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Tsitsi Dangarembga: A Manifesto. Interview with Tsitsi Dangarembga

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TSITSI DANGAREMBGA: A MANIFESTO

INTERVIEW WITH
TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

INTERVIEW BY
**JYOTI MISTRY AND
ANTJE SCHUHMAN**

Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in Zimbabwe and is the author of the critically acclaimed novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988). As a filmmaker and activist she is invested in the ‘capacity building’ of young female visual artists. She recognised the opportunity present in the gathering of an influential group of women at the Goethe-Institut ‘ARTSWork: Meeting of African Women Filmmakers’ conference in 2010, and used the context of the conference to draft a preliminary Manifesto of African Women Filmmakers, the initial workings of which are outlined below. Inspired by the undertakings of the manifesto, the accompanying interview offers a contextual description of the immediate experiences, observations and rationale for how filmmaking for women in Zimbabwe has evolved. Even more significantly, Dangarembga addresses the complexity of the gendered experience for filmmakers on the continent.

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MANIFESTO OF AFRICAN WOMEN FILMMAKERS

Having met at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg, at the Conference of African Women Filmmakers held from 2 to 5 September 2010;

Having deliberated on the continued misrepresentation and under-representation of women in general, and in particular of African women in all their diversity worldwide in the moving images media;

Recognising our exclusion as a group from a fair share of the resources of all natures that constitute the means of representation in the medium of moving images in all its forms;

Recognising that the media represent a social voice and position of authority so that which appears in the media is socially empowered and that which does not appear in the media is socially disadvantaged, with the result that mainstream moving images media works to continue the subjugation of women, and particularly of African women;

Acknowledging the platform availed to us by the Goethe-Institut, Johannesburg, this meeting of African Women Film Practitioners requests all national cultural ministries and all national public and private broadcasters on the continent, and the Commission of Culture in the African Union to take appropriate steps, in conjunction with representative structures of African Women Film practitioners (such as UPAFI - Pan African Women in Film - and

its affiliated membership bodies), as well as regional bodies (such as Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe) to hold consultations aimed at putting into place mechanisms to implement, with critical and urgent considerations, this manifesto.

This manifesto, drafted on this day of 3 September 2010, states the following:

1. That African women film practitioners be availed of a 50% share of all public and private development, production, distribution and exhibition resources, including human resources, invested in moving image media in all their forms on the African continent.
 2. That all broadcasting content, whether private or public, conform to a 50% woman-determined content protocol through the setting up of effective gender desks at all levels in all relevant public and private institutions.
 3. That conformity to a 50% woman-determined broadcasting content is ensured through further affirmative action strategies.
 4. That all official decision-making bodies concerned with broadcasting, whether public or private and in whichever capacity, initiate strategies with the ultimate aim in the foreseeable future of membership consisting of 50% women in these decision-making bodies.
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ANTJE SCHUHMANN: *How would you describe the current socio-political context in Zimbabwe in which you produce films and the youth development projects you are involved with?*

TSITSI DANGAREMBGA: Almost all narrative in Zimbabwe is highly politicised. The tight, if not always obvious, grip of the state on all arts practice, including film practice, results in the fact that only those who have access to state favour are able to produce on any meaningful scale. At the same time, until recently, forces allied against the Zimbabwean state also supported their own practitioners, regardless of merit. The result of this is a polarised and often meaningless film practice that has little respect for professional production standards. Support is given due to political allegiance and [not] on merit [or] track record. Those who [might] wish to practise filmmaking in a more insightful manner fall into the gap between the two poles, much to the detriment of their practice.

This scenario unfolds in a situation where filmmaking in Zimbabwe is emerging from its 'development message era'. During this era, which peaked in the 1990s, filmmaking was driven by social issues productions which were funded by local NGOs, not from a culture budget, but from a social messaging quota. This era created the genre of the development film. This development message era mimics in a way the use of film as a medium of political indoctrination that took place during the Smith regime from 1964 to 1979. Filmmaking practices that were open to black Zimbabweans were therefore hardly ever free from direct messaging agendas. This is the kind of practice that young filmmakers have been exposed to locally. On the other hand, they are [also] exposed to any number of Hollywood B-movies and Nollywood [video films]. Professional film education and informed criticism has not flourished. This situation scarcely makes for a youth that is conscious of the great power that narrative has for positive social development. This is apparent [in] both the level of the narratives that the youth often seek to make, and [the] formal qualities of the films. Their films often result in a mimicking of Hollywood or Nollywood content and style, rather than exploring authentic Zimbabwean stories. This is the level at which I endeavour to engage. Once the need for authentic Zimbabwean stories has been understood, and some training in developing these has been given, I move on to formal technical training.

Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name) (2006) by director Tawanda Gunda

Mupengo, is an example of a film that was made in this way. It is the beginnings of weaning a generation off a didactic approach to film narrative, whether concerning political or social messaging, and leading them into the realm of their own imagination. To be free to express that which is within oneself without consciously aligning it to a given set of values and parameters is a highly political act in a culture that is built on conformity and which is very volatile politically. Risks of falling out of favour with any of the interests in the conflict are high. In fact, these risks are almost unavoidable as none of the 'interests' speak to the real concerns of your average Zimbabwean, or even to the real concerns of a spectrum of real Zimbabweans, whether youth or other age groups. This work is done through the NGOs that I work with: Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ), Nyerai Films and, most recently, the Institute of Creative Arts for Progress in Africa. Financing is through donor funds. However, as donor funds are generally not allocated to culture and even less so to the expensive practice of film, the opportunities for enabling this development work are limited. The last productions were made in the mid-2000s and we have many good scripts that have not been produced.

JYOTI MISTRY: *Production and distribution on the African continent has largely taken place on an ad hoc basis, often informed by entrepreneurial strategies and largely with a business or entrepreneurial sensibility. These objectives are seldom invested in gender symmetry, with no balance in production decisions or distribution networks. What strategies would you suggest to enable the vision of the manifesto for 50% women-determined content and distribution?*

TSITSI: In a situation like ours in Zimbabwe, strategies have to start from the basics, from the very beginning. Therefore, we need to ensure affirmative action in training and we have to ensure quality training. I think there is no alternative for affirmative action to support women's media initiatives and women's media houses, especially film production houses. For example, Sweden has a goal of 40% funding for women's productions. Similar affirmative action would have to be taken for women's distribution outlets, including mass media distribution. This would have to be enshrined in law because I do not see the men who control the media currently – [or] their female supporters – giving up easily. This, in turn, would require

massive and well-funded advocacy from women's organisations and other gender-sensitive forums. The women's manifesto is a beginning, but it is really the *very* beginning. I have been in the field long enough to know that I have further to go in this respect than I have covered. But I am prepared for the journey.

ANTJE: *How would you see this work on a continental level as opposed to on a regional level?*

TSITSI: My belief, as in other sectors, is that the continent has to organise regionally and that once regional sectors are functioning, the continental initiative can be co-ordinated. One region might serve as a pilot and as other regions come on board best practices are shared. Then there would be the final co-ordination of the successful regional initiatives at a continental level. This is the model I would prefer to ensure even distribution of activities, achievements and benefits, rather than one large 'monster' organisation controlling everything.

JYOTI: *The Zimbabwean feminist theorist Patricia McFadden has described the post-colonial situation in Africa as one dominated by 'femocrats' – women in bureaucratic and/or government positions who re-inscribe patriarchal values and do not enable women's empowerment. She is particularly critical of women politicians and women in leadership positions who seem to be increasingly less empathetic to women in arts, culture and business, and to women who work for social development. How do you view the role of 'femocrats' in enabling or disabling the vision of the manifesto?*

TSITSI: I think the lack of sympathy for the arts is not entirely gendered. I think there might be less sympathy from successful professional women in other sectors because of the old perception of women artists as women of lax or loose morals and as highly sexually aggressive. I do believe one has to be unashamedly passionate to be a successful artist, and that society condones this more in men than in women. So female artists have an additional border or obstacle to cross and this obviously becomes more daunting with age. On the other hand, one has to know how to direct the passion, and I think this is something that has to be learnt. In the absence of training institutions, many artists do expend themselves and this may

contribute to the negative image Zimbabweans generally have of artists and would explain why women would be particularly unsupportive of other women artists.

Having said that, the first instance of private support I ever received for my enterprise was from a woman director of Stanbic Bank, Ms Pindi Nyandoro. But I do believe she was an exception. Some women in leadership positions in current Zimbabwe are aware of the limited room at the top and therefore would not want to open the floodgates. It is only logical that they have territory to protect, and [that they must do so while not challenging the status quo too much]. They are rarely, in my opinion, in a position to change the conditions as they also are not [the] top decision-makers in their domain. So this is a manifestation of the universal divide-and-rule strategy.

JYOTI: *In your experience, has being a woman been an advantage or a disadvantage, or both, in filmmaking?*

TSITSI: When I was younger, being a woman was advantageous in the profession. There was certainly a move to promote [young] underprivileged African women in the medium.

JYOTI: *In what ways are you perceived as underprivileged? What has changed in your life that has shifted this perception of privilege as you described it earlier?*

TSITSI: When I was roaming about as a graduate without a roof over my head, having had the manuscript to *Nervous Conditions* turned down by the local publishing industry, you only had to look at me to see I was underprivileged. That was when organisations receiving sizeable amounts of donor funding would employ me on devastatingly exploitative terms. I received roughly US\$2 000 for co-writing and directing *Everyone's Child*, and that was not the only case of gross exploitation which is rife in the sector. It is one thing I am working on [changing], so that people at least have the option of an honest endeavour, even if the sector does attract a lot of chancers. However, the success of my creative writing career, and having successfully completed my film studies in Germany, created the impression was that I was no longer underprivileged. One problem many of the older generation of African women artists face is that it is very difficult for us to

acquire reliable agents who will look after our business affairs. Thus we tend to be cheated regularly by publishers and others in the arts industry, and have no recourse because legal fees are prohibitively high. I am still looking for an agent to engage with my affairs. However, the general public, not knowing details of how these processes work, draws its own conclusions. Hard work and thriftiness inherited from my family background mean I do have a roof over my head and can just about afford to send my children to school. I quickly hit the glass ceiling when people decided I was no longer young or underprivileged. So I find that gender is now working against me in a big way, along with ageism and classism, which in this case is false; irrespective of my abilities and contributions. The good thing is that I don't actually feel any older, just wiser.

ANTJE: *You say: 'I quickly hit the glass ceiling when people decided I was no longer underprivileged'. What do you mean by 'the glass ceiling'? It would be interesting to hear more of your experiences?*

TSITSI: By 'the glass ceiling' I mean the limit of possibility in terms of upward mobility and career development. I found that there were exceedingly few opportunities for me. Applications were not successful; initiatives were hardly supported. Yet the results of my work when I tenaciously held on were celebrated on and off the continent. This refers to works that I was commissioned to do, such as *Everyone's Child* (1996) and the input I had on other productions by organisations like Media for Development (MFD), such as *More Time* (Isaac Mabhikwa, 1994) and *Neria* (Godwin Mawuru, 1993) and *Flame* (Ingrid Sinclair, 1996). The development and training work I do with Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ), such as in *Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name)* as well as my personal creative work *Kare Kare Zvako: Mother's Day* – and even when I do get funding for these projects, the amounts I receive are fractions of what other organisations [with] more demographically acceptable individuals receive. The paradox is that because my product is so good, people do not believe I am being prejudiced in the way I am. So I refer to the conditions of the environment which discriminates according to demographics.

I also refer to the way in which I am interpreted in relation to my experience and track record. By my reckoning, an exceptional mid-career artist who does a lot of social responsibility work in the area of arts

development and training, should not have to beg for grants of US\$2 500, but that is exactly the situation I am in most of the time. My information is that those production houses that produced films like *Neria* and *Flame* had extremely generous budgets. The other side of the story is that organisations that do not have the experience I bring are awarded large grants to do advocacy work using arts and the media. This happened with the 'Women can do it' campaign in 2008 to encourage women to stand for election at [the] national level and to encourage the electorate to vote for women. The proportion of female representation in parliament in Zimbabwe decreased in that year. There were a lot of reasons for this. However, as a media practitioner who worked professionally in advertising, I believe that the unprofessional campaign produced by a women's political advocacy organisation did not have the necessary creative or media expertise to add value as it should have. Fortunately, there are now African women who understand the need to engage in arts and cultural production at a professional international standard. Some of these women set up the African Women's Development Fund and so I am hoping that there will be some relief on the horizon. The European Union African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Fund also has a sound approach to developing African art and film, but it is one fund for all the African Pacific and Caribbean countries.

ANTJE: *In your opinion then, who produces the 'glass ceiling', or which structures are enabling it and keeping it alive?*

TSITSI: 'The glass ceiling' is produced by the powers that be. In Zimbabwe, therefore, I am dealing with people who fund films and who have control over the media. Funders of film in Zimbabwe are usually international. They may be based [inside] Zimbabwe or outside, and choose who and what to fund according to their own criteria, which are often not based on professional merit and track record. In fact, the development imperative requires that those with no track record be promoted! This is obviously contradictory and I think the solution is to put the responsibility of development in the hands of those with a proven track record in the given environment, rather than relying on the instincts of internationals. These instincts are often extremely well intentioned, but these intentions cannot make up for a lack of knowledge of the environment.

At other times, political agendas distort the picture. In Zimbabwe

the state also has funds which it disburse[s] for art and creative media products. Again, agendas dominate here, especially in the last decade or so of enormous political, economic and social tension. Thus we see arts events such as the commemoration galas and media campaigns [that use] television and radio jingles being promoted and now, increasingly, the use of popular music to spread political messages. This would be fine if all opinions could be expressed, but expression is skewed in the direction of one political group. This is the other side of the coin to the international engagement that we have seen over roughly the last decade: artistic criteria are often compromised for other expediencies. The mass media also contribute to the glass ceiling by deciding [who will be promoted] and who will be blacklisted, regardless of newsworthiness.

I think a final feature contributing to the glass ceiling is ignorance. The arts have traditionally been looked upon as a frivolity for entertainment purposes in Zimbabwe. The notion of the arts as a space for contesting how the world is understood is certainly not appreciated by the general public. So the arts page in local newspapers is very much like 'kidz korn' or some such. There is hardly ever any serious, critical analysis of arts products in terms of engagement with social issues and the efficacy of this in terms of aesthetics. However, we live in a time of change in Zimbabwe and I am still hoping that my activities based, on my convictions, will eventually prevail.