Notwithstanding natural disasters, 2010 was an exceptional year, particularly for women in film. Firstly, Kathryn Bigelow broke the gender divide and became the only woman ever to win Best Director at the Academy Awards of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Not long after this, a group of African women directors got together for a conference in Johannesburg and took part in a first-of-its-kind film festival showcasing African women directors, organised by Women of the Sun. The first event got extensive international attention, which was well deserved. The second felt like a bit of a clandestine operation. Ten years into the 21st century it seems that films made by African women, with one or two exceptions, are not able to draw crowds. The world is just not ready.

In fact it is worth asking whether the world will ever be ready, *en masse*, to sample the curio that is African women’s cinema, when it appears to be no easy feat to persuade South Africans to watch South African movies on the big screen. Perhaps people were confused about the very term ‘African women’s cinema’ and wondered: will it all look and sound the same? I once went to a women’s spoken poetry evening where most of the poems made reference to menstrual blood and infidelity, and even...
though I have experienced both, I can relate to the anxiety that there
could be a common theme within films grouped under a ‘made by a
woman’ banner.

Actually, the broad span of films that women on this continent make
only goes to prove that they are as diverse in story, tone and style as
the experiences and world views of the people who make them. Would
we consider placing all black filmmakers under one aesthetic umbrella
and attempt to argue that there’s a black film style or a black approach
to making films? If so, what do we do with Indian film? Indians in the
history of South Africa are politically black too. Do you see what we are up
against? If we narrow it down and discount formulaic, star-driven, action-
packed commercial models and place our focus on independent films,
can we find a unifying gender aesthetic, a single gender category? Could
a common feminine thread be found in the works of, say, American
filmmaker Sophia Coppola¹ and Algerian filmmaker Djamila Sahraoui²?
Or if you want to compare solely within the African diaspora, could the
films of Ghanaian writer and director Shirley Frimpong Manso³ be found
to have resonance with those of Burkina Faso’s most renowned woman
filmmaker, Fanta Régina Nacro⁴?

I would say that although the films made by each of these women could
not be more different, what unites them as filmmakers is their struggle to
have their films realised. Even Kathryn Bigelow, a well-respected director
even before she took home her Academy Award, fought for many years
to get a big film project financed. Although women have a substantial
body of work in documentary and experimental genres, in the world
of fiction, and particularly in terms of auteur filmmaking, women are
woefully under-represented.

Allison Anders⁵, one of the few American filmmakers working
successfully in the Hollywood studio system, calls this kind of
independent cinema, where women get to write and shoot their own
scripts, ‘dark, personal work’. The number of women in this category is
tiny and of these, many struggle to get a body of work to their name.
Instead there is a constant fight to make each subsequent film (if they are
lucky), a fight as though each is their first. It seems that the saying ‘You
are only as good as your last film’ applies solely to men. For women, it
is a case of having to prove yourself anew each time. When it comes to
black women, these statistics get even more extreme. As Anders puts it:
Women directors have to restart their careers each time they make a movie ... I think once they've heard a woman's voice they're like, okay. Thank you. I've heard it now. Especially women of colour. Forget it (2000:27).

The depressing fact is that making an independent feature film is going to get even harder for everyone, not just women. This is first and foremost because of the huge amount of money that needs to be invested up front in a venture that may never make any money back, later or somewhere down the line. As the industry shifts and new media platforms open up to change the format of filmmaking, along with its models of distribution, the channel for getting financial backing to make a full-length, independent feature film gets narrower and narrower. Whenever there is a global financial crisis it is nearly always arts budgets that are the first to get slashed. In this context, anything that is deemed to be risky in any way, either due to subject matter or to the filmmaker being a newcomer, has very little chance of being nurtured into life. The few women who ‘make it’ and get the backing they need have to be extremely talented as well as passionate about what they do. They usually write like genies, or work closely with people who do, and will probably have experienced a certain amount of good fortune just managing to get all the conditions right to get their film made. It is nothing short of a miracle when this happens and you have to applaud the very small number who do get past all the hurdles and make a film that resonates with audiences. Perhaps what unites women auteurs is the fact that they have to struggle uphill with their legs tied together to actually achieve what they do.

Mira Nair,* who began as a documentary filmmaker and later went on to become one of the most renowned female fiction directors in the business, puts it beautifully when she describes how she works on set, pulling in with actors and crew and refusing to play the precious director: ‘I would do anything. There are no rules ever in directing, I think. Whatever the actor needs, whatever the situation needs, you have to come up with’ (Nair 2000:266). Nair’s passion to make her debut feature, *India Cabaret* (1985), came out of her experience of documenting the lives of striptease artists.

Being a documentary filmmaker and living among your subjects in order to get the core of who they are and the meaning behind
their lives was the instinctive approach that Nair turned to while directing *Salaam Bombay* (1988), a story told from the point of view of orphan street children in Bombay. The majority of Nair’s cast were non-actors: street kids who got through the auditions. She wanted to remain as close to their reality as possible, working for long hours in their world, getting covered ‘in shit’ and dealing with large crowds of onlookers on the streets of Bombay on a daily basis. What she elucidates is a whole different world to the fairytale we get shown in commercial Indian cinema. Nair and her co-writer even rewrote the script with the children to ensure that every word of dialogue would be real. She ended up with a beautiful film. ‘It was a sort of guerrilla operation. Maybe it’s like having a baby. You can get all the pain out’ (Nair 2000:267).

Anders, who was a single parent when she went to film school, makes no secret of the highly personal nature of her filmmaking:

> It’s my job, in a way, to put this stuff out there. The strange thing is that people think that when you put personal stuff into your work that it’s cathartic. It’s not real – or not entirely. I think it definitely helps along the way (2000:59).

The script of her first film, *Gas Food Lodging* (1992), was based on a novel by Richard Peck, *Don’t Look and It Won’t Hurt* (1999). The book had so much in common with Anders’ reality that she wished she had written it herself. So she adapted the novel into a script and fine-tuned the facts to more closely portray what she needed to say. Anders, who was gang-raped at the age of twelve, built abuse into the storyline and even named her rapists in the script. When her producer objected she told him,

> What? Are these rapists going to come forward and say how dare she? I’m going to sue her? I said, boy, I would love that. I would love it if it drew them out of the woodwork (2000:60).

Lisa Cholodenko is another independent filmmaker who writes and directs her own work. Her first feature was in part inspired by a difficult relationship with her boss:
I just felt really oppressed and denigrated. And I think the original idea for *High Art* [1998] came out of this incredible humiliation I felt at being around this person, how much repulsion I felt at the time and how unconscious and indifferent she was as to how she made people around and under her feel. I was raging, in a way, and this was my outlet (2005: 42).

Cholodenko had her first big hit with *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), which won a Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture in the category of Musical or Comedy. It is a beautiful, tender and funny film about a lesbian couple whose lives are turned upside down when their kids decide to meet their sperm-donor father. Cholodenko and co-writer Stuart Blumberg began writing the script in 2004. Despite the fear that a film about semen, lesbians and inquisitive kids would not be received well, the film was green-lit in 2006, but shooting was postponed when Lisa herself got pregnant with anonymous sperm. Once again, much of the film’s strength lies in its acute proximity to the truth of the filmmaker.

When you compare Sahraoui’s film *Barakat!* (2006) and Régina Nacro’s *The Night of Truth* (2004), there are some strong similarities. Yet these lie not in style, tone or story, but by way of intention. Both films deal with different countries in different times. Nacro creates a fictional African state, closely akin to Rwanda, while Sahraoui’s film is about the country she grew up in, Algeria. In both cases the countries are at war and lives, lots of lives, are at stake. It is the stark reality of far too many places on this continent and as Nacro points out, not just on this continent. Her film could just as easily be pointing a finger at the genocide that followed the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. These two women directors, both of whom easily fall into the category of independent filmmakers, were not driven to write about anything other than the all-consuming conflict they have seen around them, and of women, their strength, their complicity and their ability to represent resistance. What comes through is a love of place and, in both cases, the need to create, through film, some kind of hope. Once again, both storylines are deeply steeped in harsh, bleak, personal reality.

If you believe, as I do, that what goes on behind the camera is reflected in the final film, then you will agree that the struggle to get personal
recognition for your vision will pop up all over the place within the films themselves. And this, if anything, can begin to bleed into some kind of gender aesthetic, but only in independent cinema. It could be argued that once the independent woman filmmaker has embarked on the heroine’s journey of getting her film made, there is no turning back. The only way is forward into the quagmire, and the only resources she can rely on are her original vision of the film, the quest itself and the truths that lie within her. I would argue that what comes out of this is an honest quality in women’s independent cinema that resonates with audiences on a deep human level and that this candour is precisely what makes these films more poignant to watch.

However, I think there is a very important factor that needs to be pointed out to any woman thinking about sacrificing her life to the world of directing. With the job comes a certain amount of kudos. But no matter how ‘down with the people’ you attempt to be, crews respond predictably when it is a woman at the helm. For Anders, this is what sucks most about being in the driving seat:

He goes, “On the plane I thought you were the wardrobe chick. I didn’t know you were the director. Then the guys told me. “The redhead who was yakking it up with us? She’s the director, man”. Unfortunately, this kind of tedious respect has continued with my crews ever since. It’s a hard thing for women directors: you don’t get laid as much (2001:67).

REFERENCES


NOTES
1 US-American filmmaker of films such as *Lost in Translation* (2003) and *Somewhere* (2010), which won several prestigious international awards.
2 Algerian filmmaker. Her film *Barakat!* deliberately aims to undermine the image of submissive Muslim women and is discussed in this book by Katarina Hedrén.
3 Ghanaian film director, producer and writer, who tells stories with African perspectives.
4 The Grande Dame amongst Burkina Faso's filmmakers. The gender politics of her film *Puk Nini* is discussed in this book.
5 US-American filmmaker, scriptwriter and producer for film and TV. She directed episodes of *Sex and the City* and produced *The L-Word* series.
6 Filmmaker of Indian descent living in New York, who has made a number of critically and commercially successful films and is the recipient of numerous awards.
7 American filmmaker, whose debut film *High Art* (1998) received critical acclaim and attention for its portrayal of lesbian relationships.