 65–68; Dovey 35).

Spectatorship, the presumed site of Third Cinema's pedagogical success, is similarly problematised. The revolutionary imaginary presumes a homogeneous audience capable of ideological alignment. African filmmakers, however, recognise diverse spectatorship—local and diasporic, popular and elite—and frequently design films that accommodate multiple interpretations. As Rancière (21–23) notes, spectatorship can be a site of co-creation, where meaning is negotiated rather than imposed. In films such as Sembène's *Xala* (1975) or Bekolo's *Le Complot d'Aristote* (1996), audiences are invited to navigate irony, spiritual ambiguity, and ethical tension, producing political and social understanding through interpretive labour rather than immediate comprehension (Warner 20; Diawara 38).

These fractures underscore a broader theoretical tension. Third Cinema presupposes that political efficacy derives from narrative clarity, ideological legibility, and audience compliance. African cinematic practice demonstrates that aesthetic complexity, temporal indirection, and interpretive plurality can produce equally, if not more, profound forms of resistance. Films may convey critique obliquely, rely on affective resonance rather than didacticism, and foreground historical and cultural specificity that resists universalising

revolutionary narratives (Dovey 36; Barlet 43).

By highlighting these limits, African cinema compels a reassessment of what constitutes effective political filmmaking. Form, temporality, and spectatorship are not neutral vessels for ideology; they are active sites in which politics is enacted, negotiated, and experienced in ways that exceed prescriptive frameworks. The fractures revealed here do not diminish the historical significance of Third Cinema; rather, they indicate the necessity of a more flexible, historically attentive, and aesthetically sensitive understanding of resistance in African cinema (Shohat and Stam 47–49; Ukadike 60–61).

Thus African cinema demonstrates that political engagement can be subtle, contingent, and mediated through aesthetic, temporal, and spectatorial complexity. By reframing the relationship between form, time, and audience, these films expand the possibilities of what revolutionary cinema might achieve, showing that resistance is as much about reflection, relationality, and ethical mediation as it is about immediacy or ideological certainty.

Contemporary Pressures: Platforms, Popular Cinema, and Postcolonial Afterlives

African cinema today operates in a landscape radically different from the one in which Third Cinema was conceived. The rise of digital technologies, streaming platforms, transnational funding, and global festival circuits has transformed both production and reception. Power no longer manifests solely through overt political repression; it now operates through visibility, marketability, and algorithmic selection (Lobato 2019). In this context, Third Cinema's revolutionary imaginary—predicated on immediacy, ethical legibility, and direct mobilisation—struggles to account for the multiplicity and complexity of contemporary African film practices (Warner 22–24).

Digital platforms such as Netflix, Showmax, and YouTube have dramatically expanded the reach of African films, but they also introduce new pressures. Algorithmic curation and data-driven audience metrics incentivise narratives that are accessible, culturally translatable, and entertaining.

Experimental or reflective formal strategies associated with Third Cinema—such as spiritual cosmologies, ritualised sequences, or non-linear temporality—may be sidelined in global circulation, while easily digestible storylines achieve visibility and financial viability (Lobato 2019; Haynes 78–80). This tension illustrates a central challenge: contemporary African filmmakers must constantly negotiate political, aesthetic, and economic imperatives, navigating a terrain that Third Cinema's idealised revolutionary framework cannot fully encompass.

Popular cinema, particularly the prolific Nigerian film industry, further complicates this landscape. Nollywood produces films at remarkable volume, often prioritising speed, audience familiarity, and cultural resonance. While sometimes dismissed as purely “entertainment,” these films engage audiences in socially and politically meaningful ways, mediating moral values, lived realities, and local-global tensions (Haynes 82–84; Armes 60–62). For instance, films such as Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine* (2009) and Tunde Kelani's *Maami* (2011) deploy culturally embedded narratives that address ethical dilemmas, social cohesion, and intergenerational responsibility. By foregrounding relational and communal concerns rather than overt revolutionary messaging, popular cinema demonstrates that resistance can operate subtly, negotiating social norms through humour, moral tension, and narrative reflection rather than explicit ideological prescription.

Transnational collaboration and global circulation add another layer of complexity. African filmmakers increasingly engage diasporic audiences, international festival expectations, and co-production frameworks, navigating the opportunities and constraints of global visibility (Shohat and Stam 49–51; Warner 23–24). These dynamics shape narrative choices, aesthetic experimentation, and thematic focus, resulting in films that are simultaneously local and global, reflective and market-aware. Third Cinema's assumptions about collective mobilisation and pedagogical spectatorship are ill-equipped to account for these hybrid, multi-sited conditions. As Ukadike

(61–63) notes, contemporary African films inhabit liminal spaces in which cultural translation, audience diversity, and platform imperatives interact, producing forms of resistance that are contextually contingent, ethically complex, and technologically mediated.

The postcolonial afterlives of African societies further complicate the revolutionary imaginary. Contemporary filmmakers grapple not only with legacies of colonialism but also with state failure, neoliberal restructuring, urbanisation, and cultural displacement. Political critique is often indirect, exploring systemic inequities, social anxieties, and historical legacies rather than presenting a binary of oppressor versus oppressed (Barlet 44–46). Aesthetic strategies such as non-linear temporality, mythic embedding, or narrative ambiguity do not dilute political engagement; rather, they recalibrate it, insisting that resistance can be reflective, multifaceted, and temporally extended. Films like Sembène's *Moolaadé* (2004) and Bekolo's *Le Complot d'Aristote* (1996) exemplify this approach, enacting social critique through layered narrative, ritualised symbolism, and ethical deliberation rather than direct revolutionary mobilization.

In sum, contemporary African cinema operates under pressures unforeseen by Third Cinema: platform economies, popular expectations, and postcolonial transformations. These conditions demand flexibility, hybridity, and interpretive multiplicity. By foregrounding visibility, circulation, and audience diversity, contemporary films challenge the prescriptive assumptions of revolutionary cinema while expanding the possibilities of political and aesthetic engagement (Lobato 2019; Shohat and Stam 50–51; Haynes 84). Resistance in this context is enacted not solely through immediacy or ideological clarity, but through subtle, adaptive, and reflective strategies that resonate across diverse historical, cultural, and technological contexts. African cinema today demonstrates that political and aesthetic engagements are inseparable from audience negotiation, platform constraints, and global circulation, requiring new theoretical models

capable of accommodating both innovation and specificity.

2. Recommendations Towards a Contemporary Framework for African Cinema

The evolution of African cinema in the twenty-first century necessitates a reconsideration of both theory and practice. Third Cinema, while historically invaluable, should be approached less as a prescriptive blueprint and more as a conceptual point of departure. Its emphasis on immediacy, ideological clarity, and collective mobilisation, though foundational, cannot adequately account for the diverse strategies of resistance deployed by contemporary African filmmakers. Scholars are therefore encouraged to engage with African film aesthetics on their own terms, recognising that narrative ambiguity, ritualised sequences, and reflective temporalities constitute legitimate forms of political and ethical intervention (Diawara 36–37; Dovey 35). By treating these practices as epistemologically significant rather than peripheral, critical frameworks can more faithfully capture the complexity and nuance of African cinematic expression.

Filmmakers are also invited to embrace hybrid aesthetics that negotiate the demands of local specificity and global visibility. Transnational funding, streaming platforms, and festival circuits offer unprecedented opportunities for circulation, but they introduce pressures that may incentivise legibility, marketability, or culturally neutral narratives. Creative negotiation of these pressures allows filmmakers to maintain culturally grounded epistemologies while participating in global media economies. Films such as Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine* (2009) exemplify this balance, combining spiritual and ethical concerns rooted in Yoruba cosmology with production values that resonate with diasporic and international audiences (Shohat and Stam 50–51; Warner 22–23). Such hybrid approaches illustrate that aesthetic and political complexity need not be sacrificed for transnational circulation, but can be strategically articulated within contemporary media infrastructures.

A renewed emphasis on spectatorship

is equally critical. African cinema should be understood as producing audiences who are active, heterogeneous, and interpretively engaged rather than passive recipients of moral instruction. By creating space for multiple readings, filmmakers invite viewers to participate in ethical, historical, and social deliberation, extending the revolutionary potential of cinema beyond prescriptive ideological alignment (Rancière 22–23; Ukadike 61–63). This approach also acknowledges the realities of digital and diasporic viewership, where audiences encounter films across cultural, linguistic, and technological contexts. Recognising this multiplicity of spectatorship challenges traditional models that presume uniform reception and highlights the ethical and political significance of interpretive agency.

The pressures of platform economies demand additional strategic flexibility. Algorithmic curation, audience metrics, and streaming visibility shape which stories are seen and which remain marginalised. Filmmakers must therefore navigate these structural forces while maintaining the integrity of reflective, ritualised, or experimental cinematic forms. Nollywood productions offer instructive examples: while high-volume commercial output often prioritises speed and accessibility, films such as Tunde Kelani's *Maami* (2011) demonstrate that culturally resonant narratives addressing moral, social, and familial concerns can achieve both critical acclaim and audience engagement. This suggests that popular and artful forms of cinema need not exist in opposition; rather, they can operate in dialogue, providing avenues for subtle yet meaningful resistance (Lobato 2019; Haynes 84).

Finally, ethical and historical reflexivity must underpin both cinematic practice and critical engagement. Contemporary African films confront postcolonial afterlives that include state failure, social inequities, neoliberal restructuring, and cultural displacement. Addressing these conditions requires narrative and formal strategies capable of representing complexity without reducing it to binaries of oppressor and oppressed. Ritualised storytelling, non-linear

temporality, and mythic embedding are not merely aesthetic choices but deliberate interventions that recalibrate political critique, situating it within broader moral, spiritual, and social frameworks (Barlet 44–46; Diawara 37). By foregrounding these strategies, filmmakers and scholars alike can cultivate a cinema that is simultaneously resistant, reflective, and attuned to the historical, cultural, and technological specificities of contemporary African life.

The contemporary African cinema therefore benefits from an approach that is both flexible and attentive to context. By reinterpreting Third Cinema as a point of departure, engaging with hybrid aesthetics, recognising diverse spectatorship, negotiating platform pressures, and foregrounding ethical and historical reflexivity, filmmakers and scholars can cultivate a dynamic, responsive, and politically potent cinema. These recommendations emphasise the capacity of African films to resist, reflect, and circulate in ways that exceed traditional revolutionary prescriptions, underscoring the ongoing relevance of Third Cinema while simultaneously pointing toward its transformation in the twenty-first century.

3. Conclusion After Third Cinema?

Third Cinema remains a landmark in the history of revolutionary filmmaking, offering a paradigm in which cinema is both a weapon and a pedagogue. Its conceptual assumptions—linear temporality, unambiguous ideology, and a homogeneous, educable spectator—have historically guided African filmmakers and critics alike. Yet as this analysis demonstrates, these assumptions are increasingly strained in the context of contemporary African cinema. Across African film aesthetics, narrative experimentation, temporal structures, and modes of spectatorship, political and ethical engagement emerges through strategies that diverge sharply from Third Cinema's prescriptive framework. Films employing ambiguity, ritual, myth, or cyclical temporality reveal that resistance need not be immediate, legible, or singularly aligned with ideological imperatives, illustrating the epistemological

and ethical breadth of African cinematic practice (Diawara 36; Ukadike 63).

Contemporary pressures further complicate the revolutionary imaginary. Digital platforms, streaming economies, and global festival circuits shape visibility and circulation in ways that challenge the ideals of immediacy and collective mobilisation central to Third Cinema (Lobato 2019; Shohat and Stam 51). Popular cinema, including the prolific output of Nollywood, demonstrates that mass-oriented, culturally resonant storytelling can convey political and social critique without adhering to conventional revolutionary templates. Films such as Afolayan's *The Figurine* (2009) and Kelani's *Maami* (2011) exemplify this, blending ethical deliberation, spiritual reflection, and communal narrative with transnational appeal. Moreover, postcolonial realities—state fragility, neoliberal restructuring, and diasporic entanglements—require cinematic strategies that are nuanced, multifaceted, and attentive to local-global interconnections, capacities that Third Cinema's original formulations cannot fully accommodate (Barlet 44–46; Ukadike 61–63).

These observations do not diminish the historical significance of Third Cinema; rather, they reveal its limitations while simultaneously demonstrating how African cinema extends, contests, and transform the revolutionary

imaginary. Political engagement, aesthetic innovation, and audience interpretation are inseparable yet unpredictable. Resistance is realised not only through direct instruction or mobilisation but also through reflection, relationality, interpretive multiplicity, and ethical complexity. African cinema thereby performs a dual task: it honours the ambitions of revolutionary film theory while exposing the conceptual and formal boundaries of that framework.

In the end, “after Third Cinema” is not a declaration of its obsolescence but recognition that contemporary African filmmaking operates in conditions and with sensibilities that demand new theoretical engagement. Political cinema can be hybrid, iterative, and ethically sophisticated, capable of enacting critique without sacrificing aesthetic or narrative complexity. Resistance is no longer solely about clarity, immediacy, or mobilising spectators; it is about creating space for ethical reflection, temporal depth, and relational understanding. African cinema offers a model for theorising postcolonial resistance in the twenty-first century, one that honours the revolutionary project while asserting its own aesthetic and conceptual autonomy, demonstrating that revolutionary aspirations can evolve without losing critical potency (Shohat and Stam 51).

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