African feminist engagements with film

African feminist filmmakers and theorists reflect on the shifting roles of women working at all levels of the film and media industries on the continent, and the task of making films that challenge the existing fictions that misrepresent and distort women's realities.

African film-making is one of the most vibrant and dynamic cultural arenas of our times. Feminist Africa issue 16 (FA16) focuses on feminist engagements with film in various African contexts. To do justice to this rich and rapidly changing arena, the issue draws on a diverse community of film-makers, critics, film scholars and theorists in many ways. We have drawn our inspiration from their work, by attending many screenings and festivals over the years. The three of us, Yaba Badoe [5] (Ghana/UK), Salem Mekuria [6] (Ethiopia/USA), and Amina Mama [7] have a combined expertise that adds up to over half a century of experience in all aspects of film-making and film scholarship. This is not to mention all the hours that we spend in lifetimes of viewing and interpreting films for the sheer pleasure of doing so, and engaging with the challenges of being critical spectators and theorising film from our multiple subversive perspectives.

The perspectives of the contributors to FA16 deepen and nuance our understanding of the manner in which we engage with various aspects of film and the film industry. These include the history of colonial subjugation and enslavement, as well as contemporary global cultural regimes, all of which have operated to erase and misrepresent women from Africa and to service the appetites and cravings of others, in ways that were, and are, often at the very least inimical to our well-being.

These obstacles mean that African women have an especially hard time mobilizing resources to make films at all. This is all the more evident when we wish to make films that speak to our conditions and challenge the existing fictions that misrepresent and distort our realities. Struck by the number of relatively young women from all over the continent who have emerged onto the cinematic landscape during the last 10-15 years, we approached over a dozen women film-makers and invited them to contribute to Feminist Africa. The more we learnt about the arduous conditions these women must navigate to see any of their work come to fruition, the less surprised we were when, later in the process, many of the submissions we had solicited could not be completed, given the demands of actually making films on shoestring budgets.

In FA16 we explore a number of key themes that characterise Africa’s rapidly evolving cinema industry, and its shifting fortunes since its inception as a powerful medium that has been grasped by African men and women determined to ‘dismantle the master’s house.’

We pursued our commitment to this largely unwritten history with a feature article by diasporan scholar and organizer, Beti Ellerson [8]. Her contribution to African women’s film and film studies has been substantial over many years, much of it available online at the website of the Center for the Study and Research of African Women in Cinema [9], and the blog of African Women in Cinema [10] that she established in 2004. Ellerson prefaches her article [11] with the account of the first cinematic encounter with film in 1936 of a Senegalese woman, Kadidja Pâté, as recorded by her son, historian and writer Hampâté Bâ. She then discusses the importance of developing film criticism and film theory that articulate African perspectives on film, before proceeding to discuss the representation of women and gender relations in the work of several of the best-known African women film-makers, and the many challenges that must be scaled by those idealistic and tenacious enough to pursue this powerful craft. Ellerson has also interviewed just about every African women filmmaker on record. In the issue we include a gem from her collection – an interview with the Zimbabwean woman...
novelist, filmmaker and festival organizer, Tsitsi Dangaremba [12].

There is cause to be excited by the future potential of the growing number of women at all levels of the film and media industries on the continent, from the poorly paid acting roles and the on-the-spot improvisations that commercial videos seem to rely on, to more technical roles in production and film direction. A population of women-who-are-increasingly-feminist film-makers, screen-writers, producers, camera-people, light and sound experts and editors is the surest answer to the challenges of changing the limited and distorted representations of African women that have held sway since the earliest colonial propaganda films, and of developing a cinematic language attuned to the lived realities of African people. These challenges are already being met in a range of innovative ways that testify to the huge creative energies of African women and their resilience and persistence.

Some – like Sandra Mbanefo Obiagwu, poet, writer, film producer, director and communications teacher – have worked on many fronts, ultimately establishing their own production companies. In conversation with Nana Sekiyamah [13] of the African Women’s Development Fund, Obiagwu describes her film-making as motivated by her distress at the endless parade of witches, corrupt urban gold diggers, and sexually corrupt students who figure in so many popular Nigerian films. We need to develop critical consciousness not only among the film-making community in Africa, but among the viewing public too. The tired refrain from film-makers and distributors is that they must pander to ‘audience tastes’ in order to sell. This does little to excuse the excesses of cheap commercial video makers, and the content is often so bad that it may well be a gross underestimation of the intelligence of audiences that are diverse, and global.

Lindiwe Dovey, South African film-maker, scholar and festival organizer, argues that African independent cinema has been feminist in its orientation since its inception [14], referring to the powerful celebrations of African women – past and present – in the work of the man most-recognised as the founding father of African cinema, Sembene Ousmane [15] (1923-2007). Whether or not one elects to call him a feminist film-maker, it is clear that his contribution has been highly influential in ways that Dovey explores.

Salem Mekuria’s feature [16] also acknowledges Sembene, for his contribution to the subversion of colonial and nationalist gender discourses, and for his influence on her own film-making. She traces the inspiration and evolution of her powerfully original oeuvre, evolving across continents, beginning with documentaries in African-American history including the Harlem Renaissance through to her questioning and carefully studied documentation of a deeply intimate, personal story in Deluge (1996) that reveals the unmitigated horrors of the Mengistu regime, to her more current experimentation with form using triptych video installations.

Mekuria describes how the work of Sembene and that of his contemporaries: “demonstrate how social change has its deepest roots in self-realization and how the creative filmmaking process provides a quasi-ideal space in which to critique the status-quo and to experiment with the possibilities of more just social relations to develop.”

Indeed, not only do Sembene’s films include positive characterisations of women, but he repeatedly draws on past and present gender relations as a key trope for critically exploring the politics of all forms of inequality. His films have variously provided powerful critiques of class society (Borom Sarrat 1963), racism (Black Girl 1996) nation, religion and official mythologies of nation (Ceddo 1976), rampant corruption, and polygamy (Xala 1975), the human cost of African women migrants’ participation in the global care economy (Black Girl 1996), or the life struggles that see a sexually exploited schoolgirl become a successful urban entrepreneur who can choose her own path and partner (Faat Kine). His final tribute, Moulaade (2004), explores women’s courageous resistance to the dangerous practice of genital cutting. Twelve years before this film, another African cinema giant, Cheik Oumar Sissoko, had made Finzan (1992), featuring two rural women who rebel against the practice of genital cutting and wife inheritance.

One might equally name Djibril Diop Mambety [17] (1945-1998) as a key critic of the gender status quo. His much shorter career was dedicated to the idea of ‘cinema de poche’ by which he meant...
films for and about ordinary people. Also entirely in local languages (but not excluding occasional Wolof appropriations of French), his films are significantly more experimental, maverick phantasmagoric tales of oppressed ordinary people and their strategies for surviving despite postcolonial injustices that predate the ‘high theory’ academic discourses on the condition referred to as ‘postcoloniality’.

His three-part series, Lives of Ordinary People, includes Le Franc, the hilarious tale of an ill-fated lottery winner, set in the context of structural adjustment, with intensifying poverty and hardship characterising the lives of most Senegalese people. La Petit Venduese de la Soleil (The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun. 1999), completed posthumously, draws connections between poverty, class, gender, age and disability. Mambety skilfully presents these intersections being played out among the street hawkers of Dakar through the tenacity of his lead character, a young girl unafraid to contravene the gender conventions of her community, no matter what.

Yaba Badoe discusses the long journey [18] that culminated in The Witches of Gambaga [19] (Ghana/UK 2010) in an essay that includes her personal narrative of how the film was inspired by a long sleepless night in the community of condemned women. She also raises many of the challenges facing those interested in finding a cinematic language for representing women’s lives in a world that has a pre-ordained grammar that is also related to the matter of funding. This theme is also addressed by veteran Egyptian documentary filmmaker and film activist, Jihan El Tahri [20], in a feature that reflects on the strategies she has had to develop to navigate structures of representation [21] that effectively preclude the development of independent voices and perspectives on the world.

Iman Kamel’s deeply personal and artistic documentary, Beit Sha’ar [22] (Nomad’s Home), was inspired during a period of wandering and soul-searching in the Sinai Desert, which led her to return to film the Bedouin women who captivated her poetic imagination. Her account of the frustration felt by her camerawoman [23] suggests that Kamel’s interest may have been stimulated rather than deterred by the fact that filming the faces of these women is forbidden.

It is a less-than-widely understood fact that the highest honour at FESPACO [24] (The Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou) – the award of the Yennenga’s Stallion to the Best Feature Film – pays tribute to legendary Princess Yennenga who is credited with being the founder of the Mossi people in what is now Burkina Faso. Even less known is the fact that she is believed to be buried in Gambaga, the village in Northern Ghana where the witches camp featured in Yaba Badoe’s film is now located. This valorisation is little more than symbolic, given that no woman has been awarded Yennenga’s Stallion since its inception. However, Burkinabe/French director Sarah Bouyain’s impressive trans-national feature Notre Etrangere [25] filmed in Burkina Faso and France won a European Union Award presented under the auspices of FESPACO 2011. Yaba Badoe reviews the film in the issue. [26]

FESPACO’s record is in stark contrast to the accolades bestowed on women at the first Luxor African Film Festival in 2012. The Festival’s two top awards went to women. The Greater Nile Award for Best Film: the Golden Mask of Tutankhamen was awarded to Ghanaian-Kenyan Hawa Essuman for her film, Soul Boy [27], and The Special Jury Award: the Silver Mask of Tutankhamen went to Taghreed Elsanhouri of Sudan for her film, Our Beloved Sudan [28]. Women have not been among the top honourees at subsequent editions of this festival, however. The fluctuating recognition of African women filmmaker’s craft and contributions is clearly a hurdle that needs to be overcome. The field of African women’s film production nevertheless continues to grow and expand, offering critical, creative and surprising visions and stories.

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