In its basic definition, the idea of Third Cinema was a concept meant to apply to revolutionary situations in countries outside dominant modes of production. Nonetheless, the idea has always retained a hold on the minds of politically inclined filmmakers operating outside of a third world context. One such group is the L.A. Rebellion, a loose association of African and African American filmmakers who came together as film students at UCLA in the late 60s and 70s. In this paper, I argue that the influence of two of their teachers, Elyseo Taylor and Teshome Gabriel, helped crystallize a way of thinking about the place of Third Cinema in the first world. Gabriel’s groundbreaking study, Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation (1979) offered a particular way of understanding politically engaged countercinema practices. In the filmmaking of the L.A. Rebellion, adapting Third Cinema to an American context resulted in a refiguring of its concepts, strategies, and practices. The result of Third Cinema in the first world, I’ll argue, was a shift from an aesthetics of liberation to an aesthetics of confrontation.

Drawing on recently collected archival materials, oral histories, and newly preserved films—all components of UCLA’s L.A. Rebellion project—this paper explores a specific subset of L.A. Rebellion filmmaking, one that directly aligns with countercinema practices and global liberation movements. Focusing on Larry Clark’s As Above, So Below, Ben Caldwell’s I&I: An African Allegory, Alile Sharon Larkin’s Your Children Come Back to You, Haile Gerima’s Bush Mama, and Bernard Nicolas’s Gidget Meets Hondo, this paper not only fills out our understanding of the films of L.A. Rebellion, but also gives a better picture of African American film practices of the 70s more broadly.

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