

Editorial: African Feminist Engagements with Film¹

Yaba Badoe, Amina Mama and Salem Mekuria

Feminist Africa is 10 years old! To celebrate we have a bumper issue on one of the most vibrant and dynamic cultural arenas of our times – African film-making. True to FA's founding editorial policy, this issue focuses on feminist engagements with film in various African contexts. To do justice to this rich and rapidly changing arena, we have drawn on a diverse community of film-makers, critics, film scholars and theorists in many ways. Firstly we have drawn our inspiration from their work, by attending many screenings and festivals over the years. Our issue co-editors, Yaba Badoe (Ghana/UK) and Salem Mekuria (Ethiopia/USA), both highly accomplished film-makers themselves, have worked closely with the Editor and the FA team in Cape Town, to co-edit and produce FA 16. Our combined expertise adds up to over half a century of experience in all aspects of film-making and film scholarship, not to mention all the hours that we –like most of you – 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 our contributors –makers, organizers, distributors, theorists and critics of film– all offer to 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 mis-represent women from Africa and to service the appetites and cravings of others, in ways that were often at the very least inimical to our well-being. Gayatri Spivak came up with the powerful term 'epistemic violence' to convey the deleterious impact of being subjected to the determinations of others. Even before film was invented, African women were represented in ways that have given us concern for generations. Consider the numerous

iconic representations of Saartje Baartman, who, in 19th century Europe, was exhibited at festivals and fairs to a public fascinated by the ‘spectacle’ of her body in a cage at popular freak shows.

These obstacles mean that we 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, challenging the existing fictions that misrepresent and distort our realities if they do not completely erase us.

In this issue 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’².

All three of us met up while participating in the symposium on “*African Film, Video & the Social Impact of New Technologies*” organized by the Council for the Development of Social Science in Africa (CODESRIA under the auspices of FESPACO 2011). During this remarkable festival we met and kept company with many exciting film makers, and were 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. It was at this meeting that we approached over a dozen women film-makers and invited them to contribute to Feminist Africa. The more we learnt about the arduous conditions they 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. Two of the founders of African film studies - Manthia Diawara and Kofi Anyidiho, facilitated the CODESRIA symposium with the gravitas lent by their gray hairs, and by the presence of an avid group of students from NAFTI (National Film and Television Institute) also in attendance. Not surprisingly, the commercial success of Nollywood took up an inordinate amount of the discussion, but so did its endless pandering to misogynistic fantasies about evil women getting their come-uppances. Nigerian film-maker, Tunde Kilani, led both an appreciation and critique of Nollywood, to argue for a greater use of the rich wealth of African literature in film-making, and greater participation from women. Judith Kibinge presented a well-researched history of film-making in Kenya, reminding us that cinema history for most of our 54 nations is thin at best, and sorely in need of excavation and critical reflection. Finding her happily caught up in shooting her latest work and unable to write for us, we pursued

this commitment to largely unwritten history with the feature contribution of diasporan scholar and organizer, Beti Ellerson. 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, and the blog of African Women in Cinema, (www.africanwomenincinema.org) that she established in 2004. Ellerson prefaces her feature with Kadidja Pâté's account of her first cinematic encounter with film in 1936 before moving on to "explore the tenets of an African women cinema criticism and its application at the emergence of an African cinematic practice some twenty years later." Following Kadidja Pâté's account, as recorded by her son Hampâté Bâ, Ellerson discusses the importance of developing film criticism and film theory that articulates 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, so we have also included a gem from her collection – an interview with the Zimbabwean novelist, filmmaker and festival organizer, Tsitsi Dangaremba.

Also in 2011, the African Women's Development Foundation and the Lagos-based Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts organised the *African Women in Film Forum: In Audio, Pictures and Text*. Held in Nigeria's high octane cultural capital, Lagos, the forum was attended by a cross section of women film- and video-makers, from both commercial and independent film sectors, making it a landmark event that introduced a new level of seriousness into the discussions of film and its implications for women and gender relations in African contexts. The Forum showed that while we have good cause to critique many of the low-cost productions appealing to the imagined banality of audience tastes and flooding a rapidly growing and increasingly global commercial market, we can also be excited by the future potential arising from the growing number of women involved at all levels of the film and media industries, 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.

Some – like Sandra Mbanefo Obiagwu poet, writer, film producer, director and a communications teacher – have worked on many fronts, ultimately establishing their own production companies. In conversation with Nana

Sekiyamah of the African Women's Development Fund during the *African Women in Film Forum* 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. Similar motivations have inspired all the contributors to this issue, who as women, have taken up the tools that will change the limited and distorted representations of women that have held sway since the earliest colonial propaganda films were broadcast to mystify Africa's restless people by colonising their minds – and so dull the capacity for the creativity and imagination that are as key to resilience as to resistance. African women film-makers channel Amílcar Cabral's insights – whether they have read his writings or not – evidenced by their struggle to develop a cinematic language attuned to the lived realities of African people – women and men. Aminata Oudreago put it succinctly in her conversation with Beti Ellerson, when she points out that:

"Women of the Diaspora and African women do not live the same reality. Our problems are similar but are not posed in the same way. ...We asked the women of the African Diaspora to let us first talk among ourselves before meeting them. (p. 50)

The challenges are clearly being met in a range of innovative ways that testify to the huge creative energies of African women and the resilience and persistence that has seen a growing number work their way into a realm that has always favoured men, and that has contributed to the subordination of women. The surest answer to this cultural onslaught lies in the hands of the growing population of women-who-are-increasingly-feminist film-makers, screen-writers, producers, camera-people, light and sound experts and editors – we need to develop critical consciousness among the film-making community in Africa, and among the viewing public. 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, 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 (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 also acknowledges Sembene, for his contribution to the subversion of colonial and nationalist gender discourses, and his influence on her film-making. She describes how studying his work and those of his contemporaries:

"has been invaluable in developing my understanding of cinema's vast potential to transform the unbalanced relations between the dominant and the dominated. Their works 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 (Mekuria p. 10).

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), the life struggles that see a sexually exploited schoolgirl become a successful urban entrepreneur who can choose her own path and partner (*Faat Kine*), or his final tribute, *Moulaade* (2004), which 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 (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 3 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 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.

Mekuria's feature 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 current experimentation with form using triptych video installations.

After the CODESRIA workshop, the remainder of our days in Burkina Faso were devoted to savouring an atmosphere animated by thousands of ordinary Burkinabes flocking out of their workplaces to view even the most sophisticated *auteur* films, and as eager to see the latest in African cinematography as the cosmopolitan collection of directors, producers, jury members and critics who were also in attendance. We too found ourselves viewing as many films as possible, in an effort to slake the great hunger experienced by all African film fans, who rarely get the chance to view many of the films produced by and for African audiences, and with our multiple and endlessly intriguing realities in the sights of lenses that search far deeper than the whites of our eyes.

Yaba Badoe 's feature discusses the long journey that culminated in *The Witches of Gambaga* (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 addressed by veteran Egyptian documentary filmmaker and film activist, Jihan El Tahri, in a feature that reflects on the strategies she has had to develop to navigate structures of representation that effectively preclude the development of independent voices and perspectives on the world.

Iman Kamel's deeply personal and artistic documentary *Beit Sha'ar* (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 suggests that Kamel's interest may have been stimulated rather than deterred by the fact that filming the faces of women is forbidden.

It is a less-than-widely understood fact that the highest honor at FESPACO – the award of the Yennenga's Stallion to the Best Feature Film – pays a 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 Yannenga's Stallion since its inception. However, Burkinabe/French Director Sarah Bouyain's impressive transnational feature *Notre Etrangere* filmed in Burkina Faso and France won a European Union Award presented under the auspices of FESPACO 2011.

FESPACO's record is in stark contrast to the accolades bestowed on women at the first Luxor African Film Festival in February 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 Ghanian-Kenyan Hawa Essuman for her film *Soul Boy* and The Special Jury Award: the Silver Mask of Tutankhamen to Taghreed Elsanhoury of Sudan for her film *Our Beloved Sudan*.

Endnotes

- 1 We owe a particular note of thanks to the judges and organisers of Africa's largest Film Festival – La Festival Pan Africain d'Arts Cineastes (aka FESPACO), because we first met to conceptualise *Feminist Africa 16* as their guests, over the dusty tables of La Village D'Artisans in Ougadougou, between the thrilling screenings of the latest in African film.
- 2 Reference to African-American poet, Audre Lourde 'Sister Outsider' (1984, The Crossing Press).