

Jyoti Mistry; Antje Schuhmann

Introduction: By Way of Context and Content

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INTRODUCTION

BY WAY OF CONTEXT AND CONTENT

JYOTI MISTRY AND ANTJE SCHUHMAN

The initial impetus for this book was to collect, archive and document the very disparate stories that emerged from a unique gathering of women all working in and with film, who came to Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2010 from different parts of the African continent and from Germany, and met at the Goethe-Institut. The occasion was the ARTSWork Platform: Meeting of African Women Filmmakers. At first sight, the context for a dialogue between a German cultural institution, invited participants from Germany and film practitioners from all over Africa was an obvious axis through which the meeting should be mediated. However, it turned out very differently. We soon realised that this was only a starting point. The direction and breadth of the views and opinions expressed, and the workshop topics and the discussions that arose out of these sessions, saw a far more complex web emerging than anyone had anticipated – of co-dependencies and inter-relationships on the African continent, where national similarities were shared and divides interrogated, all against the rich landscape of film, festivals, feminism and funding politics.

ARTSWork (2010) was the spark for a series of engagements that would take place over the following two years, on occasion facilitated through other Goethe-Institut events in Johannesburg, such as the 'Über(w)unden (Art in Troubled Times)' conference (September 2011),

but also at other events that were ripe with opportunities for film practitioners to meet in a single place, such as the Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) in 2010.

There were multiple forms of simultaneous conversation taking place among women – and also some men – at different times, in formal and informal spaces, on planned and unplanned occasions, where various people met, exchanged, disagreed, shared and collaborated. Some exchanges were once-off conversations, some had to be revisited and some are still ongoing. The common thread was that all of the participants were active in one or several aspects of filmmaking.

It is almost a cliché to say that women need to tell their own stories, that women’s voices need to be heard, that Africa has numerous stories and experiences that have to be shown. Yet the cliché holds a kernel of truth. We would add: these stories and experiences not only need to be shown, but to be shown by women, on their own terms.

Filmmakers often describe themselves as storytellers, though the modes of storytelling may come in different forms and present unique experiences. And theorists often position themselves as interpreters on the outside of these stories. If filmmaking is about storytelling, this book is also about storytelling, and its stories are ongoing. But it is also about the *conditions* of storytelling and it is these conditions that partly shaped the process of how we decided to put these voices together and how we chose the framework within which to share them.

Given the focus on filmmakers who identify as female and who live and work in different countries in Africa, a feminist framework to interpret these women’s experiences and to ‘read’ their filmic work was an obvious choice. Africa as a geo-political location is also a space of collective and shared memories within which conflict and post-conflict narratives emerge. These narratives of historical and personal traumas are further transferred between generations and inform the subject content for healing and restitutive politics across the African continent. Film is a vehicle for releasing the repressed and the silenced, for remembering, altering and transforming narratives that might otherwise be forgotten. These processes are not only highly gendered but also racialised and infused with anti-/post-/neo-colonial legacies. There are no longer any simple divisions between a global South and North – imperial gaze regimes and relations are steadily reproduced, opposed,

subverted and further altered based on historical-political conditions. Therefore a third aspect of the framework for the book was an analysis of how gender, racial and cultural identity (either self-determined or imposed) intersect with the politics of representation. The complex socio-political landscape within which women work (inclusive of their experiences), the work they produce and the reception of their work shapes the through-line of the book.

The circumstances that fund the telling of these stories provides context for understanding what stories are told and under what conditions. Festivals provide a further context for interpretation since these circuits of exhibition function as a framing device for the stories and their storytellers. While this book brings together women filmmakers who tell stories, it also positions these stories in the context of the interpreters, the theorists who search for representations and meaning, which reveal something of the women themselves, their contexts and their practices.

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'Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.' Anthills of the Savannah, *Chinua Achebe*

Historically, theorists are seen to be separate from storytellers and filmmakers. Filmmakers and theorists are each circumscribed by the language paradigms of their practice (film language in the case of filmmakers and theoretical discourse in the case of interpreters) and one is often seen as impenetrable to the other.

These specific positions are not held apart in this book; instead they are brought together in conversation with each other. At times this conversation is a collision of ideas and at other times it is a contestation of experiences and a desire to be heard from the unique point of where these women are located.

What does it mean for academics to be in conversation with creative practitioners, and how do practitioners involved in reading films as texts interpret the curatorial strategies that frame films at film festivals? Film practitioners and theorists are assumed to speak different languages. Words that have a cadence and value in one context are understood and appropriated wholly differently in another. In a few instances filmmaking

is also explored as a theoretical interrogation where filmmakers are also theorists, and theorists are also filmmakers, creatively engaged intellectuals searching through the medium for ways that will challenge historically inspired modes of working or storytelling. For African women this also means challenging knowledge paradigms from within patriarchal and colonial legacies.

The current African reorientation towards itself reveals the significant role women play in this self-definition of Africa. This includes the gradual recognition, outside Africa, of the need to engage differently with the continent that has been referred to as the 'heart of darkness'. Increasingly Africans are approached as strategic partners and collaborators. Both aspects, the self-reorientating and a less paternalistic Northern approach, require and produce alternative image productions about and within Africa. This forms a crucial construction site, where women play a key role.

This book of texts and conversations is not a mere static receptacle. It explores not only the conditions of making films in post-colonial Africa with a gender-sensitive and feminist analysis, it also discusses the complexities of individual and/or collective positioning when art meets politics and vice versa. In part analytical, in part inspired by reception studies addressing how audiences view films, the contributions seek to theorise the lines of insider-outsider positions. It further documents and intervenes in an ongoing process from the particular angle of feminism and trauma studies in relation to cultural production. It invites the exploration of different and sometimes contradictory approaches towards social and political change from varied positions, depending on the contributors, their experiences and their geo-political histories.

The overall commitment of contributors to this project was explicable precisely because it gave opportunities for women to voice their opinions and their experiences in a context that would be heard in a refreshed way. They worked to ensure that their voices would be heard via these pages by new audiences, different from those of their films.

There were many tensions with which we had to grapple in the overall process: tensions between the analytical languages, concepts and theories we use in trying to understand, to represent and sometimes to intervene in realities that are often perceived as too complex or too simple. In other words: tensions between our scholarly tools organised in various disciplines – post-colonial studies, film studies, critical theory, feminist

theory and practice, developmental studies and so forth – on the one hand, and the lived experiences of diverse people – women, men and differently identified practitioners – on the other.

We also tried to transcend some of the confines of individualised knowledge production and so we assembled not only a broad variety of perspectives, but also a wide spectrum of positionalities. This is further reflected in the diversity of text genres and writing styles in these pages. People contributed to this cacophonous counter-canon through writing and through conversations, some from the inside, some from the outside, and some inside-out of academia and filmmaking. Consequently, this book challenges notions of what it means to be positioned as a woman in a man's world when engaged with cultural and intellectual production, both within academia and within the 'industries' of filmmaking, festivals and art production. These strategic and highly political questions transcend seemingly different environments: How do I (as a woman) position myself towards inequality? As an individual or as part of an imagined (heterodox) community of people all navigating and/or battling intersecting structures of discrimination?

Feminist theory contributes to a growing intellectual uncertainty about how most adequately to explain or interpret human experiences. However, knowledge production within the normative framework of academic publishing still meets deviations (such as speaking from the position of a subjective first person narrator) with scepticism. We believed it was important to straddle this by generating alternative opportunities and by acknowledging that relevant knowledge production is in fact taking place also in contexts outside of institutional frameworks. It is exactly the arrangement of traditional academic texts on the 'seeing-eye', with the knowledge gained through the reflections of filmmakers, producers and festival curators regarding their respective experiences that is reflected in this collection. Once again, this facilitates a dialectic; a mutual validation and exchange between these varying types of knowledge production site and their circulation.

Wishing to apply this dialectical approach to our assembly of the varying contributions to this book, we were inspired by the critical and methodological approach of *bricolage*.

Traditionally, a single theoretical approach, alluding to the illusion of a universal, objective representation of facts and truth, seems more

desirable for academic scholarship. We decided to divert from this path. The conceptual framework of the collection, as Matt Rogers puts it, is 'explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality. Further, it signifies approaches that examine phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing, theoretical and methodological perspectives' (Rogers 2012:1). Inspired by critical theory, French philosophy and feminist theory in conversation with psychoanalytically informed cultural studies and anti-imperial and anti-capitalist film theory, the various contributors who share their experiences, reflections and positions here, offer alternatives to the more canonised approach in African cinema and gender studies scholarship. The use of interviews with practitioners as well as theoreticians, critical essays coupled with reflexive positions, and storytelling (anecdotes and experiences) serves to create a heterodox practice.

By positioning the multiple discourses alongside one another, we suggest that the assumed different paradigms of practice and theory and the circuits of exhibition and reception are in the service of one another. Listening to the stories of filmmakers, alongside watching their films and recognising the multiple theoretical possibilities of films made, and seen, is a way of enriching our understanding of the layered facets that inform how women make sense of their experiences, tell their stories and generate theoretical and practical possibilities that enable an increased and more nuanced understanding of the conditions for women film practitioners working in and on Africa.

As we collected and began to sift through all the material we were gathering it became clear that there were important resonances in the experiences of women, but there were also important dissonances and productive disagreements that revealed complex and interesting differences. One that began to emerge during the inaugural event at the Goethe-Institut, for example, was in the socio-political climates of Germany and Africa. We felt that these needed to be heard not just in the confines of a single event, but also in a wider context where reception would be greater and the issues would receive the necessary political attention when the collection was published and circulated. If change is to take place for persons who are identified or who self-identify as women, it is necessary that the multiplicity of their voices be disseminated in as many forums as possible.

The structure of the book should not be viewed as a linear progression, although attempts at this 'linearity' are evident in terms of certain organising principles that provide thematic coherence. However, in keeping with *bricolage*, the contributions serve to inform one another more as a lattice and we encourage readers to see the relational or referential connections between texts even when they do not sit alongside one another.

Broadly speaking, the material is organised to evoke themes. The first theme is a historical and theoretical contextualisation which is then informed by dialogue (in the form of interviews) which in some way addresses the continuities or discontinuities between the theoretical or conceptual frameworks offered and the lived experiences of the participants.

The second theme gives cognisance to the layers in the construction of gender in historical-political terms and considers how this is reflected in artistic expression and cultural production. It therefore draws on strategies of reading or audience/viewer responses to texts (films) as a way of reflecting on the intentions of filmmakers and artists dealing with gender and trauma, history and memory, and nation and state.

The third thematic component of the book considers conditions of production as a way of informing content creation. Informed by the broader theoretical framework of the previous theme, the production contributions offer a way of revealing how ideas of gender relations, issues of gendered power relations in the state and in the production process are 'soft' factors, tacit but highly significant in influencing production processes and content generation.

The final thematic area brings together a series of invaluable impressions and experiences in the value chain of meaning-making and production processes. The influence and role of curators and exhibition platforms (in the form of festivals and distribution) is assessed to reveal the challenges for African women to have their films approached outside of historical, aesthetic and content prejudices that presuppose a creative essentialism which further disenfranchises them on a global platform.

In many ways this approach is an evolution from the seminal works of Manthia Diawara (1992) and Frank Ukadike (1994) and is in keeping with the contemporary contributions of Stephanie Newell and Onokoome Okome (2013) and Carmela Garritano (2013). As such, it speaks to

the work of authors such as Beti Ellerson, Jane Bryce (2010, 2011) and Audrey McCluskey (2009) and is part of a newly emerging scholarly trend exemplified by publications such as *Feminist Africa*.

As *bricoleurs* we may not always have agreed with the different voices we assembled. For instance, in our understanding of gender as a social construct we problematise hegemonic gaze regimes seeing sex, seeing bodies, as organised along the ‘natural’ binary of being *either male or female*. We prefer exploring the intersections along which we are all situated in one or another way: gender-race-class-sexuality-age and so forth; intersections that position us simultaneously as discriminated against and privileged in different aspects of our being in the world.

We prioritise gender as an analytic category in addition to exploring notions of an anti-imperial gaze, as promoted by Third Cinema and various film festivals founded at the peak of anti-colonial struggles (see contributions by Beti Ellerson and Max Annas and Henriette Gunkel), of a post-colonial gaze invested in nation-building (see Nobunye Levin) or of the more or less successful practices of decolonisation (Dorothee Wenner, Katarina Hedrén, Jyoti Mistry). Our intention is to provide an *interruption*, to rupture classic and too often andro-centric or supposedly gender-neutral approaches to academic knowledge production and publication politics. Knowledge is *also* produced from the lived experiences of storytellers, as well as from their stories.

‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,’ argued Audre Lorde (2007:110). Changing dominant power relations and systems of privilege, which are not limited to unequal gender relations, also needs the (re)framing of the North-South divide, too often seen as either only disabling or mainly enabling, in order to develop a constructive deliberation of contemporary practices in full recognition of historic legacies. New tools, a fresh gaze and different stories are required in order to dismantle the master’s house and this collection of writing allows for certain sets of possibilities to emerge as a way of proposing praxis and paradigm shifts.

Examining the relationship between gender politics and film practice also opened up the dialogue on strained issues such as funding resources and their relationship to content production and, in a much broader sense, led to questioning conceptions of knowledge production between the North and South and within and outside of academia.

The essays and interviews are informed by a set of different inquiries unified not by an essentialising retreat to a universal womanhood, but by an interrogation of what it means for people who self-identify as women to work with and in film in various contemporary contexts on the African continent.

The stories are nomadic. They transgress the shores of Africa as a geographical location, inviting reflections from the post-colonial West, including perspectives from the African diaspora in the USA and Europe, and sympathetic positions of anti-imperial self-reflections on North-South collaboration. Whereas the initial conversations at the Goethe-Institut also included practitioners from countries formerly colonised by Portugal and France, one could argue that due to the prevalence of Anglophone academic structures and the linguistic hegemony of English, not only in Africa, the British Empire has succeeded posthumously one more time. Therefore this compilation is, with some exceptions, located in an Anglo-Saxon-inspired framework.

After the Goethe-Institut's ARTSWork: Meeting of African Women Filmmakers in 2010, we took three years to search for more stories, experiences, insights and analyses to enable the evolution of the project. Our 'field research' resulted in a heterotopian set of contributions, interviews, manifestos, keynote addresses, reflections and discussion statements which form an assemblage – coming together here as *bricolage*.

As mentioned earlier, this approach also implied a grappling with the expectations and restrictions of academic publishing, which at times appeared to be at odds with Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of 'wild thinking', introduced in his book *The Savage Mind* (1962), which 'employed the *bricolage* metaphor in his search for underlying structures that govern human meaning-making' (Rogers 2012:2), and this became an inspiration for our textual assemblage. The value chain of cultural practitioners is reflected in the *bricolage* approach of this collection, which seeks to create a way of understanding the multiple factors that are involved in meaning-making and knowledge production, specifically in relation to the conditions that women in film practice encounter.

The stories required alternative research methodologies to echo the layered understanding and knowledge of what it means to identify as a woman film practitioner on the African continent. As 'wild thinking'

bricoleurs, we employed another concept from Levi-Strauss: the notion of ‘mythical rationalities’.¹

This notion was useful for collecting stories on two levels: firstly, the filmmakers are storytellers within the narrative world of the films they make; and secondly, they tell the stories of their practice of making films: the obstacles, trials, tribulations and triumphs. The sum of these narratives further contributes to how meaning is made and serves to enhance the understanding of the socio-cultural and economic circulation of these products as cultural and political artefacts.

The multiple layers of making meaning and making sense of the climate and landscape of filmmaking are seen through the veneer of the different strata at which knowledge production is possible. The conditions for differing regimes of hetero-patriarchy and (neo)-post-colonialities are inscribed in the hierarchy of cultural production: from the producers, filmmakers, curators, businesswomen and entrepreneurs, to the cultural commentators. To reflect the multiple positions women encounter in their work lives, often very much entwined with their private lives, situated within the public complexities of post-conflict and sometimes neo-colonial societies, necessitated a non-dogmatic approach, an approach that could hold ambiguities and seeming contradictions together, that did not position all women as those to whom something is done and all men as those who are doing and that enabled us to reflect on the lived realities of a North-South exchange within multiple sets of power relations without searching for innocent authenticities. What was needed was an approach recognising and promoting a different kind of knowledge production.

The socio-cultural and economic circulation of films as cultural and political artefacts provides the context to engage the relationship of filmic practices with modes of social change and justice, as well as forms that engage collective traumata.

An increasingly wide range of studies on the social, political, cultural and psycho-social consequences of regimes of terror and violence, most prominently of the Holocaust and transatlantic slavery, speak to the inter-generational transmission of trauma. This happens not only between individuals but, due to the intersection of collective and individual traumata, also within the different generations of traumatised collectives more broadly. These processes are highly gendered and

racialised as they are based in past and present identification politics: who has been identified/labelled by whom as what and consequently been violated? These politics often inform till today, in more or less subtle ways, individuals' and groups' access to redress and to resources. These politics are used to reinforce or to dismantle systems of privilege. Trauma is intimately linked to the hidden, the repressed and the forbidden – to taboos and silences. As such, collective traumata are related to memory politics: to acts of silencing and to the remembrance of certain experiences and stories on behalf of others. The politics of memory itself reflects gendered and racialised power relations (see the interviews with Djo Tunda wa Munga and Rumbi Katedza and the examination of Zanele Muholi's work).

The political condition of colonial histories, coupled with the violence of creating post-colonial freedoms in Africa, emphasises the significance of trauma as subject matter in film. As subject matter it enables filmmakers to access production possibilities (funding and exhibition) and it circumscribes form and content.

These circumstances lead to questions around establishing women's film productions as normal commodities within the framework of an (often still to be established) industry versus artistic freedom under conditions of severe financial restrictions and a lack of infrastructure and state support. The gap is often filled with NGO money, which poses new questions about independence and 'agenda setting'.

Access is not simply about navigating the local and regional production terrain. One of the complexities for women practitioners is the recurring issue of funding, resources and infrastructure. There is an important double bind in the funding models for filmmakers on the African continent. Many projects which allow opportunities for filmmakers are projects commissioned by NGOs which have specific mandates on their content production. Often themes that pertain to health, children and women's issues, or human rights programmes, or those that deal with the traumatic impact of civil unrest are well funded and offer filmmakers sustainable employment. But these projects are not necessarily the projects with which filmmakers themselves want constantly to be involved in the way that NGOs require.

NGOs are invariably positioned in the North and create varying dependencies on how content is generated on the African continent

and across classic North-South divides. Through these platforms of North-South exchange a conversation between cultural agents in film production, film programming (film curating), film criticism and the reception of film offers further reflection on how meanings come to be made differently, based on the various contexts of their reception. This is dealt with through the interviews and case studies documented in the latter part of the book.

The initial three chapters serve as a way of establishing the themes of the book in relation to one another. Beti Ellerson's historical overview of women filmmakers in Africa, alongside Christina von Braun's interrogation of the development on ideas of 'the gaze' in relation to feminist theory take the reader into a direct conversation, mediated by Ines Kappert, that questions experiences of feminist values versus practice and its lived experiences.

Since 1969, the Third Cinema manifesto written by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino has challenged dominant modes of production and representation inscribed in North American and European ideologies. However, the politics of the manifesto and its underlying theories were developed further to address its appropriation in an African context and, more recently, to incorporate multi-culturalism as one of the means to find elasticity in its definition. Feminist re-readings acknowledge not only the need to critically (re)-examine the maybe too-positive notions of the post-colonial state as *the* agent for change, but also the need for more awareness of the complex intersections between gender and ethnicity. Notions of authentic culture often reinscribe patriarchal hegemony, while claiming anti-colonial agency:

In relation to who is able to make claims on the state, and how those claims might advance Third Cinema, it is useful to note the masculinist and occidental bias in the original theories, given that approaches may vary not only according to historical circumstances (which Solanas and Getino recommend), but according to gender and ethnicity. Feminist cinema and indigenous media have had [a] far-reaching impact on the mode of production, chosen film language, and targeted audience, which might not always be a "mass" audience, yet is viewed as no less conducive to generating change at the national level. Finally, there is the complex goal of cultural self-determination, and the extent to which a

truly autochthonous media practice can develop in under-industrialized or in neo- and postcolonial circumstances (Benamou [nd]).

To write against, or rather re-frame, the revolutionary discourse of Third Cinema is not simply to bring gender into the equation, but to further account for technological shifts that inform production conditions and to recognise that some of the canonised discourses on African representation also need to be reconsidered against emerging nationalist discourses which serve to subvert the historically more 'homogenising' discourses on cultural production in Africa.

In a broad historical overview, Beti Ellerson's account offers some of the key moments and early women contributors to the building of cinema on the African continent. Her contribution sets the terrain to contextualise the establishment of the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) and the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI) in 1969 and the political agenda that informed these initiatives. African Cinema taxonomy and theory was, in part, the recognition of the representation of colonialism – the use of films to rethink pre-colonial knowledge and as a mode of realist storytelling to capture the experiences of colonialism and the post-colonial state. In this historical context the notion of 'privileged' is a way of suggesting that the filmmakers mostly referred to in this canon were formally trained as filmmakers – many of them in institutions abroad. This distinction is necessary as contemporary practices of filmmaking on the continent, as result of technological accessibility, have revolutionised the landscape of contemporary filmmaking in Africa. African Cinema, posited as a Pan-African concept with its impetus informed by a political vision to use cinema not only to connect and make accessible the experiences of Africans to each other, also served as a vehicle for different, non-Eurocentric, cultural representations. As Diawara writes:

... the new members of the FEPACI believed their prophetic mission was to unite and to use film as a tool for the liberation of the colonized countries and as a step toward the total unity of Africa. It was in this sense that in its early days FEPACI sought to be affiliated with its sister association, the Organization of African Unity (OAU). In 1969,

at the Festival Panafricain de la Culture in Algiers, African filmmakers gathered to create an inter-African organization (1992:39).

The establishment of FEPACI was a defining moment for the programmatic agenda of ‘decolonising cinema’.

Decolonisation by rejecting white imaginations in cinematic representations was a way of building solidarity; a way to provide a platform for a conscious political will through cinema and to ‘take back’ African history which, through colonialism, had denied Africans the ability to tell stories in a uniquely African way. While FEPACI continues to be instrumental in organising the biennial film festival in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, exponential changes and growth of film production on the continent have created a new generation of filmmakers who, firstly, do not rely on the privilege of formal film school training and, secondly, are able to tap directly into markets and create content outside of the infrastructure that has historically been necessary for the making of films (for example, national funding sources and foreign funding agencies).

There are a number of important and interesting contradictions emerging from these contemporary production conditions. These are largely informed by the collapse of certain infrastructures (for example, the closing down of many movie theatres and a lack of funding from broadcasters). Digital technology and the rapid turnover from production to distribution have further facilitated and revolutionised how films as products move into markets, not only locally and nationally, but through the current prolific network for moving products into the diaspora more globally.

Christina von Braun’s chapter, ‘Staged Authenticity’ makes a significant departure from the more accepted idea that filmic gaze is gendered. She argues for a neutrality of the gaze on account of its mediation through the camera apparatus and rethinks the position of the observer and the potential offered in reordering gender. It is an important political move that suggests that the camera and the act of filming can ‘choose between identifying with masculinity or femininity, between the experience of “inviolability” and that of “lack”, and even both simultaneously’. Such a hypothesis allows for a radical shift in the politics of gaze regimes initially inscribed in cinema studies (Laura Mulvey 1975, 1981, 1989), and creates the possibility for

reconfiguring identity formations to serve the multiple functions that the ‘cinema-arm’ offers in an African context. Von Braun concludes: ‘[t]hat means learning to differentiate between the phantasmal self-images of the collective imaginary and one’s own individual violability. Only then can the images of the collective imaginary be “made legible”’. It is this invitation to view the apparatus as the camera with infinite identity possibilities that enables women’s film narratives to be extricated from a gendered gaze. This offers the starting point for the rest of the contributions, where there is an acute awareness that the women who reflect on their experiences and observations do so from multiple historical-political positions: colonial histories, histories of liberation and oppression. These histories and places of personal memory constitute the place for a re-imagined sense of the collective which informs a number of the underlying concerns expressed by the subjects who are interviewed in this book: Jihan El-Tahri and Taghreed Elsanhoury.

In the interview that Ines Kappert conducts with Christina von Braun and Taghreed Elsanhoury, the two subjects answer very differently to the question ‘Are you a feminist?’ Elsanhoury speaks of her identification as a ‘feminist’ as a private articulation while Von Braun offers a public declaration of her political subject positioning. Herein lies the summation of the recurring tensions that emerge in the interviews that follow and the prevailing themes that underpin the experiences of women on the African continent. The multiple roles of women, not simply as cultural practitioners in film, is bifurcated if not multi-furcated; a split-consciousness with dual agendas that inform their politics and their practices and reveal the tensions between private positions and public articulations.

There are other participants who totally refute any feminist categories, who do not ascribe to feminist politics as collective identity, as tools of analysis and as vehicle for change. Feminism for them is neither instrumental in informing their practice nor relevant in transforming the patriarchal structures in their communities. Instead, in their discussions femininity and feminism come to be conflated or are viewed as mutually exclusive. Feminism is an individual experience, a private act, and the collectivisation of feminist politics is seen, in part, as anti-feminine. In this instance, these film practitioners claim an individual agency but refuse a collective political identity. This refusal is not infused with a post-

modern anti-identitarian critique as raised by post-colonial and/or queer feminists, who problematise politics of belonging based on imagining a homogenous 'we'. The rejection of the need to adopt a position within a chosen political collective is often grounded in situating oneself as an individual, in notions of natural femininity and heterosexuality and/or a tactical disguise of one's sympathies with a collective battle in order to better 'work the system from within'. Mozambican filmmaker Isabel Noronha in her interview with Max Annas and Henriette Gunkel calls her filmmaking practice 'cinema of resistance', in which she explores life in a post-colonial state. In the detailed account of her development towards a film practice she shows how personal will rather than a collective identification is the source from which she draws her emancipation, a sentiment not unlike those expressed in the interview with Jihan El-Tahri. These women are less concerned with the immediate politics of gender as a collective identification and more focused on the broader terrain of the politics of patriarchy and the way in which individual experience enables individual emancipation.

What are the challenges of representing these non-conforming paradigmatic and pragmatic experiences? How do we reflect on knowledge production that belies any programmatic structure, that is responsive, spontaneous to opportunity and motivated by a desire to reinvent as determined by individual will and yet inspired on occasion by a collective consciousness?

We refer to Spivak's notion of *strategic essentialism* to ground political agency in a universal understanding (culturally, socially, biologically) of 'womanhood'. But acknowledging that the political, theoretical and/or personal preferences 'we' women have are informed by our different socio-political positions means also acknowledging that such preferences amongst women do differ. We might agree or disagree on how to claim agency and in the course of claiming agency we might agree or disagree on how we as women identify ourselves. One might call herself feminist, another might reject this label as anti-feminine, anti-men, a white Western legacy, and might prefer to identify as womanist (Alice Walker), or as a woman of colour activist, or as 'woman-identified woman' (the Radical Lesbian manifesto; see Radicalesbians 1970) or simply as a woman empowered by her mother rather than by any political movement.

But beyond all differences, it is obvious that the marginality of women in society and of women as film practitioners needs to be radically and consciously challenged, with multiple direct and indirect tactics, and with both individual and collective strategies. Consequently, this book documents a repositioning that is demanded, insisted upon, not by proxy but by women themselves working in this field who speak vividly of reconfiguring their positions as cultural practitioners.

Given that gender is a relational social construct, framing proper femininity as well as proper masculinity by Othering alternative gender performances, we recognise that gender relations experienced by practitioners in film are not a matter to be addressed (or challenged) by women only; there are also (male) scholars and practitioners, such as Annas and Wa Munga, who are interested in how to subvert and change dominant gender hierarchies in societies in general and in cultural productions specifically, particularly cultural productions which inform hegemonic and alternative ways of seeing gender.

Women making films have historically always been on the margins. *African* women making films are a doubly over-determined marginality. How should one approach this subject matter, which requires considered deliberation not simply as a matter of historical redress, but which begs a political (re)positioning on its own terms? Similar but different in its vision and agenda, Djo Tunda wa Munga and Rumbi Katedza, in a highly charged conversation, express the differences and similarities in their experiences of making films as a vehicle for healing. The traumatic histories of their respective countries, the DRC and Zimbabwe, offer a backdrop for what, in part, informs their film projects. Each sees art and the film medium as a means for holding a mirror up to the societies they come from. In this interview both film practitioners regard film as a means to educate and conscientise and as a tool to create a site for socio-political change in their countries. And even though their agendas might be similar, the fact that Katedza is a woman means that her access and experiences are markedly different from those of Wa Munga.

Visual artist and photographer, Zanele Muholi, makes films that have a strong aesthetic awareness of violence as a landscape on which to offer her socio-political and historical commentary. Antje Schuhmann's analysis of Muholi's work not only serves as a site that confronts violence against women and the politics of Othering in an either hetero-normative or (post-)

colonial context, but is augmented through autobiographical reflection and activism. Schuhmann is able to bring to the fore the significance of film as a creative, artistic practice which intervenes in dominant memory politics and national identity projects. Collective trauma is a subtext in Schuhmann's discussion of Muholi's visual activism and its forms of archiving, documenting, giving voice and claiming voice, of making visible the invisible; a reading of Muholi's mixed media work is situated in a psychoanalytically informed cultural analysis. Navigating topographies of violence leads to the question of how to 'heal' an imperial, heteronormative gaze and how to correct or subvert hegemonic gaze regimes. The role of film as artistic expression, coupled with visual activism, is an addition to the conditions of production informing the multi-layered possibilities of how and why women on the African continent make films. While Muholi is unambiguous in her commitment to an art practice, she expresses the need for didacticism: her artistic practice is about educating an audience and creating a space for black lesbian women to be recognised and centred in a contemporary democratic South Africa.

In the case study of Fanta Régina Nacro's *Puk Nini* (1995) a sample audience reveals some of the competing factors at play in what is considered desirable (or plausible) for different markets and/or audiences. What is apparent from the conversation held at a roundtable in Johannesburg, South Africa is that audiences in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, responded to the same film in a different context (South Africa) in a way that was notably distinct. Perceptions differ not only due to locality, but also due to age; African societies are made up of young people navigating the tensions between innovation and tradition. The perceptions of gender relations vary from place to place and from one generation to the next, while the lived realities of hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity at the intersection of class and race often seem relatively similar but differ in rural and urban contexts. These differences are constructive in that they are opportunities for addressing similarities and differences in the issues raised: gender relations, the representation of women and men and issues that emerge through discourses on culture.

Discourses on the female body politics, mobilised for the purposes of national culture and nation state formation, is reflected in Nobunye Levin's chapter 'I am Saartjie Baartman'. In her chapter she considers the significance of the repatriation of the body of Sarah Baartman (otherwise

known as the Hottentot Venus) in forging a post-apartheid South African identity. Levin provides a close reading of the historically ascribed white European male gaze on Baartman's black female body. The place of male narrators in Baartman's history, defined in the documentaries of Swazi-born filmmaker Zola Maseko, is another position from which she considers dominant discourses of this historical figure. It is at this point that she shifts from her analytical position to her role as a filmmaker. Her strategy for countering and challenging these male narratives that have been in the service of empirical or nationalist discourses is to reclaim the personal in Baartman's history. In her film *I am Saartjie Baartman* (2009), Levin describes her creative and narrative choices: to return to personal and intimate experiences of Baartman as a woman and to explore her loves and losses. As a filmmaker, Levin is aware of the recurrent cinematic representation of women's bodies as symbolic of the nation state, and her insistence on reclaiming the space of the private is a political strategy to subvert official and prevalent histories that have been codified through predominantly male representations.

Making films might be considered an artistic practice but it is also a business endeavour; films are also a commodity. In addition, films can be used as instruments to educate and/or as a mode of activism. For women on the African continent it is also a potential site for labour and economic empowerment. It is a vehicle through which to render histories and experiences visible. It is also a cultural product which travels – it crosses borders – and in this movement new meanings are produced. 'Africa' is no more a homogenous continent than 'woman' is a single universal category. The experiences of regional and geographical loci are inflected by gender, by class, by sexual orientation, by ethnic positioning, by rural or urban contexts, not to mention specific national histories of pre-colonial formations, slavery, colonialism, apartheid, liberation struggles and current conditions of post-coloniality. Logically, the question 'What does it mean for women to be involved in cultural production in film in Africa?' can only produce more questions. Given the differences amongst women, what are the intersections or similarities in the ways in which they experience their cultural practice? What are the coping mechanisms which they might share? What are the specifics? What are the challenges and chances of succeeding as women film practitioners on the African continent?

Women who work in film as cultural practitioners are not only filmmakers. They are also businesswomen and entrepreneurs, curators and cultural critics. They are writers or producers. Some of these women's voices are collected in this book.

The chapters on production and curatorial practices reposition women's film and filmmaking from the margin to a more visible, prominent position and allow these voices to be heard, at times even in their disharmony.

The film practitioners, also as producers and directors and interview subjects, reflect a multi-faceted understanding of gender relations, gendered inequalities and political agency – either as individual or collective and at times both. This agency may be claimed in the name of feminism or not. In Jyoti Mistry's contribution, 'Filmmaking at the Margins of a Community', a number of competing understandings of agency emerge. In the course of her role as co-producer of *Elekwani* (Ntshavheni wa Luruli, 2012), the tensions between the narrative world of the film and the real-world experience of the rural women participating in its production becomes starkly evident. She analyses the experiences of agency for the women in the local Venda community as a split experience, as double consciousness: women at once the subjects of a sovereign and citizens in a South African democratic state. For some women filmmakers the identification with feminist theory and practice is political in various enabling ways; it connects their filmmaking practice with socio-political change. While on the one hand they acknowledge their agency, as in the case of Jihan El-Tahri's interview, they also recognise their marginality in the broader hegemonic, patriarchal sense in the 'business' of filmmaking, as expressed in Tsitsi Dangarembga's 'A Manifesto'.

The inclusion of conversations and reflections by Shannon Walsh and Arya Laloo on their collaborative filmmaking project *Jeppé on a Friday* (2012) is an important marker of how women filmmakers are not only experimenting with alternative film languages but are also finding different approaches to the production process of filmmaking. It is a conversation about the centrality of new aesthetics emerging in the context of different ways of filmmaking, and about how content and form are mutually informative.

Their collaborative project sets into motion numerous interrogatory questions regarding how geo-political positions and cultural assumptions

come to inform content, one filmmaker being from the North (Walsh) and the other from the South (Laloo). As Laloo and Walsh observe, there are inherent mistrusts from the outside that are also imposed on these forms of collaboration as to the equity of conceptual and creative inputs. These filmmakers not only reflect on how these mistrusts operate, but show how they become productive spaces for ensuring their own interrogation of the power of representation in both the characters they choose and how they tell their stories.

In some ways the issue of mistrust mirrors the debates expressed by Dorothee Wenner regarding North-South initiatives that have enabled African filmmakers in various projects. It is worth considering how the opportunity afforded to the young and talented filmmaker Hawa Essuman (see Wenner's contribution) is in part undermined through this rhetoric and instead of the opportunity being seen as empowering it reproduces, in dangerous ways, the absence of creative and political agency that has historically been denied to women. But in their interview, Laloo and Walsh reflect a powerful political agency not only in the production choice to collaborate, but also in the demand to reconsider historical privileging of the male gaze. In their film they select five male characters from the inner-city neighbourhood of Jeppestown to explore urban regeneration and development. Their stylistic choices of how to shoot, engage with and represent the male protagonists provide a refreshing observation of masculinity in an urban context. The decision to represent women in their absence against a backdrop of a male-dominated part of the city provides a significant creative and political intervention. These decisions invite debate and Walsh and Lallo express their differing lack of resolution regarding the gender politics of this choice.

Anita Khanna, as a seasoned writer, festival director and producer, offers a general overview of the local South African and global climate for women filmmakers, balancing the tensions between commercial imperatives, independent filmmaking and the specifics of the African context for women filmmakers. She suggests that women work differently in the production process, and she shows how this results in different kinds of films. Women's approach to filmmaking is different, she maintains, not only in the narratives they choose, but significantly also, in how they work on set and with crews.

This duality of critical analysis and creative practice is one of the modes through which women filmmakers seek to interrupt, to destabilise and to defy dominant representations of women's histories, and in so doing seek to create new cinematic languages that best express women's histories and women's experiences.

Katarina Hedrén's review of *Barakat!* (Djamila Sahraoui, 2006) addresses the representation of the film's main female characters who access public spaces in search of one of their husbands in war-torn Algeria. She problematises the tensions between 'normative' modes of representing women in Africa and those representations from *African women* filmmakers that challenge this 'normativity'. Hedrén briefly discusses three film narratives which empower women in different ways before presenting a close reading of *Barakat!* She examines how Sahraoui moves the women protagonists in her film away from the 'victim' label that society is so ready to put on women affected by war, oppression and trauma and in so doing shapes a narrative that reflects on the split consciousness of the women and their feelings about their political environment. In Hedrén's words, Sahraoui 'chooses to portray women who, out of desperation, fear or simply because "they are done" with being oppressed and victimised, decide to take control over their own destinies'.

The place of co-productions and collaborations with European countries plays a vital role in how content is produced and exhibited, but is also the site of contested politics, as is revealed in Dorothee Wenner's candid piece on festival programming. She recounts the making of *Soul Boy* (Hawa Essuman and Tom Tykwer, 2010) and the 'external forces' that effect, shape or challenge definitions. While co-productions with France, Germany and Portugal are less foregrounded in the book, it is evident through experiences recounted by filmmakers like Taghreed Elsanhoury and Jihan El-Tahri that funding plays a pivotal role in how films come to be made and eventually distributed.

Limited infrastructure locally and nationally are just two of many production obstacles and why funding is often sought abroad. Funding from abroad, however, often determines the content. Taghreed Elsanhoury, Jihan El-Tahri and Tsitsi Dangarembga all offer reflections and experiences regarding this context and the political terrain which, at times, both enables and disables the possibility of a climate more conducive to women's making films on the African continent. Often

foreign agencies that commission content are the primary sources for women filmmakers to produce content, and while this sector is a viable mode for income and employment as film practitioners, the content is often determined by the briefs from these agencies.

These push-pull factors are the underlying source of tensions, which also inform the conditions of reception for films. Films commissioned by agencies are, in some instances, not for local consumption, and films produced with local markets in mind are driven by a different set of imperatives. Wenner's contribution on the politics in the world of film festival programming is a revealing and complex unfolding of how festivals are perfectly poised to introduce African content to European audiences. In the context of film festivals, there is an openness and receptivity to African films even though there remains a 'stigma' that African films are issue driven or bleak. However, the economic drivers outside the festival circuit paint a wholly different picture: European distributors and exhibitors are less likely to sign on African films as part of their general programming because African films still do not perform well at the box office when compared with other art house films. Yet the video-film industry in Africa is part of a booming informal economy where content is made locally for specific local audiences whose expectations and reception are very distinct from those informing the selection made for international film festivals.

The capacity for cinema as an instrument of political commentary and as a challenge to colonialism, as a reflection of post-colonial experiences and as a challenge to hegemonic, Eurocentric and bourgeois representations, is historically well anchored in the theories of Third Cinema.

Paul Willemsen makes a valuable observation about Indian cinema that may usefully be applied to the shift in conditions of film production in Africa:

It allows us to address questions regarding the mobilization of pre-capitalist ideologies and capitalist but anti-imperialist tendencies among urban workers and underclasses; about the operative differences between central and regional capitals, and so on. This type of approach allows us to envisage the possibility that in some circumstances, bourgeois cultural trends may have a greater emancipatory potential

than anti-capitalist ones which hark back to an idealized fantasy of pre-colonial innocence (2006:40).

Such an observation speaks directly to the issue of the shifting economic and political landscapes in contemporary Africa. The tension between ‘bourgeois trends’ and a socio-political drive is well captured in Wenner’s reflections on the complexities of programming films made in Africa for European festivals.

And again, as *bricoleurs* our aim was not to find voices that echo our positions, but rather to position multiple perspectives in their contradictions next to one another and allow them to be interpreted within the socio-political and cultural context, as well as the local and national position of the speaker and the reader. The perspectives of the women whose voices we collected for this book are shaped by their respective experiences of empowerment or disempowerment. They are shaped by class, gender, sexuality and race and so are their interpretations. Willemen draws from Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1986) concept ‘creative understanding’ to address the relationship between reading, interpretation and the position of the reader relative to how meaning is produced:

... one must be “other” oneself if anything is learned about the meanings of other cultures, of another culture’s limits, the effectiveness of its borders, of the areas where, ... “the most intense and productive life of culture takes place.” ... for Bakhtin, creative understanding requires a thorough knowledge of at least two cultural spheres. It is not simply a matter of engaging in a dialogue with some other culture’s products, but of using one’s understanding of another cultural practice to re-perceive and rethink one’s own cultural constellation at the same time (Willemen 2006:37–38).

In offering this assemblage as *bricoleurs* we have brought together some of the most vocal and instrumental female-identified cultural practitioners working in film on the African continent today. We follow hereby a notion of creative understanding that not only demands that the writer and participant be subject to making meaning but also, as Bakhtin suggests, invites the reader to rethink their own position when engaging these contributions.

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NOTES

- 1 'In societies adopting mythical rationalities, Levi Strauss explains, meaning-making processes mirror a bricolage process. Like an "intellectual bricolage", he explains, mythical-knowers piece together their life-history with artifacts (e.g. texts, discourses, social practices) of their given cultural context to construct meaning' (Rogers 2012:3).