

Ines Kappert

'I am a feminist only in secret'. Interview with Taghreed Elsanhoury and Christina von Braun

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'I AM A FEMINIST ONLY IN SECRET'

INTERVIEW WITH
**TAGHREED ELSANHOURI AND
CHRISTINA VON BRAUN**

INTERVIEW BY
INES KAPPERT

In September 2010 African women filmmakers met with *taz* editor, German author and journalist Ines Kappert, who also took the time to interview German intellectual, filmmaker and feminist academic Christina von Braun and Sudanese filmmaker Taghreed Elsanhoury. While debate about the state of filmmaking on the continent continues, especially for women practitioners, there is an increasing demand for stories which capture authentic perspectives and reveal how women from the continent narrate stories from an African point of view. Within the framework of the three-day 'ARTSWork: Meeting of African Women Filmmakers' conference, Elsanhoury and von Braun met to discuss what it means to take a camera in one's hand as a woman in the Sudan and why feminism has a bad reputation in African societies.

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INES KAPPERT: *In your films and in your work in general, the gender perspective and negotiations between men and women play an important role. Would you call yourselves feminists?*

TAGHREED ELSANHOURI: Only in secret.

CHRISTINA VON BRAUN: Naturally I am a feminist. The term is used almost only in a defamatory sense in the public domain; this is all the more reason to confess to it.

TAGHREED: To label myself a feminist would be counterproductive. We, that is my generation of women between 20 and 40 years old, are all grateful today for what women achieved in the seventies, but in our everyday lives we have learned that we have to proceed more strategically in order to get from A to B. Apart from that, for me as a black woman, race is just as important as gender.

INES [TO CHRISTINA]: *Younger women, especially, dismiss the feminist movement as a point of reference in the struggle for their own freedom of action remarkably often. Does that annoy you?*

CHRISTINA: Annoy? I don't know. If women can't relate to feminism, then they are entitled not to. That doesn't affect me. But, unfortunately, closet feminists *de facto* put their names to the defamatory attributions to feminism. We shouldn't participate in these derogatory discourses, and that doesn't at all mean adopting an uncritical stance towards women's movements and the different shades of feminism. But of course I understand that it is somewhat different for a Sudanese woman than for myself.

TAGHREED: Perhaps it is time to rehabilitate the term. At the moment to be a feminist is just as much as to be despised for saying: 'I am a Communist.'

INES: *What meaning does solidarity have for you?*

TAGHREED: That has to do with my multi-culturalism, too. I was born in the Sudan and then grew up in London and also went to school there. I am completely clear about what Western women have achieved in the West. I am aware also that I profit from their achievements, whether it has to do with the right to a divorce or the right to vote. But I don't believe that I'm dishonouring this legacy because I don't wear a feminist badge on my chest all the time. There are very diverse forms of solidarity.

CHRISTINA: One should never forget: the first women's movement, the Suffragettes, was used by the colonial rulers, male and female, to undermine Egyptian society. The same people who stood up for doing away with the veil and promoted the 'modernisation' of women in Egypt fought against the franchise for women in Great Britain. To that extent, it isn't surprising that in African societies, feminism is seen as a Western import and has accordingly been given a bad reputation. But I'm pleading for people to keep in mind that there isn't only one 'feminism', but very many different forms – in the West, too. In France, for instance, emancipation is understood somewhat differently from in, say, Germany or Scandinavia.

***INES:** The wholesale rejection of feminist ideas today as always paternalistic, if not colonialist, could also harm Western women because they have nothing to do with colonialism – even if it is only because of being born at a later time, or just because they're trying to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors.*

TAGHREED: I'd like to tell you both a story. When I was travelling around in South Sudan for the first time, I came across Nomad women who had never been to school. This shocked me greatly because the women looked just like me and in spite of that, they almost appeared to belong to another species. I thought at the time, for heaven's sake, they can't even write, what happens to them and what is my responsibility here? Such a thought made me think for the first time about the differences in the experiences of women in the Sudan. Perhaps white women felt like that when they encountered us, women in Africa. Perhaps they felt as if too much was asked of them and they were full of sympathy. In this sense there might be a similarity in this situation. And I wanted to help but hadn't a clue as to how to do it or where to start.

CHRISTINA: I have never been an activist who attended large street demonstrations, it isn't my thing. But in my research work I have continually asked myself the question: What were the circumstances that produced particular images of men and women? What were the cultural, societal and spiritual factors that characterised gender and the role of images in creating role models? Probably even the demand for emancipation is the product of historical circumstances. If we are to view it internationally, every society

has its own type of emancipation. No one else can do it for you, it has to be created by the people, the women themselves.

INES [TO CHRISTINA]: *Among other things, your scientific interest is directed toward the genealogy of cinema and the dominant ways of looking or gaze regimes. How are these connected?*

CHRISTINA: Every new technology in the media was accompanied by a change in the order of the sexes. It does not matter whether we are speaking about the invention of the alphabet, the central perspective, the printing press or even the invention of the cinema at the end of the 19th century. Photography – and, following on from that, cinema – has adopted dominant ways of looking at the central perspective. Put simply, these have defined looking as male and being-looked-at as female. But the visual techniques are Western inventions and so these dominant ways of looking, the idea of the gendered gaze, are genuinely Western, too. In a different historical or social context these techniques may have a different effect on how technology, its relation to the gaze and gender intersect.

TAGHREED: Without doubt there is a cultural difference with regard to the gaze. The Western gaze is very direct as opposed to that of the East. In the East it is not customary to look one another in the eyes. Women and men, especially, routinely avoid direct eye contact and because of this I always find it exciting when a protagonist in film looks at me unabashedly or looks directly into the camera.

INES: *Why?*

TAGHREED: Maybe it is only curiosity because the man or woman concerned isn't perhaps so familiar with the visual media. In spite of this there is always something radical and confrontational about not avoiding the eye of the camera but presenting oneself openly to it.

CHRISTINA: This would mean that in a culture that avoids the direct gaze or eye contact, a dialogue with the eyes is subverted by the direct gaze into the camera. This would represent an act of subversion in your own culture?

TAGHREED: Perhaps, yes.

CHRISTINA: But it could also mean that you employ the technique and in so doing use Western tradition subversively. This tradition actually claims that the human being cannot return the one-sided gaze of the camera eye.

INES [TO TAGHREED]: *When you were in your mid-20s you returned to the home country of your parents for the first time, and in 2006 you made your first documentary film, All About Darfur. What meaning does 'own culture' have for you?*

TAGHREED: I haven't any 'own culture'. I live in a state of continuous psychological stress and tension. As an adolescent I felt this hybridity to be burdensome, but today I experience it as a source of creativity.

CHRISTINA: You mentioned that in *All About Darfur* many women didn't want to express an opinion in front of the camera. Why is this?

TAGHREED: There are many reasons. For a start, I am a city woman and many of my interview partners in the Sudan came from the countryside and had never been to school. For that reason, there was an enormous gap in education. In addition, I was working with a cameraman. But, interestingly, the women always immediately understood that I was the boss and not the cameraman. Most Sudanese women aren't used to being asked for their opinion or advice, especially not where political topics are concerned. My question as to how they experienced the partition of the Sudan was probably too political, and because of their insecurity in being invited to express an opinion, the women then hid behind their veils. The younger ones started to giggle while the older ones become pointedly quiet. In the end I needed a week to gain their confidence, but I learnt my lesson. If I wanted the voices of women, especially in remote regions, then I had to plan in production to spend more time with the women and gain their confidence. This additional time also costs more money.

CHRISTINA: What does it mean to be a woman with a camera and to be filming in a culture that prefers to avoid direct eye contact? Isn't that almost obscene?

TAGHREED: In some ways it is brutal, to say the least, but it's very important to me. In fact, I insist on direct eye contact. Perhaps this is where my Western education comes into play or perhaps I'm too hard on my culture. But no, I don't think that I should have to apologise only because I'm demanding something.

CHRISTINA: But couldn't the avoidance of eye contact between the sexes also be a sign of respect?

TAGHREED: It does involve respect, but it is a double-edged respect. I interpret men's looking away from me particularly as a lack of attention to me. It is as if they don't believe I could be capable of understanding their words and deliberations.

INES: *If you were a man, do you believe you would have been addressed directly?*

TAGHREED: Yes, of course. Men address each other directly and women address each other directly. Men to men and women to women.

INES: *According to this, the camera does assist in adopting a male subject position as women therefore garner more respect?*

TAGHREED: As a documentary filmmaker the camera unconditionally is subject to my control and I can ask the questions, and in this context one can't just ignore me. For me, the averted gaze is a metaphor for the majority of people in the Sudan who don't want to confront reality. They want to look away and they don't want to take any responsibility. This is what makes me very angry. But with the camera – my camera can confront people with their averted gaze and it relentlessly demands attention. If I speak in front of the camera, I am then always challenged to reflect on my words and this requires self-reflection from both the filmmaker and the conversation partner.

CHRISTINA: What a wonderful description of the work of a female cinematographer!

INES [TO CHRISTINA]: *At the same time, this intimacy with the camera eye, connoted as masculine, diverges clearly from your interpretation. You rather saw the camera as an instrument of repression that transformed women into objects of the male gaze.*

CHRISTINA: Yes, certainly; historically, this analysis is correct. In the early days of the cinema, the eye of the camera continually unveiled women and thus subjected them to the desire of the 'armed eye'. It is not by chance that simultaneously with the invention of photography and cinema, the phenomenon of anorexia nervosa emerged. Anorexia is the refusal to offer one's own flesh to be devoured by the 'voracious' eye. Women withdraw from this gaze regime or ways of looking by attempting to become invisible. Today female cinematographers frequently deconstruct this system of looking through their own films as a matter of course.

INES: *Is unveiling always negative? Especially in Western cultures, we enjoy putting the female body on display, being able to reveal and celebrate it.*

CHRISTINA: Our 'veil' is called the pressure towards nudity. Think of the bikini. Since its invention women [have been] becoming increasingly thinner ... The freedom to be naked is always accompanied by a compulsion to conform to stereotypes and to assume a different body. We should proceed very carefully with this assumption that Western women are freer because they are dressed more revealingly. Of course, one can walk better with flat shoes and a life without a corset is also a better one, but freedom has not yet been achieved by an exposed navel.

INES [TO TAGHREED]: *Do you agree with that?*

TAGHREED: Of course. I'm also a victim of the Western ideal of beauty and would be glad to have a flat stomach and legs free of cellulite. But here in Johannesburg when I look at my colleagues who come from all over Africa, I think, *so what, my figure is quite okay*. The women here are all very proud of their bellies and they aren't all flat! Even in the Sudan, the women are more relaxed with regard to their figures than the women in London, but without doubt the veil does have a repressive side.

CHRISTINA: Of course.

TAGHREED: For me, the veil symbolises compromise above all. I wear it as a courtesy to others or as a protective precaution against aggression to the extent that both the compulsion to reveal and that to conceal are instruments for the oppression of women. They serve exactly the same purpose, namely to force a feminine ideal onto the individual woman.

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As is evident from this interview, the lived experiences of Christina von Braun and Taghreed Elsanhoury inform how each expresses her political positioning in relation to feminism. Their social contexts shape how the term is understood and, whether or not, it is enabling or disabling, depending on the filmmaker's political and artistic agendas – which are informed by the geo-political places they occupy. While they may differ on the matter of feminism as a term and its multiple interpretations, they are unambiguous and unanimous on the subject of the 'power of the camera'. Both celebrate its value as an instrument for social commentary. Both harness its power to subvert hegemonic gender dispositives. And both use the camera as an instrument to challenge acts of looking and ways of seeing to counter the historical construction of the gaze.