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'Women, use the gaze to change reality'. Interview with Katarina Hedrén

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'WOMEN, USE THE GAZE TO CHANGE REALITY'

INTERVIEW WITH
KATARINA HEDRÉN

INTERVIEW BY
**JYOTI MISTRY AND
ANTJE SCHUHMAN**

Katarina Hedrén is a film programmer and festival organiser, as well as a discussion and workshop moderator/facilitator, and a writer, translator and interpreter in different contexts related to the cultural industries. She has worked with various producers, organisations and film festivals such as Women of the Sun, an advocacy organisation for African woman filmmakers, the Tri-Continental Human Rights Film Festival and the international documentary conference, People to People. She is one of two co-programmers for the First Wednesday Film Club, an independent Johannesburg-based film club which has become an institution among film- and TV-industry professionals and film enthusiasts. Her writing has appeared in Swedish, South African and pan-African publications and websites, including the Swedish film publication *FLM*, the Stockholm International Film Festival's catalogue, *The Times*, *Africa is a Country* and *Africiné*. Katarina is the author of the blog 'In the Words of Katarina'. Before moving to South Africa from Sweden she was a board member and the chairperson of the Swedish-African film festival CinemAfrica between 2001 and 2005. In addition to offering Swedish cinemagoers otherwise hard-to-access quality films made by African filmmakers from Africa and its diasporas, CinemAfrica's goal is to spread nuanced portrayals of Africa and Africans.

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JYOTI MISTRY: *You have quite an extraordinary position in being able to navigate between multiple spaces, not just in terms of where you live and work but in the kinds of access you have curating and advising on African cinema for Scandinavian film festivals and film programmes. Can you offer some observations on the experiences and some of the complexities and challenges: not just in terms of the expectations but also the kind of content that is favoured and created in Africa?*

KATARINA HEDRÉN: The lack of financial and infrastructural resources available to create viable African film industries is a huge problem. African filmmakers often spend more time trying to find money than focusing on aesthetics and storytelling concerns. In most cases filmmakers either make self-financed films, or they rely on the support of institutions with specific mandates and not enough regard for aesthetics and artistic concerns. Many African films deal with interesting or pressing issues, but not all of them do so in a cinematic way.

In the future, I am looking forward to seeing more African filmmakers turning the lens on geographical and cultural landscapes other than their own. While no one raises an eyebrow when Western filmmakers explore and explain remote parts of the world, African filmmakers are expected to solely focus on their own realities.

When it comes to the film festival circuit, I would like for more international film festivals to include African films in their main selections, instead of programming them separately in special-interest and separate sections.

Whether it is international film festivals or African film festivals, programmers often curate African content around particular themes or for the purpose of introducing African film to new audiences. Such themes are more often than not related to societal concerns [more] than to cinema and aesthetics. Both the Durban and the Toronto international film festivals have a history of ensuring that they showcase the best of African cinema and that their programming reflects the progress and the diversity of African cinema. If more festivals did the same, African film would become less of a curious sideshow of which not much is expected, in the eyes of both African audiences and audiences in other parts of the world. It would also, of course, help to remind audiences that behind every 'African problem' or any other circumstances that happen to unfold in African countries or

which are portrayed by filmmakers that happen to be African, is the thinking and feeling individual who makes the film. These individuals share many traits with other Africans, and have a whole lot in common with Europeans, Americans and Asians too.

ANTJE SCHUHMAN: *You have taken to creating a blog that reflects on some of your experiences and observations of the content and debates around race and gender in European-African relations. Without reducing your observations of the subtleties and nuances that you have expressed over time, how might you express the prevailing sentiments regarding representations of race and gender and the aesthetic and content considerations of films produced?*

KATARINA: Growing up on film and TV-content created by white American and European filmmakers has taught me to engage and identify with characters and contexts that at least at a superficial level do little to validate my existence as a black woman. Here I make reference to Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy, every film by Woody Allen and popular TV series like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, as a few examples. Being able to identify with human beings regardless of gender and colour is a good thing. However, getting used to seeing people who look like me playing extras or appearing as distorted caricatures or not seeing black people at all remains the problem.

A couple of years ago Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (author of *Half of a Yellow Sun* [2006]) spoke about the danger of the 'single story'.¹ That story is one that portrays Africa as a place of misery without nuance or subtlety. Films like *The Constant Gardener* (2005) by Fernando Meirelles or Susanne Bier's Oscar-winning film *In a Better World* (2010), both made by accomplished filmmakers, illustrate this danger. This single story is a threat both to Africans who are reduced to tired stereotypes, and filmmakers, who become so distracted by fantasies that they lose the capacity to skilfully portray countries and human beings who happen to be African in nuanced and complex ways.

Obviously, not all black filmmakers treat black characters with more respect and dignity [than] all their white colleagues ... What has become clear to me, however, is that talented black filmmakers are more likely to treat *all* their characters, regardless of their skin colour, as rounded human beings in their stories.

In an insert for Radio Sweden in 2013, entitled *Senegalese film makes us smarter*, I compared Bier's *In A Better World* with French/Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis's *Tey* (2012). Bier's film unfolds in Denmark and what was then Sudan, and Gomis's in Dakar, Senegal. While painting complex and nuanced portraits of her Danish characters, the Sudanese end up being represented as either helpless victims or unspeakably evil villains. Satché, the main character in *Tey*, is Senegalese, but could have been of any nationality and lived in any country in the world, which is emphasised through his portrayal by American poet Saul Williams. So Alain Gomis tells a story not simply of a Senegalese man, but rather of a human being dealing with feelings of fear, joy, lust and disappointment; emotions that anyone can relate to regardless of gender, nationality or [skin] colour.

I'm obviously not saying that filmmakers must not talk about negative aspects of Africa. Filmmakers like Djamila Sahraoui, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun and Kivu Ruhorahoza do, without ever compromising their characters and themselves.

The experience of being reduced to clichés and stereotypes is as painful as it is humbling, and I am certain that this experience is partly what makes these filmmakers' films so much more nuanced than Susanne Bier's and Ferdinand Meirelles's.

ANTJE: *What is your opinion on the gendered dimensions of African cinema in terms of content and production, and the role of women in developing cinema on the continent?*

KATARINA: I am not sure that African cinemas are worse off in this regard than films from other parts of the world. Film industries in Africa are no exception. They are also male dominated. Where women are at the centre they tend to be portrayed as victims of poverty and/or of African men, or as objects of seduction. In the same way that filmmakers from other parts of the world struggle to portray Africa and Africans, male filmmakers tend to look at the world through male glasses and not pay attention to female perspectives [or] even female presence on the screen. The female body and psyche tend to be used as symbols, props and battlegrounds, rather than being considered in their own right. Again, this is as true in Africa as it is elsewhere in the world.

What is unique in Africa, though, is that many African films have been commissioned or made with the support of organisations mandated to

support development [and/or] promote healthy living, democracy and justice. As women and children are especially vulnerable in regions plagued by conflict or poverty, it is understandable that they are often portrayed as victims. What is harder to understand, however, is that we [are] so rarely introduced to women with names, histories, likes and dislikes. It is about being able to portray women as individuals who happen to exist in certain or particular contexts and who are no different from other people and individuals with hopes, dreams and ambitions – this is of course putting extreme circumstances aside.

If women in general are marginalised on and behind the big screen, then black women are even more marginalised and poor black women, as well as black lesbians and queer women, are further marginalised. Dee Rees, an African American woman filmmaker, made *Pariah* in 2011. It's a coming-of-age coming out story about a lesbian girl living in the inner city. This film won widespread acclaim and it gives me hope that the world is not completely uninterested in seeing black women on film.

Djamila Sahraoui's *Barakat!*, which I deal with in my chapter in this book, is a unique film in that it features two women on a rescue mission to save a man. *Barakat!* passes what has become known as the Bechdel Test, which stipulates that a film must include two named women who talk to each other about something other than a man. This film is unique and [not only is it] set apart from most other African films, but [it] is distinct from most films from all over the world.

JYOTI: *What is your single most desired aspiration for seeing how gender inequalities might be shifted in the film industry or as a creative artwork?*

KATARINA: The only solution, in my opinion, is [for] more women with a feminist agenda [to] become decision makers [who are in] control of finances, that is, producers, broadcasting directors, ministers of arts and culture, heads of film funds, as well as film schools and film festivals. I cannot imagine that such a radical change would not result in more nuanced and less gender-normative and oppressive film content [being] made by both men and women.

The wonderful bell hooks coined the concept of 'The Oppositional Gaze' in her 1992 paper [of] the same name [which was] subtitle[d] 'Black Female Spectators'. Hooks refers back to a time when slaves in America were not

allowed to look at white people but did so nevertheless. By breaking the rules, she concludes, they used their gaze to change reality. Ultimately, that is what I am hoping for – that more women making films will result in more truthful accounts not just about women [in] film, but about the world as a whole.

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NOTES

- 1 'The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story' (Adichie 2009).