

# Conference Reports – February 2012

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## **Women and Film in Africa: Overcoming Social Barriers**

University of Westminster, London, 19–20 November 2011

### **A report by Bronwen Pugsley, University of Nottingham, UK**

In his introductory talk, co-organiser Winston Mano stated that this third annual conference on African film, hosted by the University of Westminster, would focus on a cinematic production that exists against the odds: due to oppressive patriarchal values and a dire lack of funds, the African women who work as actresses, filmmakers, producers, promoters, and distributors are engaged in a permanent struggle for their voices to be heard. Mano's statement echoed throughout many of the papers and discussions that took place during the two-day conference. Recurring questions included the systemic lack of funding, distribution, and exhibition opportunities. These key issues were first raised by keynote speaker Yaba Badoe, who presented her latest film, *The Witches of Gambaga* (2010), a documentary that denounces the ostracism of women accused of sorcery, a growing Ghanaian social phenomenon. In her talk, Badoe described the arduous process of making the film and insisted on the importance of properly 'packaging' a film in order to obtain funding. This particular point was later reiterated by the second keynote speaker, filmmaker Jihan El Tahri — part two of whose documentary, *Cuba: An African Odyssey* (2007), was screened on the second day of the conference. El Tahri discussed at length the difficulties involved in attaining recognition 'beyond labels': although she dislikes being defined foremost on the basis of her gender, origins, or nationality, rather than by the specificities her filmmaking practice, El Tahri recognises that such labels are regrettably essential to the efficient commercialisation of her films.

Although concerns regarding the difficulties facing the women involved in African cinemas were naturally central to the various papers and panel discussions that took place throughout the conference, they did not eclipse other interests. Most notably, panellists and audience members celebrated the many achievements of African women in film. This was particularly apparent in the first panel, 'Documentaries by African Women', which hosted papers that drew attention to the growing diversity and quality of documentary filmmaking in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. Bertrand Cabedoche (University of Grenoble 3) provided an overview of some of the most innovative films made by women filmmakers during the yearly Africadoc training programme, and placed particular emphasis on Khady Sylla's challenging film on mental illness, *Une Fenêtre ouverte* (2005). Cabedoche's assertion that Francophone sub-Saharan African documentary filmmaking has gained in diversity as well as complexity since the turn of the twenty-first century was reflected in Daniela Ricci's (University of Lyon 3) presentation on Katy Léna Ndiaye's poetic documentary *En attendant les hommes* (2007). Using clips from the documentary, which consists of dialogues

between the filmmaker and her subjects, Ricci spoke of the film's highly intimate nature, of its celebration of the poetry of women's voices and the notion of a global sisterhood. Barbara Knorpp (Brunel University) returned to the origins of filmmaking by African women with an examination of Safi Faye's pioneering docufiction *Kaddu Beykat* (1975). Knorpp discussed the filmmaker's innovative ethnographic practice, characterised by a poetic treatment of time, repetitions, a non-linear structure, and an elaborate interplay between the mythical and the actual. Finally, in my own paper on the politicisation of ethnography, I suggested that many women filmmakers from Francophone Africa — including Sylla, Ndiaye, and Faye — deliberately break with the codes of traditional ethnography, that their approaches to cultural phenomena are both formally and politically reflexive.

The afternoon panel, 'Roles Created for African Women', shifted the focus of attention away from women filmmakers and towards questions of representation. In particular, the papers focused on examples of resistance to the stereotypical images of women constructed by many African (and non African) film directors. Ekuia Andrea Agha (Birkbeck College) provided an outline of these commonly observed stereotypes: women who are subjugated to their male relatives, who are positioned as victims and commodities. Agha then suggested that Ousmane Sembène's characterisation of African women in *Ceddo* (1976) successfully challenges the negative roles commonly assigned to them. Likewise, Matthias de Groof (University of Antwerp) argued that the rebellious women who feature in Jean-Pierre's Bekolo's fantasy film, *Les Saignantes* (2005), defy and appropriate autocratic and patriarchal power through an exaggeration of femininity, a feature that de Groof related to Mary Ann Doane's concept of the 'masquerade'. Finally, Roselyn Vona Doghudje (University of Ibadan) discussed the representation of women in films with/by Nigerian actress, writer, and producer Funke Akindele.

Many of the issues discussed in the latter panel were equally central to the second day's morning session, 'Image and Stereotypes of African Women in Film Dramas'. Two papers focused on 'Nollywood', a prolific Nigerian film industry that ranks amongst the largest and most dynamic in the global market: A. Irene Pogoson's (University of Ibadan) analysis of *Jenifa* (Muhydeen S. Ayinde, 2008) and Shaibu Hussein's (Lagos State University School of Communication) reflection on the gender imbalance within Nigerian filmmaking. Hussein deplored the underrepresentation of women directors within the industry, considered some of the factors accounting for the current figures, and suggested initiatives to promote filmmaking by women. Maryam Kazeem (London School of Economics and Political Science), on the other hand, discussed how Black subjectivities are mediated in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (2008–). Through exploration of its representation of femininity and homosexuality, Kazeem argued that, although the television series attempts to provide a

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dynamic representation of Botswana, it is nonetheless portrayed through an African-American lens, as the series relies heavily on Western terminology.

The afternoon panel, 'Women's Rights and Issues Based Films' focused largely on questions of reception. Florence Ayisi and Catalin Brylla (University of Wales, Newport) introduced the results of their fieldwork on the reception of *Sisters in Law* (Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi, 2005) in Cameroon. Ayisi and Brylla detailed the various responses of focus groups, determined on the basis of gender, religious, and socio-economic factors, and suggested that film has the power to promote new ideas and behaviours, encourage a reflection on rights and duties, both individually and collectively. Louise Müller (Leiden University) similarly emphasised the important role of film, in this case in terms of the gender relationships of women of West African origin living in the Netherlands. Müller presented her research on the reception of Ghanaian cinema among immigrant communities, and argued that these films encourage women to mediate between the social norms prevalent in their countries of origin and the expectations of European societies. The afternoon's final contribution was Sheila Petty's (University of Regina) readings of *La Nuit de la vérité* (Fanta Régina Nacro, 2004) and *Hollow City* (João Ganga, 2004). Using Achille Mbembe's concept of 'Necropolitics', Petty demonstrated how these two films reflect on civil war and extreme violence.

With such varied papers applying postcolonial, feminist, reception, and documentary theory, the conference efficiently showcased the diversity and quality of scholarly work relating to women and film in Africa. That this is a field of growing interest to scholars throughout the world was apparent, as delegates — most of whom were early-career researchers — travelled to London for this event from Europe, Africa, and America. The enthusiasm was clearly shared by all attendees and the discussions that followed each session enabled panel and audience members to raise issues of relevance to scholars, as well as to those working in front of and behind the camera. Many impassioned debates took place regarding the relationship between African and global cinemas — Hollywood in particular — and the current dependency on Western funding. Great emphasis was also placed on the power of representation and on the importance of African-made films reaching African audiences, and many rightly deplored the lack of adequate distribution and exhibition circuits. However, as technological evolutions render the process of filmmaking more affordable and less complex and as we bear witness to the diversification of sites for film distribution [1] we may hope for an overhaul of the context of creation and commercialisation of African films. Events such as this one, organised by the African Media Centre, undeniably contribute to increasing the visibility of women and film in Africa and provide an invaluable platform for the meeting of academics, enthusiasts, and those working in the industry.

## Notes

[1] See, for example, the M-Net African Film Library, H7 Films, and AfricaFilms.tv.

## **Research Symposium: Gender Cultures and Reality Television**

University of Auckland, Auckland, 2-3 December 2011

### **A report by Felicity Perry, University of Auckland, New Zealand**

Bridezillas, Bollywood celebrities, calendar girls, feuding housewives, desperate singles, drag queens, a fairy jobmother, and a disgraced duchess – there was no shortage of scheduled drama at this research symposium, held in association with the Gender Politics and Reality Television conference which took place in Dublin in August 2011. This symposium provided a southern hemisphere location to build on the ideas espoused at the Dublin conference, and aimed to explore the intersections between gender, culture and place formed through reality television. The organisers, Misha Kavka and Amy West of the University of Auckland, stressed their desire for a critical focus on cultural specificity and the social geographies of gender. Overall this goal was achieved, with the majority of papers addressing the relationship between gender, place and reality television. Fittingly for a symposium based in the Antipodes, the range of presentations avoided the northern hemisphere bias often dominating such proceedings, and took us beyond the USA and United Kingdom to Bangladesh, Turkey, Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, South Africa, India, China, Brazil, Singapore, Taiwan, and Serbia. Due to the organization of the symposium into a two-day, single stream format, participants could witness the analysis of the various locales without having to miss certain papers and discussions due to attending a parallel session. This made for an intimate and supportive symposium, which was further fostered through the combination of established speakers with newer academics in each panel.

Brenda Weber (Indiana University) was to present a plenary address on the opening morning of the symposium, however she was afflicted with laryngitis and, in what would have made good comedic television, could only whisper her detailed and witty comments. Rescheduled as the final presentation, Weber, with stronger vocal chords, addressed the link between place and transformation, arguing in her analysis of the show *Finding Sarah* that the 'new world' ethos of the US and Canada, with its promotion of egalitarianism and change, allowed for the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, to burst holes in the suffocating self-identified subject position of "self-loathing" royalty she occupies in the United Kingdom and embrace the mobility of identity promoted through the cultural mythology of North America. Tania Lewis (RMIT University, Melbourne), who swapped her plenary session with Weber, thus forming the opening of the symposium, took the audience to a different continent and class position – that

of the rising middle class in Asia. As with Weber's address, mobility, gender and place were foregrounded, with Lewis examining the role of reality television formats in the construction of class. Lewis positioned reality television at the intersection between tradition and change, with many 'lifestyle' programmes showing audiences how to be an active citizen of 'global' capitalism yet still adhere to their localised responsibilities. Part of a larger study funded by the Australian Research Council, Lewis' research involved her watching television with families in India, allowing her to see how the shows correspond with their daily lives. Lewis's use of ethnographic methods formed a welcome point of difference at a symposium largely dominated by textual analysis, a difference which was also found in the work of Karen Tice (University of Kentucky) on college students' experiences of 'charm school' in the south of the USA and Zala Volcic's (University of Queensland) analysis of audience reception of the Serbian show *The Palace*.

The plenary speakers' themes produced a thread that was reiterated and expanded on by many other papers – that of the relationship between reality television, gender and neoliberalism. Hannah Hamad (Massey University, New Zealand), who discussed the UK-based show *The Fairy Jobmother* (in which the 'jobmother' finds jobs for the long-term unemployed) argued that within neoliberalism reality television stands in for the state. Supporting neoliberal governance, the majority of the reality television shows analysed during the symposium push an individualizing agenda. The 'jobmother', for instance, situates joblessness as an individual failing rather than a result of the economic recession. The shows outlined in Karen Tice's paper locate class differences as an individual choice rather than based in social structures which promote inequality. Tice examined campus-based 'enhancement' programmes which emulate reality television shows such as *Flavor of Love: Charm School* and *From G's to Gents*. Within such programmes, participants are told to be their own 'CEO', and to present themselves as a 'brand'. Tice argued that these courses teach students how to emulate the norms of class structures above those they have been ensconced in, promoting a neoliberal agenda of 'good' citizenship through self-reliance and self-improvement.

Amy West (University of Auckland) and Alexia Smit (University of Cape Town) further showed how television can work to stand in for the state. West's paper examined how the New Zealand show *One Land* attempts to present New Zealand as unproblematically 'bicultural', smoothing over the cultural devastation (and the continued negative effects) caused to Māori by European settlement. The relationships between Māori and the settlers are portrayed as mutually reciprocal, and flourishing through interpersonal relationships such as marriage. Smit argued that the South African show *Forgive and Forget* emphasises the importance of forgiveness at a time when the state is invested in constructing a post-apartheid national culture based on clemency between blacks and whites. The show neglects to mention the social and emotional

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damage of apartheid, focusing on the importance of individual relationships rather than social structures.

This emphasis on the individual was highlighted by many of the panellists, who described instances of individuals transforming into ideal neoliberal citizens. Inevitably this involves submitting to gendered ideals, or what Brenda Weber and Karen Tice have termed "salvation through submission", whereby the reality television protagonist changes herself to conform to idealised social norms. Indeed, Misha Kavka asserted that it is rarely white masculine men who are 'made-over' on camera for they already occupy the position of 'normal'. Supporting this, Anthea Taylor (University of Queensland) outlined the often painful ways that single women on the show *Tough Love* are corralled into acting in a hegemonically feminine manner – including being subjected to the personal criticisms of men, and to electric shocks from the male host – with the coveted prize for such conformity an end to their (clearly terrible) status as single.

While there was consensus that the majority of reality television programmes serve to naturalise the sex-gender order, there were arguments made that reality television, with its focus on difference, can serve to shake gender norms. Sirri Serhat Serter (Anadolu University, Turkey) contended that the Turkish adaptation of *Come Dine with Me, Yemekteyiz*, is able to destabilise the belief that only women can cook well by featuring two males in the competition each season. Frances Bonner (University of Queensland) argued that although the *Dancing with the Stars* format adheres visually to a heterosexual norm, its inclusion of transgendered dancers challenges the notion that gender follows from sex. Further, the relationship between the female professional dancers and their male celebrity dance partners troubles gender divisions. Although the female dancers appear as though they are being led by their male partners (in accordance with ballroom dancing traditions), they are in fact leading, thus challenging the notion that men are in control. Joanna McIntyre (University of Queensland) also argued that representations of queer subjects on reality television in Australia destabilise gender binaries. McIntyre asserted that such representations are made palatable to audiences through the queer subjects being coded as underdogs who deserve a 'fair go' and through such subjects exhibiting traditional (white) Australian values of mateship and loyalty. While this emphasis on traditional values could be seen as conservative, McIntyre asserted that this emphasis acts to slide these 'mainstream' Australian values towards queerness.

The symposium was a timely look at the way reality television both shapes and reflects gender practices in a neoliberal world. As Weber asserted in her plenary address, the subjects that are at the forefront of reality television today are those who place a new spin on the now globalised 'American' dream of upward mobility, moulding it to include not just tertiary education and home ownership, but beauty, confidence, happiness, and fame. The ideal reality television subject wants it 'all' and will do 'anything' to get it. That is, they are the ever-desiring



capitalist subject. Those scholars (clearly absent at this symposium) who continue to situate reality television as unworthy of analysis, take note – this symposium demonstrated that this television genre, perhaps more than any other, provides continued insights into the intersection of entertainment with capitalism, gender, and place. That is, reality television offers a zoom lens into the construction and mutation of the scripts we live by.