Neptune Frost and the Anthropocene: Rethinking Third Cinema's Anticolonial Politics

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to reveal the ongoing currency of Third Cinema's politics in view of the Anthropocene through a close reading of Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman's *Neptune Frost* (2021). The introductory part of the article addresses the continuing relevance of Third Cinema's politics and connects it with research interested in decolonising the Anthropocene. In the main corpus, I proceed to analyse *Neptune Frost* through a Third cinematic lens. I argue that the study of the film can participate in recent debates on the importance of problematising the "we" of human responsibility for the Anthropocene.[1]

Keywords: Third Cinema; Anthropocene; decolonising the Anthropocene; world cinema; Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman.

Following Ewa Mazierska's argument that certain films "lend themselves to a Third cinema critique" (Mazierska & Kristensen, 2020, p. 18), this article discusses Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman's *Neptune Frost* (2021) as a film that recovers Third Cinema's radicalism and

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1 I formulated many of the ideas discussed in this article during a research-reading group on media and the Anthropocene organised by Matthias Grotkopp at Freie Universität Berlin in 2022–2023. Many thanks to Matthias and all the other participants. I am also indebted to the two *Film-Philosophy* reviewers and the editors of this issue for their feedback. The author confirms that AI – the apparatus of intellectual laziness – was not used while researching and writing this article.

anticolonialism. A basic assumption that governs my argument is that films read through the critical lens of Third Cinema can offer a better historical perspective on the causes of the Anthropocene, namely its roots in colonial/neocolonial extractive operations and racial violence. In doing so, such films can challenge racialised, universal notions of "humanity" and the "world"; this is in line with many scholars' arguments that the ecocrisis demands non-linear historical thinking that enables us to understand it as the outcome of multiple temporalities that can connect the colonial past with the neocolonial present. Scholars have highlighted the connection between empire, capital, colonialism and the Anthropocene, seeking to unveil the social, political and racial dimensions of the climate crisis. Kathryn Yusoff, for example, has emphasised the racial aspects of the ecocrisis and how the Anthropocene cannot be disconnected from colonial histories of extraction of resources and racialised labour. She explains that, according to the colonial understanding of the human, activity/ productivity is associated with whiteness, whereas passivity is associated with Blackness:

> Extractable matter must be both passive (awaiting extraction and posses-sing of properties) and able to be activated through the mastery of white men. Historically, both slaves and gold have to be material and epistemically made through the recognition and extraction of their inhuman properties. (2018, p. 14)

Yusoff affirms that the pseudo-universalism of the term Anthropocene conceals ongoing relations of combined and uneven development produced by the geographical differentiation of global capitalism into spaces of extraction of resources and cheap labour, and spaces of capitalist accumulation and consumption. She urges us to draw attention to the political rather than geological features of the Anthropocene and to understand it as the product of a western world-making mentality that is directly interrelated to settler colonialism and histories of Black/Indigenous genocide.

Similarly, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that the fight for environmental justice is interconnected with antiracism and anticolonialism; the Anthropocene is for Mirzoeff not just the product of histories of accumul-ation by dispossession, but also a reality in which the major polluters are countries with a history of colonial and imperial oppression that do not suffer as much from its negative consequences (see 2018, p. 143). The upholders of analogous arguments agree that the history of colonialism has not just produced uneven economic development but also uneven/

inequitable environmental impacts. Along these lines, Samuel Leguizamon Grant opts for the term "Apartheidocene", which seeks to go beyond abstract universalist narratives of human guilt, since "for us all to be equally guilty, we would all have to be equally powerful in the current system running the world – a system designed to limit the power of the majority of humanity" (2017, p. 4).

Grant's point encapsulates a key argument put forward by critical race theorists and environmental humanities scholars, namely that for people of colour the reality of the Anthropocene is not new. As Sylvia Wynter argues, the dominant narrative of climate anxiety betokens a desire to continue securing the privileges of the western view of the human subject associated with whiteness (see 2003, p. 261). Meanwhile, Heather Davis and Zoë Todd argue that the Eurocentric angst about the Anthropocene is a belated "arrival of the reverberations of that seismic shockwave into the nations who introduced colonial, capitalist processes across the globe in the last half-millennium in the first place" (2017, p.774). It is in this context that Kyle Powys Whyte also suggests that for Indigenous and Black people the climate crisis can be characterised as a "déjà vu" (2018, p. 88) that bridges their past with the present conditions of dispossession and oppression.

Given the above, we can see that decolonial approaches to the Anthropocene can prevent critical analyses from simply replicating anxieties for how the ecocrisis might lead to the collapse of an uneven and unequal world-system. What is more, Third Cinema's commitment to decolonising aesthetics and politics, together with its insistence on producing films that address global conditions of inequality, combined and uneven development, and neocolonial conditions of existence, demonstrate its ongoing relevance, since it can provide an optic of analysis for many contemporary films, too. Uneven development, as the late Neil Smith explained, is crucial when thinking about environmental issues, because it is "the concrete process and pattern of the production of nature under capitalism" (2008, p. 8). Smith's argument points to the dialectical interconnection between nature and society as he understands nature not in essentialist terms but as something directly affected by and responding to capitalist regimes of accumulation grounded in unequal geopolitics.

The question of decolonisation as a means of fighting uneven development and achieving social justice is central to many Third Cinema manifestos, which point to the continuing asymmetries of power and core-periphery inequities in the global landscape following the supposed end of formal colonialism. In Fernando Birri's "Cinema and Underdevelopment" (1962), for example, underdevelopment is

intertwined with the persistence of world inequalities rooted in global coloniality. Birri proposes that to fight "external and internal" colonialism (2014, p. 217), filmmakers need to produce films that can critically reflect on conditions of underdevelopment and awaken people's political consciousness. Similarly, Glauber Rocha argues that the political aesthetics of Cinema Nôvo is directly interconnected with the conditions of deprivation that are the product of neocolonial conditions of existence (see 2014, p. 219). At the core of Rocha's famous "aesthetics of hunger" is that hunger and underdevelopment can turn into a weapon that produces knowledge and resistance on the aesthetic and the political level, hence Cinema Nôvo's need to show that anticolonial violence and resistance are not a sign of backwardness, but of political consciousness. Finally, Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino's "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World" points to the importance of creating a new culture of political emancipation that can negate the "neocolonial situation" and "the culture of the rulers" (2014, p. 232). This new culture to which the Third cinematic tradition belongs is committed to undermining the feelings of inferiority experienced by historically oppressed populations, who have been conditioned to copy the imperial nations' cultures. In a significant passage, Solanas and Getino reflect on the colonial whitestream understanding of humanity: "Sooner or later, the inferior man recognizes Man with a capital M; this recognition means the destruction of his defences. If you want to be a man, says the oppressor, you have to be like me, speak my language, deny your own being, transform yourself into me" (p. 234). An insight that emerges from their critique is that the global coloniality of power does not simply lead to economic dependency, but also affects the colonised population's understanding of the world, culture and their relationship with their own land. Linking back to the Anthropocene, this results in the universalisation of what Yusoff calls "white masculine modernity" (2018, p.60) and becomes an efficient way of perpetuating structures that facilitate the exploitation of peripheral populations, their labour, land and natural resources.

Many scholars, such as Teshome Gabriel, Lars Kristensen, Ewa Mazierska, Ella Shohat, Robert Stam and Mike Wayne, have noted that Third Cinema refers to a heterogeneous body of films whose key characteristic is not formal uniformity but their commitment to decolonisation and social emancipation (see Gabriel, 1982; Mazierska & Kristensen, 2020; Stam, 2014; Shohat, 2003; Wayne, 2001). As such, the term is not a matter of geography but refers to films whose politics addresses struggles against the global coloniality of power. After all, as

Solanas noted, Third Cinema filmmakers welcomed the openness of the term itself:

> For us, Third Cinema is the expression of a new culture and of social changes. Generally speaking, Third Cinema gives an account of reality and history. It is also linked with national culture. It is the way the world is conceptualised and not the genre nor the explicitly political character of a film which makes it belong to Third Cinema [...] Third Cinema is an open category, unfinished, incomplete. It is a research category. It is a democratic, national, popular cinema. Third Cinema is also an experimental cinema, but it is not practised in the solitude of one's home or in a laboratory because it conducts research into communication. What is required is to make that Third Cinema gain space, everywhere, in all its forms [...] But it must be stressed that there are 36 different kinds of Third Cinema. (cited in Willemen, 1989, p. 14)

Third Cinema's call for films that facilitate decolonisation on a political and cultural level resonates with debates on the need to reevaluate history and debunk Eurocentric truisms, making it useful for the decolonisation of the Anthropocene discourse. Not only can we link Third Cinema films from the past to the Anthropocene debates of the present, but we can also reread through the Third Cinema lens contemporary films dealing directly or indirectly with ecocritical themes.

Sharae Deckard has cogently argued that to better understand concepts of world culture (or in her case world literature) on a political level, it is essential to focus on objects that disrupt world-systemic hierarchies and which capture both global processes of accumulation and their ecological consequences. Deckard advocates a "world-literary criticism of world-ecological literature", namely "the study of literature in which the horizon of the world-ecology is critically mediated and in which the cyclical rise and fall of ecological regimes and commodity chains might be registered with peculiar salience in the peripheries" (2024, p. 74). I suggest that revisiting Third Cinema not just as a movement but also as a critical concept can play a similar role in/for film studies. This approach can make one rethink world cinema debates in ways that, following Stephen Shapiro (2024), refute an apolitical cosmopolitanism of good taste, and which focus on how an oppositional world-film culture registers, rather than represents, geopolitical, economic and environmental inequalities.[2]

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2 For Shapiro, the word registration "convey[s] the tensions of disempowerment and inequality within the capitalist world-system rather than the implicit connotation of empowerment caught in the phrase 'to represent'" (2024, p. 69). Meanwhile, "cosmopolitanism is the notion that the consumption of cultural objects beyond

The reader might question my desire to recover Third Cinema criticism especially at a time when scholars are engaging with the concepts of Fourth and Fifth Cinema, with Barry Barclay defining the former as a cinema that gives voice to Indigenous populations and their experiences (see Barclay, 2015), while Raminder Kaur and Mariagiulia Grassilly define the latter as a subversive cinema produced by stateless people whose audiovisual testimonies alert us to issues of global inequality and border militarisation (see 2019, p. 3). While these theorisations are welcome, I maintain the term Third Cinema precisely because of its link with a past utopian belief in Third World internationalism as formulated at the 1955 Bandung conference in Indonesia by Asian and African nations. Vijay Prashad explains that the Third World concept brought together people from Africa, Asia and Latin America, and inspired the political imagination of millions across the world fighting for independence against imperial/colonial powers, poverty and for the right to self-determination. As Prashad aptly puts it, "the Third World was not a place. It was a project" (2007, p. xv). The Third World as an idea thus gave rise to a new global vision that challenged the pseudo-universalism of the Euro-American worldview; as scholars have noted, it also gave rise to other significant projects such as "Pan-Africanism, tricontinentalism, and late twentieth-century internationalisms" (Popescu, 2020, p. 59), which in turn aspired to create a different world-system and to produce global solidarities amongst people who had historically suffered from colonial rule.

This utopian vision inevitably led to cultural production committed to political and cultural decolonisation, with "Third Cinema" as a term making clear reference to the spirit of Third-Worldism. Prashad argues that the Third World was a broad church that welcomed all those who resisted colonialism and imperialism, and this is captured in the words of the Indonesian revolutionary Sukarno: "we are united by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appears. We are united by a common detestation of racialism. And we are united by a common determination to preserve and stabilize peace in the world" (cited in

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one's national location is inherently emancipatory and egalitarian. In a simplified version, this is the idea that if we eat the world on expanded à la carte menus, then we are removing social inequality. Internationalism, in the Marxist idiom, [meanwhile] means a different kind of social solidarity based on class alliances and the intersection of race, sex-gender, physical ability, and generational domination with a system of labour-exploitation. To paraphrase the Theses on Feuerbach, cosmopolitanism looks to the creation of a civil society, but internationalism seeks out a social humanity" (cited in Lazarus, 2019, p. 11).

Prashad, 2007, p. 34). In this sense, while Third Cinema was a term introduced by white Latin American filmmakers, it was inspired by the Third Worldist spirit/culture of the time, and this is the reason why questions of race as well as indigeneity figure importantly in many films by Third Cinema filmmakers like Med Hondo, Ousmane Sembène, Euzhan Palcy, Assia Djebar, Safi Faye, Jorge Sanjinés, Raymundo Gleyzer, Jorge Prelorán and Heiny Srour.

For this article, it is also important to highlight that many Third Cinema films engage with Anthropocene questions and register conditions of global inequality that have environmental implications. For example, Cinema Nôvo classics set in the Brazilian sertão, like *Vidas Sêcas / Barren Lives* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963) and *Os Fuzis / The Guns* (Ruy Guerra, 1964), deal with themes of aridity in the region, while also approaching these issues through the perspective of race. Indeed, these films in hindsight evoke the history of the sertão, which, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro explains, was home to Indigenous populations decimated by "the colonial authorities" (2019, p. 302), before people of Amerindian heritage became the main labourers in the plantation-style economy of the area, with unscrupulous landowners engaging in "deforestation, cattle overgrazing, and cotton monoculture" (p. 302). A rereading of these films leads to novel insights regarding the intersection between racialised labour, colonialism and environmental transformation.[3]

Clearly, then, Third Cinema's polemical and anti-imperialist rhetoric resonates with contemporary debates on decolonisation. This is best

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3 Other Third Cinema films that invite new readings in light of the Anthropocene crisis include Glauber Rocha's short documentary on the history of the Amazon rainforest, *Amazonas, Amazonas* (1965); Safi Faye's *Kaddu Beykat / Letter from my Village* (1975) and *Fad'jal* (1979), which address the negative effects of dryness in Senegalese farming communities; Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara's *Minsa'y Isang Gamu-gamo / Once a Moth* (1976), which shows how the North American military presence in the Philippines is not just a form of neocolonial control that affects the lives of both local people and the country's economy, but also a reality with negative environmental implications; Sergio Giral's *Maluala* (1979) and *Rancheador / Slave Hunter* (1979), which address histories of the racialised plantation economy of pre-revolutionary Cuba; Jorge Sanjinés's *El coraje del pueblo / The Courage of the People* (1971) and *Jatun auka / The Principal Enemy* (1974), which respectively show the connection between labour exploitation in Bolivia and the extraction of minerals on the part of the mining industry, connecting past and contemporary histories of violence against Indigenous populations and their lands; and Med Hondo's *Sarraounia* (1986), which focuses on the assault against African people in the 19th century and the appropriation of their land and resources by European powers.

embodied in the work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, who suggest that decolonisation cannot be reduced to a liberal metaphor that "reconcile[s] settler guilt" (2012, p. 3) and generates politics of recognition that reproduce relations of power rooted in colonial hierarchies. For Tuck and Yang, rather, decolonisation is a process directly interrelated with the repatriation of land and people and a worldview that goes beyond the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment project. As they say, the liberal reduction of decolonisation to a metaphor

> turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation. In reality, the tracks walk all over land/people in settler contexts. Though the details are not fixed or agreed upon, in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically. (2012, p. 7)

Decolonisation as described by Tuck and Yang originates in the revolutionary understanding of justice not simply content with the acknowledgement of past wrongs but committed to the alteration of persistent structural conditions of inequality. The same applies for the Third Cinema filmmakers whose politics were rooted in the struggle against past and contemporary injustices. For, a key aspect of Third Cinema's emergence was the realisation that the modern world-system perpetuated global divisions of labour, asymmetries of power and ethnic and racial hierarchies introduced during colonialism, and thus was not decolonised following the end of formal colonialism. Furthermore, Mike Wayne has noted that the first generation of Third Cinema filmmakers emerged at a time when western-orchestrated dictatorships and military coups were a means of terminating political movements that challenged the coloniality of power in the peripheries (see 2016, p. 19). The point to underscore here is that Third Cinema as a project and critique becomes relevant again now that imperial states find new ways of extracting surplus value from the peripheries as well as subjecting their workers to patterns of coerced/semi-coerced labour, something that has geopolitical and environmental implications. As Ramon Grosfoguel and Ana Margarita Cervantes-Rodriguez pointed out in 2002, decolonisation was nothing but a myth as there is a "subjacent continuity that characterizes capitalist, cultural, and geopolitical relations on a global scale after the collapse of 'global colonialism' in the post-1945 era" (2002, p. xx).

Despite its relevance, Third Cinema remains a relatively marginal area of concern in film studies, and this is perhaps because its politics is not a politics of reconciliation but of revolutionary struggle, a radicalism that

does not tally well with recent conceptions of justice grounded in human rights discourse. Robert Meister suggests that in the post-Cold War era, justice is founded on an apolitical humanitarianism that simply seeks to promote an understanding of it as reconciliation. The catch is that this reconciliation in fact puts justice on hold and former victims become "'reconciled' to the continuing benefits of past injustice that fellow citizens still enjoy" (2010, p. 24). For Meister, this is in opposition to the revolutionary view of justice-as-struggle that characterised secular and anticolonial revolutions from the 18th to the 20th century. The revolutionary project was not simply concerned with a politics of recognition, but was committed to eradicating structural injustices from the past in the post-revolutionary present. Antithetically, those unsatisfied with a mere recognition of their past victimhood and willing to continue the struggle are stigmatised as dangerous and "extremist" by the advocates of human rights discourses (p. 24). Post-Apartheid South Africa provides a clear example where the state acknowledgment of the victimhood of the Black population was not accompanied by a challenge to white wealth accumulated during Apartheid. In this sense, the white economic privileges were protected and the change that took place offered a "moral victory" (p. 53) for the Black majority, but not a structural transformation that challenged past positions of economic and social privilege.[4]

Following Meister, then, we can understand why Third Cinema's radical anticolonialism, which does not just seek to provide "moral victory" for the past, but, as per Solanas and Getino, to act in the reality of the neocolonial present, remains a fringe concern in the discipline. What

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4 Also relevant in this context is Salar Mameni's neologism Terracene, which is a critical appropriation of the word terror aiming "to highlight the terror unleashed by the complex machinery of war, settler-colonial and industrial-resource exploitations on a global scale that have led to the formation of massive wastelands and ongoing climatic disasters. Terracene is also meant to direct attention toward terra (the earth) and Terrans inhabiting such wastelands" (2023, p. 48). Mameni argues that there is a historical entanglement between the Anthropocene and the war on terror as they were both introduced pretty much at the same time in the early 21st century. Furthermore, both are racialised concepts. The Anthropocene attributes blame to humanity as a whole for practices of environmental degradation introduced by colonial and neocolonial powers, whereas "terrorist" is an obscure term that puts under the same banner all those dissatisfied with the unequal world-system. The latter is also used to stigmatise those resisting neocolonial practices of extraction and land grab that perpetuate environmental disaster. After all, the term "terrorist" carries historical baggage, since those fighting for independence from colonial rule were defamed as terrorists by the colonisers.

is more, Third Cinema is not in line with the Euro-American tradition of postcolonialism. As many scholars have highlighted, postcolonial scholarship in capitalist metropoles tends at times to disconnect questions of continuing global inequality from those of culture, with Neil Lazarus stating, for example, that postcolonial theory's prioritisation of issues of multiculturalism ends up reproducing "a dematerialized understanding of 'the West'" (2002, p. 45). As such, Eurocentrism is presented as a form of cultural prejudice rather than as something directly intertwined with the historical connection between imperialism, colonialism and capitalism.

Along these lines, Monica Popescu criticizes the 1980s-1990s turn in postcolonial studies that dismissed the radicalism of key intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, and C.L.R. James "in favour of poststructuralist approaches that focused on the complex intermeshing of power and knowledge production" (2020, p.8). Rossen Djagalov, meanwhile, argues that the anticolonialism of the Third Worldist movements has been superseded by a "subtle French poststructuralism" (2020, p. 224) that fails to address the persistence of inequities in the Global South. The postcolonial intellectual tradition, in other words, hides behind what Vivek Chibber (2013) calls "postmodern jargon", with its political critique seeming to take capitalist relations for granted, as if they have been naturalised. Indeed, Popescu explains that this is clearly the case in postcolonial studies that unsubtly dismiss the Marxism of past liberationist thinkers. In Meister's terms, then, it would seem that postcolonial scholarship's emphasis on celebrating global culturalism and cosmopolitan pluralism is more concerned with proclaiming "moral victories" rather than with reviving the revolutionary anticolonial spirit of the Third Worldist movements of the past.

And yet, in the times of the Anthropocene, I claim that this anticolonial and anti-capitalist spirit needs to be revived and has the capacity to offer a compass for envisaging a world that combines environmental, racial and political justice – and it is precisely an understanding of justice as struggle rather than integration that I find politically pertinent in Anisia Uzeyman and Saul Williams's anti-extractivist Afrofuturist film *Neptune Frost*. That is, the film revives Third Cinema's anticolonialism as it does not simply engage in a germane critique of the material conditions that produce environmental damage, neocolonial labour relations and the usurpation of resources in Africa, but it also articulates a politics of resistance grounded in a militant vision of the future. In revitalising Third Cinema's call for films that simultaneously agitate and educate, *Neptune Frost* offers a polemical take on how to overcome the Anthropocene.

Neptune Frost: Envisioning a Liberated Future

> Then what is mined, of course, deals with the recurring fact that we live our lives so heavily dependent on resources that we don't grow or mine in this country. I can't start my day without my coffee, your coffee, you know, where does it come from? Your tea? Where does it come from? The rubber in your tires, the cotton in your clothes, the gold in your watch, the coltan in your smartphone and lithium in your electric vehicle? Where does it come from? The answer is so often the same place, the same continent, the same reason, the same sort of exploitation. So the idea of what is mined and what is mine was something that I was trying to play with, for the sake of the freedom that we wanted to kind of explore in language, but also politically on screen. (Saul Williams, cited in Gates, 2022)

Shot in Rwanda, but taking place in Burundi, *Neptune Frost* is an Afrofuturist musical that follows two characters, an intersex hacker called Neptune (played by both Cheryl Isheja and Bertrand Ninteretse) and Matalusa (Bertrand Ninteretse), a miner whose brother Tekno (Robert Ninteretse) is murdered by a supervisor at the coltan mine where they both work. The stories of the two characters intersect as they are guided by a bird named Frost and end up participating in a militant hacker collective called Digitaria, where upcycled computers and digital devices are repurposed to support the community. In Digitaria, the characters join another group of hackers and engage in anti-extractivist debates, discuss the international division of labour and the miners' invisible labour, which provides the energy for economic growth in the Global North. Later, they are joined by another group of coltan miners and decide to rebel against the Authority, the country's pro-western puppet regime. Neptune's technopathy enables the group to hack the system and spread their ideas on a global scale, making the western media paranoid that the hack originates from China and Russia. Surveillance cameras and drones manage to locate the community and destroy it. However, the narrative concludes in a militant tone; we see Neptune gazing at the Authority's surveillance camera and suggesting that practices of resistance will continue.

Neptune Frost is punctuated by frequent musical sequences where the collective's polemical critique of neocolonialism is combined with a celebration of queerness, Afro music and a critique of patriarchy. The film is not explicitly about the Anthropocene but its emphasis on issues of extraction, Black labour at coltan mines and its portrayal of the country's government as a puppet regime serving extractive capitalist interests chime neatly with themes that are relevant in the Anthropocene. Furthermore, the imaginary revolutionary community that seeks to stop the corporate exploitation of resource-rich global South nations puts

forward an egalitarian and sustainable vision of the future that valorises those who produce wealth rather than practices of capital accumulation and profit.

The film's emphasis on the construction of a unified collective oppositional force highlights a group reality that downplays the storylines of the individual characters. This is in line with Third Cinema's political critique of first and second cinema narratives structured around individual characters whose desires motivate the dramatic action. Teshome H. Gabriel explains that unlike Euro-American cinema's individualist mindset, Third Cinema valorises collective commitment and social/historical processes that deindividuate the narrative: "the individual 'hero' in the Third World context does not make history, he/she only serves historical necessities" (2011, p. 199). Emblematic here is Miguel Littín's statement, "I don't make an individualist and psychological cinema. I relate a collective fight in which the individual keeps his [sic] importance but in function of the collective fight. Everyone involved in the film participates politically in its creation" (cited in Gabriel, 1982, p. 38). At the core of this argument is a different understanding of character, where individual agency cannot by itself produce change; characters in Third Cinema are placed within a wider context of historically determined situations and this is the reason why they are part of a collective reality.[5]

With regard to *Neptune Frost*, the stories of the two key characters provide the starting point for the utopian construction of an anticolonial collective subjectivity that can rethink human-induced climate change as part of the wider project of capitalist modernity. Exemplary in this respect is one of the opening passages of the film in which we see the murder of Tekno by an overzealous work manager. The sequence begins with a voice-over by Neptune that plays with the dual meaning of the word "mine" to reflect on questions of neocolonial oppression: "but my life was

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5 It is not accidental that Third Cinema films with a polemical edge that articulate a utopian vision of the future highlight the changes in collective attitudes that become a precondition of anticolonial resistance. Examples include Littín's *La Tierra Prometida / The Promised Land* (1971), Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* (1972), Humberto Solás' *Cantata de Chile* (1976) and Ruy Guerra's *Mueda, Memória e Massacre / Mueda, Memory and Massacre* (1979). This rejection of individualism also applies to post-1970s films that can be seen under the Third Cinema rubric, such as Michel Khleifi's عرس الجليل / *Wedding in Galilee* (1987) and Raoul Peck's *Lumumba, la mort d'un prophète / Lumumba, the Death of a Prophet* (1990). More recent examples might include the Karrabing Film Collective's *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland* (2018), Juliano Dornelles and Kleber Mendonça Filho's Cinema Nôvo-influenced *Bacurau* (2019), Petna Ndaliko Katondolo's *Kapita* (2020) and Raam Reddy's *The Fable* (2024).

never quite mine. What is mine? Will I recognise it when I see it? Will it claim my life or set it free?" Whereas these words are spoken by Neptune, the camera captures a group of miners as they labour hard at a coltan mine. The possessive pronoun mine is intentionally complicated with the mine as a site of extraction and labour exploitation. The sequence thus challenges notions of possessive individualism and highlights a key setting of social oppression for Black bodies in resource-rich countries. The camera registers the action to highlight the collective facet of oppression; as it cuts to Tekno, a man portrayed as somebody with a deep connection to the Earth, it briefly centres on him only to be interrupted by a violent gesture on the part of a manager, who kills him for not working hard enough.

This scene makes concrete how mining simultaneously produces wealth, death and soil change. The play with the word "mine" ironically comments on the dispossession faced by populations in resource-rich countries; meanwhile their right to life is defied by underpaid labour and poor working conditions as they endanger their health to increase the prosperity of populations outside the continent. The depiction of Tekno's violent death turns into a moment of collective political awakening as the miners become conscious of how the mistreatment of their land and bodies perpetuates their inequality. The arousal of their political consciousness is preceded by a collective mourning; the workers are shown playing the drums while the voice-over addresses the connection between mining, profit and death. Neptune is heard saying that "the worker pays the price it seems. Metal precious currency. Third and First World currency. Black market currency. Drumbeat, heartbeat that old, Black-bodied currency. Every martyr currency. All that you pay not to see". Meanwhile, the camera captures visuals of the mined minerals and then cuts to the indignant workers who turn into a collective force of disobedience as they sing to honour their dead colleague.

This sequence, in which Neptune directly addresses the audience to say that when they buy technological products, they pay to erase the violence that was essential for their production, underlines a desire to debunk the commodity fetishism of the contemporary technologies of media and communication, whereby the violence against workers behind mass-produced objects is concealed, with the result that those objects take on an intrinsic value in themselves (see Marx, 1976, p. 166). Kohei Saito has commented on the importance of rethinking Marx's concept of commodity fetishism in the Anthropocene arguing that in doing so we can identify capital's tendency to produce uneven geopolitical dynamics that produce environmental harm (2022, p.125). Given that coltan is a key mineral in the production of digital media, the film's portrayal of the

mistreatment of coltan miners also turns into a reflexive critique not just of unequal economic relations but also of the labour exploitation upon which digital media production is reliant. Williams confirms this when he argues that a key starting point was the directors' realisation that contemporary "technological advancement is still based heavily on a very analogue form of exploitation" (cited in Burton, 2022).

As the camera shifts from the bodies of the workers to the extracted minerals, this sequence additionally demonstrates how the plundering of natural resources simultaneously depletes the workers' bodily resources and the soil of life (see Foster, 2000, p. 164). Indeed, if McKenzie Wark argues that the Anthropocene demands the production of a history from the point of view of those whose bodies suffer to remove natural resources that facilitate capitalist growth (see Wark, 2015), then *Neptune Frost* offers precisely such a (counter-history from the viewpoint of African miners, whose voice is rarely heard in hegemonic discourses on the Anthropocene or in mainstream ecocapitalist debates. In doing so, the film problematises the politics of time by showing the persistence of colonial practices associated with forced labour in the neocolonial present, where the underpaid labour of workers in peripheral countries supports the unsustainable development of states in the capitalist core. One is invited simultaneously to consider the exploitation of Black working bodies in its *longue durée* and the link of such practices to the ecocrisis. The past and the present are intermingled to show the persistence of colonial modernity in the present as well as to alert the audience to how ecological injustice has been a long reality for Black populations. As Jason Allen-Paisant suggests, "black and brown people have been living the 'Anthropocene' for centuries, long before it became a problem for the West" (2021, p.31).

Finally, the sequence also serves a pedagogical and a militant purpose as the commentary on the exploitation of resources and Black labour goes hand in hand with a desire to imagine a political alternative. Tekno's murder provokes the production of a collective worker force coming to life that seeks to reimagine the future. Importantly, the collective is pictured using drums to communicate, making an indirect link between old media of communication and new media produced by the industries of extraction. In an interview, Uzeyman and Williams state that "the drum is the first form of wireless communication" (cited in Brown, 2022); the percussion instruments played here by the miners turn into media of political agitation and consciousness, while their songs of resistance also reflect with some irony how coltan mines are used for the production of digital media of wireless communication.

As we get to see Neptune's hacking abilities, the reclamation of both old and new media becomes central to advancing a utopian reality, as is also made clear by how the stories of the two characters intersect. For, both Neptune and Matalusa meet in the alternative community of Digitaria after resting under an acacia tree, whose roots allow them to communicate. As the filmmakers explain in the DVD extras, this implausible narrative device rests on the idea that there is a "world wide web" under the trees and within the land, suggesting that the Earth itself is a medium.[6] The characters' ability to connect with each other by interacting with the non-human world draws on histories of Black/Indigenous resistance that understood land as a spiritual site providing both nourishment and connection. Janae Davis, Alex Moulton, Levi van Sant and Brian Williams explain that this reciprocal relation with the land negates the rationalistic understanding that perceives its value solely in terms of economic worth (see 2019, p. 8). The reconnection with the land in *Neptune Frost* thus becomes a means of reconnecting with the people who have long suffered from neocolonial mining operations and monocultures.

Furthermore, it allows them to take control of new media technologies in order to initiate radical change – as is suggested when Matalusa and Neptune are invited by an avatar named Patolo to use the energy within the land to articulate a new vision of the future that questions business practices, the history of slavery and its relation to the present. The song that plays at this moment has a polemical tone, as follows: "Hack into land rights and ownership. Hack into business law, proprietorship. Hack into the history of the bank. Hack and question the business of slavery, of free labour, its relation to today's world. Hack into ambition, into greed. Hack into suffering and sufferance. The treatment of one faith towards another". The song therefore suggests that the reclamation of old and new technology can become a form of resistance to envision a future that does away with the extractive economic model rooted in colonial plantations. This is the reason why the lyrics merge the past with the present and link histories of capitalist accumulation to slavery and land appropriation – as per recent discussions of the ecocrisis that highlight how the plantation system continues to contribute to the long environmental crisis as aspects of the plantation mindset persist in the present (see, for example,

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6 Interplant communication is not a sci-fi narrative device, for as scholars of forest ecology have demonstrated, plants and fungi collaborate to share resources such as water and nutrients transferred through "mycorrhizal networks" (Simard et al., 2015, p. 137). Ecosystems are thus organised through collaboration rather than competition.

Haraway, Mitman & Tsing 2019, p. 5).[7] Indeed, the plantation system went hand in hand with a transatlantic market contingent on land grabs, coerced labour, the enforced relocation of Black/Indigenous populations and accumulation by extraction and dispossession, thereby producing an uneven world-system where the loci of wealth production were different from the loci of wealth accumulation (see Williams, 2012, 48).

The logic of resource and labour extraction connects the plantation system of the past with the so-called globalised present. For, the plantation system is still alive in enclosed mines in Congo, Zambia, Rwanda and Pakistan, where the local populations experience abuse and poor working conditions that endanger their health for the sake of corporate profits. According to Clyde Woods, the plantation persists "in enclosures and reserves; industrial estates and mill villages; free-trade and export zones; enterprise and empowerment zones; ghettos and gated communities; suburbanization and gentrification; game preserves and tourist resorts; pine plantations and mines; and migratory and prison labor" (2007, p.56), which is not to mention Asian sweatshops, spaces of underdevelopment in urban-metropolitan areas, and critical infrastructure projects that privatise and pollute public lands. For, what characterises all of these places is the appropriation of public space and the exploitation of cheap labour for the benefit of a minority.

The persistence of the plantation system is registered in *Neptune Frost*'s opening sequence, where Black labourers risk losing their lives for not doing efficiently their underpaid jobs in monitored and enclosed spaces. In confronting neocolonial issues related to the Anthropocene from the labour perspective, the film's politics are in keeping with the Third cinematic tradition and its conviction that anticolonial struggle can only be efficient when combined with class struggle (see Mazierska & Kristensen, 2020, p. 6; Sembène, cited in Hennebelle, 2008, p. 13). *Neptune Frost* thus highlights how the construction of a counter-reality is premised on merging anticolonial, class and environmental struggles, as can be seen when the characters reach the utopian community of Digitaria, which provides safe shelter for refugees. This community functions as a space where alternative forms of power and energy are being explored, with its members using upcycled materials for clothing as

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7 *Neptune Frost*'s reappropriation of the musical is in keeping with a Brechtian tradition of filmmaking that includes many Third Cinema directors, who drew on Brecht's idea that musical sequences can act as extra-narrative commentaries and make political critique accessible to a wider audience (see Brecht, 2014, pp. 71–80). The influence of Brecht on Third Cinema has been well documented (see Stam, 2014, p. 274; Wayne, 2001, p. 25; Willemen, 1989, p. 9).

well as digital trash for their energy needs. They receive each other with the greeting "unanimous goldmine", which, the voice-over explains, is "the greeting of the resource-rich who face a world beholden to the currency of our depletion. This golden salute elevates the vibration of metallic injustice to the threshold of planetary injustice". The narrative is intercut by collective discussions where arguments are pitted against counterarguments aiming to illuminate how Black bodies provide the necessary energy for economic growth in the imperial economies. These political debates are emblematic of the film's dialectical quality. It all starts when the miners seek to understand the reasons behind their oppression. Amongst the ideas debated is that they sacrifice their lives to dig out material which they cannot own. A woman, Elohel (Rebecca Mucyo), intervenes to argue that "they cut the cost by exploiting us. They cut the cost of oil through warfare then fuel their armies. We fuel the machine. The engine is the colony. The master and slave, the hardware and the circuit board. The programming is the same".

These dialectical interchanges go beyond the limits of the diegetic universe and turn into an indictment of capitalist accumulation and coerced labour conditions, which themselves stabilise world-systemic inequalities. The dialectical aspect of these passages is in keeping with Haile Gerima's understanding of Third Cinema's mission as "a catalyst, directly or indirectly, in demystifying the superiority of the developed countries" (1989, p. 79). Debunking this "superiority" is a process that involves not only unveiling the violence behind combined and uneven development, but also imagining an empowering future, as per the practice of direct democracy in Digitaria, where debates about achieving a decolonised future of equality are considered within the context of past historical contradictions persisting into the present. Unfolding through songs and discussions, the narrative puts forward potential strategies of resistance as the members of Digitaria hack the Internet and upload videos where they explain how the capitalist order depends upon their own invisible labour. In one emblematic scene a miner is heard saying, "Boycott. Recognize the pattern in the coding. The Black bodies floating in space, in the Mediterranean, the bottom of the Atlantic and beneath us. They are the same Black bodies, mined and mining".

As the film takes on the style of the uploaded videos, *Neptune Frost* becomes a manifesto for a decolonised aesthetics founded upon the principles of raising awareness and disseminating uncomfortable truths. Exemplary in this respect is a tune sung by Matalusa that energises the Digitarians, whose dance operates as a communal form of political expression. The lyrics connect Google's global power, the production of cars and iPhones, the destruction of mountains and the natural

environment, and the extraction of coltan, with Matalusa addressing the camera at the song's end and shouting "fuck Mr. Google" – thereby revealing the connection between invisible labour, uneven development and the digital realm, as well as the surveillance structures that facilitate the oppression of underpaid miners in Africa.

The utopian formation of a resistant collective subject invites the audience to envision not an apocalyptic but a liberated future structured upon the building of solidarities and the reclaiming of Black agency as a counter to the ecological imperialism that seeks, as Grant sardonically frames it, "to 'protect' nature from people – failing to see that we are part of nature, and that people who have not lost their local ecological knowledge are far better earth-keepers than scientists trained in far-away academies" (2017, p. 10). Significantly, this articulation of a liberated future overlaps with the formulation of a different understanding of social agency that goes beyond what Wynter calls the white-constructed concept of the human, namely the "(neo)Liberal-humanist, homo oeconomicus" (2015, p. 199) that functions as the universal standard against which all others are measured and classified. Not only do Williams and Uzeyman challenge this conception of the human as the productive (male) individual guided by instrumental rationality. They also propose a vision of a liberated future that goes beyond binarisms, as the intersex character of Neptune, who changes gender when they become politicised, clearly shows. Other characters in Digitaria also emblematise non-binary identities, and it is not accidental that the construction of a utopian reality goes hand in hand with an articulation of the human that goes beyond the Anthropocene male individual defined by Yusoff as "the lone liberal subject, individualized and in possession of the horizon that he surveys as his territorial acquisition" (2018, p. 60). In doing so, *Neptune Frost* suggests that the building of intersectional solidarities and resistances is a necessary step for imagining an environmentally just future that can challenge the long history of global coloniality.

Beyond the End of the World

In the film's final image, Neptune looks defiantly at the camera of an attacking drone. Framed from the point of view of the drone, the scene conflates the gaze of surveillance technologies with the audience's view of the action. As Lakshmi Padmanabhan puts it, the directors address "the structural complicity between the technologies used to produce these dreams and the technologies we use to dream them, all of which rest on the ultimate currency – the labor of workers turned into technology, metal, and money" (2023, p. 35). There is also something polemical in Neptune's gaze, who remains defiant despite the impending defeat of the

Digitaria project. This direct look at the camera is readable as a reclaiming of political agency that can offer a path to imagine alternatives outside the Anthropocene.

In evading end-of-the-world narratives that simply lament the forthcoming collapse of colonial modernity, and in clearly placing the Anthropocene within the context of histories of colonial/neocolonial violence, *Neptune Frost* invites us to think beyond mainstream apocalyptic imagery. Such an approach corresponds with the Afrofuturist belief that race will play an important role in the future and will be critical in the building of solidarities that can enable a new vision of an egalitarian and environmentally sustainable world. An important aspect of Afrofuturism is the dalliance with generic tropes of science fiction as a means of reclaiming the past from a Black point of view, but also of doing away with mainstream narratives that tend to associate Blackness with decline. Afrofuturists seek to envisage ways in which Black people will play a central role in the shaping of a socially just future and help us, according to Lisa Yaszek, "to say yes to the possibility of new and better futures and thus to take back the global cultural imaginary today" (2006, p. 59).

Ytasha L. Womack argues that the Afrofuturist rewriting of the past and reimagining the future from a Black perspective turns into an act of resistance that defies the mainstream marginalisation of the Black experience (2013, p. 24). This desire to dissociate Black identity from catastrophe has been acknowledged by Williams and Uzeyman, who have explained that a central aim of *Neptune Frost* was to avoid a "miserabilist" approach focusing on "somebody's hunger or somebody's need" (cited in Brown, 2022). Following the Afrofuturist belief in the empowerment of people of colour, *Neptune Frost* seeks to address past and present forms of resource extraction from African soil not to communicate resignation, but to put forward the idea that there is a connection between racial egalitarianism and environmental justice. The Anthropocene crisis calls into question liberal narratives of progress, meaning that the critique put forward by *Neptune Frost* speaks to the present by urging us to imagine a world beyond the rationalistic paradigm of western liberalism (see also Rollefson, 2008).

Audra Mitchell and Aadita Chaudhury have cogently argued that mainstream anxieties surrounding climate debates are anxieties about the impending collapse of structures of white privilege; they propose that mainstream dystopian narratives fail to capture the intertwinement between the Anthropocene and the failure of the western liberal model, instead repeating narratives of abstract human responsibility for the ecocrisis. Furthermore, white futurisms unconsciously reproduce the empire mindset as they associate Black mobilities with decline and

catastrophe, at times placing responsibility for the environmental degradation on those who have historically been on the receiving end of oppression. In effect, end-of-the-world narratives seem to argue for the stabilisation of racial hierarchies as a means of survival for the "universal" white liberal subject. Against this, Mitchell and Chaudhury suggest that a key feature of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) futurisms is a desire to go beyond apolitical apocalyptic fears and to envisage alternatives based upon solidarities that reimagine the future beyond the limitations of white modernity:

> The worlds envisioned by BIPOC futurists do not focus on maintaining current inscriptions of "difference" imposed by a universal notion of "humanity", or pursue societal "purity". Indeed [...] amongst the most salient forms of agency engendered in BIPOC futurisms is the creation of solidarity, coalition, and community across imposed lines of race, gender and sexuality, species, generation, and temporality. (2020, p. 325)

BIPOC futurisms do not thus lament the impending collapse of white colonial modernity on account of the ecocrisis, but rather see it as an opportunity for imagining something that exceeds the empire mindset.

Much of the white post-apocalyptic end-of-the-world discourse does not bemoan a long history of environmental catastrophe but the realisation that the structures of living that promote white privilege are unsustainable. It is for this reason that many of the mainstream proposed solutions to the Anthropocene seek to revive "key techniques used by European colonizers to annex land, displace communities and undermine the sovereignty of BIPOC peoples across the planet" (Chaudhury & Mitchell, 2020, p. 318). Farhana Sultana similarly posits that narratives of apocalypse evoke angst about "loss of material wellbeing tied to white supremacy" (2022, p. 7), and calls for a decolonisation of the climate discourse by recovering the past and present struggles of BIPOC communities.

BIPOC futurisms have a role to play in decolonising the climate conversation as they welcome a world beyond the capitalist structures of power and highlight the key role of the historically oppressed in the articulation of a new vision of history. BIPOC subjects can envision a decolonised historical process founded upon the repatriation of lands and people, and can participate in the abolition of the colonial/capitalist understanding of land as property. These are questions raised by *Neptune Frost*, a film that welcomes the possibility of a new world that does away with the extractive mindset of the status quo. It is important to acknowledge that such a project is in keeping with the revolutionary understanding of justice as struggle, which is precisely why I have read

the film through a Third cinematic lens, since there are certain affinities between Third Cinema's radical anticolonialism and the Afrofuturist desire to envisage a world beyond the logic of empire and capital.

 Paul Willemen has explained that Third Cinema is a flexible category that combines strategies of research and experimentation, while also being "a cinema forever in need of adaptation to the shifting dynamics at work in social struggles" (1989, p. 10). Given that in today's world one cannot delink struggles against racial injustice and neocolonialism from environmental inequalities and crises, Third Cinema's lessons become pertinent in the Anthropocene era. A film like *Neptune Frost*, which challenges apolitical dystopian narratives and invites the viewer to envision a future shorn of neocolonial extractive models of development can urge us to expand Third Cinema's temporal parameters and to rethink the currency of its call for decolonisation on the political and cultural front. As many scholars have acknowledged, the Anthropocene crisis necessitates not just a rethinking of the future but also a non-linear view of history that can enable us to place human-induced climate change within a wider culture of imperial and colonial plunder. Third Cinema theory, Third Cinema critique, and Third Cinema practice provide a fitting framework that can help us to envisage not just a decolonised culture, but also a decolonised future where the relationship between people and land does not accede to the logic of capital accumulation.

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