

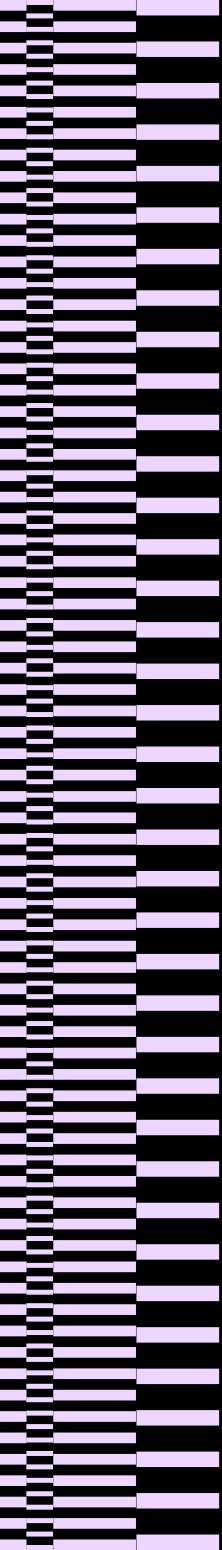
# STREETGIRLING THE ARCHIVES

Archive  
Books

## TOWARD A GLOBAL

Edited by  
Lizelle Bisschoff,  
Ana Grگیć and  
Stefanie Van de Peer

## WOMEN'S FILM HERITAGE



Film series

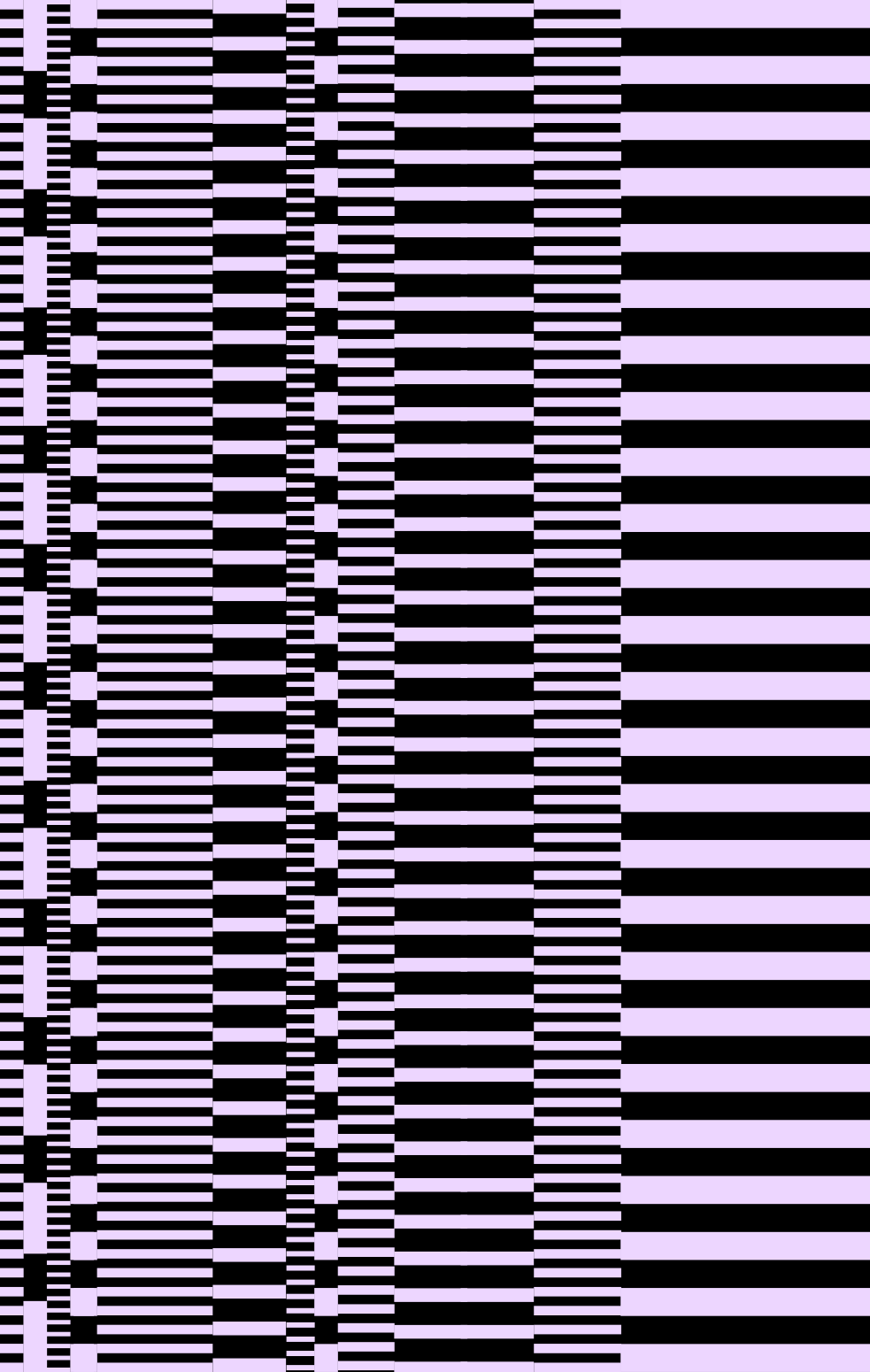
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# WOMEN'S FILM HERITAGE



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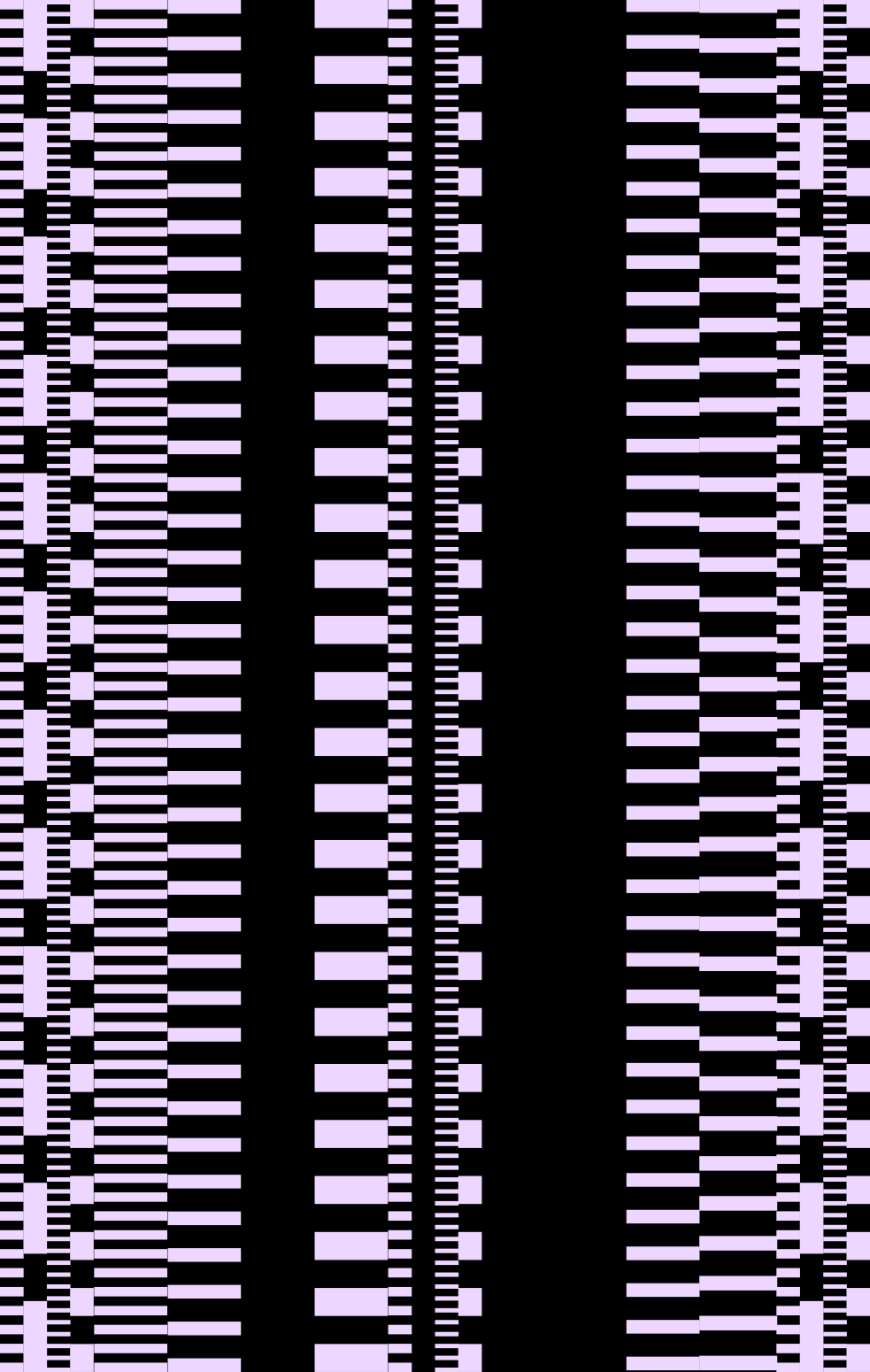
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# Introduction

## Global Women's Film Movements from Legacies to Heritage

Stefanie Van de Peer

Obi-Wan Kenobi: "Perhaps the archives are incomplete."

Jocasta Nu: "If an item does not appear in our records, it does not exist."

Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones

Jocasta Nu, the head-librarian and archivist in *Star Wars*, is a Jedi who looks after all the data-files in the Jedi temple. She wears the robes of the librarians and wears her hair in a top knot bun with hair sticks. She is a dignified and elegant, but rare presence in the saga. As an archivist, she knows where to find everything, but when Obi-Wan Kenobi asks her about a planet he cannot find, she denies the possibility of its existence if it is not represented in the archive. This internalised patriarchal attitude to presences and absences in the archive is disappointing, and the way it has infiltrated popular culture says a lot about how hierarchies of knowledge need to be countered in order to find ways in which to address the gaps in knowledge and history. This book then, wants to counter and critique the idea that only that which is conserved can possibly have existed.

This is the outcome of two years of networking, workshops and conferences that focused on bringing together scholars, archivists and filmmakers who address gaps left in our shared histories, with a particular focus on feminist cultural memory and film heritage in the Global South. We use the terminology around Global South as developed since the 1960s, in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement. Each chapter has its own approach to the concept, but as a collective, for us, Global South is a non-geographical epistemological, anti-imperialist and radical route to knowledge that is anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist.<sup>1</sup> This book sits at the intersection of feminist and anti-colonial research. Through the network, women and people identifying as female from across the globe met and shared passions, frustrations, knowledge and experiences on their encounters with or in film archives and restoration projects, where women's work from the Global South has been and continues to be neglected. Realising that the meeting of the anti-colonial movement with second-wave feminism and the rise of film studies in the seventies was a fecund framework, collectively we decided to focus on that era in order to find a workable methodology for our diverse approaches to film history. Using feminist, anti-racist philosophies, and wanting to move away sharply from the canon, our research questions were: What remains unremembered in feminist film history? Why do we collectively still know so little about non-White feminist film history?

<sup>1</sup> The history of the idea of "Global South" in the humanities is rooted in many traditions, since the 1960s, and spans across countries from India (with a clear influence of the Gramscian concept of "South"), and China to Mexico and Argentina and including indigenous cultures everywhere. It is a political and cultural term that also includes the silenced and oppressed voices of the geographical North. Individual authors and teams throughout this book refer to theorists and thinkers like Gayatri C. Spivak, Chandra T. Mohanty, Maria Lugones, Maria Sagato, Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell, who have all contributed to the understanding of Global South.

What is it about women's work that delays the attention of historians? What is cultural memory if it only selectively hears and sees the past? What do we do with materials that exist but that we do not (yet) know about? This is intersectional work and while the money for such research is still mostly located in the Global North, the legacies we are working with are in the Global South. This is complex positional work, that demands humility and self-reflection about our colonialist pasts. Our goal is to change notions of what and who counts in film history. Change is needed. And in order to change the world, we need to work *collectively* on reinterpreting it, which will allow for and make possible the change that is needed. We must move beyond – *stretch* – our interpretation and understanding of history to change it. Film history, therefore, must become a process of discovery, with multiple entry points, and multiple possible outcomes. In the writings in this book, authors have been asked to be self-reflexive, philosophical, and honest, all in the interest of the self-critical turn in feminist and anti-colonialist research. Many of the chapters here are co-authored and conversational, thus moving away from “canonical” scholarship and towards an editorial approach that centralises freedom of expression, hoping to make more visible and accessible the role of women and their films in the global film archives. Because, after all, the women are there in the archives (and outside of the archives too), even if we do not (yet) know about them. We highlight what women have achieved, how they have contributed and indeed spearheaded filmmaking practices, and how they have disrupted complacent approaches to cinema history. It is time these women are recognised. This book, then, brings together disparate efforts to safeguard individual corpuses of film cultures and film legacies, envisaging collaboration across borders to invigorate a movement concerned with the presences, absences, practices and

methodologies in global archives, hoping to open access to and visibility in archives of the work by women from the Global South.

For this book and in it, we have come together as a collective of women trying to give a fuller articulation to the past of feminist cinema. It is important that we acknowledge, from the very start of this book, that we do not claim “completeness” because – while this is an attempt to rectify past mistakes or oversights – we cannot claim to be the first, or the last to do so, and a lot more work is still needed. What we do want to do is to *stretch* our shared concept of the film archive, of the materials that have survived in or outside of the archive, and how or in what state these materials are now accessible, or not. Specifically, we are concerned with the way in which women’s films and women’s labour have been excluded from canonisation. In fact, films by Global South women are often left to personal rather than public efforts in the broadening of historical research and understanding of the past. That is to say, there is a longstanding trend to allow women’s work to remain part of specific, personal legacies rather than being embraced in the overall concept of a shared acknowledged heritage. As is the case with such efforts, the desire to stretch our complacency about canons and the role of archives grew out of an awareness that film history, as it is written and passed down, all too often excludes any ideas on or respect for feminisms other than White, Western – i.e. American or European – feminisms. Since the 1970s historians have acknowledged the “benign neglect” (Tucker 1983) of women’s work in scholarship, as there has been a consistent obsession with the written word, with male creativity and labour, and with the upper classes. We question the use of the word “benign”, and propose that the continued neglect and marginalisation is pernicious and damaging. In a Global South context, this clearly has its

roots in Orientalism and an essentially European attitude towards historiography (or history-writing), which has caused disappointment and resistance to these trends in more recent decades. The rewriting of history, or the re-addressing of the benignly neglected eras and areas in history, is therefore a radical act aligned with a strong sense of feminist anti-racism and an anti-colonial effort in scholarship. The redirection into an interdisciplinary effort of history-writing undermines the “benign neglect” and reacts against it, by starting to *stretch* the archive so as to include lower classes, women’s works and popular media. Likewise, the specialist knowledge that feminist films have been made in contexts entirely different from those dominated by White feminists encourages us to stretch our understanding of where the labour of feminist filmmaking is located, what feminist cinema and feminist film studies can and should be, and how we may ensure to protect it from further neglect.

With this publication we want to give shape to fuller configurations of the internationalist feminist film movements, to highlight historically transnational networks and past alliances. Chapters discuss a variety of methodological and conceptual approaches to the topic of a global women’s film heritage, and ways to deconstruct the popularity of dominant historiographies. In particular, we are interested in the terminology of legacy, heritage, feminism, and the meaning of the local and the global in terms of an ethics of care as a radical method. In the conviction that transparency contributes more to the so-called decolonisation of film studies and film history, we embrace a feminist ethics of care, rooted in inclusivity and solidarity. Our starting point is that we do not want to continue the classic academic publication. Established publishers in the neoliberal British academy, while interested in mining the knowledge of anti-colonial feminist endeavours, refuse to make the books they publish accessible to the

authors and subjects they profit from: academic books are prohibitively expensive, and are often only available in hardback format for years before the paperback – more affordable – version comes out. Moving away from that model, with this online publication of various formats of writing and video essays, instead we aim to curate a safe, inclusive and accessible online space, where patience and kindness between author and reader take precedence over gratuitous intellectualism or strict word counts. This book showcases contributions by authors and filmmakers from all around the world, written in the language they preferred (and translated into English for accessibility), and made available for free so that scholars, filmmakers, archivists and activists can read it wherever they can find an internet connection. Awareness that not everyone has access to the internet has sadly not yet resulted in an alternative publishing platform that is truly inclusive and accessible. Many of us are also curators by necessity – in order to share our love of the films we find and know about we need to screen them – and as such, our collective aim remains bringing the films and the filmmakers we write about in this book to all areas and all people around the world to encourage acknowledgement of and engagement with their feminist principles and creative labour. And so, what we present here includes a variety of formats: reports, reflections, analyses, video essay, and co-written explorations of a theme. This reflects the solidarity and diversity of the networks this book is rooted in. An example, and inspiration of this feminist solidarity, is the grief and resulting sympathy expressed during a presentation about Angolan/Portuguese cinematic injustices, where a woman's contributions to early anti-colonial filmmaking had been malevolently destroyed. Her testimony showed how she had failed to find traces of her own past in the vaults of the countries' national archives. Rooted in emotional labour, testimonies and activist feminist



solidarity, this book is the result of collaboration, openness, communication and cooperation.

Interested in figuring out a way to delve into the past of feminist cinema more inclusively, we spoke of our shared frustrations with archival, curatorial and preservation theories and practice, and how the historical discourses around these are dominated entirely by White male voices. Experiences with restoration's obsession over ownership and rights, curatorial preoccupations with location, and the material traces, fragments and other ghostly appearances of film, we were inspired by the work currently being done by anti-colonial film scholars on repatriation and restitution. In terms of the practice, there is a growing tendency to recognise the contributions of the filmmakers of the Global South. For example, the World Cinema Project (WCP) has restored, preserved and exhibited 44 films from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Central America, South America, and the Middle East, but so far only one single film on their list of restorations is by a woman: *Sambizanga* by Sarah Maldoror (1972). Likewise, in Berlin in Germany, the Arsenal Institute has curated two projects – The Living Archive (on world cinema) and The Visionary Archive (on African cinema) – where world cinema films have been given attention. Paolo Cherchi Usai's Pordenone Silent Film Festival in Italy and his work at George Eastman House in the US, as well as Mark Cousins' curatorial and journalistic work, have also made efforts to increase recognition of the world's film heritage. But these institutions and curators are all entirely male-dominated. Even Cousins' series *Women Make Film* neglects the political and historical role of women in cinema, instead focusing on contemporary aesthetic details. The exception is Arsenal, whose board of directors is made up of women scholars and curators. Indeed, it is the only institute to have given some attention to feminist film heritage, adding Assia Djebar's film *La Zerda* (1982), Trinh T. Minh-

ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) and Sarah Maldoror's *Monangambee* (1969) to their projects. This lack of attention paid to women and feminist filmmakers from the Global South limits our understanding of film feminism as a concept. There is so much more to discover, to acknowledge and to celebrate in terms of our shared feminist film heritage. A more inclusive understanding of feminist film history would broaden our abilities to find solidarity across cultures and practices. Although the global cultural sector is acutely underfunded, substantial work is being done in archives and film museums everywhere. As a collective, we connected with several initiatives across the sector at film festivals, cinematheques and archives to develop women's anti-colonial skillsets and knowledge. There is a need to recognise the existing efforts of film archives in locations in the Global South, like Cairo, Beirut, Tunis, Mexico-City, Buenos Aires, Dakar, and in Pretoria. These archives were historically managed by colonising forces, and since independence, the changes to materials and infrastructure have posed both threats and opportunities. This is in response to the constant changes to film's materiality and infrastructure, to the danger of a loss of knowledge with the passing of the filmmakers, and with the growing links between scholarship, historiography, and archival practice. The expansion (the *stretching*) of the world's film archives is crucial in the actualisation of a global women's film history that meaningfully participates in the decolonisation of individual legacies and results in a visible, shared, and accessible heritage. Similarly, in the post-socialist context, film archives in Eastern Europe and the Balkans struggle to digitise their heritage, or make it accessible to researchers and visible to global audiences. Continued stigmatisation, economic deprivation, and historical subalternity in the easternmost part of Europe and its overlapping Balkan identity, continue to inhibit the region's

confidence, consigning it in socio-economic terms to the so-called Global South. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania in particular, though geographically located in Europe, do not benefit from European film preservation and digitisation grants because they are not part of the European Union. Within these contexts, women's film heritage is even further marginalised and neglected. As we explore further on in this introduction, one of our main principles and methodologies in this book is non-alignment. It is a constructive alternative to the neoliberalism of the Western world which we want to avoid, and it is the tool we used in this project to move away from capitalist, neoliberal academic principles. In our view, non-alignment enables a long view for a better, more collective inclusive future, as there is space for vision and ethics, moving beyond a short-sighted vision of individual or institutional power and relationships.

In our feminist context however we looked further than anti-colonialism and non-alignment, in thinking about ways to put a halt to extractive practices in preservation and archival principles. Overall, funding for archival practice tends to come from the Global North. Infrastructure and equipment are developed, employed and safeguarded in Europe and North America. Contemporary archive studies and film historical scholarship tend to build on the philosophical work of Benjamin Stora, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. These historians' research and writing on history, memory and the preservation of heritage reveals a proclivity for the conceptual – not the practical – and a Eurocentric thinking when it comes to considerations of the heritage of the (moving) image. Even though Stora and Derrida were experts on North Africa, their perspectives were Western-centric, imbued with universalist and patriarchal value systems. Even feminist scholars who critiqued their work, like Judith

Butler, remain committed to an understanding of emancipation as a universalist, one-directional flow instead of a dialogue between diverse politics, histories and film cultures. Much like the state of film production and distribution, Western Europe remains the hub for film preservation. While the above-described efforts do address some gaps in a global film heritage, there remain problems with their accessibility in terms of rights holders, exhibition and curation. The repatriation of the restored films is not always straightforward. One example is the above-mentioned *La Zerda* by Assia Djebar (1982), restored by Arsenal. The film expresses very strong anti-French sentiments from an Algerian perspective, but also critiques the Algerian liberation movement from a feminist perspective. As such, the film is controversial with the Algerian government and unwanted in the national film archives. Repatriation is therefore too simple a concept for complex feminist histories, and so we found purpose in thinking more deeply about the language and concept of rematriation. Rematriation is an indigenous concept, where there is an effort to return spiritual and material heritage to its motherland. In political terms, it aims to dismantle the White supremacy of history, where even concepts such as repatriation remain mired in problematic notions of patrimony and patriarchy. By contrast, rematriation enables us to recognise gender (in)justices as well as the limitations of the usual patriarchal knowledge systems. Accessing different systems of knowledge production, rooted in emotional labour and women-only (online) spaces, enabled us to enact deep solidarity and plan future commitment to activist scholarship and practices.

This book, then, is rooted in a desire to consider the diverse methodologies of decolonizing film history in an activist feminist way. We critique the continued Western European dominance of funding and infrastructure for restoration efforts

(including our own). We address the (neo-)colonial history of archives, museums and festivals; the sense of “service” practised by these institutions; and the (material and conceptual) ownership of artefacts and restorations. We also counter the assumption that non-Western archives and film heritage efforts follow Western European and North American models of preservation *à la lettre*. While it is often the case that existing models of collecting, archiving and preserving or curating dominate the approaches to any film heritage project, in what follows we want to address the groundswell of efforts to move away from these practices and approaches. Each chapter puts the spotlight on non-canonical feminist filmmakers and non-normative archival practices, paying attention to screen media that have been variously neglected, ignored or un-remembered (about which more later in this introduction). The archives and institutions we showcase are all too often considered in terms of lack, or having to catch up to the Western standards of practice. Instead, we want to emphasise that different archival and filmmaking practices may in fact contribute to a fuller, more inclusive and indeed a more interesting shared film history. Our starting point is that women have always contributed to the film industry and to film history, but that the patriarchal act of historiography has been subject to the consequences of non-remembering or neglect. Our collective efforts to make these different practices and approaches more visible has led us to the nexus of feminist film history, the 1970s and the period leading up to this decade, in particular the internationalist and non-aligned movements of the 60s and 70s.

The principles of the internationalist non-aligned movement spoke to our focus on the Global South and East, in opposition to the privileged North and West. The Non-Aligned Movement broke away from the Cold War and its binary historiography of West versus East. Rather than

align themselves with either political ideology, the member states of the Non-Aligned Movement followed the idealist principles of friendship, peace and environmentalism (Pavithran 2007). The movement had a crucial influence on the decolonisation process in the sixties and seventies. Internationalism is an increasingly important ideal running through concepts of the global, and we advocate for internationalism and its central principle of cooperation. Indeed, we contend that cooperation and collaboration are at the heart of a lot of feminist filmmaking, and should be central to the preservation of a feminist film history. We advocate for compassion and an ethics of care as we deconstruct academic practices. In fact, our overarching methodology is inspired by the Non-Aligned Movement. As film scholars, when we see or read studies of feminist film history, we get overwhelmed by the focus on American and UK/EU feminism, to the detriment of and the neglect of the “rest” of the world. We find the terminology of “Third World,” Postcolonial,” etc... lacking and instead prefer to explore non-alignment. It explicitly responds to the assumptions of Western European and American dominance in the field of politics, which we wanted to emulate in our cultural, academic and feminist endeavours. Surprised by how little research there is on this movement in film studies, we used it to shape our online attitude and ethics of care across geographical, time and linguistic barriers. Contrary to the patriarchal need to categorise and conceptualise, non-alignment allowed us to leave space for interpretation, subtleties and nuances.

The central non-aligned principles are mutual respect, integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence (Pavithran). These are values initiated in the post-World War Two era and during the Cold War, in a treaty signed by India's Prime Minister (1947–1964) Jawaharlal Nehru, Yugoslavia's

Prime Minister (1944–1963) Josip Broz Tito and Egypt's Prime Minister (1954–1962) Gamal Abdel Nasser, who wanted to achieve global international peace and security, with a focus on steering clear of the bi-polar world divided between Russia and the US, between communism and capitalism. Although the leaders of the non-aligned movement in the sixties fell afoul of their idealism in their later political careers, the principles of the non-aligned movement remain relevant. Indeed, non-alignment and its focus on international political and cultural cooperation has remained an inherent principle of ideal – perhaps utopian – international relations and policies. It is radical, flexible, and focused on common goals rather than individual ambitions of countries. At our events, we found that practising non-aligned methodologies in film studies and film history encourages mutual respect, integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit. This allowed for emotions like empathy, sympathy and solidarity to take centre stage across geographical, temporal and linguistic boundaries. Patience and respect for one another's particular modes of expression abounded in our network, and have resulted in a multi-lingual, patiently edited and collaboratively constructed open access book. The hope is that the work in these pages and the way it is presented may result in more considerate understanding and recognition of non-Western, non-hierarchical archives and preservation facilities and professionals, identifying films and filmmaker collectives, self-reflexively locating work, filmmakers and archivists, and collaborating with one another for further disclosure of our shared feminist film heritage.

The non-aligned, anti-colonial and feminist movements intersected in the 1970s, and in their turn also intersected with the rise of film studies. In his overview of the developments in film theory, Andrew shows how Anglocentric film theory has been. Where film scholars have, historically,

tried to include “different” angles, focus has been on Japanese, French and, to a limited extent, German film studies, failing entirely to recognise the contributions by filmmakers and scholars from the Global South. But Andrew neglects to point this out in any depth, merely mentioning that filmmaking from the “Third World” emanated from colonial geopolitical contexts (903). Since Andrew’s article, Film Studies has fully embraced “World Cinema,” “Transnational Cinema” and “Global Cinema” as theoretical concepts. It is interesting however to deconstruct and critique the embrace of the transnational, the global and the world (or the universal) in film studies as inherently modern and Western/European. The practice of transnationalism permeated the philosophies and discourses of the countries belonging to the non-aligned movement and beyond in the Global Majority. The terminology of this expanding field remains contested, though filmmakers and theorists from the Global South are slowly becoming more recognised (see for example, Shohat; Saljoughi; Chaudhuri). Indeed, the de-Westernisation of film studies (Higbee & Ba; Martin-Jones) has not yet resulted in a satisfactory decolonisation of the field. The decolonial movement in academia is currently in the process of recognising the absence of female theorists in its discourse, even though these theorists are often foundational to the language and concepts used in the decolonising movement (see Spivak on the (female) subaltern; Mohanty on feminist solidarity). Conversely, the feminist impetus in most disciplines is increasingly recognising the neglect of women’s work from and about the Global South. Humm showed that feminist theory as an identifiable area of study dates from the 1970s, but that it remained exclusively White and spectator focused. When Black feminism caused a shift in women’s studies, the study of women of colour as producers also began to emerge. As such, feminist aesthetics and



practice were far ahead of feminist film theory, even in the 1970s. Indeed, the 1970s tackled the causes of women's oppression (capitalism and masculinity) describing society as a structure of oppressors (male) and oppressed (female). Humm discusses Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and bell hooks' work from the 1980s in some detail but neglects the contributions of feminist scholars from the Global South. As such, feminist film studies' efforts to instate women into history is not enough: we must recognise the work of non-Western or Global Majority women too. Humm describes how Laura Mulvey's essay inaugurated a distinctive British and American body of work devoted to issues of spectatorship, which is still central to some of the most prominent feminist film history work today. She acknowledges that the historiography of feminist film theory itself is also neglected. The exclusions of women and of anti-colonial thought therefore need to be brought into focus. The convergence of feminist and anti-colonial work in historiography can reverse the neglect of the work by Global South women.

The 1970s feminist turn in filmmaking resulted in a wave of activist film and video that used the contemporary developments in technology. Sony introduced the Betamax videotape in 1975, and JVC launched the VHS tape, while increasingly lightweight 16 mm cameras were adapted and improved to enable synchronous sound recording, making filmmaking (and consumption) more woman friendly. Simultaneously, the "Algiers Charter on African Cinema" was written and inaugurated at the second congress of FEPACI (the Federation of Pan-African Cineastes), and the "New Arab Cinema Manifesto" was announced, both showing a deep commitment to anti-imperialist filmmaking, continuing the anti-establishment strategies of the Latin American Third Cinema Manifesto (1969). Also, manifestos such as

“Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” (UK, 1973), the “Womanifesto” (USA, 1975) and “For the Self-Expression of the Arab Woman” (Tunisia, 1978) explicitly refer to these developments as enabling women’s work. Importantly, the difference with the Third Cinema Manifesto was that the African and Arab manifestos included considerations of and contributions by women filmmakers. And so, globally, cinematic revolutions were taking place. These global anti-establishment trends need to be acknowledged as major influences on filmmakers everywhere, in particular those concerned with social justice and the rights of the oppressed. As I have shown elsewhere (Van de Peer, 2017), New Arab Cinema pushed filmmakers to embrace the reality of everyday life over the grand discourses of a sentimentalist cinema. Third Cinema similarly preferred an engagement with the real, with the lower classes and with those whose lives had been ignored by the establishment for too long. Both manifestos called for transparency of perspective, while they also strongly believed in the ability of active, engaged audiences to act upon calls for change. As such, the significance of global idealist cinema movements cannot be ignored; the consequences of the 1968 movements were felt by worldwide activist filmmakers and were amplified by the convergence in 1975 of decolonisation, feminism, and the rise of film studies.

The 1970s also witnessed the rise in popularity of film festivals as a platform for filmmakers to connect with their audiences. One of the most interesting festivals in this context is Doc Leipzig. As Moine assures, “the GDR enjoyed greater latitude in the so-called Third World than anywhere else on the Globe” (2018: 157). The festival explicitly adhered to the non-aligned principles, like “socialist internationalism, anti-imperialist solidarity and peaceful coexistence” (Moine: 157), which resulted in the increased inter-connectedness of Eastern German, Balkan and

Global South film professionals. Representatives of film archives, schools and institutions exchanged practices, films and know-how in the spirit of humanism, socialism and solidarity (which *sometimes* included gender equality and women's emancipation). It is interesting, then, to see how women filmmakers like Cuban Sarah Gomez remain unacknowledged in the festival's online archival photographs. This confirms the slow movements towards principles of solidarity and emancipation but it also reveals the absurdity of the Western world thinking it is the most emancipated and developed in terms of its film history. It is at the intersection of anti-colonial and feminist thinking then, that this collection thrives: we emphasise the roles of women filmmakers in history, the contributions of feminist scholars to film historiography, and the work of women re-shaping the structures on which the archival and preservation institutions are built. We do so in an internationalist and non-aligned manner, including collaboration between multiple languages, levels of experience and formats of writing.

Our aim to contribute to the stretching of the archive, is a commitment to the widening of our understanding of the archive beyond its preoccupation with the canon, and to the cultivation of a broader concept of history and historiography, and the accessibility of that which we do not know is there, or that of which only fragments and traces survive. The idea of the fragment, the ephemeral memory, the interrupted and fleeting dream is at the centre of Allyson Nadia Field's work on early Black film. Field seeks to study non-existent films through looking at the "presence of absence" by considering the cultural context at the time and analysing archival ephemera, which constitutes "a composite portrait of rich filmmaking practices" (2015, 23–28). She argues for "looking and thinking adjacently" (Field 2015: 26), in the spirit of Trinh T. Minh-Ha's concept of "speaking nearby" (Kaplan

1997: 195–217) and Assia Djebar’s experiments with “speaking around” her subjects. To approach the forgotten, neglected and fragmented parts of history, those things left out of patriarchal historiography and the canonisation of male work, is a radical act of emancipation. While Frymus acknowledges that “seeing traditional historical inquiry as deeply skewed towards the privileged group is a necessary first step in understanding, and eventually eliminating historiographic omissions,” she also asks: “how do we notice the voices of minorities [...] when systemic racism has excluded them from the written records, and when all we hear is overbearing silence? What methods do we use to retrieve them? How do we stop perpetuating erasure of certain stories and voices?” (2020: 228). Indeed, as Anselmo (2021: 162) shows, “Silence constitutes an invisible form of violence since it is difficult to mount a historical argument in the void of material evidence”. In order to address the silence and open our biased hearing up to voices previously unheard, we must radically tilt our heads, listen actively and see differently. We see the solution to overcome the violence of silence and neglect in a feminist ethics and aesthetics of care, where a *care-full* listening and seeing will help us to enact our non-aligned principles of collaboration, friendship and mutual respect.

A historical precedent of our current effort is perhaps the Early Cinema movement, which has roots in the 1978 FIAF conference in Brighton. It rediscovered pre-1906 cinema, which marked a historical turn in cinema studies, by challenging cinema’s origins and “firsts”, and acknowledging forgotten film pioneers and films, and importantly shifting the emphasis from textual analysis to a non-text approach. The Italian visual arts and media scholar, Giuliana Bruno’s work on film fragments employs an interdisciplinary and intermedia approach to map particular women’s contributions to early Italian cinema, and in doing so, addresses

the challenge posed by feminism to the study of film. When studying women's contributions to early cinema, prominent feminist film scholar Jane Gaines acknowledges the unknowability of the past, as well as the "methodological disillusionment" and limitations of historiographic projects (2018: 1–15). An example of this is the Women Film Pioneers Project, launched in October 2013. It is an ever-expanding digital publication and online resource that explores women's global involvement at all levels of film production during the silent film era, which began with the desire to challenge the established notion of the great "fathers" of cinema, through the search for "women film pioneers". The project has since adopted the principle that "What we assume never existed is what we invariably find". Both Gaines (2002: 100-105) and Bruno (1993: 234) have argued that the issue of "authorship" emerges as a key concern in feminist theory and criticism, and in regards to early cinema. This is the case because women could assume creative roles, since the very notion of authorship had not yet been solidified, and also because cinema was not yet an important and viable industry and "so little was at stake," thus allowing women to more easily access creative roles (Gaines 2002: 105). Likewise, in this book and in our project, we explicitly wanted to highlight the work of those working behind the scenes, doubly or even triply invisible. We know women were working in the film industry, so why does their work continue to be a blind spot in film history? As Gains explains:

A blind presumption of authorship can have the effect of negating whatever agency we would want to assert on behalf of early film industry workers. For agency in this context means credit for the women who imagined, scripted, arranged, shot, cut, and conformed the first moving pictures. Credit means recovery of the lost and languishing and

reconstitution of the historical record. Giving credit to women missing and eclipsed means rewriting the cultural history of the century of the industrially produced fantasy. (Gaines 2002: 110)

As of July 2023, the Women Film Pioneers Project online resource features pioneer profiles of 315 women from around the world. A burgeoning body of work by early cinema and feminist media history scholars has brought to light the incredible diversity of roles women held in film production, exhibition and distribution (see Bean and Negra 2002; Abel 2005; Lowe 2005; Gledhill and Knight 2015), and women's contribution to the development of film narrative and the growth of local film industries were also brought to prominence (see Stamp 2012; Gaines et al. 2013; Hill 2016; Förster 2017; Gaines 2018). Still much work remains to be done, to recognise women's practices as both producers and consumers of early cinema around the world. Most scholarship that gives women creatives of early cinema visibility remains focused on North American and Western European contexts, and very few women make the cut in cinema histories (Grgić, 2022). Feminist scholarship has recognised the increased imperative with which film history needs to address the medium's heritage (Callahan, 2010; Gledhill and Knight, 2015), but most publications continue to neglect work from the Global South and the Balkans. As filmmakers pass away and film stock disintegrates, archives, likewise, have recognised the need to move beyond the safeguarding of canonical works to start to include the so-far ignored work by Eastern European, Asian, African and Latin American women. The urgency of this movement contains a pragmatic factor in that women often remain the sole protectors of their own work, and their legacies are under threat. This loss of historical women's films, of female workers'

legacies and of non-Western and non-canonical media, combined with an ideology that emphasises the urgency with which we must address the deficiencies of patriarchal historiography, result in radical methods that enable us to deal with silences, blind spots, and loss. As such, in this project, we look beyond the canon and the successfully preserved: we deal with orphan films, with widows' labour, with the liberation of memories and legacies stuck behind gatekeepers' doors, with student films and family archives, amateur and home-made films and videos, the ideas of imperfection and sharing and with the concept of providing shelter and care in our preservations of Global South women's contributions to an anti-colonial feminist film history. Our shared ethics of care, which questions the failure of moving individual, personal and subjective legacies into a globally shared, recognised film heritage, is therefore not only a method of research but also a theme discovered in the films studied.

The silences left in our shared global film history and the gaps in our knowledge constitute a neglect. But they do not necessarily translate into total oblivion. What we do not collectively know, is not necessarily forgotten on an individual level. If we cannot hear or see something, that does not mean that it is not there. We know that women have always been there in film, as we know from fragments and traces, but we have failed their memory, and our own cultural heritage as a consequence. To deal with this, we must move beyond the dichotomy between remembering and forgetting. Instead of non-existence, Sendyka (2022) proposes that we consider non-memory. She proposes that there is an in-between state of thinking and being about the past: the unremembered experience. For her, non-memory is not a gap in knowledge, as knowledge is so rooted in language and discourse: what exists outside of discourse is not in fact absent, although

perhaps it may be harder to find or define. In fact, defining and linguistic framing of something as ephemeral as the history of audio-visual media is doubly oppressive in a structuralist sense, where things only exist if there is a word or a language for them. Instead, Sendyka proposes a deeper consideration of vernacular knowledge, where non-memory acts as the societally significant gaps in collective memory. Where traces, fragments, incomplete memories, feelings and emotions exist instead of knowledge, this implicit “embodied knowledge” must be recognised in its coexistence alongside the explicitly remembered. That which is not remembered – in this case women’s feminist film legacies – is not necessarily forgotten. Indeed, “the ‘Europeanization’ of difficult memory [...] leads to the ethnographically unjustified omission of collective experience” (Sendyka: 528). In order to move away from the Eurocentric privileging of language and beyond the binary of remembering and forgetting, Sendyka proposes to use Halbwachs’ ideas that history

is mediated and transmitted to nonwitnesses in at least two registers: the official one, making use of symbolic communication, rational logic and narration, [...] and the intimate one, in which the transfer occurs by means of distorted symbolic modes and [...] extra-symbolic modes, thanks to the non-verbal elements of speech and performative acts: somatic activities, interactions with objects and people. “Tacit knowledge” meets here that which can be put into words. What has been consciously recognized mixes with the “unthought known”: something that we actually do know, but about which we do not want, or cannot think, and that remains in the realm of uncanny cognitive recognition-omission. (Sendyka: 531)



The concept of non-memory, then, allows us to treat the uncertain past with sensitivity, with instinct and desire, rather than with logic and rationality. This is a feminist approach, in which one recognises that history, memory and non-memory are performative, affective, irrational, silent, tacit, volatile, inclusive and that they defy binaries. The traces and fragments of films found in and outside of archives, and the overall ephemerality of the medium of film and of our human memory need to be acknowledged and indeed shape the groundwork for the decolonial effort of humility. This then ensures the need for a feminist ethics of care, through careful and care-full consideration of actions and words, which is the way in which individual film legacies can be brought into a shared cinematic heritage.

Making a distinction between an ethics and an aesthetics of care is useful here. Both lead to humble solidarity and to a better world through interpersonal relationships and the recognition that we need one another to make the world a better place. But as Thompson (2015) explains, the responsibilities of care still lie mostly with women and people of colour. Just as non-memory is described as a sensory act, so is care conceived of as a “soft” skill. It both requires and results in affective solidarity, openness and honesty of intention, mutual respect and regard, and a sensory dynamic. He argues: “Where an ethics of care focuses upon the values inherent, exhibited or perhaps desired within these human interdependencies, the aesthetics of care seeks to focus upon how the sensory and affective are realised in human relations fostered in art projects” (Thompson, 2015: 436). The key point here is that care is rooted in reciprocal and subjective human relationships, in inter-subjectivity, through which we recognise ourselves as reliant on the other. It moves away from the arrogance of total knowledge and admits to the fallibility of humanity, bypassing the need for defensiveness or aggression when

shortcomings are pointed out. It is an ethical enquiry calling into question historiography, and proposing a care-full practice of collaboration and solidarity instead. "An aesthetics of care is, therefore, a sensory ethical practice, that [...] involves not only learning how to be attentive and patient, how to listen and respond, but also how to rethink our own attitudes about difference and exclusion" (Thompson, 2015: 437). In working with women from around the world, experts in their field, and with (or on) women whose historical creative work has been non-remembered, the aesthetics of care allow us to really see and listen, to tilt our heads and stretch our concept of a global heritage (in or outside of the archive), so that we may help make film history more inclusive, and so that individual legacies can transition into shared cultural heritage.

Explaining in more detail the belief in and developments of the idea of turning individual legacies into a shared cultural heritage, I want to delve a little deeper into the concept of rematriation and the wish to return spiritual and material heritage to its motherland, which stems from my own experiences with restoration projects. As we have established, a legacy is someone's spiritual and material bestowal, something that is passed down by a predecessor and that creates individual respect among those privileged few that have knowledge and awareness of this past matter. In addition, it has a legal connotation, which in essence emphasises the patriarchal and personal responsibility of the individual for the successful transfer of knowledge or material. If the articles inherent to a legacy gain additional meaning and value within the wider cultural sphere, they may become (part of a) shared heritage of a significant field or identity, such as a region or nation. If this occurs, then the content of a legacy which is in the process of becoming heritage, turns into a mode of expression (including customs, practices,

places, objects, artistic expressions and values) by a community and passed on from generation to generation. The fundamental idea we describe in this book is the lack of successful transference from individual legacies to shared heritage when it comes to women's cultural memory. In addition, it is interesting to note that the term heritage also has a patriarchal connotation in terms of its linguistic and meaning-making links to the terminology around inheritance. Feminist films throughout history, especially in the Global South, have been actively rejected from or passively neglected in existing film archives and thus also from any shared heritage work, due to the colonialist and patronising attitude towards so-called developmental creative work. Instead, women filmmakers and film labourers have been personally responsible for safeguarding their work for future generations, and as such Global South anti-colonial and feminist work from the past has ended up in private archives, passed down from generation to generation within families. Women working in cinema, from the start of film history to those making explicitly feminist films in the sixties and seventies, have passed away or are approaching the end of life. If their legacy remains dependent on their individual efforts to store and safeguard their work, without the funds or possibility to restore, digitise or otherwise safeguard it for the future, then how can these films possibly be transferred into a shared heritage? There is a real urgency not only in recognising women's efforts in film and cinema histories, but also in investing time and money into assisting with the protection of legacies from further ignorance and oblivion.

How does rematriation enable us to deal with cinematic pasts, legacies and heritage more productively? This is where experiences with anti-colonial feminist methodologies are most acutely relevant. As mentioned above, while the finances, infrastructure and know-how for this type of work are still by and large located in the Global North,

the legacies we are working with are located in the Global South. So, what can, realistically, be the role of the Global North in the transmission from an individual film legacy to shared cultural heritage? The singular and one-directional act of exhuming, restoring and making newly available a film from the Global South needs to be replaced by a reciprocal, multi-directional and networked consultation between collaborating partners. This is the only route towards decentring the archive and its histories. Rematriation, then, becomes an anti-colonial tool. If funding for restoration, digitisation and new subtitling work comes from the North, this raises issues around ownership. Rights holders often respond defensively to efforts to decolonise global feminist film heritage. Indeed, in my experience from working on three film projects that aimed to restore, subtitle and digitise feminist films from the Global South, the fact that these projects were sponsored by UK-based organisations and institutions became a very complex and contentious issue for the filmmakers involved. This translated into an effort to decolonise our work, which was difficult as we were beholden to our funders and institutions, and indeed benefitted significantly from this work in terms of our roles in academia (and REF) in the UK. Firstly, it can be difficult to locate the rights holders of Global South women's films. Once the rights holders are located, it becomes evident these are often situated (and locked) in the capitals of previous colonial occupiers. Secondly, there are no incentives for these rights holders to release the films for restoration, probably precisely because the motivation of the projects is to repatriate the films – return them to their makers or their makers' family.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For more information on ways in which film scholars and professionals have dealt with the refusal of rights holders to release the films in their archives for restoration and renewed exhibition, please read the Manifesto "Liberate the Image" available online: [https://themanifesto.documentary-convention.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Liberate-The-Image.Engl\\_.pdf](https://themanifesto.documentary-convention.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Liberate-The-Image.Engl_.pdf)

This is why the World Cinema Project has been unable to restore more women's films. And it has shown me, through the projects I was part of, that restitution or repatriation is not quite good enough: if we continue to mine women's work from the Global South for our own professional and academic profit or promotion, then there is no consistency in our so-called decolonisation. It continues donor-dependency and prevents the agency of women filmmakers *and* their audiences. Rather, collaborating to develop restoration skills and knowledge, and investing in the infrastructure of archives and restoration facilities in the Global South is a better way of supporting indigenous or local efforts to transfer women's film legacies into becoming part of a shared global feminist film heritage. That way we do not merely return the films to their makers but also to the communities they were made with and for. This points at a humble exchange rooted in solidarity, which again leads us towards the ethics of (feminist) care, where care for the films and for the women who made them assists in assuring that a personal film legacy may integrate into a shared cultural heritage for global audiences who benefit from feeling the global (feminist) connection the films advocate.

Part 1 of this book, entitled "Care in Practice," searches for traces of the care taken in restoration and curation practices, and also searches for the care needed to be employed in the treatment and usage of the traces that are found in the archives. Testimonies of different approaches to archives, restoration and curation by scholars, filmmakers, cultural programmers and archivists, delineate ways in which film history enacts recollection of the past. With the ethics and aesthetics of care inherent to our entire project, it seeped through to our word choices and topic choices. As this section of the book shows, taking care of the objects and ephemera in our shared global archives is a responsibility that becomes increasingly important for curators.

Likewise, our feminist solidarity works across geographical and historical boundaries so that we can learn to more fully understand how feminisms in and of film have changed history, if not historiography.

Feminist film studies have for a long time grappled with representational issues. Textual analyses can inspire specific readings or encourage readings against the grain. From the ethics and aesthetics of care, we continue in part 2 “Representation, Self-Representation” with *care-full* close readings of representational issues in women’s films from around the world. In this section of the book, we delve deeper into some individual films and their filmmakers’ lives and professional careers, to discover how confident self-representation claimed the screen in different ways at many points in film history. All these feminist case studies of women’s representation in films from around the world show that ultimately, self-representation is an empowering tool and a sometimes-subversive act. The readings here represent new ways of engaging with both neglected films and with some well-established auteurist work as well. Non-memory has clearly not led to total loss or disappearance. As we move into the final part of the book, we will see how self-representation and a feminist reading of women on and off screen can translate into disruptions in history.

The final part of this book, “Revisioning the Past,” looks at how throughout history, women – both on and off the screen – have disrupted patriarchal complacency and changed the medium of cinema all over the world. Since the earliest years of film, women have been ignored and neglected, while film history and academia have apparently similarly not remembered the work they did to improve the artform and its industry. In each of the chapters, authors confirm that – even if we do not remember it – women have always been there, and they have often initiated crucial changes that have

led to the critical appraisal of and developments in cinema. As such, the book ends on a reflection of how women have been portrayed by star and diva actresses, directors, producers, writers, both on and off screen, throughout history, and how things have changed *and* stayed the same. We continue to have to fight for recognition of how women contributed to cinema and to the industry, and we find ourselves writing in passionate tones and activist language. The urgency with which reinterpretation is needed in order to lead to actual change for the future of film history is once again confirmed. It is hoped, then, that this book lights a fire in more scholars', archivists' and curators' bellies to continue to bear a torch for women in cinema. Until we have overcompensated, we will not reach an equilibrium. We continue to search for balance through diverse philosophies, commitments and convictions, because while data is often biased and software developed in circumstances of privilege and patriarchy, we can claim, use and benefit from them in an approach that combines our sometimes limited findings (traces, mentions) with a confidence that they are there, they are important and we need to bring them to light in our anti-canonical feminist historiography practices to paint fairer, inclusive and holistic pictures of our shared histories. All of us writing in this book wear multiple hats, as scholars, researchers, archivists, curators, programmers, database managers, all necessary characteristics of the film activist.

In conclusion, there are (non-remembered) traces, suggestions, mentions, and fleeting information on women's contributions to film history everywhere. These traces are proof that women's films and feminist filmmakers are there, and have always been there, and the feminist endeavour is to acknowledge, recognise and celebrate this labour for its contributions to global feminism. Through an aesthetics of care, we practice an anti-colonial and feminist approach that enables personal legacies

to transform into shared communal heritage. We do this by aiming for that which we do not collectively remember not to be forgotten. As the concept of non-memory enables us to look harder, see differently and discover the significance of instinct and emotional labour or embodied knowledge, we may start to care better for our predecessors, whose shoulders we stand on. As archival workers, historians and academics, we carefully delve them up like archaeologists and bring them to light, listening to their stories, however tenuous, incomplete and vulnerable this knowledge is. Even if memory and knowledge are incomplete, they are important aspects of the overall picture and can bring nuance to the dominance of patriarchal histories everywhere.

The past and contemporary feminist networks that we are part of sustain women's cinema histories, filmmakers, visual artists, creatives – often despite dismissive attitudes and oppressive regimes, and against the grand narratives of traditional and conservative societies. It is through collaborative networks and personal meetings that feminist work can sustain itself. In that framework, it is important to remember that feminism is not or should not be a term exclusive to women, or to White women, and should not be seen as a privilege. Perhaps feminisms (plural) is a better use of the word: a concept and a term worth fighting for in its broadest most pluralistic and internationalist meaning possible. Feminist methodologies and positionalities are about accessibility, visibility, transparency, humility: values that are inclusive of everything, everyone, everywhere.

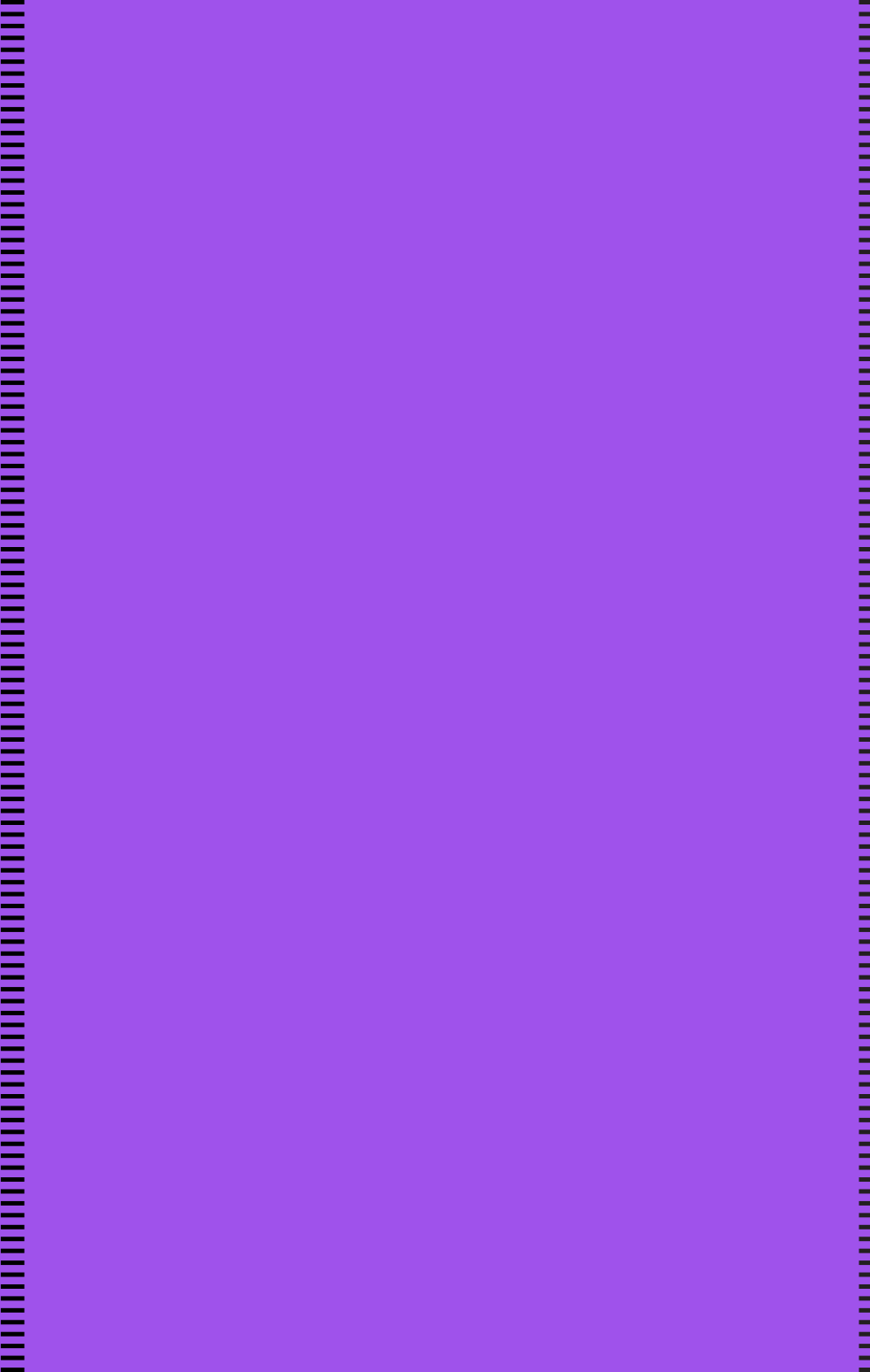


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# PART 1 GAREIN PRACTICE



## CHAPITRE 1

# Itinéraire d'un processus de restauration collectif: les leçons de la collection Jocelyne Saab

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Chrystel Elias

### RÉSUMÉ :

Dans le chapitre 1, les auteurs – Mathilde Rouxel, Manal Zakharia, Nadim Kamel, Chrystel Elias et Monzer El Hachem – décrivent collectivement leur parcours dans le processus de restauration de l'œuvre de la cinéaste libano-française Jocelyne Saab (1948–2019). Son héritage est pris en charge par l'Association Jocelyne Saab, qui s'est organisée en réseau de cinéphiles actifs entre le Liban, où la pratique n'était pas encore vraiment développée, et l'Europe, où le matériel est stocké et l'infrastructure nécessaire disponible. Travail d'équipe, basé sur la communication et la collaboration, ces restaurations ont été l'occasion de former une dizaine de techniciens à l'éthique et à la pratique de l'archivage. Ce chapitre, rédigé à dix mains, vise à documenter le processus de restauration et à ouvrir le champ à d'autres

projets éventuels.

Jocelyne Saab (1948–2019) était une réalisatrice, artiste et actrice culturelle libanaise. Elle vivait entre Paris, Beyrouth et le Caire, et a choisi de prendre la nationalité française dans les années 1980. Profondément engagée pour le développement culturel et l'écriture de l'histoire de son pays, le Liban, elle a toute sa carrière travaillé en collaboration avec la France, où elle a pu dès ses débuts diffuser des œuvres censurées au Liban ou dans d'autres pays de la vaste région du Maghreb et du Moyen-Orient (Rouxel, M. et Van de Peer, S. 2021). Son patrimoine est aujourd'hui pris en charge par l'Association Jocelyne Saab, qui durant quatre ans, avec très peu de financements, a oeuvré à la mise en place d'une chaîne de travail efficace ayant permis la restauration de l'ensemble de la filmographie documentaire de la cinéaste entre 1974 et 1982 (15 films) de façon indépendante, entre le Liban, où cette pratique n'était pas encore véritablement développée, et l'Europe où est conservé le matériel et où l'on trouve les équipements nécessaires. Travail d'équipe, basé sur la communication et la coopération, ces restaurations ont été l'occasion de former une dizaine de techniciens à l'éthique et à la pratique de l'archive. Cet article, écrit à dix mains sans être trop technique, a pour objectif de documenter le processus de restauration et d'ouvrir le champ à d'autres projets possibles.

*Les Enfants de la guerre*, copie de diffusion – Scan: KASK & Conservatorium





## Genèse d'un projet de restauration pour la mémoire collective

Jocelyne Saab est née dans une famille chrétienne maronite bourgeoise de Beyrouth. Elle a grandi dans un palais comptant parmi les monuments patrimoniaux de l'architecture libanaise, situé à l'Ouest de la ville, dans un quartier profondément cosmopolite, où elle côtoyait quotidiennement des Libanais musulmans, des Palestiniens, des Kurdes. Elle a fait sa scolarité chez les Sœurs de Nazareth, et dut suivre des études d'économie, son père refusant qu'elle suive comme elle le souhaitait des études de cinéma. C'est pendant ses études à l'Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth qu'elle découvre les mouvements de la gauche militante libanaise, nationaliste arabe et pro-palestinienne : elle découvre à dix-huit ans l'horreur des camps de réfugiés palestiniens, situés à l'écart de la ville

au sud de Beyrouth, et l'urgence politique de la cause palestinienne. Elle rejoint Paris pour finir sa maîtrise en économie islamique et tente d'intégrer le milieu du journalisme. Elle commence d'abord par animer une émission de radio à Beyrouth, *Les Marsupilamis ont les yeux bleus*, où elle diffuse de la musique occidentale et raconte des faits-divers atypiques. Elle y apprend le montage son. Après un bref passage au quotidien de presse écrite *Al Safa* où elle rencontre Etel Adnan, elle est recrutée par France 3 pour servir de traductrice à un journaliste qui doit partir faire un portrait de Kadhafi en Libye. Faute de visa, c'est Jocelyne Saab qui guidera l'entretien tout au long du séjour. Ses qualités linguistiques (elle est trilingue) et son aplomb lui valent un premier poste de reporter au Moyen-Orient : suite à ses premiers reportages en Libye, elle couvre la guerre d'Octobre en Égypte et en Syrie (1973), la guerre au Kurdistan irakien (1974), la résistance des palestiniens à la frontière syro-libanaise (1974). La même année, elle réalise un film sur la résistance des femmes palestiniennes au Liban, qui est rejeté par la rédaction : après ce film, elle décide de quitter la télévision et de réaliser ses reportages elle-mêmes, qu'elle vendra aux mêmes chaînes françaises puis dans le monde entier. Elle est la première journaliste et cinéaste à réaliser avec *Le Liban dans la tourmente* (1975, co-réalisé avec le journaliste Jorg Stöcklin) un film sur les débuts de la guerre civile libanaise, alors que personne ne croyait alors au conflit ; sorti en salle à Paris, son film est acclamé et la finesse de son analyse saluée. Elle, qui connaissait bien les rouages de la télévision française qui l'avaient formée, voulait donner un témoignage à contre-courant du discours des mass-médias français de l'époque, qui analysaient la

Jocelyne Saab  
devant sa maison  
brûlée. *Beyrouth,  
ma ville*, 1982

guerre du Liban sous le prisme confessionnel, là où elle y voyait l'expression la plus violente qui soit de la lutte des classes.

À partir de cette date, Jocelyne Saab décide de filmer Beyrouth et la guerre qui la déchire. Elle décide de la filmer autrement – elle ne filme pas les massacres, mais prend le témoignage de ceux qui ont survécu ; elle ne filme pas les morts, mais cherche dans les débris jonchant les rues après les bombardements ce qui reste de poétique dans le monde brutal qu'elle traverse. Elle convoque la poétesse Etel Adnan et le dramaturge Roger Assaf pour écrire les textes de ses commentaires, éclatant les logiques télévisuelles du montage documentaire et proposant une dénonciation sensible et au plus proche de la détresse des civils au cœur du conflit libanais. Elle réalise plus d'une dizaine de films sur le conflit jusqu'en 1982, date du départ de l'Organisation de Libération de la Palestine de Beyrouth après le siège israélien de la ville.



Suite à ce film, Jocelyne Saab s'installe à Paris. Elle réalise son premier projet de fiction en pleine guerre (*Une vie suspendue*, 1985) ainsi que quelques documentaires pour la télévision, mais cette fois en Égypte. Un armistice est signé à Taëf en 1989. Après 15 ans de conflit sanglant, c'est officiellement la fin de la guerre civile libanaise. Il s'agit alors de reconstruire le pays. Pour Jocelyne Saab, c'est la mémoire qu'il faut participer à construire. Elle se lance dans le projet titanesque de reconstruire la Cinémathèque Libanaise. Durant quatre ans, elle tente de retrouver un maximum de films tournés à Beyrouth, par des Libanais ou par des étrangers, qui seraient la base de la future cinémathèque. Ce projet, intitulé « 1001 images », doit aussi être l'occasion d'un livre qui raconterai non seulement l'histoire du cinéma au Liban mais aussi celle de la ville, qui comptait durant la jeunesse de Saab un grand nombre de ciné-clubs où l'on montrait tant des films français ou italiens que des films de Bollywood indiens ; c'est dans le respect de cette mémoire que son projet s'écrivait. Elle obtient le soutien du ministère de la Culture libanais et celui du ministère de la Culture français. Elle rassemble près de quatre-cent titres : des films documentaires et de fictions, mais aussi des journaux d'actualités, français et libanais, des reportages, etc. Elle en restaure une trentaine, qui serviront aussi de base au film qu'elle construit en parallèle : *Il était une fois Beyrouth, histoire d'une star* (1994), qui met en scène deux jeunes filles de vingt ans qui n'ont connu de Beyrouth que la guerre, et qui plongent dans l'histoire de leur ville à travers les films dans le cinéma du vieux cinéphile collectionneur, monsieur Farouk,

Shéhérazade d'un autre lieu et temps. Les trente copies restaurées ont circulé dans le monde entier, mais la création de la cinémathèque Libanaise n'a pas suscité l'enthousiasme souhaité par Jocelyne Saab. Créée comme une annexe du ministère de la culture libanais, cette nouvelle cinémathèque n'a jamais vraiment rempli le rôle de service public que Saab avait souhaité (Rouxel 2018). Parallèlement, dans le sillage de ses recherches de films, Saab a choisi de déposer le matériel original de la plupart de ses films aux Archives du film françaises, à Bois d'Arcy. Ce geste de sauvegarde patrimoniale s'inscrit à la fois dans la continuité du projet qu'elle conduisait au Liban, et en totale contradiction avec sa volonté de rendre au Liban son patrimoine cinématographique : sans doute avait-elle déjà le sentiment que sa volonté serait vouée à l'échec.

Son décès le 7 janvier 2019 a provoqué une onde de choc au Liban. Pourtant, les jeunes générations ne connaissaient pas son œuvre : les films de Jocelyne Saab étaient inaccessibles. Plusieurs raisons expliquent cette inaccessibilité : la première est sans doute que Jocelyne Saab elle-même ne disposait pas de copie numérique de tous ses films, et que les copies dont elle disposait étaient souvent des DVD de l'INA, de mauvaise qualité. Elle était par ailleurs très inquiète que ses images soient utilisées par d'autres sans qu'elle soit citée et évitait autant que possible de faire circuler ses films : puisque personne ne connaissait son travail, il était facile d'utiliser ses archives. Son rêve était de restaurer son œuvre et d'en proposer une édition DVD. Le défi de l'Association Jocelyne Saab était double : ouvrir l'accès à ces films au Liban et aux générations de Libanais n'ayant pas connu la

guerre, et restaurer ces films pour pouvoir créer cet accès élargi aux œuvres, et ainsi exaucer le vœu de Jocelyne Saab de voir ses œuvres éditées. L'Association Jocelyne Saab, initialement l'Association des Amis de Jocelyne Saab, est une association loi 1901 à but non-lucratif basée en France pour des raisons logistiques, co-fondée dès février 2019 par Mathilde Rouxel et Nessim Ricardou-Saab avec la participation de Michèle Tyan et de Myrna Maakaron, et administrée à ce jour par Mathilde Rouxel, Jinane Mrad et Michèle Tyan. Son conseil d'administration se compose principalement d'anciens proches de Jocelyne Saab, Français et Libanais en majorité.

Barbelés à la frontière  
israélienne au Sud du  
Liban. *Sud Liban, histoire  
d'un village assiégé*, 1976

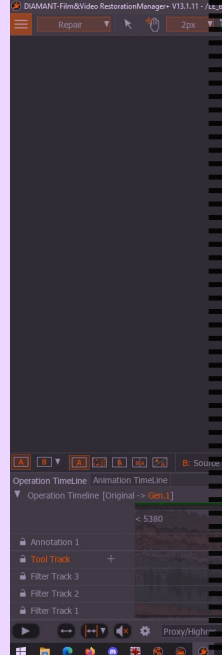


# L'Association Jocelyne Saab : une démarche qui veut s'inscrire dans l'héritage de la cinéaste

L'Association Jocelyne Saab est née pour faciliter la circulation des films de la cinéaste libanaise, préserver son patrimoine et réfléchir à la valorisation de l'ensemble de son œuvre. Elle a pris en charge dans un premier temps à l'aide de deux partenaires essentiels au projet, le Polygone étoilé à Marseille et Lucid Post au Liban, la numérisation de tous les éléments analogiques de Jocelyne Saab – Betanum, Beta SP, miniDV, VHS – qui comportaient des copies de la plupart de ses films. Les 35 films de sa filmographie ont été resynchronisés, sous-titrés petit à petit en français, en anglais et en arabe et remasterisés pour permettre leur diffusion : cela a permis la programmation de la première rétrospective intégrale des films de Jocelyne Saab à DocLisboa en octobre 2019. D'autres rétrospectives ont suivi, et les films ont pu circuler dans le monde entier, grâce à un effort de diffusion porté par l'Association et grâce aux hommages rendus par les festivals spécialisés et certaines institutions.

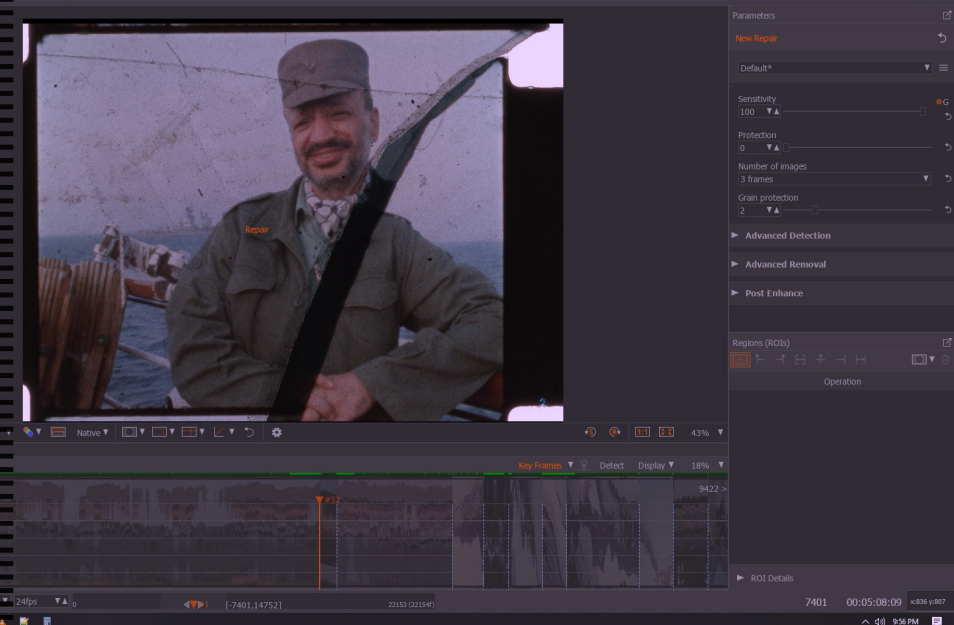
La deuxième étape a été de cartographier les lieux conservant des films de Jocelyne Saab afin de pouvoir faire un état des lieux du matériel disponible en vue d'une restauration de l'ensemble de la filmographie dont nous disposons des droits. La plupart des éléments originaux étaient conservés au CNC ; les archives filmiques dispersées ont été rassemblées par l'Association et déposées au CNC. À ce jour, le matériel original

de deux films seulement est demeuré introuvable (*La Tueuse*, 1989, archives de Canal Plus ; *La Dame de Saïgon*, 1997, archives d'ADR production). Au Liban, les quelques archives filmiques conservées sur place (documents analogiques, filmiques et non-film), que nous n'avons pas eu les moyens de rapatrier, sont conservés par des privés, faute d'institutions capables d'accueillir un tel matériel. Deux choses guidaient le projet de l'Association : restaurer l'ensemble des films de Jocelyne Saab, par tranche historique – mais pas par bribes ; et impliquer des techniciens libanais dans le processus de restauration des œuvres. Devant l'incapacité des fonds d'archives institutionnels de répondre à un projet de cette forme, le projet est devenu celui de former directement des partenaires libanais ou palestiniens, qui ont découvert avec émerveillement l'œuvre de la cinéaste et les images de Beyrouth dans les années 1970, à la restauration filmique. Nous avons obtenu pour cela le soutien structurel de KASK & Conservatorium à Gand (Belgique) et du Polygone étoilé à Marseille (France) pour la préparation des bobines et leur numérisation ; le soutien technique de l'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) qui nous a formé à l'utilisation du scanner et à l'étalonnage à KASK & Conservatorium avec Mohanad Yaqubi qui nous a accueilli dans son programme de recherche (CRAMP) ; le soutien technique de la FIAF et de la Cinémathèque suisse, qui ont formé au Polygone étoilé cinq techniciens à l'éthique de la restauration numérique et à l'utilisation des logiciels Diamant HS-ART et DaVinci Resolve, et qui ont suivi notre travail tout au long du processus de restauration jusqu'à la finalisation des fichiers films numériques restaurés.



Déchirure sur un photogramme montrant Yasser Arafat. *Le Bateau de l'exil*, 1982





Ces ateliers de formation ont été repris au Liban pour former davantage de techniciens, et la majorité du travail de restauration numérique a été réalisé au Liban, grâce aux infrastructures et services de deux boîtes de postproduction à Beyrouth : The Post Office et Lucid Post. Le Liban est en effet un pays réputé pour ses compétences en postproduction : malgré une industrie cinématographique très fragile, le pays a de très bons techniciens et est capable de prendre en charge de très gros projets. La question de la restauration numérique est une question qui peut être posée sur place à Beyrouth, et pourrait être une première action et une manière de sauvegarder des films que des archives de film à l'international ne peuvent pas prendre en charge. Forte de cette conviction, l'Association Jocelyne Saab a fait l'acquisition du logiciel de restauration numérique Dimanant HS-Art, ce qui a permis la restauration entre le Liban et la France des quinze premiers documentaires de Jocelyne Saab, réalisés entre 1974 et 1982.

Nous situons cette démarche de restauration dans la continuité du travail engagé par Jocelyne Saab pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine cinématographique libanais, car elle est animée par la même volonté de participer à une meilleure connaissance de l'histoire du cinéma du pays, non seulement à travers les œuvres qui la compose mais aussi, plus matériellement parlant, à travers les pratiques de création de ceux qui ont fait l'histoire du pays. Le Liban compte aujourd'hui de nombreuses initiatives qui s'intéressent aux archives cinématographiques du pays ou de la région des pays arabes de manière plus générale. Initiatives privées non soutenues par des institutions publiques, très fragiles au Liban, elles axent leur travaux respectifs en fonction de différents objectifs : recensement des œuvres créées par des artistes libanais d'un côté, préservation de fonds films rares et participation à des projets de restaurations portés par des boîtes de production d'un autre côté, préservation et études d'une archive de studio pour d'autres : chaque structure est habitée par ses problématiques propres et participent à une meilleure connaissance de l'histoire du cinéma au Liban. Le projet de l'Association Jocelyne Saab est de travailler à un autre niveau : en initiant des techniciens et des étudiants à la restauration, l'objectif de l'association est de sensibiliser à l'importance du patrimoine cinématographique. Dès la mise en place des premiers ateliers, l'Association a tissé des partenariats avec différentes entités libanaises alertes sur cette question : le projet Cinematheque Beirut de l'association Metropolis ; Studio Haroun, qui travaille dans ses

*Le Bateau de l'exil,*  
1982, restauration  
image: Nadim Kamel



studios depuis quelques années à la restauration des films du fonds de son entreprise familiale ; Nadi Likol Nas, qui a la charge du patrimoine filmique de nombreux réalisateurs libanais (Maroun Baghdadi, Borhane Alaouié, Jean Chamoun, etc.), ainsi que des professionnels de la postproduction ont pu proposer des candidatures aux ateliers de formation que nous avons mis en place sous l'œil alerte des professionnels membres de la FIAF qui nous ont accompagnés.

Nous ne prétendons pas nous substituer à un travail de laboratoire ; nous souhaitons simplement offrir à de petits fonds la possibilité de sauvegarder des films afin de pouvoir les faire circuler et ainsi les faire connaître.



# La collection Jocelyne Saab

Le matériel original des films de Jocelyne Saab est conservé, en grande majorité, aux Archives françaises du film à Bois d'Arcy (France). Selon une technique héritée de son apprentissage à la télévision, Jocelyne Saab tournait en positif inversible 16 mm, tirait et montait ses films à Paris et tirait des copies de diffusion directement à partir de ces copies de travail, sans réaliser d'internégatif. Les plans étaient scotchés entre eux, et le matériel a été beaucoup manipulé, dans l'urgence de l'actualité cinématographique, puis par la suite – Jocelyne Saab a souvent réutilisé dans ses films ultérieurs des passages de ses films précédents. Seuls deux films existaient en négatif collé : *Lettre de Beyrouth*, diffusé à la télévision en 1978 mais qu'elle destinait originellement aux salles de cinéma, et *Iran, utopie en marche* (1981) qui a été réalisé dans des conditions de production particulières puisqu'il s'agissait d'une commande de la chaîne de télévision japonaise NHK et qu'un premier montage a été créé au Japon avant que Jocelyne Saab ne récupère le matériel pour créer le film dont nous disposons et qui est en circulation aujourd'hui. La plupart des films disposent d'un son mixé sur bande magnétique 16 mm, parfois en plusieurs versions (il existe pour plusieurs films une voix-off en arabe ou en anglais, l'original étant toujours en français) ; il existe dans quelques cas des bandes internationales sans commentaire. Toutes les bandes magnétiques ont été doublées sur pellicule optique négative, et il n'existe plus dans certains cas que les bandes optiques, de bien moindre qualité et beaucoup plus difficile à restaurer.

Nous ne disposons pas de rushes mais Jocelyne Saab a conservé dans le cas de deux reportages un montage inachevé et parfois incomplet de films remontés et diffusés à la télévision française (*Les Palestiniens continuent*, 1974, coréalisé avec Arnaud Hamelin ; *Bilan de la guerre : Les Libanais otages de leur ville*, 1982). Malgré leur caractère lacunaire, nous avons décidé de numériser ces éléments, pour les sauvegarder, mais aussi comme un témoignage des méthodes de travail de la cinéaste. Dans le cas des *Palestiniens continuent*, le matériel était victime du syndrome du vinaigre, à un stade relativement avancé : nous avons réalisé une numérisation brute et un étalonnage qui a permis de raviver l'image, en dépit du manque de données colorimétriques retenues par la pellicule en décomposition. Dans le cas de *Bilan de la guerre*, moins abîmé, nous avons choisi de nettoyer l'image numériquement, tout en conservant les sautes d'images provoquées par le passage des scotchs dans l'appareil de numérisation : la bande sonore n'ayant pas été complètement finalisée (on entend le souffle de Jocelyne Saab dans le micro enregistrant le commentaire du reportage), son adéquation à ce choix de restauration brute permet de prendre conscience de la matérialité de la pellicule et des outils de travail dont disposait la cinéaste au moment du tournage de ces films, dans les années 1970-1980.

Un travail plus précautionneux de restauration a été conduit sur les autres œuvres, dont les montages nous sont parvenus dans leur forme finale, avec l'objectif de s'approcher au plus près des conditions de la première projection ou diffusion du film après sa réalisation. Devant la

précarité du matériel conservé, le 16 mm étant déjà à l'origine beaucoup plus fragile que le 35 mm, il s'est agi lors de la préparation de celui-ci à la numérisation de simplement nettoyer le film et de réparer les scotchs trop sensibles à la tension pour ne pas que le film se casse au moment de son passage au scanner. Cette décision a été appuyée par les experts de la Cinémathèque Suisse venus nous former au Polygone étoilé : toucher à l'ensemble du film présente un risque de dégradation trop grand pour ce type de matériel. Le principal du travail de restauration a donc été effectué numériquement.

Les restaurations ont été réalisées sur des numérisations 2K, résolution adaptée au format 16mm. Portée par une équipe de douze personnes, supervisée par Mathilde Rouxel, la restauration de la filmographie documentaire de Jocelyne Saab a nécessité plus de deux ans de travail. Chaque choix d'intervention a été longuement questionné, réfléchi et confronté à l'expertise des professionnels (en particulier Robert Byrne, restaurateur indépendant (États-Unis), et Jean-Philippe Bessas, responsable de la numérisation et de l'étalonnage à l'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (France)) qui ont encadré le projet dans sa dimension technique. Ces scans seront conservés et mis à disposition des chercheurs ou des artistes qui le souhaitent.

La restauration image a été permise par le logiciel Diamant HS-Art, acquis par l'Association Jocelyne Saab. Une équipe élargie a travaillé à la restauration image, au Liban et en France, formés au moment du projet au sein des ateliers conduits par l'Association ou bien en école : Nadim Kamel, Mounir Al Mahmoud, Mahmoud Korek,

Chrystel Elias, Wassim Tanios, Manal Zakharia, Vanessa Helou, Maël Simon, Margaux Chalançon. Le matériel étant pour certains films très abîmé, il s'agissait principalement pour les restaurateurs numériques de stabiliser l'image et de la nettoyer des éclats de gélatine, des poussières persistantes et des traces de colle en récupérant des données présentes dans les images précédentes et les images suivantes, mais la plupart des rayures traversant l'image de haut en bas – et beaucoup plus visibles sur une pellicule 16mm que sur une pellicule 35mm – était impossible à faire disparaître sans recréer une matière qui n'existait plus : cette possibilité a été rejetée pour des raisons éthiques. La restauration numérique fait donc toujours état d'imperfections présentes sur la pellicule, ce qui d'un point de vue éthique et esthétique n'entre pas en contradiction avec le projet que nous menons collectivement dans l'association : ces films sont les témoins d'une histoire et la mémoire d'un engagement politique, qui se traduit aussi dans la matérialité de ce qui a fait advenir ces films.

La restauration du son optique a été une véritable gageure qui a engagé plusieurs mois de travail et de nombreuses tentatives renouvelées. L'exemple de la version française de *Beyrouth, jamais plus* est à ce titre parlant. Une première numérisation a été réalisée avec l'aide du logiciel libre AEO light. Le son était faible, avec un bruit de fond assez puissant et des fréquences manquantes au-delà de 5khz. La première théorie était que ces fréquences ont été perdues à cause d'un mauvais réglage des paramètres de lecture du logiciel. Après plusieurs tentatives, on s'est dit qu'il fallait mieux numériser les bobines avec un lecteur analogique, mais le problème des

fréquences manquantes n'a pas été résolu. Il est possible que ce problème vienne du mixage où même de l'impression du film sur son optique. Lors de la première tentative de restauration, Monzer El Hachem a conduit un traitement agressif pour éliminer les bruits de fond a mené à un son métallique avec une modulation des voix qui ne paraissent plus naturelles. La restauration a donc été reprise de bout en bout en suivant une technique plus délicate, non dans le but d'éliminer complètement le bruit de fond, mais de le réduire au maximum possible en affectant au minimum les voix. Le logiciel utilisé est Izotope RX, avec plusieurs déroulement du module de réduction spectral. Il était nécessaire aussi d'enlever manuellement d'autres bruits instantanés qui provenaient des rayures sur la bobine. Enfin le son du film a été dupliqué, et les voix ont été séparées de tous les autres sons, puis superposées avec le son restauré. Ceci a permis d'augmenter uniquement le niveau des voix, et les rendre plus intelligibles sans dénaturer le son original.

Le travail d'étalonnage des films a été effectué sur le logiciel DaVinci Resolve à partir des fichiers films 2K restaurés. Les enjeux de cette phase ultime de la restauration ont été des enjeux de rééquilibrage des couleurs. La numérisation a en effet fait apparaître une variété de marque et de type de pellicule, qui n'ont pas vieilli de la même façon avec le temps. La majorité des pellicules de film positif inversible 16mm utilisées par Jocelyne Saab étaient de la marque Kodak, et de la technologie Kodachrome qui a pour caractéristique des couleurs vives et saturées, qui demeurent assez fixes avec le temps (Habib 2021). Toutefois, d'autres types de pellicule utilisées par Saab,

*Beyrouth, ma ville,  
1982. Étalonnage:  
Chrystel Elias*





de marque Fuji notamment, ont vu leur couleur se ternir voire quasiment disparaître. Certaines images, victimes du syndrome du vinaigre, ont considérablement rougies. Par ailleurs, Jocelyne Saab procédait régulièrement à de la migration d'images, reprenant des images de reportages réalisés par d'autres ou bien de reportages qu'elle avait elle-même réalisé auparavant : dans cette migration, l'image perd de sa qualité et soulève des questions colorimétriques au moment de la restauration. L'essentiel du travail d'étalonnage effectué par Chrystel Elias a été de recalibrer les couleurs afin que la disparité des matériaux soit atténuée au regard, et que les couleurs originales soient ravivées pour s'approcher au plus près de l'état du film au moment de sa création.



Le travail de restauration des films de Jocelyne Saab a en effet permis de découvrir des versions des films jusqu'ici inconnues : diffusés sur les chaînes de télévision française, les films étaient remontés, pour atténuer certains propos politiques et réduire les durées pour les adapter aux programmes. Revenir au matériel original conservé par Jocelyne Saab a permis de restaurer ses choix de montage et d'enrichir l'archive existante sur la question de la guerre civile libanaise.

Le cas de Jocelyne Saab est en cas pratique exemplaire mais atypique : l'Association Jocelyne Saab détient l'intégralité des droits de la grande majorité de la filmographie de Jocelyne Saab, la plupart de ses films sont conservés dans d'excellentes conditions et son œuvre est importante (25 courts-métrages en 16 mm, deux fictions en 35 mm), ce qui a permis de mettre en place une chaîne de travail efficace et formatrice, qui a pour objectif désormais de servir à d'autres filmographies. Nous sommes ouverts à partager ce nouveau savoir-faire et les outils qui leurs sont associés pour soutenir la remise en circulation d'autres filmographies rares et essentielles.

## Conclusion : bâtir une mémoire du passé par l'acquisition d'un savoir-faire pour l'avenir

Compte-tenu de la particularité transformative des logiciels numériques d'aujourd'hui, où l'intelligence artificielle prend une place de plus en plus importante dans les pratiques de reconstruction des images, documenter les pratiques de restauration que nous avons conduit avec ce projet est une étape importante. Parler du matériel, par-delà les films et ce qu'ils nous disent du monde, permet aussi de replacer la filmographie de Saab dans son époque : à travers la réalité de la qualité des pellicules 16mm qu'elle utilisait, les méthodes de prises de son que l'on peut déduire des bobines qu'elle a laissées derrière elle et la pratique qu'elle avait du montage (rapide, peu soigneux du matériel car réalisé dans l'urgence de l'événement pour une diffusion télévisuelle), nous pouvons lire toute une histoire de la pratique documentaire dans les années 1970. C'est aussi à partir du matériel que nous comprenons que les enjeux auxquels a dû faire face une documentariste indépendante capable de vendre ses sujets à des chaînes de télévision européenne en regard de cinéastes militantes financées par des partis politiques, dont les films n'ont pas traversé les mêmes circuits de diffusion et n'ont pas bénéficié des mêmes conditions de préservation. Se réapproprier l'accès au matériel permet de prendre conscience de toute une réalité politique portée par le cinéma à un moment donné de l'histoire : la portée mémorielle d'un film n'existe

pas seulement dans les images et les sons montés qui traverse l'histoire en s'adaptant aux formats de diffusion (film d'abord, vidéo ensuite, numérique aujourd'hui) mais aussi dans les archives qui attestent de sa fabrication. L'expérience de la restauration des films de Jocelyne Saab atteste que cette nouvelle forme de connaissance de l'histoire est passée par l'acquisition de savoirs-faire utiles pour l'avenir – pour la sauvegarde d'autres films, la compréhension d'autres aventures cinématographiques et l'imprégnation d'un héritage national, esthétique et politique. À l'écart des standards institutionnels classiques, cette expérience permet aussi de reconsidérer l'écriture classique d'une histoire du cinéma, et de s'intéresser aux productions indépendantes, fragiles, mal protégées – notamment celle des femmes, restées longtemps les moutons noirs de l'industrie cinématographique à travers le monde.

#### Références

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## CHAPTER 1

# Itinerary of a Collective Process of Restoration: Lessons From the Jocelyne Saab Collection

Mathilde Rouxel, Manal Zakharia,  
Nadim Kamel, Monzer El Hachem,  
Chrystel Elias

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### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 1, the authors – Mathilde Rouxel, Manal Zakharia, Nadim Kamel, Adrien Von Nagel and Monzer El Hachem – collectively describe their journey alongside the restoration process of the oeuvre of Lebanese French filmmaker Jocelyne Saab (1948–2019). Her legacy is looked after by the Association Jocelyne Saab, who organised themselves in a network of cinephiles active between Lebanon, where the practice was not yet really developed, and Europe, where the material is stored and the necessary infrastructure is available. As a team effort, based on communication and collaboration, these restorations were an opportunity to train a dozen technicians in archive ethics and practice. This chapter, written by ten hands, aims to document the process of restoration and to open the field for other possible projects.

Jocelyne Saab (1948–2019) was a film director, actress, and Lebanese cultural activist. She lived between Paris, Beirut, and Cairo, and chose to take French nationality in 1980. Deeply committed to the cultural development and the writing of the history of her country, Lebanon, she has collaborated with France throughout all of her career, where she could broadcast works censored in Lebanon and other countries from the vast SWANA region (Rouxel and Van de Peer 2021). Her heritage is now looked after by the Association Jocelyne Saab which for four years, with very little financing, has worked towards establishing an efficient chain of work that enabled the independent restoration of the filmmaker's entire filmography between 1974 and 1982 (15 films), between Lebanon, where the practice was not yet really developed, and Europe, where the material is stored and necessary equipment are available. As a team effort, based on communication and cooperation, these restorations were an opportunity to train a dozen technicians in archive ethics and practice. This article, written by ten hands without being overly technical, aims to document the process of restoration and to open the field for other possible projects.

## **Genesis of a restoration project for collective memory**

Jocelyne Saab was born in a bourgeois Maronite Christian family in Beirut. She grew up in a palace that is one of Lebanon's architectural heritage monuments, situated at the west of the city, in a deeply cosmopolitan neighborhood, where she

daily frequented muslim Lebanese, Palestinian, and Kurdish people. She was educated by the Sisters of Nazareth and had to study economics, as her father refused her to study cinema as she wished. It was during her years at the Saint-Joseph University of Beirut that she discovered the Lebanese leftist militant, the arab nationalist and pro-Palestinian movements: she discovered at eighteen years old the horror of the Palestinian refugee camps, situated on the outskirts of the south city of Beirut and the urgency of the Palestinian cause. She moved to Paris to finish her master's degree in Islamic economics and attempted to enter the field of journalism. She began by hosting a radio show in Beirut, *Les Marsupilamis ont les yeux bleus* [Marsupilamis have blue eyes], where she played western music and unusual stories. There, she learned sound editing. After a short stint at the daily Al Safa newspaper where she met Etel Adnan, she was recruited by France 3 to act as a translator for a journalist who had to go to Lybia to write a portrait of Gaddafi. Due to a lack of visa, it was Jocelyne Saab who guided the interview throughout the stay. Her linguistic skills (she is trilingual) and her confidence granted her a first reporter position in the Middle East: Following her first reports in Lybia, she covered the Yom Kippur War in Egypt and Syria (1973), the war in the Iraki Kurdistan (1974), and the resistance of Palestinians at the Syrian-lebanese border (1974). The same year, she directed a movie about the resistance of Palestinian women which was rejected by the editors: after this movie, she decided to leave television and direct her own reports which she sold to the same French channels and then all over the world. She was the first journalist and filmmaker to direct a

movie about the beginnings of the Lebanese civil war when nobody believed in the conflict with *Le Liban dans la tourmente* [Lebanon in turmoil] (1975, co-directed with the journalist Jorg Stöcklin); first projected in Parisian cinemas, her movie is acclaimed for the finesse of her analyze. She, who was familiar with the workings of French television which had trained her, wanted to give a testimony that went against the grain of French mass media of the time which analyzed the war in Lebanon from a sectarian perspective, whereas she saw it as the most violent expression of class struggles.

From this moment, Jocelyne Saab decided to film Beirut and the war tearing it apart. She decided to film differently – she doesn't film the massacres, but takes the testimony of those who survived; she doesn't film the dead, but searches in the debris littering the streets after the bombings what is left of poetry in the brutal world she crosses. She called on poet Etel Adnan and playwright Roger Assaf to write the texts of her comments, shattering the televisual logic of documentary editing and offering a sensitive denunciation of the distress of civilians at the heart of the Lebanese conflict. She made over a dozen of films on the conflict until 1982, when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation left Beirut after the Israeli siege of the city.

Following this film, Jocelyne Saab moved to Paris. She directed her first fiction project in the midst of war (*Une vie suspendue* [A suspended life], 1985) as well as a number of documentaries for television, but this time in Egypt. An armistice was signed in Taif in 1989. After 15 years of bloody conflict, it was officially the end of the Lebanese civil war. It was now time to rebuild the country. For Jocelyne Saab,



it's the memory that she must help to build. She began the titanic project of rebuilding the Lebanese Cinematheque. For four years, she attempted to find as many as possible movies shot in Beirut, by Lebanese or foreigners which would form the basis of the future cinematheque. This project, entitled "1001 images," is also intended to be the publication of a book that would tell not only the history of cinema in Lebanon but also of this city, which during Saab's youth was home to a large number of cine clubs that would show French and Italian movies, as well as Bollywood flicks from India; her project was to honour. She was supported by the French and the Lebanese ministries of culture. She gathered almost four hundred titles: documentaries and fiction films, as well as French and Lebanese newsreels, reports, and more. She restored almost 30 of them, which also served as the basis for the moving she was developing parallelly: *Il était une fois Beyrouth, histoire d'une star* [Once upon a time in Beirut, the story of a star] (1994), which features two twenty years old girls who have only known Beirut during the war, and that dive into the history of their city through movies in the theatre of an old cinephile collector, Mr. Farouk, Scheherazade from another time and place. The thirty restored films have circulated worldwide, but the creation of the Lebanese Cinematheque did not arouse the enthusiasm Jocelyne Saab had hoped for. Created as an annex of the Lebanese Ministry of Culture, this new cinematheque never really fulfilled the role of public service the way Saab had wished for (Rouxel 2018).

At the same time, in the course of her film research, Saab chose to place the original material of most of her movies in the French Film Archives, in Bois d'Arcy. This gesture of heritage preservation

is in line with the project she was carrying in Lebanon and in total contradiction with her will to give back to Lebanon its cinematographic heritage: no doubt that she had the feeling that her ambition was doomed to fail.

Her death on 7 January 2019 sent shockwaves through Lebanon. Yet, the younger generations were not familiar with her work: the movies of Jocelyne Saab were not accessible. Several reasons explain this: firstly, Jocelyne Saab herself did not have digital copies of all her movies, and the copies she did have were poor-quality INA [Institut National de l'Audiovisuel] DVDs. She was also very worried that her images would be used without acknowledging her, and avoided as much as possible circulating her films: since nobody knew her work, it was easy to use her archives. Her dream was to restore her work and offer a DVD edition. The challenge of the Jocelyne Saab association was twofold: to offer access to her films in Lebanon and to the generations of Lebanese that had not experienced the war and to restore these films to create an enlarged access to the works, and thus fulfill Jocelyne Saab's wish to see her work released. The Jocelyne Saab Association, initially the Associations des Amis de Jocelyne Saab [Association of Friends of Jocelyne Saab], is a non-profit association under the French law of 1901, based in France for logistical reasons, co-founded in February 2019 by Mathilde Rouxel and Nessim Ricardou-Saab with the participation of Michèle Tyran and Myrna Maakaron, and administrated to this day by Mathilde Rouxel, Jinane Mrad, and Michèle Tyran. The administration board is mainly composed of close friends of Jocelyne Saab, mostly French and Lebanese.

## The Jocelyne Saab Association: an Initiative in Keeping with the Filmmaker's Legacy

The Jocelyne Saab association was born to facilitate the circulation of the Lebanese filmmaker, preserve her heritage, and explore ways of promoting her body of work. With the help of two essential partners in the project, the Polygone Etoilé in Marseille and the Lucid Post in Lebanon, it initially undertook the digitalization of all Jocelyne Saab's analog elements – Betanum, Beta SP, miniDV, VHS – which included copies of most of her films. The 35 movies in her filmography were resynchronized, gradually subtitled in French, English, and Arabic, and remastered for broadcast: this enabled the first complete retrospective of Jocelyne Saab's movie at DocLisboa in October 2019. Other retrospectives followed, and the films were able to be shown worldwide, thanks to a distribution effort by the Association and thanks to the tribute paid by specialized festivals and some institutions. The second step was to map out the locations where Jocelyne Saab's movies are kept, so as to be able to take an overview of the available material in order to restore the entire filmography for which we had the rights. Most of the original materials were held by the CNC [Centre National du Cinema]. To this day, the original material of only two movies has not been found (*La Tueuse* [The Killer], 1989, archives of Canal Plus; *La Dame de Saigon* [The Saigon Lady], 1997, archives of ADR production). In

Lebanon, the few film archives preserved locally (analogue documents, films, and non-films), which we are unable to transport, are kept by private individuals, in the absence of institutions capable of hosting such material.

Two things guided the project of the Association: to restore all of Jocelyne Saab's films, by historical slices – but not by snippet; and to involve Lebanese technicians in the process of the restoration of the works. Faced with the inability of institutional archives to respond to a project of this kind, the project became one of directly training to film restoration Lebanese or Palestinian partners, who had discovered the filmmaker's work and images of Beirut in the 1970s with wonder. We obtained structural support from KASK & Conservatorium in Ghent (Belgium) and Polygone Étoilé Marseille (France) for reel preparation and digitalization; technical support from the INA where we had training in scanner use and color grading at KASK & Conservatorium with Mohanad Yaqubi who hosted us in his research program (CRAMP); the technical support of FIAF and the Cinémathèque Suisse, who trained at the Polygone Étoilé five technicians to the ethics of digital restoration and the use of Diamant HS-ART and DaVinci Resolve softwares, and who followed our work throughout the restoration until the restoration of the digital film files.

These training workshops were repeated in Lebanon to train more technicians, and the majority of the work of digital restoration was achieved in Lebanon, thanks to the infrastructure and services of two post-production companies in Beirut: The Post Office and Lucid Post. Lebanon is indeed a

country renowned for its post-production expertise: despite a very fragile cinematographic industry, the country has very good technicians and is capable of taking on very large projects. The question of digital restoration is one that can be addressed on the spot in Beirut and could be a first action and a way of safeguarding films that international film archives cannot handle. With this conviction, the Jocelyne Saab Association acquired the software of digital restoration Diamant HS-Art, which allowed the restoration between Lebanon and France of the fifteen first documentaries of Jocelyne Saab, made between 1974 and 1982.

We situate this work of restoration in the continuity of the work undertaken by Jocelyne Saab to safeguard Lebanon's cinematographic heritage, as it is driven by the same desire to contribute to a better knowledge of the country's cinema history, not only through the works of those who constitute it but also, materially speaking, through the practices of creation of those who made the country's history. Lebanon is home today to a number of initiatives concerned with the country's cinematographic archives, or those of the Arab region in general. These private initiatives, which are not supported by public institutions and are very fragile in Lebanon, focus their respective works on different purposes: recording the works created by Lebanese artists for some, preservation of rare film collections, and participation in projects of restoration led by production companies, preservation and study of studio archives for others: each structure is driven by its own specific issues and contributes to a better knowledge of the history of cinema in Lebanon. The project of the Jocelyne Saab Association is to work at another

scale: by initiating students and technicians to restoration, the goal of the association is to raise awareness of the importance of cinematographic heritage. From the start of the first workshops, the Association wove partnerships between diverse Lebanese entities keen to address this issue: the Metropolis associations' project of Cinematheque Beirut; Studio Haroun, which has been working for a few years on the restoration of films from the family business' archive; Nadi Likol Nas, which is in charge of the film heritage of a number of Lebanese directors (Maroun Baghdadi, Borhane Alaouié, Jean Chamoub, etc.), as well as post-production professionals were able to put forward candidates for the training workshops we set up under the watchful eye of FIAF professional members who accompanied us.

We do not pretend to be a substitute for laboratory work; we simply wish to offer to small funds the possibility of saving films so they can be circulated and better known.

## **The Jocelyne Saab Collection**

Most of the original material of Jocelyne Saab's films is preserved at the Archives Françaises du Film at Bois d'Arcy (France). Following a technique inherited from her apprenticeship in television, Jocelyne Saab shot in 16mm reversal positive, printed and edited her films in Paris, and made broadcast copies directly from these work prints, without producing an internegative. The shots were taped together and the material heavily manipulated, in the urgency of the cinematographic

actuality, and then later – Jocelyne Saab often reused passages from her previous films in her later films. Only two movies existed in taped negative: *Lettre de Beyrouth* [Letters of Beirut], broadcasted on television in 1978 but originally intended for cinemas, and *Iran, utopie en marche* [Iran, walking utopia] (1981), which was directed in peculiar production conditions since it was commissioned by the Japanese television channel NHK and that an initial cut was created in Japan before Jocelyne Saab could gather the material to create the film we have and that is now in circulation. Most of the films have mixed sound on 16mm magnetic tape, sometimes in several versions (some of the films have an Arabic or English voice-over, the original always being in French); in a few cases, there are international tapes without commentary. All magnetic tapes have been dubbed onto negative optical film, and in some cases, only the optical tapes exist, which are of much poorer quality and much more difficult to restore. We do not have rushes at our disposal, but in the case of two reports, Jocelyne Saab has preserved an unfinished and sometimes incomplete cuttings of films reedited and broadcasted on French television (*Les Palestiniens continuent* [The Palestinians continue], 1974, coréalisé avec Arnaud Hamelin; *Bilan de la guerre: Les Libanais otages de leur ville* [Conclusion of the war: The Lebanese are hostages of their city], 1982). Despite their incomplete quality, we have decided to digitalize these elements, not only to safeguard them, but also as a testimony of the filmmaker's working methods. In the case of *Les Palestiniens continuent*, the material has fallen victim to the vinegar syndrome, at a relatively advanced stage: we conducted a raw scan and

color grading that revived the image, despite the lack of colorimetric data retained by the decomposing film. In the case of *Bilan de la guerre*, less damaged, we chose to digitally clean the image, while preserving the image jumps caused by the tape passing through the digitizer: the soundtrack never being completely finalized (we hear the breath of Jocelyne Saab in the recording the commentary on the report), its adequacy to this choice of raw restoration reveals the materiality of the film and the working tools available to the filmmaker at the times these films were shot, in 1970-1980.

More careful restoration was conducted on other works for which the edits have come down to us in their final form, with the aim of getting as close as possible to the first diffusion of the movie after it was completed. In view of the precariousness of the preserved material, 16mm being already much more fragile than 35mm, it was a matter of simply cleaning the film and repairing the scotch tape, which was too sensitive to tension, to prevent the film from breaking as it passed through the scanner. This decision was supported by the experts from the Cinematheque Suisse who came to Polygone Etoilé: touching the entire film presents too great of a risk of damage for this material. Most of the restoration was therefore carried out digitally.

The restorations were carried out on 2K scans, a resolution adequate to the 16mm format. It took more than two years of work for a team of twelve people, under the supervision of Mathilde Rouxel, to restore the documentary filmography of Jocelyne Saab. Each choice of intervention was questioned at length, reflected upon, and confronted with the expertise of professionals (in particular Robert Byrne, independent restorer



(United States), and Jean-Philippe Bessas, in charge of the digitalisation and colour grading at the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (France) who oversaw the technical aspects of the projects. These scans will be preserved and made available on demand for artists or researchers.

Image restoration was made possible by Diamant HS-Art software, purchased by the Jocelyne Saab Association. An extended team trained at the time of the project in workshops run by the Association or at school worked on image restoration in Lebanon and in France: Nadim Kamel, Mounir Al Mahmoud, Mahmoud Korek, Adrien von Nagel, Wassim Tanios, Manal Zakharia, Vanessa Helou, Maël Simon, Margaux Chalançon. As the material was for some parts very damaged, the main task for the digital restorer was to stabilize the image and clean it of gelatine flakes, persistent dust, and traces of glue by recovering data from previous and next images, however, most of the scratches crossing the images from top to bottom – and much more visible on 16mm than on 35mm film – were impossible to remove without recreating a material that no longer existed: this possibility was rejected for ethical reasons. The digital restoration therefore still shows the imperfections present on the film, which from an ethical and aesthetic point of view is not in contradiction with the project we are collectively carrying out in the association: these films are the witnesses of a history and the memory of a political commitment, which is also reflected in the materiality of what brought these films to life.

Restoring the optical sound was a real wager, requiring several months of work and numerous repeated attempts. The example of the French version of *Beyrouth, jamais plus*

[Beirut, never again] is telling in this respect. A first digitization was carried out with the help of the free software AEO Light. The sound was weak, with a powerful background noise and missing frequencies above 5khz. The first assumption was that these frequencies had been lost due to an incorrect setting of the software's playback parameters. After several attempts, we decided it would be better to digitize the spools with an analogue player, but the problem of the missing frequencies was not solved. It's possible that this problem stems from the mixing or even from the printing of the film on its optics. In the first restoration attempt, Monzer E Hachem's aggressive treatment to eliminate background noise led to a metallic sound with unnatural voice modulation. The restoration was therefore carried out from start to finish using a more delicate technique, not with the aim of completely eliminating the background noise, but of reducing it as much as possible, while minimizing the effect on the voices. The software used was Izotope RX, with several runs of the spectral reduction module. It was also necessary to manually remove other instantaneous noise coming from scratches on the spool. Finally, the film sound was duplicated, and the voices were separated from other sounds, and then overlaid with the restored sound. This allowed only the level of the voices to be increased, making them more intelligible without distorting the original sound.

Film colour grading was carried out using DaVinci Resolve software, based on the restored 2K film files. The challenge of this final phase of the restoration was to balance the colours. Digitization revealed a variety of film brands and types, which have not aged in the same way over time. The

majority of the 16mm reversal positive film used by Jocelyne Saab was Kodak, using Kodachrome technology, which is characterized by vivid, saturated colours that remain fairly fixed over time (Habib 2021). However, other types of film used by Saab, notably Fuji, have seen their color fade or almost disappear. Some images, subject to vinegar syndrome, reddened considerably. Furthermore, Jocelyne Saab regularly carried out image migration, taking images from reports produced by others or from reports she had produced herself: in this migration, the image loses its quality and raises colorimetric questions at the time of restoration. The main part of Chrystel Elias's color-grading work was to recalibrate the colours so that the disparity of the materials would be attenuated to the eye, and the original colours would be revived to come as close as possible to the state of the film at the time of its creation.

The restoration of Jocelyne Saab's films has enabled us to discover previously unknown versions of the films: when broadcast on French television, the films were re-edited to soften certain political statements and shorten the running times to suit the programs. Returning to the original material preserved by Jocelyne Saab made it possible to restore her editing choices and enrich the existing archive on the issue of the Lebanese Civil War.

The case of Jocelyne Saab is both exemplary and atypical: the Association Jocelyne Saab holds all the rights to the vast majority of Jocelyne Saab's filmography, most of her films are preserved in excellent conditions, and her body of work is substantial (25 short films in 16 mm, two fictions in 35 mm), which has enabled us to set up an efficient,

formative chain of work, which now aims to serve other filmographies. We're open to sharing this new expertise and the tools associated with it to support the circulation of other rare and essential filmographies.

## **Conclusion: Building a Memory of the Past by Acquiring Expertise for the Future**

Given the transformative particularity of today's digital software, where artificial intelligence plays an increasingly important role in image reconstruction practices, documenting the restoration practices that we have conducted with this project is an important step. Talking about material, beyond films and what they tell us about the world, also allows us to place Saab's filmography in its time: through the reality of the quality of the 16mm film she used, the sound recording methods we can deduce from the reels she left behind, and the practice she had of editing (fast, with little care for the material as it was made in the urgency of the event for television broadcast), we can read a history of documentary practice in the 1970s. It's also from the material that we understand the challenges faced by an independent documentary filmmaker able to sell her subjects to European TV channels, compared to activist filmmakers funded by political parties, whose films didn't pass through the same distribution circuits and didn't benefit from the same preservation conditions. To reappropriate access to the material allows us to become aware of a whole political reality conveyed by the

cinema at a given moment in history: the memorial significance of a film exists not only in the edited images and sounds that travel through history, adapting to different distribution formats (first film, then video, now digital), but also in the archives that attest to its making. The experience of restoring Jocelyne Saab's films attests to the fact that this new form of knowledge of history has involved the acquisition of useful know-how for the future – for the safeguarding of other films, the understanding of other cinematographic adventures and the impregnation of national, aesthetic, and political heritage. Away from conventional institutional standards, this experience also makes it possible to reconsider the classic writing of a history of cinema and to take an interest in independent, fragile, poorly protected productions – particularly those by women, who have long been the black sheep of the film industry worldwide.

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## CAPÍTULO 2

# Retos de trabajar con métodos cuantitativos: intentando rastrear las primeras redes transnacionales de mujeres iberoamericanas interesadas en el cine

Ainamar Clariana-Rodagut

### RESUMEN:

El capítulo 2 ofrece una reflexión metodológica de Ainamar Clariana Rodagut, humanista e investigadora en ciencias sociales, sobre las implicaciones de utilizar métodos cuantitativos a la hora de reescribir la historia del cine feminista (invisible). Las observaciones de la autora se originaron mientras trabajaba con un especialista en análisis de redes, tratando de localizar mujeres interesadas en el cine en una enorme base de datos. La autora reflexiona en torno a la diferencia entre la búsqueda de patrones generales, y la investigación microhistórica necesaria para escribir las historiografías de mujeres. Constata que el principal problema es que las fuentes suelen ser muy difíciles de encontrar.

En este texto propongo una reflexión metodológica hecha por una humanista e investigadora en ciencias sociales en torno a las implicaciones de utilizar métodos cuantitativos a la hora de proponer una reescritura de la historia del cine teniendo en cuenta a las mujeres y sus experiencias, que han sido hasta ahora invisibilizadas. Las reflexiones que presento en este artículo fueron surgiendo mientras trabajaba con un colega científico de datos, con quien intentamos rastrear, con métodos cuantitativos, a las mujeres interesadas en el cine en una amplia base de datos. De esta experiencia pude sacar algunas consideraciones que me parecen fundamentales a la hora de trabajar con mujeres del campo cultural desde la historia. Una de las primeras reflexiones que me hice y que me condujo a las siguientes tiene que ver con la diferencia entre buscar patrones generales, como objetivo principal de alguien que trabaja desde una perspectiva cuantitativa, y el contraste de este objetivo con el de escribir las historias de mujeres, cuyas fuentes son a menudo muy difíciles de encontrar. El trabajo desde esta perspectiva humanista implica investigar sobre casos concretos que, vistos en cantidad, no podrían convertirse en patrones generales; pero cuyo valor, sin embargo, nos permite reflexionar a escala global. Para ello utilizaré como ejemplo la investigación que llevé a cabo conjuntamente con mi colega Alessio Cardillo, especialista en análisis de sistemas complejos. Nuestro objetivo en aquel trabajo conjunto fue encontrar un método adecuado para poder analizar la labor de las mujeres vinculadas con el cine en el campo cultural iberoamericano de la primera mitad del siglo XX.



## Introducción a este texto

Este texto es un híbrido entre artículo académico y ensayo más libre. El texto se presenta como una especie de bitácora de reflexiones que me fueron surgiendo cuando iba trabajando con mi colega Alessio Cardillo, físico de formación. Mi colega Alessio y yo formamos parte del mismo grupo de investigación (GlobaLS). De nuestra colaboración han surgido diversas ponencias y un artículo que estamos escribiendo a cuatro manos. Mientras el artículo se presentará con los resultados de nuestra investigación conjunta, este texto que propongo aquí funcionaría como algo así como un complemento al mismo, aunque independiente de este. En este texto no presentaré los resultados, en números, de nuestro análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo. Lo que, en cambio, sí presentaré son mis reflexiones sobre las dificultades y retos que implica una colaboración de estas características. Y aunque, quizá, este propósito parezca naif y muy tópico, creo que no existen textos de estas características que, no únicamente reflexionen en torno a las dificultades de trabajar con métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos a la vez, y de forma interdisciplinar entre especialistas provenientes de tan dispares disciplinas, sino que tengan como foco principal el estudio histórico de mujeres provenientes del campo cultural. Porque soy de la firme convicción que, a pesar de que las matemáticas tienen pretensión de lenguaje universal, el objeto en sí mismo, en este caso en concreto, tiene ciertas especificidades que determinan las posibilidades y limitaciones a la hora de usar ciertos métodos de análisis cuantitativos.

No tengo constancia, en este sentido, de textos que lidien con la problemática que presento aquí. No quiero decir que no existan textos académicos que reflexionen en torno al trabajo con datos y mujeres, como es el caso de *Data Feminism* (2020), referente clave para mí, o que no existan investigaciones muy interesantes con perspectiva de género y haciendo uso del Social Network Analysis para el análisis de datos provenientes de diferentes campos culturales o sociales (Smith-Doerr 2010; Lutter 2015; Verhoeven 2020; Morgan et al. 2021; Macedo et al. 2022; Wapman et al. 2022). Sin embargo, las especificidades y condicionantes que determinan las reflexiones que presento aquí me parece no haberlas visto hasta ahora.

Es por ello que el objetivo principal de este texto no es el de presentar o argumentar resultados, sino de sugerir preguntas y compartir cavilaciones que puedan quizá ayudar a investigadoras e investigadores que en un futuro más cercano que lejano se encuentren en circunstancias similares. Creo, firmemente, en la construcción colectiva del conocimiento, así como en la transparencia y la colaboración. Y es con este espíritu que escribo este texto.

## **Si hablamos de datos, preguntémonos de dónde salieron**

Como apuntan las autoras de *Data Feminism*, es fundamental, a la hora de trabajar con datos, ser transparentes sobre el lugar de proveniencia de esos datos, es decir, enunciar desde el principio la siguiente información: dónde han sido recopilados

estos datos, a quiénes pertenecen, a quiénes refieren, quién los ha recopilado y bajo qué circunstancia han sido recopilados. Las razones por la cuales es tan importante referir a todo ello cuando trabajamos con datos son varias. Por un lugar, evitar el extractivismo de datos, o al menos ser consciente de él. Por otro lado, dar crédito a las personas que hicieron el trabajo de recopilación, lo que a menudo no sucede. Asimismo, es fundamental entender las circunstancias en que estas personas recopilaron los datos, es decir, hacer patentes dinámicas de explotación si las hubiera. Todo ello no solamente para ser transparentes, sino también para dejar patentes los sesgos de esos datos. Porque, como ya sabemos, no es posible informar el universo completo de ningún campo, especialmente si nos referimos al campo cultural. Por lo tanto, siempre estaremos trabajando con una muestra. Esta muestra, al ser una muestra y presuponer la representatividad, supone en sí misma una selección. Esta selección siempre estará sesgada por la persona que la hace.

Se da por sentado, en esta reflexión, que todo el conocimiento es situado (Harding 1986; Haraway 1988), y por lo tanto no puede separarse del contexto y de las circunstancias en las que emerge. Pero, además, también se considera que el conocimiento objetivo es un cúmulo de puntos de vistas (Haraway 1988). Por eso la enunciación de todas las personas, agentes y agencias (Latour 2005), que participan de un proceso de generación de datos, y de conocimiento extraído de estos datos tienen que necesariamente ser referidas, expuestas. Todo ello para hacerse, asimismo, una idea de la representatividad de estos datos. Es decir, saber a qué realidades se refieren las

afirmaciones que vamos a hacer. Saber, en este sentido, cuál es el grado de representatividad respecto al universo que queremos mapear de los datos con los que contamos. La idea es que, de cara al futuro, este conocimiento pueda ser ampliado y completado, idealmente, con otras miradas que tengan sesgos distintos.

En esta línea, no únicamente se trata de enunciar el lugar de procedencia de los datos con los que vamos a trabajar, sino también el propio lugar desde el que quien está usando esos datos, o escribiendo, lo está haciendo. Es en este sentido que creo que es importante enunciar que los datos con los que yo trabajé con mi compañero Alessio fueron recopilados por parte de nuestros colegas del grupo de investigación, especialmente por las colegas que trabajan para el proyecto ERC del que algunas de nosotras formamos parte. Trabajamos, en este sentido, en unas condiciones de alto privilegio, ya que nuestra investigación está financiada y apoyada por una entidad con mucho prestigio y poder económico. Asimismo, la procedencia de las personas que formamos parte del grupo que introducimos los datos en nuestra base de datos con la que Alessio y yo trabajamos es dispar. La mayoría procedemos de países europeos, aunque no centrales, España y Bulgaria, mientras tres de las compañeras que actualmente forman parte del equipo son latinoamericanas, de Uruguay, Argentina y Brasil. Esta diversificación en lo correspondiente a las culturas de procedencia de las miembros del equipo ha sido muy ventajosa a la hora de plantear cuestiones relacionadas con las desigualdades producidas por diversidad étnica, así como a la hora de reflexionar en torno a procesos históricos. La perspectiva

descentrada, siempre con cierta cautela, es algo que define a nuestro grupo de investigación. Además, la posición de privilegio en lo referente a las condiciones en las que trabajamos está asimismo afectadas por la precariedad del sistema académico español; lo que se traduce en posiciones temporales e inestables, basadas en proyectos, que definen todos nuestros contratos. Además, nuestro grupo de investigación cuenta con presupuesto para la contratación de ayudantes de investigación, cuya labor ha sido la de apoyar a la introducción de datos dentro de nuestra base de datos, con la guía de cada una de nosotras. Estas ayudantes se han caracterizado, a menudo, por ser estudiantes en prácticas de carreras como filología, muy interesadas en aprender de nuestro grupo. Contamos, asimismo, con financiación para hacer uso como equipo del entorno virtual Nodegoat. Se trata de un software gratuito para el uso de personas individuales, y de pago dependiendo de las funciones que sea necesario activar. A pesar de todo ello, tenemos una política de transparencia y publicación de datos en abierto. Lo que incluye la publicación de nuestros resultados en abierto, así como la publicación en crudo de los datos asociados a nuestras investigaciones en repositorios públicos y de consulta, acceso y descarga, gratuitos.

## **La investigación y de dónde salieron las preguntas**

El marco del proyecto del que nacieron las preguntas que dirigirían la colaboración entre mi

colega Alessio y yo tienen su origen en el proyecto Social Networks of Past. Mapping Hispanic and Lusophone Literary Modernity (1898–1959), liderado por Diana Roig-Sanz, y del que ambos formamos parte. Por lo tanto, los datos con los que trabajamos refieren al mundo cultural y literario del contexto iberoamericano durante la primera mitad del siglo XX. Y, tal como se refiere en el título del proyecto, el método principal para rastrear esa contribución de Iberoamérica en el advenimiento de la modernidad es el trabajo con redes. Las redes como metodología se pueden aplicar tanto cuantitativamente como cualitativamente, tal como yo he ido trabajando en mi investigación sobre cineclubes y mujeres en la primera mitad del siglo XX. En mi caso he hecho uso, sobre todo, de la Actor-Network Theory, pero también he usado conceptos bourdesianos (Bourdieu 1992) e intentado construir redes formales (Lemercier 2015).

En el contexto expuesto, haciendo uso de la base de datos construida por nuestro equipo (ahora con 13601 entradas para personas, 2651 relaciones establecidas a través de correspondencia, 786 libros, 1205 organizaciones o instituciones, 3015 para eventos, 401 publicaciones periódicas, 33511 artículos, 2065 relaciones entre personas establecidas más allá de las generadas a partir de las otras categorías), con Alessio nos preguntábamos qué mujeres habían tenido un rol clave dentro del campo cinematográfico. Obviamente, siendo humanista, especializada en cine, y habiendo sido la persona principal que ha introducido los datos de mujeres relacionadas con el campo cinematográfico dentro de la base de datos, yo tenía mis propias hipótesis. Igualmente, como experimento me interesaba mucho saber

qué me podía decir nuevo el método de análisis de mi colega. Todo ello a pesar de saber que las redes, tal como las entendía la Social Network Analysis, y como las podía entender yo desde la sociología relacional, no eran iguales (Venturini, Munk and Jacomy 2019).

Dos de las primeras obviedades que se hicieron patentes en el análisis de redes sociales que Alessio llevó a cabo y leímos juntos tienen que ver con la calidad de los datos. Dos cosas obvias, la primera la falta de datos, no contamos con todos los datos del universo que estamos intentando mapear, y dos, nuestros datos están altamente sesgados. Estas dos afirmaciones, que parecen evidentes teniendo en cuenta el contexto en el que trabajamos y nuestro objeto de estudio, requieren en sí mismas ciertas reflexiones que justifiquen nuestra insistencia en el uso del método. La falta de datos, nos dijimos, es algo generalizado, ninguna investigación con datos puede contar con todos los datos. Especialmente si esta está centrada en el campo de la cultura. Ahora bien, es cierto que los métodos del SNA dan por supuesto que se tienen todos los datos para poder hacer afirmaciones generales y establecer patrones de comportamiento de las redes complejas que se están analizando. Como este no era el caso, sabíamos que era fundamental exponer la procedencia de todos los datos que teníamos y listar los datasets de los que habíamos extraído estos datos, o las fuentes que habíamos usado para extraerlos, pero también las personas e instituciones vinculadas a este proceso.

Hecho esto quedaba algo fundamental, los sesgos. Como tantas investigaciones con objetos denostados por la historiografía, la falta de datos

solamente podía ser tratada comenzando por algún lugar. Por mucho que el método de trabajo que me guiara a la hora de recoger los datos fuera el trabajo con redes, necesitaba un punto de entrada en la red. Así fue como construí casos de estudio basados en ciertas personalidades de mujeres clave dentro del campo cinematográfico iberoamericano y sus redes. Pero ahora, cuando trabajaba con Alessio, sus métodos me devolvían lo que ya sabía, mis casos de estudio estaban en el centro, eran las mediadoras culturales principales (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts, 2018). Parte del reto de mi compañero, en este sentido, como él mismo anuncia era encontrar formas creativas, a veces incluso nuevas técnicas, para reducir esos sesgos de los que los dos éramos conscientes. No podía ser de otra manera, los datos habían sido recogidos con una perspectiva de género muy marcada. Siguiendo la máxima latouriana “follow the actor” yo había seguido a cada una de mis mediadoras hasta construir la red más amplia que pude de ellas. Pero sus redes, estas ego-networks que yo había construido no eran equiparables, ni comparables, a las de ninguna otra mujer que estuviera en nuestra base de datos. Porque no había construido las redes de todas las mujeres en nuestra base de datos, solo de aquellas algunas. Entonces, me preguntaba cómo podía decir que estas, a las que yo había reseguido con tanto empeño, eran mediadoras por derecho propio frente a las otras. Fue entonces cuando me di cuenta de la cuestión de los patrones generales y los casos de estudio. Mi compañero estaba buscando patrones generales para decir que un sistema complejo de estas características como el nuestro funcionaba de una manera concreta, que respondía a ciertos



patrones. De hecho, como él mismo anunciaba, estudiar casos concretos, para él, era como buscar una excepción, una tarea cansada a veces, pero útil a la vez que, como ya sabemos, no permite hacer consideraciones abstractas y generales. Eso no quiere decir que él mismo, acostumbrado a trabajar con modelos teóricos, no fuera consciente de la utilidad del trabajo sobre casos de estudio concretos. Algo que, afirma también, puede ser altamente gratificante.

Me di cuenta entonces que, a pesar de las dificultades, en realidad en el trabajo con mujeres la falta de datos únicamente se podía trabajar buscando un punto de entrada en la red como había hecho yo. Por supuesto que yo quería, a la larga, desenterrar las historias de muchas mujeres, las redes de mujeres, y repartir la agencia de forma colectiva. Por supuesto, yo pensaba en colaboración, en sororidad, quería construir grupos, hablar de lugares de intercambio. Sabía, además, que el periodo que estaba investigando era inseparable del movimiento sufragista y de, precisamente, el trabajo en red. Sabía también que las mujeres habían comenzado a ocupar el espacio público en occidente a principios del siglo XX de forma más masiva y a menudo lo habían hecho al mismo tiempo que reflexionaban en torno a su derecho al voto. Acudir al cine, como habían hecho en masa a principios de siglo, me decía, era una ocupación obvia del espacio público (Hansen, 1991). Pero, cómo podía hablar de grupos, de audiencias, de colectividades, si tenía que entrar por algún lugar en la red, y si los datos que tenía eran los de aquellas conocidas, aquellas mujeres ricas de la élite intelectual.

## Distribución de la agencia, el trabajo colectivo

Olvidémonos de los patrones generales entonces, pensemos en lo que esos casos de estudio podían mostrarnos. Como mis puntos de entrada, mis casos de estudio, opacaban la visión de la red decidimos con Alessio quitar a estas mujeres, quitar a mis casos de estudio. Al final yo no necesitaba demostrar que ellas fueron mediadoras clave en la historia cultural nacional y a menudo transnacional del cine, ya lo había demostrado con métodos cualitativos, todos los datos que había encontrado sobre ellas era una prueba fehaciente de ello. Pero ciertamente estaban todas esas otras mujeres que, a menudo, trabajando con mis casos de estudio aparecían relacionadas, muy cercanas, a mis casos de estudio. Mujeres de las que podía tener sus nombres, pero muy pocas veces otras informaciones, o informaciones muy limitadas. El Social Network Analysis en este sentido podía ayudarme a afirmar que todas estas mujeres, estas otras de las que no tenía más información eran importantes en la red. Así es como llegamos a la conclusión de que, sabiendo que los casos de estudio tenían tanta relevancia dentro del campo sulutar, probablemente estas otras mujeres con nombre y sin rostro a veces, sin biografías escritas sobre ellas, sin archivos propios, por cercanía con las otras también debieron ser importantes dentro del campo. Diana Roig-Sanz y yo escribimos un texto sobre Victoria Ocampo (2024) haciendo uso de este método, con ayuda de Alessio por supuesto. Pudimos demostrar empíricamente que esas mujeres cercanas a Ocampo que

aparecían a menudo relacionadas con ella en diferentes eventos, publicaciones, instituciones culturales, también fueron fundamentales en el campo cultural bonaerense y transnacional. No estábamos, claro está, reescribiendo la historia como ambicionaba al principio. Pero sí estábamos señalando nuevas vías de investigación que podían, a la larga, ayudar a reescribir estas historias. Demostramos, en ese texto, que Ocampo trabajó en red, con el apoyo de tantas y tantas mujeres, y que, por lo tanto, no podía ser considerada una agente que trabajaba sola y que se construyó a sí misma sin el apoyo de otras. ¿No era precisamente una estrategia feminista esta? La sororidad, el citarse unas a otras, el ayudarse a escapar de las guerras, el publicarse unas a otras, el hablar sobre el trabajo de las compañeras en eventos, en conferencias, el invitarlas a instituciones a dar charlas, pagarles viajes para que promocionen sus trabajos, el acogerlas en la casa de una para asegurarse la supervivencia. La sororidad era la única manera de sobrevivir en un mundo hostil en el que sus trabajos eran menospreciados, en el que hablar de temas de hombres les estaba prohibido, en el que sus contribuciones eran duramente criticadas, en el que sus cualidades como intelectuales o artistas eran consideradas varoniles. Por lo tanto, afirmar que trabajaban en red, y distribuir la agencia de una entre muchas no era una afirmación arriesgada, quizá menos común de lo que nos gustaría, pero muy obvia a la vez. Además, si los lugares de encuentro eran asociaciones, organizaciones, colectivos artísticos, lugares de encuentro habituales, ¿no podían en sí mismos estos espacios considerarse redes? Con límites más o menos rígidos o fluidos (Moll 1994),

pero donde el conocimiento se construía de forma colectiva seguro, y donde se daban los procesos de transferencia cultural por sentado (Espagne 2013). Podíamos, así, quizá también, distribuir la autoría y hacerla colectiva, dejar de pensar en el paradigma del autor-genio, hombre blanco burgués seguramente, y ver a las audiencias como creadoras, a las posiciones de espectador/a como posiciones creativas (Clariana-Rodagut 2017).

## **A modo de conclusión, sobre el peso de las relaciones y la comparación**

Otra de las reflexiones fundamentales que me he hecho a lo largo de este tiempo de trabajo en equipo con mi colega Alessio todavía es un interrogante que, de algún modo, sigue guiando el proceso de colaboración. A menudo, cuando he estado investigando estas colaboraciones entre mujeres, he encontrado que, precisamente, la colaboración partía de una relación personal, de una experiencia compartida. Es decir, la colaboración profesional, que podía verse reflejada en publicaciones y exhibiciones colectivas, en citas frecuentes, en correspondencias, en ideas compartidas, en realidad partían de, estaban intrincadas con, una experiencia vivencial que había unido inicialmente a sus agentes. Bien podía ser que estas se hubieran encontrado en los márgenes de la sociedad viviendo juntas después de separarse de sus parejas, como fue el caso de Lola Álvarez Bravo y María Izquierdo; podía ser que compartieran la experiencia de mujeres de clase

alta intentando escribir y sintiéndose cohibidas por ello, como fue el encuentro entre Virginia Woolf y Victoria Ocampo; o podría ser porque se dieran cuenta de las pocas publicaciones sobre mujeres escritoras que existían, y quisieran remediar esta situación, como fue el encuentro de Gabriela Mistral y María Luz Morales. Y lo que de algún modo todos estos ejemplos dejan entrever es una preocupación en el fondo por el rol social de la mujer, su encasillamiento social, y el silenciamiento de sus voces. Esta convicción, independientemente de sus tendencias políticas, de sus gustos personales, de sus procedencias geográficas, de sus disciplinas artísticas, las unía como experiencia de ser mujeres. Es importante apuntar aquí que me estoy refiriendo a mujeres siempre occidentales, latinoamericanas o europeas y de clases altas, vinculadas al mundo intelectual y cultural de sus países de origen, y al campo cultural transnacional a menudo. No quiero hacer extensivas estas afirmaciones a mujeres de clases sociales menos favorecidas, y de culturas minorizadas como si esta idea de feminismo no fuera elitista, hegemónica, blanca y burguesa. Ahora bien, al ser mujeres preocupadas por el rol social de la mujer, y desde una posición algo paternalista, se preocuparon a menudo por otras mujeres de otras clases o etnias menos privilegiadas que las suyas. Las fotografiaron queriendo denunciar sus situaciones (Lola Álvarez Bravo), impulsaron instituciones educativas para mejorar su estatus social (María Luz Morales), o lucharon por sus derechos (Victoria Ocampo). Lo importante para mí es que lo que unió a esta red de intelectuales blancas y burguesas intelectuales de principios del siglo XX fue una experiencia compartida de vivir como mujeres en

sus respectivos contextos. Los vínculos, entonces, a menudo entre ellas se construyeron en la esfera privada, aunque luego tuvieran repercusión en la esfera pública de formas más o menos obvias.

Aquí es donde aparece mi pregunta como un carámbano, ¿qué hacer de estas relaciones que se forman en la esfera íntima y que son cruciales para las historias de todas estas mujeres, y para la historia cultural por ende? ¿Puede una ciencia numérica dar cuenta de la relevancia de estas relaciones? Y, no solo eso, ¿cómo comparar estas relaciones con relaciones más públicas gestadas en espacios públicos?

Puse esta pregunta a diversas especialistas y he recibido diferentes tipos de respuestas, válidas en cierto modo, pero que no disuelven la complejidad de mi objeto de estudio. Me han dicho que podrían ser las redes multicapa una forma de trabajar con estos tipos diferentes de relaciones. Es decir, crear muchas capas de relaciones según el diferente tipo de relaciones: por ejemplo, relaciones de parentesco y amistad en una capa, relaciones establecidas en lo laboral por otra. Por supuesto, estoy convencida que las redes multicapa pueden ser muy útiles para poner de relieve diferentes grados de centralidad, no solo basadas en la cantidad de relaciones que tiene un nodo. Pero para poder hacer alguna afirmación valiosa en esta línea tendríamos que poder cuantificar las relaciones en espacios privados al mismo nivel que las relaciones gestadas en espacios públicos. Y si tenemos un número que cuantifique una relación según todas las veces que dos personas colaboraron en una publicación, ¿cómo podemos equiparar este número a una relación en el ámbito privado, que únicamente se consigna a partir de la relación en

sí misma? Por ejemplo, dos mujeres eran amigas. Pero no podemos cuantificar cuántas veces quedaron para hablar, para comer, para ir al cine. Cuando, realmente, en todas estas actividades pudieron estar sumando a la relación, al intercambio de ideas, a la colaboración y al apoyo.

Otra posibilidad sería trabajar con la duración de estos vínculos. Es decir, dar peso a las relaciones según la duración de las mismas. Sin embargo, nos encontramos con el mismo problema, ¿cómo vamos a saber desde cuándo a cuándo duró una relación de amistad? Probablemente duró toda una vida. Pero a menudo no tenemos registro de ello. Tendría sentido dar peso a las relaciones según la duración, en tanto que las colaboraciones puramente profesionales tienen menos probabilidades de durar en el tiempo, que los vínculos que tienen más de un canal por el que se establecen. No hace falta ser sociólogo, ni especialista en sistemas complejos para decir esto.

Las soluciones planteadas son muy válidas, y realmente interesantes, pero no resuelven mi conflicto. Probablemente, si mi objeto fuera contemporáneo y no histórico estas propuestas facilitarían la demostración empírica de aquello que yo quería demostrar. Porque lo que encuentro al fondo de la cuestión es, de nuevo, la falta de datos. Muy ligada, en este sentido, al asunto de los espacios privados y los espacios públicos. Porque no solamente se trata de que los datos no se han encontrado, o están dispersos en el espacio, sino que estos datos, potencialmente, no existen. Porque la relación personal difícilmente se puede cuantificar. Una forma optimista sería cuantificarla a partir de la correspondencia, entendiendo que la relación estaba mediatizada

por la carta y cuantificar las cartas, y leerlas para poder hacer un análisis hermenéutico de las ideas, de este intercambio. Ahora bien, la comparativa entre relaciones “públicas” por entes públicos, como los hombres en el contexto que nos ocupa, y las relaciones “privadas” que parten de compartir aquello íntimo, no funciona. No es fructífera. Me planteo entonces si, quizá, el problema es la comparativa entre aquello que llamamos hombre y mujer, como categorías estanco. Esta clara cuál es la respuesta desde una perspectiva cualitativa, no tiene ningún sentido. Pero, si hablamos de objetos históricos imbuidos en esas categorías, ¿cómo cuantificar sin categorías? Seguramente una forma es escapar del pensamiento binario, superar el pensamiento dualista, pero ¿es posible hacerlo con métodos cuantitativos? Y parece en este punto que podríamos volver a la pregunta de Haraway (1991) “Does feminism offer insight into the connections between science and humanism?”

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## CHAPTER 2

# Challenges of Working with Quantitative Methods: Trying to Trace the First Transnational Networks of Iberoamerican Women Interested in Cinema

Ainamar Clariana-Rodagut

Translated by Emanuela Maltese

### ABSTRACT:

Chapter 2 provides a methodological reflection by Ainamar Clariana Rodagut, a humanist and social science researcher on the implications of using quantitative methods when rewriting of the history of (invisible) feminist cinema. The author's observations originated while working with a specialist in network analysis, trying to locate women interested in cinema in a huge database. The author reflects on the contrast between the way general patterns take shape and the way women's stories are written. She finds that the main issue is that sources are often very difficult to find.

In this text, I suggest a methodological reflection made by a humanist and social science researcher on the implications of using quantitative methods when proposing a rewriting of the history of cinema, which considers women and their experiences that have been so far invisibilized. The observations I offer in this essay originated while working with a colleague, a data scientist, and trying to locate women interested in cinema in a huge database using a quantitative approach. From this experience, I was able to derive certain insights that I believe are critical when dealing with women in the cultural area from a historical standpoint. One of the first reflections I made, which led to the subsequent ones, concerned the difference between looking for general patterns—as the main objective of someone working from a quantitative perspective—and the contrast of this objective with that of writing women’s stories, whose sources are often very difficult to find. The work from this humanistic perspective entails the study of specific cases that, when considered through quantitative analysis, cannot become universal patterns; yet, their value enables us to reflect on a global scale. As an example, consider the study I conducted in collaboration with my colleague Alessio Cardillo, a specialist in complex systems analysis. Our goal in that collaborative study was to discover an appropriate method for analyzing the work of women involved with cinema in the Ibero-American cultural field in the first half of the twentieth century.

## **Introduction**

This text is a combination of an academic article and a more informal essay. The text is presented

as a kind of journal of reflections that occurred to me while working with my colleague Alessio Cardillo, a physicist by training. Alessio and I are both members of the same research organization (GloboALS). Our collaboration has resulted in the authoring of several papers and a joint article. While the article will present the results of our collaborative research, the text I am proposing here would serve as a sort of independent supplement to the article. In this text, I will not present the results, in numbers, of our quantitative and qualitative analysis. What I will discuss, however, are my thoughts on the difficulties and challenges resulting from our collaboration. Although this may appear naive and common, I believe that there are no other texts that not only reflect on the difficulties of working with quantitative and qualitative methods simultaneously—and in an interdisciplinary manner among specialists from such disparate fields—but also have the historical study of women in the cultural field as their primary focus. In fact, I am persuaded that, although mathematics aspires to be a universal language, the object itself, in this particular instance, possesses certain characteristics that determine the possibilities and limitations of utilizing particular quantitative analysis techniques.

In this regard, I am unaware of any texts that address the issues I present here. I do not mean there are no academic texts that reflect on working with data and women, such as *Data Feminism* (2020), a key reference for me, or that there are no very interesting studies with a gender perspective and using Social Network Analysis for the analysis of data from different cultural or social fields (Smith-Doerr 2010; Lutter 2015; Verhoeven 2020; Morgan

et al. 2021; Macedo et al. 2022; Wapman et al.). However, the particulars and conditioning factors that determine the reflections I present here have not yet been observed, as far as I can tell.

This is why the primary purpose of this text is not to present or dispute results, but rather to pose questions and express concerns that may assist researchers who might find themselves in similar circumstances in the near rather than distant future. I firmly believe in the collective construction of knowledge, transparency, and cooperation. It is in this vein that I compose the following text.

## **If we are Discussing Data, Let us Consider its Origin**

According to the authors of *Data Feminism*, it is crucial, when working with data, to be transparent about where the data came from, i.e., to state at the outset where the data was collected, who it belongs to, who it refers to, who collected it, and under what circumstances it was collected. There are numerous reasons why it is crucial to refer to all of this information when working with data. On the one hand, it is important to avoid data extractivism or, at the very least, be aware of it. In addition, credit must be given to those who performed the collection task, which is not always the case. Similarly, it is important to comprehend the conditions under which these individuals collected the data, i.e., to make any exploitation dynamics apparent, if there were any. This is done not only for the sake of transparency, but also to make the biases of these data evident, since as we already know, it is

impossible to report on the entire universe of any field, particularly the cultural field. Consequently, we will always operate with a sample. This sample, by virtue of being a sample and assuming representativeness, implies a selection. This selection will always be biased by the individual making it.

In this reflection, it is assumed that all knowledge is situated (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988) and thus cannot be separated from its context and circumstances of origin. However, it is also believed that objective knowledge is a collection of viewpoints (Haraway, 1988). Therefore, the enunciation of all persons, agents, and agencies (Latour, 2005) who participate in the generation of data and the extraction of knowledge from these data must be referenced and exposed. This is done in order to get an idea of the representativeness of these data, that is, to know to which realities the upcoming assertions will refer, and to determine the degree of representativeness of the data we possess in relation to the universe we wish to map. In the future, it is hoped that this knowledge can be expanded and complemented by other perspectives with various biases.

In this line, it is necessary to specify not only the provenance of the data we will be working with, but also the location from which the person using those data or writing is doing so. In this regard, I believe it is essential to note that the data with which my colleague Alessio and I worked were collected by our research group colleagues, particularly those working on the ERC project in which some of us took part. In this sense, we operate in extremely privileged conditions, as our research is funded and supported by a highly

prestigious and economically powerful entity. Analogously, the provenance of the individuals who enter data into our database and who are part of the team with which Alessio and I collaborate is diverse. While three of the team members are now from Latin America—Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil—the majority of us are from European nations, although not central, such as Spain and Bulgaria. This diversification in terms of the cultural influences of the team members has been of great assistance in bringing to light issues relating to the injustices brought about by ethnic diversity and in reflecting on historical processes. Our research group is characterized by its decentralized perspective, which is always tempered by prudence. In addition, the precariousness of the Spanish academic system affects our privileged position in terms of working conditions; this translates into transitory and unstable job positions based on projects, which define all of our contracts. In addition, our research group has a budget for the hiring of research assistants, whose task has been to assist in the entry of data into our database under our supervision. These assistants have frequently been described as apprentices in fields such as philology who are eager to learn from our group. Besides, we have received funding to utilize the Nodegoat virtual environment as a group. Individuals can utilize this software at no cost; however, certain functions require activation fees. Despite this, we have a policy of open data publication and transparency. This includes the open publication of our results, as well as the publication of raw data associated with our research in public repositories and its free consultation, access, and download.

# The Research and Origins of the Queries

The project *Social Networks of the Past. Mapping Hispanic and Lusophone Literary Modernity (1898–1959)*, directed by Diana Roig-Sanz is the source of the framework from which my colleague Alessio and I derived the questions that would guide our collaboration and in which we both participate. Therefore, the data we utilize pertain to the cultural and literary context of Ibero-America during the first half of the twentieth century. And, as indicated by the project's name, the work with networks is the primary method for tracing the contribution of Ibero-America to the advent of modernity. As I have demonstrated in my research on film societies and women in the first half of the twentieth century, networks as a methodology can be applied both quantitatively and qualitatively. In my case, I have mostly made use of Actor-Network Theory, but I have also used Bourdieusian concepts (Bourdieu 1992) and tried to build formal networks (Lemercier 2015).

In the above context, making use of the database built by our team (now with 13601 entries for persons, 2651 relationships established through correspondence, 786 books, 1205 organizations or institutions, 3015 for events, 401 periodicals, 33511 articles, 2065 relationships between persons established beyond those generated from the other categories), with Alessio we wondered which women had played a key role within the film field. Obviously, being a humanist, specialized in cinema, and having been the main person who entered the data of women related to the film field into the database, I had my own hypotheses. Similarly, as



it was an experiment, I was intrigued to explore the analytical approach used by my colleague in order to get novel insights. All this despite knowing that networks, as understood by Social Network Analysis, and as I could understand them from the standpoint of relational sociology, were not the same (Venturini, Munk, and Jacomy 2019).

Two of the most immediately obvious facts that emerged from the social network analysis that Alessio conducted, and that we read together, concerned the quality of the data. The first one: we do not have complete data for the universe we are attempting to map; the second one: our data is extremely biased. These two assertions, which seem self-evident given the context in which we are working and the subject of our study, necessitate certain reflections to justify our insistence on employing the method. We concluded that the paucity of data is a pervasive problem; no data-driven study can have all the data. Especially if it focuses on the cultural sphere. Now, it is true that SNA methods presume that one has all the data necessary to make generalizations and identify behavior patterns in the complex networks under analysis. Since this was not the case, we knew it was essential to disclose the provenance of all the data we had and list the datasets or sources from which we extracted them, as well as the individuals and institutions involved in this process.

However, after that, something fundamental remained: biases. As with so much research involving objects discredited by historiography, the lack of data could only be remedied by beginning somewhere. As much as the data collection method I followed involved working with networks, I required an entry point into the network. This is how I created

case studies based on significant female figures in the Ibero-American film industry and their networks. In contrast, when I worked with Alessio, his methods brought me back to what I already knew, namely that my case studies were at the center and served as the primary cultural mediators (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts, 2018). As he himself acknowledges, one of my partner's challenges in this regard was to find inventive, and sometimes even novel, techniques to reduce the biases of which we were both aware. The data could not be otherwise, as they were gathered with a distinct gender perspective. Following the Latourian dictum "follow the actor," I followed each of my mediators until I had assembled the largest network conceivable of them. Nevertheless, neither their network nor the ego-networks I had created were comparable to those of any other woman in our database. This was due to the fact that I had not constructed the networks of all of the women in our database, but only of a select few. So, I pondered how I could assert that these individuals, whom I had meticulously monitored, were mediators in their own right in relation to the others. Then I understood the significance of general patterns and case studies. My colleague was searching for general patterns to demonstrate that a system as complex as ours responded to certain patterns and operated in a particular manner. In actuality, as he himself stated, analyzing concrete cases for him was akin to searching for an exception, a tedious but valuable task that, as we already know, precludes abstract and general considerations. This does not imply that he, who was used to working with theoretical models, was unaware of the value of working on concrete case studies. He also stated that this is something that can be extremely satisfying.

Then I realized that, despite the difficulties, the lack of data in working with women could only be overcome by searching for an entry point in the network, as I had done. Obviously, I wanted to unearth the stories of many women, and the networks of women, and distribute the agency collectively over time. Of course, I was considering collaboration and sisterhood, and I desired to build groups and talk about places of exchange. I was also aware that the time period I was investigating was inseparable from the suffragette movement, and specifically networking. I also knew that at the beginning of the twentieth century, women in the West began to occupy public space in greater numbers, often while they were contemplating their right to vote. I used to tell myself that going to the cinema, as many people did at the turn of the century, was an evident use of public space (Hansen, 1991). But how could I speak of groups, audiences, and communities if I was required to register my data somewhere on the Internet and if the only data I possessed were those of women I was acquainted with, and of those wealthy women of the intellectual elite?

## **Distribution of the Agency, Collective Work**

Then, let's forget general patterns and consider what these case studies can teach us. As my entry points and case studies overshadowed the network's vision, Alessio and I decided to remove these women and my case studies. In the end, I did not need to prove that they were essential mediators in the national and frequently

transnational cultural history of cinema, because I had already done so with qualitative methods, and all the data I had uncovered on them was tangible evidence of this. But there were also all those other women who, because they frequently worked with my case studies, appeared to be closely related to those cases. Women whose names I could have, but on whom I was able to gather limited information if any other at all. In this way, Social Network Analysis could assist me in confirming that all of these women, about whom I had no additional information, were influential in the network. This is how we came to the conclusion that, given the significance of the case studies in the field, these other women with names and sometimes no faces, without biographies written about them, and without their own archives, due to their proximity to the others, must have also been fundamental in the field. With Alessio's assistance, Diana Roig-Sanz and I wrote a text on Victoria Ocampo (2024) using this method. We were able to demonstrate empirically that those women close to Ocampo who frequently appeared associated with her in various events, publications, and cultural institutions were also crucial in the Buenos Aires and transnational cultural fields. Evidently, we were not rewriting history, as I had originally intended.

But we were pointing out new research avenues that could help rewrite these narratives in the long term. We demonstrated in that text that Ocampo worked in a network, with the support of a large number of women, and that, as a result, she could not be considered a solitary agent who built herself without support from others. Wasn't this strategy exactly feminist? Sorority: to quote each other, to help each other escape from conflicts, to

publish each other, to speak about each other's work at events, at conferences, to invite them to institutions to give lectures, to pay for them, to travel, to promote their work, to accommodate them in one's home to ensure their survival. Sorority was the only way for women to survive in a hostile world where their work was devalued, they were prohibited from discussing men's issues, their contributions were harshly criticized, and their intellectual or artistic qualities were considered masculine. Therefore, to state that they worked in a network, and to distribute the agency of one among many was not a hazardous statement, perhaps less common than we would like, but very evident at the same time. Furthermore, if the meeting spaces were associations, organizations, artistic collectives, or regular meeting spaces, couldn't these spaces be considered networks? With more or less rigid or fluid boundaries (Moll, 1994), but where knowledge could be unquestionably constructed collectively and cultural transfer processes could be assumed (Espagne, 2013)? Thus, we might also be able to distribute authorship and make it collective, abandon the paradigm of the author-genius, white bourgeois male, and view audiences as creators and spectator positions as creative positions (Clariana-Rodagut, 2017).

## **In Conclusion, Regarding the Relevance of Relationships and Comparisons**

Another of the fundamental reflections that I have had during my time collaborating with Alessio

is a question that, in some way, continues to govern the collaboration process. When I have researched these collaborations between women, I have frequently discovered that the collaboration originated from an interpersonal relationship or a shared experience. In other words, the professional collaboration, which manifested itself in joint publications and exhibitions, frequent meetings, correspondence, and shared ideas, originated from and was entwined with an experiential event that initially brought their agents together. It is possible that they were living on the fringes of society after separating from their partners, as was the case with Lola Álvarez Bravo and María Izquierdo; that they shared the experience of upper-class women attempting to write and feeling self-conscious about it, as was the case with Virginia Woolf and Victoria Ocampo; or that they recognized the scarcity of publications on women writers and sought to remedy the situation, as Gabriela Mistral and María Luz Morales did in their encounter. All of these examples suggest a concern for the social role of women, their social categorization, and the suppression of their voices. This conviction, regardless of their political tendencies, their personal preferences, their geographical origins, their artistic disciplines, united them as an experience of being women. It is essential to note that I am referring to upper-class women who are always from the West, Latin America, or Europe and who have ties to the intellectual and cultural worlds of their home countries, as well as the transnational cultural field. I do not wish to extend these statements to women from less privileged social classes and minority cultures, as if this conception of feminism were not elitist,

hegemonic, white, and middle-class. However, as women concerned with the social role of women, and from a somewhat paternalist position, they frequently worried about other women from less privileged classes or ethnicities than themselves. They photographed them with the desire to denounce their situations (Lola Álvarez Bravo); they promoted educational institutions to improve their social status (María Luz Morales); or fought for their rights (Victoria Ocampo). What is important to me is that what united this network of white intellectuals and bourgeois intellectuals of the early twentieth century was a shared experience of living as women in their respective contexts. Then, the majority of the connections between them were forged in the private sphere, despite having more or less obvious repercussions in the public sphere.

My query becomes icicle-like at this point: what are we to make of these intimate relationships that are crucial to the narratives of all these women and thus cultural history? Can a numerical science account for the relevance of these relationships? And, not only that, but how do we compare these relationships to those that are more public and formed in public spaces?

I posed this question to a number of specialists, who have provided me with a variety of valid answers that do not, however, reduce the complexity of my object of study. I have been informed that multilayer networks could be utilized to manage these various forms of relationships. In other words, to construct multiple layers of relationships based on the various categories of relationships, such as kinship and friendship relationships in one layer and work-related relationships in another. Obviously, I am persuaded

that multilayer networks can be extremely useful for highlighting various degrees of centrality, not just based on the number of connections a node has. To make a meaningful statement along these lines, however, we must be able to quantify the relationships generated in private spaces on par with those generated in public spaces. And if we have a number that quantifies a relationship based on the number of times two individuals collaborated on a publication, how can we compare this number to a private relationship that is only recorded based on the relationship itself? For instance, two women in our database were close companions. However, we cannot quantify how often they met to chat, dine, and watch movies. In reality, they could have contributed to the relationship, the exchange of ideas, collaboration, and support through all of these activities.

Another possibility would be to work with the duration of these connections. In other words, to weight the relationships based on their duration. However, we run into the same issue: how can we determine when a friendship began and ended? Possibly, it endured a lifetime. But we often lack records of it. It would make sense to value relationships based on their duration, as long as solely professional collaborations are less likely to endure over time than bonds that are established through multiple channels. To state this, you do not need to be a sociologist or an expert in complex systems.

The proposed solutions are extremely valid and fascinating, but they do not resolve my dilemma. If the subject were contemporary rather than historical, these suggestions would likely facilitate the empirical demonstration of what I



wanted to prove, but there is a dearth of data at the heart of the issue. This scarceness is, in this sense, closely related to the issue of private and public spaces, as it is not only that the data have not been located or are dispersed throughout space, but it is also possible that they do not exist because it is challenging to quantify the intimate relationship. A positive approach would be to quantify it based on the correspondence, recognizing that the relationship was mediated by the letter, and to peruse the letters in order to conduct a hermeneutic analysis of the ideas, of this exchange. However, the comparison between “public” relationships between public entities, such as males in the present context, and “private” relationships based on the exchange of intimate information fails. It is not productive. I wonder then if, perhaps, the problem is the comparison between what we call man and woman, as if they were rigid categories. It is evident from a qualitative standpoint what the answer is; it makes no logic. How, then, can we quantify historical objects imbued with these categories if we do not use categories? Undoubtedly, one way to surmount dualistic thinking is to transcend binary thinking, but is it possible to do so using quantitative methods? And it seems at this point that we might return to Haraway’s question (1991): “Does feminism offer insight into the connections between science and humanism?”

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## CHAPTER 3

# The Widow as Archivist, Curator, and Manager: The Hidden Agents of Global Cinemas

Maria Corrigan & Isabel Seguí

### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 3 Maria Corrigan and Isabel Seguí discuss landmark Soviet and Cuban cases in order to uncover the painstaking archival, curatorial, and managerial work that vouchsafes our histories of global cinemas, exploring the labour of the widows of famous filmmakers. The different case studies demonstrate tendencies in the widows' work, showing how their diverse professional backgrounds, personalities, and geopolitical contexts foster different kinds of interventions. The strategic aim of this chapter is to propose the figure of the widow/manager of a cinematic legacy as a helpful category to analyse the gendered division of labour in cinematic ecologies.

The widow of the acclaimed filmmaker is a recurring figure in the study of global cinemas. Simultaneously gatekeepers and overshadowed personalities, the life partners of deceased cineastes often take upon themselves the responsibility of cultivating and perpetuating the memory of their husbands. To that end, they undertake a host of complex tasks and initiatives that extend the multifaceted marital labour already assumed during their partners' lifetimes. In the transition from wife to widow, this labour includes the archiving of filmic material and documents, the delegation of publishing tasks (from translation to scholarship), as well as the generation of personal and institutional alliances to disseminate the oeuvre. Though rarely credited for their active practices of cinephilia and dedication to film culture, widows are significant agents of history, often operating as *de facto* managers of their husbands' legacies.

In this article we delve into landmark Soviet and Cuban cases in order to uncover the painstaking archival, curatorial, and managerial work that vouchsafes our histories of global cinemas, exploring the labor of Elizaveta Svilova (Dziga Vertov), Pera Atasheva (Sergei Eisenstein), Yulia Solntseva (Oleksandr Dovzhenko), Dolores Calviño (Julio García Espinosa), Lázara Herrera (Santiago Álvarez), and Mirtha Ibarra (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea). The different case studies demonstrate the common features and emotional underpinnings of the widow's work, showing how their diverse professional backgrounds, personalities, and geopolitical contexts foster different kinds of interventions. As feminist scholars, we ascribe value to all forms of work in film cultures

including preservation and dissemination. The strategic aim of this article is to propose the figure of the widow/manager of a cinematic legacy as a helpful category to analyse the gendered division of labour in cinematic ecologies.

## **Soviet Cinematic Widows**

Soviet cinema of the 1920s has long been a foundational pillar of the field of film studies. The significance of this history a century later, however, is very much in flux. The widows of the Soviet avant-garde are no longer alive to continue their work in the preservation of their husbands' legacies. These husbands are central, monumental figures of the golden age of Soviet film. Nevertheless, their place in the framework of film history and national cinema is by no means fixed or secure. The current Russian administration has revealed a contentious relationship with the archival records and momentous sites of Soviet history. Even before the 2021 shuttering of Russia's oldest human rights organization, Memorial International, the Ministry of Culture shut down Moscow's Eisenstein Cabinet in 2017, with plans to install either government offices or a mini-hotel in its place. Beyond this, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reinforced the fissures in identity that the labels "Soviet" and "post-Soviet" have unsuccessfully papered over for decades.

In this new light, then, the lives of Elizaveta Ignatievna Svilova (1900-1975), Pera Moiseevna Atasheva (1900-1965), and Yulia Ippolitovna Solntseva (1901-1989) are of paramount importance in the construction of Soviet film history. Not only

did each of these women collaborate actively in the artistic work of their husbands, they also all outlived them and worked in various capacities to protect and sustain their husbands' memories after death. In addition to this significant labour, discounted in film scholarship precisely because of the marital bond and unspoken expectations surrounding the duties of wives, the widows of Soviet film enable a new perspective on an area of film history that only seems fully charted. An examination of these widows' efforts helps us to push against the common generational divides that abound in histories of Soviet film, which split the decades into units of filmmaking almost entirely decided by political realities (i.e., the avant-garde, revolutionary 1920s, the socialist realist 1930-1950s, the post-Stalin Thaw, etc.). By exploring the work of these agents of film history, we can trace a different kind of history, focusing not on rupture but on the continuous efforts to cultivate and justify the significance of both individual filmmakers and collective artistic practice in various historical contexts.

Svilova is, perhaps, the most recognized figure among the widows of Soviet cinema. Over the last decade, she has been the subject of a considerable amount of scholarly attention, with an entry in the Women Film Pioneers Project, where her career is charted in great detail and where she is described as "a film editor, director, writer, and archivist" (Molcard 2020). She is the focus of two separate articles in the 2018 special issue of the journal *Apparatus*, titled "Women at the Editing Table: Revising Soviet Film History of the 1920s and 1930s." Apart from this, however, she is a familiar face to most students of film history as she features



prominently in the landmark Soviet film, *Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), appearing repeatedly throughout the film, at work at her editing table. “Shouldn’t it be called *Woman with an Editing Bench*,” asks Karen Pearlman in a co-written introduction to the *Apparatus* special issue and in her 2016 short film by that same title (Pearlman and Adelheid 2018). Feminist scholarship on Svilova is undertaken, by and large, to remedy her curious invisibility in Soviet film history, to salvage her from the long shadow cast by her husband, and to shed light on the type of film labour that is overlooked in favour of the more prominent work of the global auteur, singular and therefore easier to export.

Vertov himself struggled to understand the reasons behind his wife’s seeming invisibility within the industry as early as 1934, writing in his diary, “Only a serious offense could justify her lack of recognition” (Vertov, quoted in Kaganovsky 2018). After his death twenty years later, Svilova retired and dedicated herself to the tasks of archiving her husband’s affairs and, in doing so, cemented her own position as a living proxy of her husband—an assistant and secondary figure in his legacy. Feminist attempts to examine her film career independent of Vertov, however, should heed caution, as she is irrevocably bound to her husband and his artistic output. Any separation of the two is ultimately counter-productive, as it simply reproduces the disavowal of collaboration that has presented Vertov as a lone genius. After all, Vertov established the collective called Kinoki (also translated as Cinema-eyes, kinocs, and cine-eyes) and, when writing, was “unwavering in his use of the word ‘we,’” a pronoun that includes Svilova and his brother Mikhail Kaufman (Pearlman, MacKay,

and Sutton 2018). In a written application to this collective (widely considered a publicity stunt, as she was already a member), Svilova promised in 1923 to “walk arm in arm” with the kinoki to “distant but certain victory” (Svilova, as quoted in Tsivian 2004: 88). I argue that the significance of Svilova’s status as “comrade-in-arms” (or *soratnik*) is diminished three times over: first, by the general devaluing of women’s and editorial work in film history; second, by scholarly hesitancy to account for collaborative labour in general; and third, by her joining of hands with Vertov as marital partners, which recasts her life’s work within the gendered expectations of wives.

Atasheva’s labor on behalf of Sergei Eisenstein presents a different set of challenges for film historians. First and foremost, Atasheva’s status as Eisenstein’s wife is subject to extensive caveats, as their marriage is presumed to have been undertaken to ensure Eisenstein’s safety under increasing criminalization of male homosexuality. For this reason, she is sometimes referred to as Eisenstein’s “closest friend and assistant,” a classification that may indeed attribute to her more agency than that of wife (Neuberger and Somaini 2017: 9). Secondly, Atasheva was not a filmmaker or film editor, although she worked behind the camera to some extent, as she was present on set and by many accounts argued fiercely with Eisenstein about the nature of his work. Tracing Atasheva’s work does not depend, as it might with Svilova and Vertov, on evaluating the degree of collaboration and mutual influence. Rather, the fruits of Atasheva’s labor are evident to us in the material culture attached to Eisenstein—that is, the rich vein of scholarship that has emerged from

posthumous publications and the community that was fostered through Atasheva's Moscow apartment, that was transformed, after her death, into the aforementioned Eisenstein Cabinet.

As I have argued elsewhere, the widow's cinephilia is often discounted because of the philia (love and kinship) by which it is bound (Corrigan 2020: 186). Atasheva's active labour is even further discounted because, according to a rather basic (possibly simplistic) understanding of marriage, she was, perhaps, not well loved in her role as wife. As a result, her significant role as an agent of film history has been taken for granted by generations of film scholars whose work would be impossible without her careful preservation of Eisenstein's vast unpublished oeuvre. Alone, she struggled to contend with the immense responsibilities of the material bequeathed to her (at first, she guarded Eisenstein's writings in an apartment that was crumbling around her and was torn down after she left). Through her cooperation with students from VGIK, Moscow's film school, she nurtured a new generation of film scholarship and established her new home as a transnational cinematic contact zone and a landing pad for international film scholars. I use the term "nurture" on purpose, because her affective labour sustained the lives and careers of multiple people. The Eisenstein Cabinet on Smolenskaya Street operated for decades as the heart and hearth of Russian film studies, without Eisenstein ever having stepped foot there. Naum Kleiman has described Atasheva as a "second mother" to him and to many of his classmates, but he interprets the value of this relationship beyond a personal level; rather, Atasheva transformed his entire understanding of the historian's task,

reinforcing the significance of kinship and care in a critical approach to the past (Corrigan 2020: 197). It is useful to think of this work as gendered and, as such, connected to the tasks that feminists call social reproduction. This model, however, has its limits, as it does not include the work Atasheva conducted planning publications, connecting scholars, and soliciting pieces of writing within and outside the Soviet Union. Nor does it take into account that the widow's work is not done entirely for the legacy of the husband, but rather is geared toward the preservation of a shared history for the commons.

The life of Yulia Solntseva is simultaneously more straightforward and more confounding than that of her contemporaries, as she herself is a highly decorated artist in addition to being an active agent in the memorialization of her husband, Ukrainian film director Oleksandr Dovzhenko. Famous for her on-screen performances in the titular silent film roles, *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (dir. Yakov Protazanov, 1924) and *The Cigarette Girl From Mosselprom* (dir. Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky, 1924), she gradually moved away from acting to become an assistant to Dovzhenko. After his death, she made the transition to a successful directorial career—so much so that she was the first female winner of the Best Director Award at the Cannes film festival in 1961. This international recognition was awarded for her *Chronicle of Flaming Years*, one of five of Dovzhenko's scenarios that she directed after his death in 1956. Solntseva's work of memorialization, therefore, is altogether unique, as it includes the more highly regarded directorial labour in addition to a host of less valued activities so often conducted by devoted widows.

In Solntseva's case, these seemingly lesser tasks include the establishing the Dovzhenko Museum in his Ukrainian hometown of Sosnitsya, creating memorial plaques to him in Moscow and Kyiv, publishing a complete collection of his written work, establishing an award in his name, and presiding over the celebrations of his major anniversaries.

The widow's work of memorialization is not merely discounted in film history; this extensive labour is often rendered invisible by the widows themselves, who tend to erase their own traces in the process of valorising the dead. Solntseva's directorial career, then, points to an important distinction that separates her quite dramatically from her widow-comrades. Unlike them, Solntseva does not disappear so easily from historical record, but establishes a career by stepping into his directorial role. Neither Svilova nor Atasheva ever attempted such a step—within their tasks, both widows tended to minimize themselves in order to extend the afterlives of their husbands. In a letter outlining her ideas for publications on Eisenstein, for instance, Atasheva, suggests to her correspondent—U.S. scholar Jay Leyda—that all these ideas are his (Corrigan 2020: 200). Likewise, Kaganovsky describes Svilova's early career, but notes that her recollections are “exaggerated to draw attention to the work of Vertov and the kinoki” (Kaganovsky 2018). Solntseva, too, considered her directorial career to be the product of her husband's vision and mentoring. But she did not erase herself and, indeed, has drawn ire for the protective—even censoring—level of control she exercised over her husband's archives. This exacting control also points to the other side of archival memorialization—the tendency toward

gatekeeping. George Liber suggests that this was part and parcel of Dovzhenko's choice in partner: "In choosing Solntseva, the film-maker insured his legacy" (Liber 2000: 97). In part, this was because Dovzhenko faced political difficulties in his cinematic explorations of Ukraine (above and beyond those faced by any artist working under Stalin). Solntseva was Moscow-born and thus "represented Russia... and greater security" (96). This national distinction is one of many factors that further complicate historical treatments of Dovzhenko, his legacy, and Solntseva's directorial career, which saw a Russian artist shaping, protecting, and directing a Ukrainian body of work.

An examination of the widow reveals the personal histories behind the creation and cultivation of national cinemas. If we look more closely at these personal histories, then, we can also find ways to decentre national cinemas, which generally rely on the prominence of auteurs. Solntseva's case points us to the tensions beneath the label of "Soviet cinema" – specifically the ongoing irreconcilable differences between Russian and Ukrainian film histories. On a global scale, moreover, the widow provides a useful transnational lens that allows us to understand the gendered hidden labour that guarantees our film histories. The next section will focus on the widow's labour in the Cuban context, revealing yet another vector shared by Soviet and Cuban cinematic legacies.

# Cuban Cinematic Widowhood

The three women addressed in this section—Dolores Calviño (born in 1947, widow of Julio García Espinosa, 1926–2016), Mirtha Ibarra (born in 1946, widow of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea “Titón”, 1928–1996), and Lázara Herrera (born in 1946, widow of Santiago Álvarez, 1919–1998)—were teenagers when the Cuban revolution happened (1959). Thus, their formative years coincided with the exhilarating initial stage of the new process, and their life stories embody the trust in the egalitarian utopia attempted on the Caribbean island. Fiercely independent, they decided to unite their lives with older men, members of the generation that made the revolution. Their husbands are at the top of the white and masculine pantheon of the golden era of revolutionary cinema. They outlived them and voluntarily assumed the responsibility of memorializing their oeuvre and ideological legacy (including its controversial and anti-establishment bits). To this end, they have been conducting variegated initiatives with different degrees of institutional support. Before we examine these activities in detail, let us contextualize the importance of cinema in Fidel Castro’s rule because part of these widows’ common agenda is bringing to the fore the instrumental role that cinema played in the first decades of the revolutionary process to avoid oblivion and biased or simplistic interpretations of the history of the period.

From 1959 to the beginning of the 1990s (when the dissolution of the Soviet Union triggered economic collapse), Cuban State film institutions developed a hectic and all-encompassing array of

activities that impacted way beyond the country's borders. The centrality of film for the new regime was demonstrated when the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC) was established only two months after the Revolution's triumph. Other instrumental organizations launched over the years, that still exist, are the Cuban Cinematheque, the Havana International Film Festival, the New Latin American Cinema Foundation, and the International School of Film and TV of San Antonio de los Baños (EICTV). It is essential to highlight the severe working conditions Cuban institutions have been forced to endure due to the American blockade. The financial and commercial embargo affects every aspect of the island's economic, social, political and cultural reality. It derives in a systematic violation of Cuban people's human rights. This should be accounted for when analysing film institutions or agents, including our protagonists. Despite continuous preservation efforts on several fronts, the material conditions make the daily running of most Cuban film institutions unsustainable. Surprisingly or not, they still exist and keep generously sharing their archival wealth with researchers and filmmakers around the globe.

Against this background, Dolores Calviño, Mirtha Ibarra and Lázara Herrera develop their work and lives. Calviño is the deputy director of the Cuban Cinematheque. She started working at ICAIC in 1974 and, in the mid-80s, assumed the responsibility of creating the EICTV with Fernando Birri. Ibarra is an award-winning actress, playwright and screenwriter. Finally, Herrera is a translator and interpreter of French by training. During Santiago Álvarez's final years, she started working with him



and from his death onward, she assumed the direction of his Office at ICAIC.

For Dolores Calviño, dedicating herself to García Espinosa's legacy does not feel like abandoning her own work because she is a "consubstantial" part of him (Interview 2022). Her work on disseminating his intellectual contributions started during the last decades of her husband's life, right after he took the fall for the production and release of *Alicia en el pueblo de las maravillas* (*Alice in Wondertown*, Daniel Díaz Torres, 1991), a satire that openly criticized the problems of Cuban society. As a consequence of the release of this film, García Espinosa fell out with the regime, quitting his directive role at ICAIC. To help him rebuild himself, Calviño scheduled and organized multiple visits overseas, when he was allowed to travel again, and submitted the proposal that got him a 1998 Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts (Interview 2022). The same year of his death, Calviño published the compilation *Julio García Espinosa: Vivir bajo la lluvia* (2016), on which they had been working together during the last year of García Espinosa's life. The book contains miscellaneous materials such as an autobiographical story obtained through a long interview, some of his published and unpublished writings—including the letter he sent to Fidel Castro in 1991 after the *Alice in Wondertown* debacle—, and newly commissioned essays on the significance of his work by scholars and fellow filmmakers. Calviño is currently writing another book, an archival project provisionally named *Julio por Julio* (*Julio by Julio*), based on unpublished García Espinosa's files, kept at their home office, on which she constantly works.

Conversely to Calviño, Mirtha Ibarra considers that taking care of the legacy of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea robs her of precious time that she should devote to personal projects, such as writing her memoir (Interview 2023). Among the initiatives she has conducted to disseminate less well-known aspects of her late husband's work was the publication of the collection of letters *Titón, volver sobre mis pasos*, in 2007. The book contains correspondence of Titón with friends and collaborators like Robert Redford, Sidney Pollack, the Goytisolo brothers, and García Espinosa. The selection was not made only for celebratory purposes. Ibarra included also some controversial exchanges between Titón and Alfredo Guevara, director of ICAIC, to showcase an often-untold history of differing opinions, negotiations and contestation. In 2008, she directed the biographical documentary *Titón, de La Havana a Guantánamera*, a Spanish co-production. Her most recent project is the creation of the cultural centre La Casa de Titón y Mirta (the House of Titón and Mirta) in San Isidro, Old Havana. In this space is kept Gutiérrez Alea and Ibarra's archive, open to the public. Although the centre team works hard to catalogue and preserve the documents donated by her (manuscripts, letters, scripts, pictures, posters, etc.), Ibarra admits that the conditions are far from optimal. However, when a US university offered her a quarter million dollars to acquire Gutiérrez Alea's papers, she rejected the offer. In her words, "I knew that the preservation would have been better there, but selling his archive to a US institution would have been betraying Titón" (Interview 2023). Instead, with the help of Eusebio Leal, she founded the House, a place firmly rooted in the community of San Isidro, as can be witnessed

in the multiple activities focused on promoting Cuban cinema for children and adults organized, sometimes dynamized by her.

Unlike Calviño and Ibarra, Lázara Herrera was not professionally involved with the cinematic medium for much of her career. She worked as a translator and interpreter and met Santiago Álvarez in this guise when accompanying a Vietnamese entourage that visited him. It was not until he became ill with Parkinson's that Herrera started devoting time to her husband's project learning the ropes for her role after his death as the director of Santiago Álvarez Office at ICAIC (Interview Osain Alvarez 2023). A position that still holds. The Office, which keeps Álvarez's papers, is devoted to managing his legacy through various activities, including organizing the International Documentary Film Festival Santiago Alvarez in Memoriam. This event occurs yearly in Santiago de Cuba, with twenty editions and counting. Another initiative put forward by the Office and the School of Journalism at the University of Havana is the Honorary Chair Santiago Alvarez, devoted to film journalism. This chair was created in 2012 "with the purpose of bringing young people closer to the work of Santiago Alvarez, a paradigm of confluence between artistic vanguard and political militancy" (Santiago Alvarez Office Website/Cátedra).

As we have seen, Calvino, Ibarra and Herrera develop a wide range of activities. Although very different in scope, the overarching impulse is resisting the forgetfulness that characterizes the Cuban and global contemporary contexts. They undertake the task of memorializing their husbands out of love but also because they consider their intellectual and artistic legacy a type of heritage that

should be known and disseminated. While efforts to preserve the filmic material are the responsibility of ICAIC, the owner of the films, the widows focus on circulating the intellectual contributions of their husbands, guarding their archives, curating their work for exhibition, critically publishing their texts, and encouraging younger practitioners to learn from their approach. In the same way that their husbands did not practice an ego-driven type of filmmaking but one inserted in the collectivist practices of the revolutionary process, these widows are not working for the posthumous elevation of individualities but are, instead, fighting for the memory of a utopian cinematic praxis to which they also contributed and devoted their professional lives. They are generationally responsible for the continuity of this legacy because those who founded ICAIC are dead. In these women, two legacy management identities merge: the wife and the member of a generation that came of age during the post-revolutionary spring. Now that the country is in the opposite mood, they feel the responsibility of saving not only the images but also the innovative ideas that mobilized their production. Calviño and Ibarra also aim to set the record straight regarding the ill-treatment perpetrated against their husbands by apparatchiks and bureaucrats at different moments. Back then, they remained silent not to harm the revolutionary process, but they are currently working to make sources available to foster necessary discussions (see, for instance, the discussion of García Espinosa's letter to Castro in Cristina Venegas's chapter "Julio García Espinosa and the Fight for a Critical Culture in Cuba" in Patrice Petro *Uncanny Histories in Film and Media*, 2022).

## Conclusions

By way of concluding, we wish to highlight the significance of the widow as an active shaping influence in the histories of global cinema. Not all cases of cinematic widowhood share our socialist and revolutionary contexts. Nevertheless, this is an important aspect of our feminist intervention as it positions the widow's work outside a critical lens entirely decided by Western feminism. Certainly, a considerable degree of the activities outlined above emerge from the love these women had for their husbands, and therefore can be understood through the frameworks of social reproduction. At the same time, both the Soviet and the Cuban cases we have explored indicate the significance of a collectivist cinematic history. In this shared context (though separated by over forty years), the widow's work to disseminate the oeuvre of her husband-collaborator is an act of historical preservation that also testifies to the extraordinary participation of women in film production and film culture, always in danger of being written out of the narrative. The widows we have discussed are not feminist; nor do they assume the position of protagonists in film history. As feminist scholars, however, we bring them to the fore and provide a glimpse at the varied tasks that might otherwise be taken for granted. This critical approach provides an important counterpoint to the auteurist, individualist emphases that national cinemas often assume.

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## Websites

Oficina Santiago Álvarez ICAIC: <https://santiagoalvarez.org/>

Casa Titón y Mirtha: [https://www.facebook.com/](https://www.facebook.com/CasaTitonYMirta)

[CasaTitonYMirta](https://www.facebook.com/CasaTitonYMirta)

## Filmography

*Chronicle of Flaming Years* (Yulia Solntseva, 1961)

*Titón, de La Habana a Guantanamera* (Mirtha Ibarra, Cuba-Spain, 2008)





## CHAPTER 4

# The Emerging Woman: Helena Solberg, Radical Filmmaking and Feminist Collectives

Written collectively by Invisible Women  
(Camilla Baier, Lauren Clarke,  
Rachel Pronger)

### ABSTRACT:

Chapter 4 is a testimony of curatorial approaches to Brazilian filmmaker Helena Solberg's work (b. 1938), co-written by Camilla Baier, Lauren Clarke, Rachel Pronger of the Invisible Women Collective. Since the late 1960s, Solberg has carved out a reputation as a prolific maker of passionate, politically engaged documentaries that approach social issues through feminist and transnational perspectives. This pattern was established with her debut *The Interview* (*A entrevista*, 1966), in which Solberg interviews a series of middle-class Rio de Janeiro women, producing a patchwork film reflecting the aspirations and attitudes of her generation. Due to its frank approach to subjects such as sex, virginity, fidelity and work, *The Interview* is regarded as one of the first feminist films to come out of South America.

# The Filmmaker and Us

“I hate labels. They limit you completely. I am a feminist, I am a woman. But I am a filmmaker first. I am a filmmaker who is also feminist.” (Solberg, 2023)

What does it mean to be a filmmaker? What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be feminist? And what does it mean to be all of these? These are some of the central questions which run through the rich filmography of Brazilian filmmaker Helena Solberg.

Since the late 1960s, Solberg has carved out a reputation as a prolific maker of passionate, politically engaged documentaries that approach social issues through feminist and transnational perspectives. This pattern was established with her debut *The Interview* (*A entrevista*, 1966), in which Solberg interviews a series of middle-class Rio de Janeiro women (her former high school classmates), producing a patchwork film reflecting the aspirations and attitudes of her generation. Due to its frank approach to subjects such as sex, virginity, fidelity and work, *The Interview* is regarded as one of the first feminist films to come out of South America. So taboo were these topics at the time, that none of the women interviewed would appear on camera, an issue Solberg sidestepped by layering their voiceovers on top of specially staged footage featuring her sister-in-law.

Across her career, Solberg has continued to find dexterous ways to fill the gap between the resources available and the stories she wants to tell. Her filmography is defined by her dedication

to her subjects, her intersectional examination of inequalities and her exploration of Latin American identity. Her early films were made within the context of Brazil's military dictatorship, and she expressed her resistance to this regime with rebellious work such as the anarchist short *Noon* (*Meio-Dia*, 1969), which depicts a group of children destroying their school. In this part of her career, she is sometimes described as the only woman affiliated with Cinema Novo, but her films are not easily bracketed within the movement's aesthetic or stylistic hallmarks. Solberg's male contemporaries in Cinema Novo never acknowledged her as one of their own. Solberg herself has spoken about the patronising attitudes she faced from male peers (Tedesco 2022), describing herself in opposition to the new wave: "We [Brazilian filmmakers] had a tendency, as always, to imitate European cinema, and I think in the Cinema Novo movement, the cameras turned towards ourselves. Perhaps there was a bit of a lack of turning the camera towards oneself, which is what I did instinctively and not because I had the idea that I wanted to do something different" (Ribeiro 2018).

Solberg has lived for large portions of her life both in Brazil and in the US, and as such approaches both countries' history through complex – sometimes criticised – transnational lenses. Significantly, her most high-profile success came with a series of documentaries made in the 1980s for PBS in the US. These explored topics such as the fight for democracy, terrorism and contested territories, and included *Chile: By Reason or By Force* (1983); *The Brazilian Connection* (1982–1983); *Portrait of a Terrorist* (1985); *Home of the Brave* (1986), *The Forbidden Land* (1990) and the

Emmy-winning *From the Ashes... Nicaragua Today* (1982). The end of dictatorship and establishment of new government support for Brazilian cinema in the 1990s, brought Solberg back to the country. Her first cinematic feature, the US/Brazilian co-production *Carmen Miranda: Bananas is My Business* (1994) signalled a new phase of fascination with Solberg's birth country's culture. In *Palavra (en)cantada* (2009), for instance, the filmmaker explores the genesis of popular music in Brazil, while in *Our Stories, Ourselves* (2013) Solberg aims her camera at teenagers living in the favelas as they take part in a dance project.

The nuances of a dual identity are a key theme, on both textual and meta-textual levels, throughout Solberg's work. This on-and-off screen interaction is demonstrated most powerfully in *Bananas is My Business*, a dazzling blend of biography and memoir which explores the life of Carmen Miranda through feminist and postcolonial angles. Here Solberg again spans genres and forms, combining Miranda's life story with autobiographical reflections from the filmmaker and creatively addressing the gaps in surviving archive footage with dreamily shot reconstructions featuring "transformista" Eric Barreto in an uncanny impersonation of the star. "It's not a straight biography, it's an affectionate biography," Solberg has said. "It's a biography where I fell in love with the subject... it is my view of her" (Solberg, 2023).

The questions about subjectivity, history and identity which inform Solberg's work, are also questions that speak directly to us as curators grounded in feminist politics. Since 2017, we have been working together as Invisible Women, an archive activist collective based between Edinburgh, Glasgow and Berlin, dedicated to

screening historical work made by women and marginalised gender filmmakers. When seeking inspiration for our work, in both its on and off-screen manifestations, we have often turned to our cross-generational peers, looking back to filmmakers like Solberg, to find connection and inspiration across time and culture.

Solberg's *The Emerging Woman* (1974) may have been made nearly 50 years ago, but its opening words – “we have looked through the history books and found no sign of us” – resonate directly with our own experience of seeking out archive films made by women filmmakers. Using original photographs, historical footage and voiceover, the film charts women's role in US society from the 1800s to the 1970s, and as such is emblematic of a filmmaker whose practice is deeply embedded in the consciousness-raising methodologies of second wave feminism. The film's opening dedication to “the memory of the women of the past 200 years, whose struggle made possible today's emerging woman” feels in no way dated. Despite the many undeniable gains of the past few decades, it still feels like women's film histories remain in a state of transition, always “emerging” never quite arriving.

## The Screenings

“I don't think that cinema can eliminate discrimination or change the condition of women, but it can lead to important reflection and generate dialogue within society. I believe that we need to occupy public spaces.” (Lemos and Gosciola 2022)

As feminist curators engaging with film through activist lenses, we felt a connection with Solberg, a filmmaker who had always seen her work as a tool for generating dialogue and reflection about the place for women in society. It was this sense of kinship with Solberg's work and life that so excited us when, in April 2023, the opportunity arose to present a retrospective in Scotland, with Solberg in attendance. When we heard via the Brazilian Embassy that Solberg would be coming to London we joined forces with the Scottish Documentary Institute and CinemaAttic to extend the filmmaker's visit, bringing a showcase of Solberg's work to venues across Edinburgh and Glasgow.

At 84-years-old Solberg is both an active artist, and a living link to a rich legacy of both filmmaking and activism. It felt like something of a calling for self-defined "archive activists," especially as one of our founding members is of joint Brazilian heritage. The retrospective arrived at a fortuitous moment. On a geo-political level, the recent end of Bolsanaro's presidency had revitalised the embassy, allowing access to the personnel and budget required to attempt this kind of ambitious cultural diplomacy. We also heard, via our contact at the Brazillian embassy, that new restorations of Solberg's films – restored by the São Paulo-based non-profit Cinelimité – were now available, which added a further motivation for a Scottish retrospective. Overall, Solberg had momentum and the timing was right – especially given that she is still well enough to travel and speak, bucking the too common trend of only celebrating women filmmakers after death – to reassess her legacy.

Our series took the form of several screenings across four weeks in Glasgow and Edinburgh,

kicking off with a double bill from the *The Women's Trilogy* (*Trilogia da Mulher*) at the Glasgow Film Theatre. The following week we welcomed Solberg and partner David Meyer to Edinburgh, where she participated in an in-conversation event with Serbian filmmaker Mila Turajlić about radical filmmaking through the decades. We rounded off by screening the two Solberg films that spoke most keenly to our curatorial ideology and personal tastes – *The Interview* (*A entrevista*, 1966) and *Bananas is My Business* (1994). Although separated by almost three decades – nearly a whole lifetime for us, three women in our early thirties – these films both speak powerfully to the overlaps between memoir and history, the political and the personal, art and autobiography. Watching them together prompted a similar kind of meta-reflection in ourselves. Screening Solberg prompted us to ask some very Solbergian questions. Where did we come from? Where are we going?

## The Collective

“It was the first time I worked with a team formed only by women. It wasn't a conscious decision; that's just how it happened. The theme of the film required female participation, but I never thought I would be taking a political position by making the film without the participation of men.”  
(Burton 1986)

In May 2017, we sat in a kitchen in a shabby student flat, drank a bottle of red wine and started a collective. At the time we were studying the Film

Exhibition and Curation MSc programme at the University of Edinburgh and, as so many desperate students do when the end of term looms, looking for an idea for our final project. We knew we wanted to work collaboratively, we knew we were interested in historical film, and we felt instinctively that women filmmakers continued to be underappreciated and under-screened.

When one of us stumbled across a short article about Ruby and Marion Grierson, the filmmaking sisters of legendary Scottish documentary producer John Grierson, an idea began to take shape. Ruby and Marion Grierson embodied what so many filmmaking women experience globally: history has neglected them precisely because they have a more famous male relative. As we began to read around John, Ruby and Marion, more female names began to emerge from the shadows, women filmmakers connected to the Griersons by the small British documentary film industry of the 1920s and 1930s, names like Mary Field, Kay Mander and Evelyn Spice Cherry.

As we followed the path of John Grierson's career from the UK to Canada, we began to realise that he had often employed women as filmmakers, but that he had also rarely credited these women fully for their work, either in his personal correspondence or in his public writing.<sup>1</sup> A visit to the John Grierson archive at Stirling University solidified the sense of Ruby and Marion as “invisible women” in filmmaking history – when we requested

<sup>1</sup> In the UK John Grierson worked as Assistant Films Officer at the Empire Marketing Board and then Films Officer at the General Post Office Film Unit. In the late 1930s, he helped found the National Film Board of Canada. He would also go on to write *Grierson on Documentary* (ed. Forsyth Hardy, Faber & Faber, 1946) and to collaborate on his biography *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* (ed. Forsyth Hardy, Faber & Faber, 1979).



every reference to the sisters held by the archive that bore their brother's name, we were presented with listings which covered barely a page of A4, double spaced.

An idea began to take place in our heads, a pop-up screening of archive films which might bring together women filmmakers from Scotland, Canada and England, all linked by connections to the Griersons. We realised that being associated with John Grierson had helped leave a trail which we could now trace in the present day, although at the same time Grierson's overbearing presence in UK film history served to obscure the women that stood behind him, who were just visible in his shadow. Our experience hunting in textbooks and archives for traces of these female filmmakers, made us all the more aware of how close to invisible these women had become, and left us wondering how many more female filmmakers had been forgotten completely over time, the victims of patchy preservation, sceptical critics and gatekeepers. The name Invisible Women came to mind spontaneously one day, and felt instantly right. The collective was born.

In July 2017, we held our first pilot event, a pop-up screening at the Whitespace gallery in South Edinburgh, known for hosting many an art student's first exhibition with the Edinburgh College of Art just down the road. It was a scrappy DIY affair – projections on a sheet, friends on the door – but it was so packed we had to sit on the floor. We had somehow hit a nerve.

When we organised that first pilot screening, Agnès Varda had only just joined Instagram. It was pre-MeToo, pre-Julia-Ducournau-at-Cannes, pre-Chloe-Zhao-at-the-Oscars, pre-Greta-Gerwig-

directs-now, pre-Jeanne-Dielmann-is-the-GOAT. We were accidentally channelling a zeitgeist. As a result, almost in spite of ourselves, the collective grew. When COVID-19 hit, we channelled our energy into the collective, working on building a digital brand through social media, launching a monthly newsletter and self-publishing a series of heavily researched blog posts discussing overlooked female filmmakers. By the time public screenings became possible again, we had built up a repository of ideas and suddenly found ourselves in demand. Now, in 2023, Invisible Women has become a small business which generates a steady stream of work, collaborations, and screening projects.

People who work in cultural cinema, inevitably end up asking themselves, often, why they do this work. The expense, energy and stress that goes into organising live film events is considerable, and the challenges of attracting audiences, press and funding are constant. In the collective, between us, we have more than a decade's experience working in exhibition, predominantly in the UK. We graduated into a financial crisis and an arts infrastructure that was already operating within austerity. Over the past ten years, we have never not worked within the context of a crisis. Our professional lives have been defined by panic and precarity. We know we are privileged to work in this field, but we know too that the field is shrinking, has always been shrinking, for as long as we can remember, and that at any time we might find that the patch of land we were standing on has disappeared completely.

Cinemas, festivals and other venues operate within a constant climate of instability. In 2022, the Edinburgh-based institution Centre for the Moving

Image collapsed, bringing down with it Scotland's longest standing advocates for cultural cinema, the Edinburgh International Film Festival (est. 1947) and the Filmhouse Cinema (est. 1979), as well as the Belmont, Aberdeen's only independent cinema, at a loss of 102 jobs. Throughout the rollercoaster of the past few years, the collective has grown to play a larger role in our professional lives. Working together in this way allows us to pool our resources and it gives us bargaining power; when pushing for more money or highlighting poor working conditions, it helps to be able to sign off with three names rather than one.

But the collective has always been about so much more than the work itself. The collective at its best is a model that blurs the lines between family, friend and colleague. Collectives are not always plain sailing, but we are lucky that so far our journey from classmate to friend to colleague has been relatively smooth. When you work alone, often remotely, as we do, it is easy to become isolated. Thanks to the collective we know that we have people who we will see or speak to at least once a week. Our Whatsapp group is always open to work questions, but it's also open to dog pictures and "what do you think of these shoes?" posts. We take our friendship as seriously as we take the films of the women we champion.

## The History

"How far back do we go, to find out where to begin? We have looked through the history books and there is no sign of us. What can we remember? We just have our memories, and the

stories we tell to each other. Was it always like that?" *The Emerging Woman* (Helena Solberg, 1974)

When we began working as a collective, we did not know much about the history of this model. Part of the joy of Invisible Women is that it has created space to research areas that interest us, which we cannot find an outlet for elsewhere in our professional lives. Over the past few years we have become obsessed with the history of collaborative filmmaking, and in particular the wave of collectivised women-led making that grew out of the consciousness raising groups of second wave feminism to become a global movement in the 1970s.

Through our independent research we traced the pulse of this movement, in disparate but interlinked iterations, around the world, from Les Insoumuses in Paris, to New Day Films in New York, to Yugantar in Bangalore. The feminist workshop movement that emerged in the UK during the 1980s, the product of a collision between Thatcherite neo-liberalism and the birth of Channel 4, proved a rich pool, particularly for regional filmmaking collectives such as the Sheffield Film Co-op, Leeds Animation Workshop, WITCH (Women's Independent Cinema House) in Liverpool and Red Flannel in Cardiff. Further from home, we also became fascinated by groups who had grown out of the revolutionary context of New Latin American Cinema, the likes of Cine Mujer in Mexico and Colombia (unrelated groups, despite the shared name), Grupo Feminista Miércoles in Venezuela, WARMI Cine y Video in Peru, and Lilith Video in Brazil. Although when we first started researching, many of the films made by these

collectives were unrestored and impossible to screen remotely, we were inspired by the work we were able to see and by the stories we heard. The work of these collectives struck a chord – we saw in these women, a sisterhood across time.

For these feminist collectives, as for us, film was not about escaping the world, but about understanding it. They used film as a means to facilitate connection, a tool to awaken the spirit, rather than to placate it or to numb. And crucially too, those collectives made work that was designed to be watched collectively, and framed by real-life encounters. This is the spirit that we aim to channel in our own work as Invisible Women too.

Which brings us back to Solberg, whose work dovetailed importantly with this movement. In the early 1970s, when Solberg had only recently moved to the US, she joined forces with Lorraine Gray, Melanie Maholick and Roberta Haber to co-found a collective. The International Women's Film Project, like so many of their global counterparts, aimed to use the camera as a tool in the battle for second wave liberation. That mission was typified by their first film, *The Emerging Woman* (1974), which offers a whistlestop history of women-led resistance in the US. Accessible and inspiring, the film quickly became a set text, screening widely in universities and even at the White House. Suddenly, remarkably, Solberg found herself positioned at the heart of the liberation movement of a newly adopted country, a strange situation which prompted a kind of existential crisis:

This film, unbeknownst to me, filled a gap, as it was used extensively in schools and libraries in a country that was not mine and

where I had just arrived. At that moment, I thought of the absurdity of having examined this reality and knowing so little about our Latin American countries, where similar cultural roots deserved a look at the condition of women. (Labaki 2021)

Solberg and the collective would address this imbalance, using the funds raised from *The Emerging Woman* to work on two more films, which together became *The Women's Trilogy*. Solberg took off with a crew of five women and one male cinematographer around Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela and Mexico, shooting in factories, and interviewing maids protesting for fairer wages and activists at women's group meetings. Being a majority woman crew made a difference to how the film came together. "They had never seen anything like that, women carrying equipment, Women shooting, doing interviews," remembered Solberg. "I was doing the interviews myself. And this did something to the film itself. To the interviews" (Solberg, 2023). The resulting film explores the experience of women across Latin America as they struggle for equal treatment both in the home and the workplace. *The Double Day (A dupla jornada, 1975)* was hastily completed, but unfortunately not in time to screen, as planned, as the opening film of the first UN women's conference, held in Mexico City in 1975.

*The Double Day* served its political purpose, but artistically Solberg was not totally satisfied – in response to the time pressure she had had to abandon her initial idea of combining poetic and analytical approaches. To address this, she worked with deleted footage from the film to make *Simply*

*Jenny* (*Simplemente Jenny*, 1977), which follows the experiences of three teenagers in a reformatory in Bolivia, as they discuss their experiences of sex work, gender and violence. In its centering of young women, speaking in the first person of their dreams of marriage and social mobility, *Simply Jenny* serves as a companion piece to *The Interview*, a mirror image from another country and the other side of the class spectrum.

*Simply Jenny* rounded off both *The Women's Trilogy* and the life of the International Women's Project. From here Solberg would continue to forge a politically engaged career, often working with women, but outside of a collectivised model. For practical, creative and political reasons, collectives are often short-lived, burning briefly but brightly. Feminist filmmaking collectives flourished from the 1970s into the 1980s, but by the 1990s most had disappeared, swallowed up by shifting funding models, a changing landscape for independent filmmaking and the fracturing of second wave feminist discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, as our own experience demonstrates, there is no telling when and where these histories of collectivity might find new resonance. Working on the Solberg retrospective was a fresh reminder that, at least for us, the point of film is to facilitate human encounters. As we sat with Solberg in an Edinburgh pub, chatting about Lucrecia Martel and Claire Denis, sharing cinephilic passion across generations, we were reminded of the value of

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the history of feminist film collectives and their connection to the second wave feminist movement see this article written by IW member Rachel Pronger for Mubi Notebook. Pronger, Rachel. Primer: Feminist Film Collectives. [MUBI Notebook](#). 7 April 2022.

these real life connections. As feminist politics continues in its seemingly endless tail-eating loop of progress followed by backlash, new liberation meeting new misogyny, we will continue to seek inspiration in the memories and legacies of our peers from previous decades. The “emerging woman” is still emerging – and as long as that is the case, we will continue to need to look back in order to move forward.

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## CAPÍTULO 5

# O pessoal é político – e profissional: reflexões sobre os arquivos pessoais de mulheres do cinema a partir do trabalho com o arquivo da cineasta Helena Solberg

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Rosa Inês de Novais Cordeiro

### RESUMO:

O capítulo 5 baseia-se no mergulho profundo nos temas e no estilo de Solberg no capítulo 4, para examinar mais de perto a preservação e a curadoria dos filmes. As autoras Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco e Rosa Inês de Novais Cordeiro se envolvem cuidadosamente com as instituições de proteção da memória audiovisual e seu frágil estado de existência e funcionamento. O ato de preservar os filmes dentro dessas organizações é quase milagroso e depende inteiramente da paixão e do compromisso de seus funcionários. O encontro acadêmico com os arquivos pessoais de Solberg resultou em iniciativas oficiais e não oficiais de organização, seleção e digitalização.

Vivemos, no Brasil, há praticamente uma década, uma notável ampliação do campo dos estudos sobre mulheres no audiovisual. Tal ampliação se insere em um movimento mais geral que ocorre em nossa sociedade, que nos últimos anos viu a reemergência de movimentos de mulheres, o aumento da sua representação na política formal, intensos debates sobre gênero e feminismos, maior demanda por ler e assistir a produções de mulheres, reivindicações de mulheres que trabalham com audiovisual etc.

Certamente, o parágrafo acima não descreve apenas a situação brasileira, mas também a de muitos países na América Latina e pelo mundo. Não obstante, interessa-nos, nesse momento, trazer alguns exemplos do Brasil que ilustram o quadro que estamos delineando. No biênio 2015–2017, o encontro nacional da Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos de Cinema e Audiovisual contou com o Seminário Temático (ST) *Cinema Queer e feminista*. E, entre 2017 e 2022, com um ST dedicado às mulheres no audiovisual.

O crescimento de artigos, monografias, dissertações e teses sobre o tema é visível, embora ainda não tenha sido quantificado. No que tange aos livros, destacam-se *Feminino e plural: mulheres no cinema brasileiro* (Holanda; Tedesco, 2017), *Mulheres de Cinema* (Holanda, 2019), *Mulheres atrás das câmeras: As cineastas brasileiras de 1930 a 2018* (Lusvargui; Vieira, 2019), *Mulheres Negras na tela do cinema* (Cazé, 2020) e *Trabalhadoras do cinema brasileiro: mulheres muito além da direção* (Tedesco, 2021), entre outros.

Toda esta movimentação tem levado pesquisadores, e principalmente pesquisadoras, a entrarem em contato com mulheres que atuavam/

atuam no audiovisual a fim de entrevistá-las. A necessidade de consultar seus arquivos também é cada vez mais sentida, e é sobre este aspecto que nos dedicaremos neste capítulo.

Tem-se, na América Latina, uma realidade de fragilidade das instituições de salvaguarda da memória audiovisual – quando elas existem. Entre incêndios, falta de recursos, estrutura e pessoal, sucessivas mudanças de gestão etc., é quase um milagre (e fruto de intenso esforço de seus trabalhadores e trabalhadoras) o que ainda é possível encontrar nelas. Ao mesmo tempo, é preciso destacar que o machismo que estrutura nossas sociedades obviamente também as conforma, e que, portanto, dedicaram seus esforços muito mais aos homens que às mulheres do cinema. Assim, resta procurar documentos dispersos geograficamente e/ou contar com acervos pessoais sob a guarda da própria mulher ou de sua família, enquanto tal panorama aos poucos se modifica (o Museo del Cine Pablo C. Ducrós Hicken de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, por exemplo, está construindo um fundo María Luisa Bemberg).

O encontro de algumas pesquisadoras com estes arquivos pessoais tem resultado em projetos formais e informais de organização, seleção e digitalização. Não obstante, por serem muitas vezes empreendidos por profissionais sem formação específica, costuma haver uma observância apenas parcial, e nem sempre consciente, dos princípios gerais da Arquivística.

A partir de nossa experiência acompanhando processos dessa natureza em diferentes países latino-americanos, e principalmente de nosso trabalho de inventário

inicial, descrição arquivística e digitalização de parte dos documentos que compõem o acervo pessoal da cineasta brasileira Helena Solberg, deparamo-nos com uma série de questões.

Considerando que, para a imensa maioria das mulheres, a vida privada costuma ter impacto significativo na vida profissional; que, ao entrevistar as mulheres do audiovisual, percebemos que diversas produções foram/são afetadas por casamento, divórcio, cuidado dos filhos, dos ascendentes e da casa; e que quando a moldura da árvore genealógica de documentos (da qual nos valem) foi elaborada não se pensou em documentos da vida privada, perguntamos:

- Em uma série de um fundo referente a um filme, no caso de filmes dirigidos por mulheres, apenas os documentos produzidos no processo de realização fílmica, são suficientes?
- Para uma melhor compreensão do processo de realização fílmica, é preciso colocar em cada série, além da árvore genealógica de documentos do filme, documentos da esfera privada de sua diretora?
- Se o conhecimento de aspectos da vida privada da realizadora é importante, quais recursos e procedimentos técnicos devemos lançar mão para indicar ao usuário informações da vida pessoal da cineasta que impactaram na obra?

Sem ter a pretensão de responder a todas estas perguntas, ou de esgotar o tema, valeremo-nos de revisão bibliográfica, da reflexão sobre nossas práticas e de casos de organização de acervos de realizadoras latino-americanas para avançarmos nas direções que as indagações acima apontam.

# Arquivos Pessoais de Mulheres na Esfera Cinematográfica

Para iniciar, nossa intenção é abordar de forma mais ampla algumas questões presentes nos fundamentos e procedimentos metodológicos arquivísticos, que também afetam os arquivos pessoais e cinematográficos.

Considerando o cenário contemporâneo expandido a partir dos anos 1960, no qual ampliaram-se as discussões sobre os fundamentos e práticas arquivísticas e fora dos limites do seu *status quo*, levantamos algumas lembranças dogmáticas da área que poderão contribuir para a sustentação da renovação e ponderação do nosso ponto de vista sobre os arquivos pessoais de mulheres na esfera audiovisual.

É nessa conjuntura de mudanças que Cook (1998) relembra os cinco mitos centrais ou tradições da Arquivística, por ocasião da sua palestra no Seminário Internacional sobre Arquivos Pessoais, ocorrido 1997, no Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo:

- 1) os arquivistas como guardiães imparciais da “Verdade”;
- 2) os arquivos, os documentos e as instituições são subprodutos sem interesse das ações e administrações (talvez aqui caiba mencionarmos um exemplo de tal prática, que são as intituladas políticas institucionais de informação);
- 3) a proveniência possui “raízes em um único órgão de origem ou transmissão, em vez de em um processo de criação”;

- 4) a “ordem” determinada aos arquivos mediante arranjo e descrição arquivística – “para não falarmos na avaliação! – é uma recriação isenta de valores de alguma realidade genuína anterior”.
- i. Sobre isso, Brothman (2018: 91) comenta que o princípio arquivístico da ordem no espaço relaciona-se à noção setecentista de organização incorporada no campo em ascensão da história natural. O autor percebe, ainda que essa atividade vai muito além de um “processo de identificação de valor, mas de criação ou destruição de valor [...]. Ao decidirem a respeito do valor arquivístico ou histórico, os arquivistas efetivamente criam, inauguram ou perpetuam um compromisso axiológico que se manifesta na permanência da ordem que daí resulta” (2018: 90-91).
- 5) “a arquivística é uma ciência – pelo menos uma ‘ciência’ como esse termo é tradicionalmente concebido e utilizado pelos arquivistas, produto da idade do racionalismo científico.”

Evidentemente que Cook (1998: 141) adverte que outras questões mais profundas estão presentes nesse horizonte e aponta as discutidas no âmbito da memória social, e indaga: “E quem, hoje, marginalizamos e excluímos da memória social por nossas ações e omissões?”

Acredita-se que algumas dessas tradições mencionadas estão sendo ultrapassadas em ritmos diferentes na liturgia Arquivística de cada sociedade. Dentro dessa perspectiva, expomos nossa opção teórica de argumentação. No aspecto *stricto* dos arquivos pessoais, recorreremos a Hobbs

(2016, 2018) e McKemmish (2018). Valemo-nos, ainda, das ideias arquivísticas em que a produção e a prática documental são consideradas constructos e representações sociais (Cook, 2001, 2017, 2018; Brothman, 2001, 2018; Heymaan 2013, 2018).

Procurando expandir a quarta tradição acima mencionada, exploramos um dos aspectos da noção de ordem nos arquivos discutida por Brothman (2018), quando desenvolve a ideia de ordem pertencente ao espaço que documentos ocupam em um acervo e a ordem intelectual. Esta última, diretamente relacionada à nossa discussão, refere-se à ordem implícita em que os documentos são organizados segundo princípios metodológicos e evidenciando “uma ordem que incorpora os valores da sociedade” (Brothman 2018: 90). Esta questão é central nos arquivos porque, entre outros motivos, é concernente a dois princípios basilares da área: ordem original e proveniência.

Quando abordamos os arquivos cinematográficos, algumas diferenças sensíveis se apresentam quanto à sua constituição, espécies documentais e unidade mantenedora. Esses documentos formam acervos que estão em arquivos pessoais ou arquivos institucionais. Contudo, um aspecto é comum e constantemente observado: a fragmentação e a ausência de documentos referentes ao processo de viabilização, produção e pós-produção de um filme.

No final dos anos 1990, estudamos o processo de realização fílmica e os documentos que eram gerados durante este percurso, pois argumentava-se que, por meio desse processo de feitura audiovisual, era possível contextualizar e antecipar indícios em relação à produção de sentido de um filme, no contexto da dinâmica da

indexação, considerando a árvore genealógica do filme ou família de documentos (Cordeiro 2000).

Ou seja, procurou-se estudar os documentos produzidos para e pela obra audiovisual, de forma a detectar, por meio deles, informações que dessem ao indexador parâmetros para a análise-indexadora no que dizia respeito aos documentos-geradores, e também alguns aspectos do filme. Porém, sempre foi inquestionável qualquer possibilidade de substituir a indexação do filme pela indexação dos seus documentos. O objeto fílmico reúne elementos que o caracterizam como elemento único em sua gramática narrativa audiovisual.

Observamos como elemento marcante o trabalho coletivo, no qual várias atividades, fases e procedimentos acontecem de forma paralela e simultânea por diferentes profissionais para a realização do filme. Registros documentais evidenciam o planejamento, o desenvolvimento e a divulgação da obra. Detalhados orçamentos e estudos são realizados para viabilizar um argumento em roteiro a ser produzido. Essas diversas atividades resultam em número expressivo de documentos técnicos (anotações de pesquisa dos filmes e de filmagem, análise técnica do roteiro, *storyboard*, cronogramas, planos de filmagem, boletins de câmera e de som, fotografias e muitos outros) de naturezas diversas e suportes, como, por exemplo, as fotografias de cenas e tudo o mais que é gerado para a divulgação da obra cinematográfica.

Com o desenvolvimento de nossas pesquisas e o contato pragmático com arquivos pessoais, surge uma nova dimensão de ordenação e análise: se a esfera privada impulsiona o processo de compreensão da produção de filmes de mulheres, e a documentação referente a ela geralmente



está alijada da “parte profissional” dos acervos, como produzir, a partir dos arquivos, os arquivos de mulheres da esfera cinematográfica, os quais poderão ser consultados?

## **A Influência da Vida Privada na Carreira das Mulheres do Cinema**

Os conceitos e as metodologias da Arquivística, assim como ocorre em todas as ciências, foram desenvolvidos considerando um suposto sujeito universal que, há bastante tempo, sabemos ter classe, gênero, raça, orientação sexual e localização geográfica. Sem ignorar a importância da tradição que a disciplina carrega, tradição que antecede bastante sua constituição como ciência/disciplina, parece-nos pertinente apontar sua dificuldade com o que não pertence à esfera pública.

Para as mulheres, as quais não fazem parte deste sujeito universal (e que, quanto mais opressões vivenciam, mais afastadas dele se encontram), é quase impossível pensar essa separação público-privado na reflexão sobre suas trajetórias profissionais. Os exemplos, aqui, poderiam ser muitos. Porém, dado o foco de nosso artigo, concentraremos-nos nas mulheres do cinema em geral, e nas diretoras de cinema em particular.

Helena Solberg, a realizadora brasileira em cujo acervo pessoal temos trabalhado, sobre quem falaremos mais detalhadamente na próxima seção deste capítulo, percebeu muito cedo a influência que a esfera privada teria em sua trajetória. Em entrevista concedida à estudiosa Julianne Burton, afirmou:

Between my job at *Metropolitano* [jornal custeado por entidades estudantis onde era repórter] and my decision to make my first film, I got married—a “Big Event.” Two or three years passed before I went back to any sort of professional development, since I immediately had a child. [...] I began to realize that, because I was a woman, my life was going to go differently than if I had been a man. Many of my filmmaker friends got married the same time I did, but they didn’t stop working. Of course, their wives *did*. I was the only woman in our group and the only one who dropped out because of marriage and family (Burton, Ano, 2010, pos.1800, grifo no original).

Solberg não está sozinha em sua constatação. Em entrevista concedida à pesquisadora Karla Holanda, Olga Futemma, que teve uma curta carreira como diretora de cinema, afirmou: “eu tenho certeza de que não fui cineasta em tempo integral, nunca, nunca. Eu acho que, por exemplo, o Renato [Tapajós, seu companheiro à época], se definia como cineasta, documentarista, porque ele era. Eu era de vez em quando” (Holanda 2017: 56). Na conclusão de sua análise sobre Futemma, Holanda analisa:

Mas Olga sempre permaneceu ao lado do mundo do cinema, por meio da pesquisa, que, “afinal, me permitia ter salário e, portanto, alguma regularidade nas contas, principalmente no investimento em relação aos meus filhos”. Ela entende que o fato de ser mulher incide sobre a profissão: “eu sou eu mais minhas circunstâncias”, diz, lembrando Ortega y Gasset (Holanda 2017: 56).

As duas cineastas apontam uma situação que ainda é mais dramática no caso da direção de fotografia, uma profissão que passa quase todo o tempo no *set* de filmagem. Se observarmos as primeiras mulheres brasileiras que conseguiram se tornar fotógrafas de cinema profissionais, veremos que a maioria delas quis ter filho, mas precisou optar pela profissão, já que crianças e estar constantemente filmando não seria conciliável.

Nossas investigações indicam que a situação permanece estruturalmente a mesma. Tomemos o exemplo de Martina Rupp. Rupp, que, ao ficar grávida, tinha acabado de fazer a direção de fotografia de seu primeiro longa-metragem de ficção e de ganhar um prêmio pelo seu trabalho em uma cobertura esportiva. E que tem a particularidade de gostar de trabalhar no cinema de grandes orçamentos, e não no cinema independente (entendido como sinônimo de projetos viabilizados com baixo orçamento e que não têm por objetivo levar muitos milhares ou milhões de pessoas às salas de cinema), ao contrário da maioria das fotógrafas de cinema até hoje. Em entrevista concedida a investigadora Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco, ela afirmou:

Essa resposta [de outras diretoras de fotografia que tinham sido mães e que, durante os primeiros anos da maternidade, trabalharam apenas em projetos independentes] quer dizer que não é possível. Eu estar com a minha filha, ser uma mãe presente e estar no mercado que eu gosto. Que eu realmente gosto do cinema e da publicidade. Eu não quero fazer, não é a minha praia, o mundo do pequeno programa

de televisão. Acho incrível, não é nem um pouco desmerecendo, mas o meu tesão está em outro lugar (Tedesco 2021: 22).

Mesmo quando o tema não é o impacto, por vezes determinante, da vida privada na vida profissional das mulheres, o estudo do processo de realização de vários filmes demonstra isso. Em entrevista feita por Tedesco, em 2009, a realizadora Lucia Murat contou que não participou da segunda viagem de equipe a Manágua, em *O incrível exército louco* (1984), sua obra de estreia, porque estava grávida. E a pioneira diretora peruana Nora de Izcue relatou a Tedesco (2009) que, sempre que assinava um contrato, fazia constar que poderia levar um dos seus quatro filhos para o set de filmagem.

Já que nos referimos a Izcue, há uma fotografia de seu acervo pessoal a qual gostaríamos de comentar.



Fonte: Acervo pessoal  
Nora de Izcue

Esta fotografia, parte do arquivo pessoal de Nora de Izcue, como dito acima, traz Saturnino Huillca, protagonista de *Runan Caycu* (1973), média-metragem divisor de águas da carreira da peruana, brincando com os filhos de Izcue. Huillca, líder camponês da região de Cusco, morou na casa da cineasta durante alguns meses por conta do documentário e teve um contato intenso e afetuosos com sua família, como podemos ver.

É uma imagem com o personagem principal de uma obra cinematográfica, produzida durante o processo filmico, embora não no set. Mas não consta no acervo digitalizado de Nora de Izcue (que é uma seleção de seu acervo pessoal), ainda que nele haja até fotografias de família. Este documento, que não pertence ao filme, mas que constitui seu universo, e que conhecemos porque pesquisamos pela primeira vez neste acervo em 2009, quando ele estava apenas em papel, fica em um limbo que nos parece muito emblemático das questões entre vida privada e vida profissional das mulheres do cinema.

A partir das reflexões resumidamente apresentadas nessa seção, traremos questões que surgiram em nossa experiência de trabalho com o arquivo pessoal de Helena Solberg.

## **O Arquivo Pessoal de Helena Solberg: Algumas Questões**

Nascida em 1938, Helena Solberg lançou seu primeiro curta-metragem em 1966. Tendo em seu currículo a direção de *A Entrevista* (Brasil, 1966), *Meio-dia* (Brasil, 1970), *The Emerging Woman*

(Estados Unidos, 1974), *The Double Day* (Estados Unidos, 1975), *Simplemente Jenny* (Estados Unidos, 1977), *From the Ashes... Nicaragua Today* (Estados Unidos, 1981), *The Brazilian Connection* (Estados Unidos, 1983), *Chile: By Reason or By Force* (Estados Unidos, 1983), *Portrait of a Terrorist* (Estados Unidos, 1985), *Home of the Brave* (Estados Unidos, 1986), *Made in Brazil* (Canadá, 1988), *The Forbidden Land* (Estados Unidos/Canadá, 1980), *Carmen Miranda, Bananas Is My Business* (Estados Unidos/Brasil/Portugal, 1994), *Brazil in Living Colours* (Inglaterra, 1997), *Vida de Menina* (Brasil, 2004), *Palavra (En)cantada* (Brasil, 2009), *A alma da gente* (Brasil, 2013) e *Meu corpo, minha vida* (Brasil, 2017) é, provavelmente, a cineasta brasileira há mais tempo em atividade. Entre 1971 e 2003, morou nos Estados Unidos, e trabalha, ainda hoje, em novos projetos.

O fato de ter tido uma trajetória transnacional foi, sem dúvida alguma, fundamental para que ela chegasse até o presente sem interrupções em sua carreira. Solberg é uma mulher branca, urbana, heterossexual, cisgênera e de classe média-alta, mas a maioria das realizadoras no Brasil dos anos 1960 e 1970 tinha perfis semelhantes, e mesmo assim suas vidas profissionais foram marcadas pela descontinuidade. Considerando que ser mulher era a única coisa que as diferenciava do perfil de quase todos os diretores brasileiros homens do período, é possível perceber o peso desta variável no exercício da função à época.

Sem dúvida alguma, estar nos Estados Unidos ampliou suas possibilidades de seguir na carreira. No entanto, isso não deve levar à conclusão precipitada que sua trajetória não foi determinada pela sua experiência como

uma mulher posicionada social, histórica e geograficamente. Não é por acaso que seu primeiro filme, *A Entrevista*, tenha se afastado de forma surpreendente dos caminhos de seus amigos do cinema novo e do cinema marginal.

That personal crisis [a insatisfação sendo apenas esposa e mãe e ter percebido que sua carreira seria diferente por ser mulher] provoked my first film, a documentary called *A entrevista* [...]. I interviewed between seventy and eighty women who had the same upper-middle-class background as I did. [...] I went around to different houses with a questionnaire. I asked about their aspirations during adolescence and about their attitudes toward two critical decisions: whether to go to the university, and whether to get married. [...] Despite their comfortable economic and social situation, these women were very, very unhappy. Though they were quite bright, they weren't able to envision much of a future for themselves. Their lack of options left them with a sense of hopelessness and futility (Burton, 2019, pos.82–83).

As motivações que a levaram a fazer *A Entrevista* são apenas um dos muitos exemplos possíveis que poderíamos citar do impacto de ser mulher (ainda que uma mulher com importantes privilégios) na carreira de Helena Solberg. As questões referentes às assimetrias de gênero, para além de nos gerarem inquietações e dúvidas na organização dos documentos dos filmes, são abordadas nas narrativas de Solberg.

Imaginemos um cenário no qual o crescente interesse pela filmografia desta diretora (que tem como marcos a defesa da tese *Helena Solberg: Trajetória de uma documentarista brasileira* (Tavares, 2011), a retrospectiva de Solberg no festival *É Tudo verdade* de 2014 e a já referida ampliação do campo dos estudos sobre mulheres no audiovisual) tivesse ocorrido após o falecimento da cineasta, e praticamente não houvesse entrevistas com ela – situação, por exemplo, da cubana Sara Gómez, que morreu com pouco mais de 30 anos de idade, em 1974.

Sem as palavras da realizadora, é bastante provável que a divisão entre esferas pessoal e profissional/pública e privada, que orienta tanto a formação dos arquivos pessoais quanto a constituição dos fundos de mulheres do cinema disponíveis para pesquisa, passando pela maioria das teorias e dos instrumentos analíticos e metodológicos de todas as áreas, dificultasse bastante a compreensão do investimento recorrente de Solberg em certas temáticas, alguns intervalos em sua filmografia, mudanças radicais de domicílio, etc.

Extrapolando nossa argumentação para o contexto latino-americano: como entender a entrada tardia no cinema de Maria Luisa Bemberg ou de Nora de Izcue sem informações sobre a idade dos filhos, no caso da primeira, e sobre divórcio, no da segunda? Como pensar a viabilidade das coproduções franco-venezuelanas de Margot Benacerraf, nos anos 1950, as quais demandavam longas temporadas da diretora em ambos os países, sem saber que ela não se casou nem teve filhos? Como analisar a viabilidade de tantos trabalhos em codireção entre os



colombianos Marta Rodríguez e Jorge Silva, ao longo de duas décadas, sem a informação de que eles eram um casal?

Se, conforme temos defendido ao longo deste texto, não é possível separar, no caso das mulheres do cinema, esfera privada e vida profissional das mulheres do cinema, como lidar com a constituição de fundos e, dentro deles, de séries referentes a filmes, a partir de seus arquivos pessoais (os quais, afirmamos anteriormente, em geral são construídos dentro da lógica binária pessoal X profissional, que pode funcionar para o suposto sujeito universal, mas que torna as trajetórias das mulheres menos inteligíveis)?

Após realizarmos um inventário inicial do acervo pessoal de Helena Solberg, e selecionarmos os documentos referentes às suas cinco primeiras obras para serem digitalizados<sup>3</sup>, vislumbramos alguns caminhos, os quais experimentaremos nas etapas posteriores do projeto. Pretendemos, em breve, escrever sobre tais experimentações: vantagens e desvantagens, erros e acertos identificados ao longo do processo. Contudo, parece-nos interessante já compartilhar algumas possibilidades vislumbradas.

Queremos, com isso, avançar em uma série de reflexões, não delimitar o campo de respostas possíveis. Diante da heterogeneidade das mulheres do cinema, seus contextos, filmes e trajetórias, além da diversidade de orçamentos, espaços físicos, estado e tamanho dos acervos pessoais, tipo de documentação que os

<sup>3</sup> Por conta do baixo valor que dispomos até o momento, foi necessário estabelecer por onde começar o trabalho com o acervo pessoal de Helena Solberg. Assim, optamos pelos documentos de alguma forma relacionados aos seus cinco primeiros filmes: *A Entrevista*, *Meio-dia*, *The Emerging Woman*, *The Double Day* e *Simplemente Jenny*.

constitui etc., as soluções para as questões que apresentamos no início do artigo necessariamente precisarão ser variadas.

Propusemo-nos a imaginar a inserção, nas árvores genealógicas de documentos de cada produção, de documentação pessoal referente a fatos que pertencem à esfera privada, mas que tenham tido impacto no processo de realização fílmica. Ainda que tenhamos feito este exercício imaginativo, posto que, para pensar diferente, é importante não desconsiderar nada de antemão, o resultado de séries tão díspares dos acervos pessoais não nos pareceu o mais interessante para um fundo que deve atender aos mais diferentes tipos de pesquisa.

Debatemos, também, a inserção de informações da esfera privada das mulheres do cinema em alguns campos da Norma Brasileira de Descrição Arquivística – Nobrade.<sup>4</sup> Pareceu-nos uma solução melhor que a apresentada no parágrafo acima, porém, insuficiente. Muitas vezes, quem pesquisa procura documentos específicos ou não sabe da existência destas informações periféricas, ou não crê que elas possam ser importantes (inclusive pela enorme variabilidade do seu preenchimento). No caso de consultas a documentos físicos, haveria uma dependência enorme da orientação de quem os entrega, que pode deixar de fazer menção à descrição por diferentes fatores. No caso de consulta a documentos digitalizados, é possível criar alertas e hiperlinks. Remeter a uma linha do tempo da vida pessoal, por exemplo, sem que haja a necessidade

<sup>4</sup> Versão adaptada brasileira da International Council on Archives. Isad(G): General international standard of archival description. Ottawa: Secretariat of the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards, 1994.

do conhecimento prévio da descrição arquivística por parte da/e/o investigador/a/e.

A criação de uma linha do tempo da vida privada, quando se está constituindo o fundo de alguma mulher do cinema, nos parece, até o momento, muito importante, e uma tarefa arquivística. Indo ao encontro de discussões que emergiram na Arquivologia a partir da década de 1980, não há neutralidade na formação de arquivos, fundos, séries, etc., desde antes do processo de seleção. Portanto, não trazer, de alguma forma, a esfera privada para junto da documentação profissional é optar, de forma consciente ou não, por seguir com teorias e práticas que invisibilizam a importância do gênero para as carreiras das mulheres no audiovisual. Ao mesmo tempo, compreendemos a resistência de inserir, em uma série que contém a árvore genealógica de documentos de um filme, por exemplo, um documento como uma linha do tempo, já que ele não estava originalmente no acervo pessoal.

E quanto a pensar em orientações atentas às assimetrias de gênero para o preenchimento da Nobrade quando se tratar de fundos de mulheres do cinema? Por um lado, sensibilizar arquivistas e pessoas que constituem arquivos, tenham formação para isso ou não, que, no caso destas mulheres, informações como matrimônio, divórcio, filhos, exigências de mudança de domicílio por causa da família etc., são fundamentais, inclusive para o entendimento da obra cinematográfica. Por outro, reforçar junto à comunidade pesquisadora a importância das informações contidas nas descrições arquivísticas. Também parece uma boa perspectiva, mas a médio e longo prazo. E precisamos intervir no campo desde já, posto que

acervos pessoais de mulheres do cinema cada vez mais se tornam arquivos, o que é ótimo, mas quase sempre seguindo princípios que não são suficientes para vislumbrar o impacto da esfera privada em suas trajetórias.

## Considerações Finais

Iniciamos nosso capítulo localizando suas questões tanto na ampliação do campo dos estudos sobre mulheres no audiovisual, vivida nos últimos 10 anos, aproximadamente, quanto em nossa experiência como pesquisadoras das trajetórias de diretoras latino-americanas e suas obras. Tendo começado nossos estudos em um momento anterior à referida ampliação, salta aos olhos a quantidade de acervos pessoais que estavam pouco ou nada organizados e apenas em suporte físico, na casa das cineastas, de suas famílias ou dispersos em diferentes instituições, e que foram organizados e digitalizados, constituindo arquivos.

Por terem sido, em muitos casos, trabalhos realizados por profissionais externos a área da Arquivologia com diferentes níveis de expertise na documentação cinematográfica, a organização dos acervos, nos parece, deu-se de forma mais ou menos consciente, a partir de alguns de seus princípios mais conhecidos, e não geraram, até o momento, debates teóricos e propostas de novas metodologias para dar conta da indissociabilidade entre esfera privada e vida profissional, que marca as trajetórias das mulheres do cinema.

Assim, mais que tentar apresentar soluções, estruturamos nosso texto de forma a demonstrar, tanto a partir do Cinema quanto da Arquivologia, a necessidade de se instaurar o debate. Por isso,

optamos por iniciar com uma discussão mais geral sobre princípios arquivísticos e discussões que têm reorientado a área, e irmos segmentando até que ela se encontrasse com contribuições do campo dos estudos sobre mulheres no audiovisual.

Apesar de estarmos concluindo a primeira etapa de nosso trabalho no acervo da cineasta Helena Solberg, pareceu-nos importante já refletir sobre as questões que o processo trouxe até agora. Ainda que reconheçamos que a prática recorrente para a constituição de arquivos não se adapta totalmente ao que se observa nas trajetórias das mulheres do cinema, posto que separa de forma drástica esfera privada e vida profissional, não nos parece que o melhor caminho seja uma mudança dramática como a inserção de documentos pessoais na árvore genealógica de documentos dos filmes.

Resolver alguns dilemas, ao menos neste estágio de nossa reflexão, parece mais fácil no caso de acervos digitais que quando se trata de documentos que ainda só estão disponíveis de forma física. A criação e disponibilização de informações que por vezes constam na descrição arquivística em forma de conexões, opcionais, posto que não estão nos acervos pessoais das mulheres do cinema (que também foram socializadas nesta cultura que separa as esferas pública e privada/ pessoal e profissional), rompe com uma suposta neutralidade, que nada tem de neutra, e permite que os arquivos sigam correspondendo ao que quem pesquisa espera deles.

Ao mesmo tempo, revisitar as normas de descrição arquivística e demais instrumentos normativos (*The FIAF moving image cataloguing manual* de Fairbairn; Pimpinelli, 2016 e *Rules*

for archival description do Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 2008), e criar orientações para o seu preenchimento à luz do que os estudos têm mostrado como constantes nas trajetórias das mulheres do cinema, parece uma boa aposta. Apesar de ser uma proposta com impacto a médio e longo prazo, talvez seja a mais eficaz se pensarmos tanto em acervos físicos quanto em digitais.

Para o caso de arquivos que estarão disponíveis para consulta apenas de forma digital, como é o caso do projeto no qual estamos trabalhando, soluções mais arrojadas são possíveis. Considerarmos tais questões desde o desenvolvimento da interface que permitirá o acesso de pesquisadoras/es à árvore genealógica de documentos dos filmes de Helena Solberg.

Apenas o tempo e o diálogo entre quem tem se dedicado a constituir arquivos a partir dos acervos pessoais das mulheres vai mostrar quais são as melhores soluções. E elas sempre irão variar de acordo com as características da profissional e de seu acervo, do projeto arquivístico, do tempo e do espaço onde se desenvolvem etc. Mas compreendemos que, no momento, mais importante que soluções é propor questões e conversar.

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## CHAPTER 5

# The Personal is Political—and Professional: Reflections on Personal Archives of Women in Cinema Based on the Research on Filmmaker Helena Solberg's Archive

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### ABSTRACT:

Chapter 5 builds on the deep dive into Solberg's themes and style in chapter 4, to look more closely at the preservation and curation of the films. Authors Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco and Rosa Inês de Novais Cordeiro engage carefully with audio-visual memory protection institutions and their fragile state of being and functioning. The act of preserving the films inside these organisations is almost miraculous and entirely dependent on the passion and commitment of their employees. The scholarly encounter with Solberg's personal archives resulted in official and unofficial initiatives for organization, selection, and digitalization.

Over the last ten years, Brazil has experienced significant advances in the field of women's studies within the audiovisual arena. This expansion is part of a larger movement in our society that has seen the re-emergence of women's movements, an increase in their representation in formal politics, intense debates on gender and feminism, a greater demand to read and watch female-produced works, demands from female audiovisual workers, and so on.

Undoubtedly, the previous paragraph not only delineates the circumstances in Brazil but also sheds light on those of many other Latin American nations and around the world. However, our current focus is on presenting specific instances from Brazil that exemplify the framework we are outlining. During the biennium of 2015–2017, the annual assembly of the *Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos de Cinema e Audiovisual* [Brazilian Society for Cinema and Audiovisual Studies] showcased the Thematic Seminar (TS) titled “Cinema Queer e Feminista” [Queer and Feminist Cinema]. Moreover, during the period from 2017 to 2022, a TS on women in the audiovisual industry was established.

The proliferation of scholarly works, including articles, monographs, dissertations, and theses on the subject is visible, although it has not yet been quantified. In the realm of literature, notable works include: *Feminino e plural: mulheres no cinema brasileiro* (HOLANDA; TEDESCO, 2017) [Feminine and Plural: Women in Brazilian Cinema]; *Mulheres de Cinema* (Holanda, 2019) [Women of Cinema]; *Mulheres atrás das câmeras: As cineastas brasileiras de 1930 a 2018* (Lusvargui; Vieira, 2019) [Women Behind the Cameras: Brazilian Female Filmmakers from 1930 to 2018]; *Mulheres Negras*

*na tela do cinema* (Cazé, 2020) [Black Women on the Silver Screen] and *Trabalhadoras do cinema brasileiro: mulheres muito além da direção* (Tedesco, 2021), [Workers in Brazilian Cinema: Women Far Beyond Directing], among other noteworthy publications.

This current wave of activism has prompted academics, particularly those who identify as female, to establish contact with women who were/are active in the audiovisual industry, with the purpose of conducting interviews with them. The need to refer to archival resources is becoming more prominent, and this particular feature will be the primary emphasis of this chapter.

In Latin America, the presence of audiovisual memory protection institutions, when they exist, is marked by a state of fragility. Despite facing challenges such as fires, limited resources, infrastructures, staff, leadership changes, and so on, preserving some elements inside these entities is almost a miracle (and because of the intense commitment of their employees). Simultaneously, it is imperative to acknowledge that the prevailing machismo within our societies significantly influences their structure, resulting in a disproportionate allocation of resources and attention towards male individuals within the film industry, as opposed to their female counterparts. The next step involves searching for documents that are geographically dispersed and potentially relying on personal collections owned by women or their families, while the landscape is evolving (the Pablo C. Ducrós Hicken Film Museum in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, for example, is in the process of establishing a fonds dedicated to María Luisa Bemberg).

The encounters of some scholars with these personal archives resulted in official and unofficial initiatives for organization, selection, and digitalization. Nevertheless, since they are regularly handled by individuals with no specific training, conformity with broad archivist principles is usually just partial and not always conscious.

Based on our experience in observing similar processes in various Latin American nations, and particularly based on our preliminary examination of inventory procedures, archival description techniques, and digitalization efforts pertaining to a portion of the personal collection belonging to Brazilian filmmaker Helena Solberg, we encountered a multitude of inquiries.

In order to delineate the questions for the interview, we had to consider some aspects: for the large majority of women, private lives exert a substantial influence on their professional lives; during the interviews with women in the audiovisual industry, it has come to our attention that numerous productions have been and continue to be affected by factors such as marriage, divorce, childcare responsibilities, care for elderly relatives, and domestic duties; the genealogical framework of the documents (that we use) was elaborated without accounting private life documents. Considering these observations, we pose the following questions:

- In a series of fonds that refer to a film, is it sufficient to depend only on documentation gathered during the filming process when assessing films directed by women?
- In order to enhance comprehension of the filmmaking process, is it necessary to include personal documents relevant to the director's private domain inside each series, in addition to

- the genealogy of the filmmaking process?
- Is it important to identify the proper materials and technical tools in order to present information about the filmmaker's personal life that inspired their work?
  - If the knowledge of the filmmaker's personal life aspects is important, which could be the best tools and technical procedures that could be used to offer the user information about the personal life of the filmmaker that had impacts on her work?

Without purporting to provide comprehensive answers or fully explore the topic, this study will use a literature analysis, self-reflection on our own methodologies, and examination of case studies involving the organization of collections of Latin American filmmakers. These approaches will help advance the areas of inquiry indicated by the aforementioned issues.

## **Women's Personal Archives in the Cinematographic Universe**

To begin, our intention is to take a broader look at some of the challenges that exist in archival methodological foundations and processes that also influence personal and film archives. In light of the evolving landscape since the 1960s, there has been a notable expansion in discussions surrounding the principles and methodologies of archives, extending beyond their conventional boundaries. In this context, we present certain entrenched recollections that may contribute to reevaluating and amplifying our perspective on the personal archives of women in the audiovisual domain.

Cook (1998) recalls the five central tropes or traditions of Archival Studies against this backdrop of change in his presentation at the *Seminário Internacional sobre Arquivos Pessoais* [International Seminar on Personal Archives], conducted in 1997 in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo:

1. Archivists are considered as the impartial guardians of the “Truth”;
2. Archives, documents, and institutions are uninteresting by-products of actions and administrations (perhaps here it is worth mentioning an example of such a practice, which is represented by the so-called institutional information policies);
3. The provenience has “roots in a single organ of origin or transmission, rather than in a process of creation”;
4. The “order” provided by archival organization and description—“not to mention evaluation!—is a value-free recreation of some previous genuine reality.”(In this context, Brothman (2018:91) remarks that the archival concept of order in space is related to the eighteenth-century idea of organization that was adopted into the developing subject of natural history. The author clearly recognizes (2018: 90–1) that this action is much more than a “process of identifying value, but of creating or destroying value [...]. Archivists, when reflecting about the archival or historical value, successfully develop, launch, or sustain an axiological commitment that is reflected in the permanence of the resulting order.”
5. “Archivistics is a science—at least a ‘science,’ as that term has traditionally been conceived and used by archivists, namely a product of the age of scientific rationalism.”

Undoubtedly, Cook (1998:141) cautions that there are other, more fundamental issues on the horizon, citing those discussed in the field of social memory, and asks, “Who do we marginalize and exclude from social memory today through our actions and omissions?”

There is a prevailing belief that some traditions are being gradually supplanted within the archive liturgy of various societies, although at various paces. From this particular standpoint, we put out our theoretical contention. In the strict realm of personal archives, our references are derived from the works of Hobbs (2016, 2018) and McKemmish (2018). The current study also draws from the theoretical framework of archive concepts, whereby the production and creation of documents are seen as social constructions and representations. This perspective is informed by the works of Cook (2001, 2017, 2018), Brothman (2001, 2018), and Heymaan (2013, 2018).

In order to further elaborate on the fourth tradition alluded to earlier, we undertook an examination of one facet of the concept of order within archives as delineated by Brothman (2018). Specifically, Brothman delves into the notion of order as it relates to both the spatial arrangement of documents within a collection and the intellectual organization thereof. The latter, which is immediately pertinent to our ongoing discourse, pertains to the inherent arrangement of documents based on methodological principles and exhibits “a structure that encompasses societal values” (Brothman, 2018: 90). The matter at hand is central to archives because, among other reasons, it concerns two basic principles of the field: original order and provenance.

When we approach film archives, they exhibit notable variations in their composition, document categories, and storage facilities. These compilations of documents are stored in private or institutional archives. Nonetheless, a recurring and constantly observed characteristic is the fragmentation and dearth of documentation relating to the many stages involved in the creation of a film, including both production and post-production.

At the end of the 1990s, we studied the filmmaking process and the documents that were produced during this process because it was argued that, through this audiovisual-making process, it was possible to contextualize and anticipate clues in relation to the production of meaning in a film, in the context of indexing dynamics, taking into account the genealogical tree of the film or family of documents (Cordeiro, 2000).

We studied documents generated for and by the audiovisual product, in order to gather, through them, information that could be useful to the indexers for an index-analysis of the documents about the creation and process of the movie making. Nevertheless, the possibility of substituting the movie's indexing with the indexing of its related documents has never been a question. The cinema artifact amalgamates several components that distinguish it as a unique entity within the framework of its audiovisual narrative grammar.

One notable aspect of the film production was the collaborative effort, in which various activities, phases, and procedures were carried out in parallel and simultaneously by different professionals to make the film. The documentary records provide evidence of the planning, development, and marketing of the project. For a screenplay to be



practicable, detailed budgets and studies are conducted. These various activities result in a large number of technical documents (film and filming research and notes, technical analysis of the script, storyboards, schedules, filming plans, camera and sound reports, photography, and many others) of different nature and supports, such as photographs of scenes and everything else generated for the promotion of the cinematographic work.

With the advancement of our research and the pragmatic contact with personal archives, a new dimension of ordering and analysis emerges: if the private sphere drives the process of understanding the production of women's films, and the associated documentation generally originates from the "professional part" of their collections, how can we produce, from the archives, accessible archives of women in the cinematic universe?

## **The Influence of the Private Life on the Careers of Women in Cinema**

The principles and methodology of Archivistics, like those of all other sciences, were formulated on the assumption of a universal subject that, as we have known for a long time, has class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and geographical location. Without disregarding the significance of the tradition that the science/discipline carries—a tradition that predates its establishment as a science/discipline—it seems germane to highlight the difficulty that Archivistics has with what does not belong to the public universe.

For women, who are not a part of this universal subject (and who, the more oppression they experience, the further they are from it), it is nearly impossible to ruminate on this public-private divide when considering their professional careers. There are numerous possible examples here. Due to the emphasis of our essay, however, we will center on women in cinema in general and women film directors in particular.

Helena Solberg, the Brazilian filmmaker on whose personal collection we have been working and about whom we will speak in greater detail in the following section, understood very early that the private sphere would have a significant impact on her career. In an interview with the scholar Julianne Burton, she stated:

Between my job at *Metropolitano* [newspaper funded by student organizations where she was a reporter] and my decision to make my first film, I got married – a “Big Event.” Two or three years passed before I went back to any sort of professional development, since I immediately had a child. [...] I began to realize that, because I was a woman, my life was going to go differently than if I had been a man. Many of my filmmaker friends got married the same time I did, but they didn’t stop working. Of course, their wives *did*. I was the only woman in our group and the only one who dropped out because of marriage and family. (Burton, Ano, 2010, pos.1800, italics in the original)

Solberg is not alone in her view. In an interview with researcher Karla Holanda, Olga Futemma, who had a brief career as a film director, said, “I’m sure I wasn’t a full-time filmmaker, never, never. I believe Renato [Tapajós, her partner at the time] described himself as a filmmaker, a documentary filmmaker because he was. I was from time to time” (Holanda, 2017: 56). Holanda concludes her analysis of Futemma by stating:

But Olga has always stayed close to the world of film through study, which “allowed me to have a salary and, therefore, some financial stability, especially in the investment for my children.” She knows that being a woman affects her career. “It’s me plus my circumstances,” she says, quoting Ortega y Gasset (Holanda, 2017: 56).

The two filmmakers note that the situation is even more dramatic for directors of photography, who spend virtually most of their time on set. If we examine the first Brazilian women who were able to become professional directors of photography, we can see that most of them desired to have children, but they were forced to choose the work, considering that having children and being most of the time on set is incompatible.

Our findings show that the problem remains substantially unchanged. Consider the case of Martina Rupp. She had just directed the photography for her first fictional movie and earned an award for her work in sports coverage when she got pregnant. Unlike the majority of female directors of photography to date, she preferred to work in big-budget movies rather than independent

cinema (defined as low-budget ventures that do not seek to draw hundreds or millions of people to the theatres). In an interview with researcher Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco, Rupp said:

This response [from other directors of photography who had been mothers and who only worked on autonomous projects during the first years of maternity] indicates that it is impossible. I can't spend time with my daughter, be a present mother, and work in the field that I like. I really like both film and advertising. I don't want to work in the world of television shows for the small screen, it isn't my thing. I am not saying this to belittle this job, it is wonderful, but my real passion is elsewhere. (Tedesco, 2021: 22)

Even when the topic is not the sometimes-decisive impact of private life on women's professional lives, this is demonstrated by the study of the production of various films. In an interview with Tedesco in 2009, director Lúcia Murat said that she did not take part in the second production excursion to Managua for *O pequeno exército louco* (1984) [The Little Mad Army], her debut feature, because she was pregnant. Nora de Izcue, a pioneering Peruvian director, revealed to Tedesco (2009) that whenever she signed a contract, she made sure that she could bring one of her four children to the set.

Nonetheless, traces of this inseparability are dispersed throughout the archives. This is the case with the image below, which we discovered during our initial investigation of Nora de Izcue's archive when it was still tangible and the result of the filmmaker's decisions.

This photograph shows Saturnino Huilca, the protagonist of *Runan Caycu* (1973), a watershed medium-length film in the Peruvian filmmaker's career, playing with Izcue's children. Huilca, a peasant leader from the Cusco region, lived in the filmmaker's house for a few months for the documentary and had intense and affectionate contact with her family, as we can see.

It is an impression of the primary character in a film that was created during the filming process, but not on set. However, it is absent from Nora de Izcue's digitized collection (a selection from her personal collection), which contains family photographs. It is an "orphan" photograph, it does not belong to the film, but constitutes its universe and remains in a state of ambiguity that seems very emblematic of the issues between the private and professional lives of women in cinema.

Based on the reflections briefly presented in this section, we will address issues that have arisen in our experience of working with Helena Solberg's personal archive.

## **Helena Solberg's Personal Archive: Some Questions**

Born in 1938, Helena Solberg released her first short film in 1966. She has directed *A Entrevista* (Brazil, 1966) [The Interview], *Meio-dia* (Brazil, 1970) [Noon], *The Emerging Woman* (United States, 1974), *The Double Day* (United States, 1975), *Simplemente Jenny* (United States, 1977) [Simply Jenny], *From the Ashes... Nicaragua Today* (United States, 1981), *The Brazilian Connection* (United States, 1983), *Chile: By Reason or By Force* (United States, 1983), *Portrait*

of a Terrorist (United States, 1985), *Home of the Brave* (United States, 1986), *Made in Brazil* (Canada, 1988), *The Forbidden Land* (United States/Canada, 1980), *Carmen Miranda, Bananas Is My Business* (United States/Brazil/Portugal, 1994), *Brazil in Living Colors* (England, 1997), *Vida de Menina* (Brazil, 2004) [Girl's Life], *Palavra (En)cantada* (Brazil, 2009) [(En)chanted Word], *A alma da gente* (Brazil, 2013) [Our Stories, Ourselves] and *Meu corpo, minha vida* (Brazil, 2017) [My body, my life]. She is probably the longest-serving Brazilian filmmaker. Between 1971 and 2003, she lived in the United States and is still working on new projects.

The fact that she has had a transnational trajectory has undoubtedly been fundamental in enabling her to reach the present day without interruptions in her career. Solberg is a white, urban, heterosexual, cisgender, upper-middle-class lady, but most female directors in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s had similar features, and even then, their professional lives were distinguished by discontinuity. Given that being a woman was the only factor that distinguished them from the profile of almost all the male Brazilian directors of the time, the weight of this variable in the exercise of the function at the time can be seen.

Undoubtedly, the experience of living in the United States expanded her possibilities to continue her path in her career. Nevertheless, it is important to avoid hastily concluding that her trajectory was not influenced by her experiences as a socially, historically, and geographically positioned woman. It was not by chance that her first film, *A Entrevista*, took an unexpected detour from the trajectories of her peers in *cinema novo* [new cinema] and *cinema marginal* [marginal cinema]:

This personal crisis [dissatisfaction with being just a wife and mother and realizing that her career would be different because she was a woman] provoked my first film, a documentary called *A Entrevista* [...]. I interviewed between seventy and eighty women who shared my background in the same upper-middle class [...] I went to various houses with a questionnaire. I asked questions about their aspirations during adolescence and their attitudes toward two critical decisions: going to university and getting married. [...] Despite their comfortable economic and social situation, these women were very, very unhappy. Although they were quite intelligent, they couldn't see a great future for themselves. The lack of options left them with a sense of hopelessness and futility. (Burton, 2019: 82–3)

Helena Solberg's motives for making *A Entrevista* are only one of many potential instances of the influence of being a woman (although a woman with substantial privileges) on her profession. Solberg's narrative approaches gender imbalances, and this concerns us and generates some questions about the organization of the movie's documents.

Imagine the following scenario: the growing interest in this director's filmography—which includes the defense of the thesis *Helena Solberg: Trajetória de uma documentarista brasileira* (Tavares, 2011) [Helena Solberg: The Trajectory of A Brazilian Documentary Filmmaker], Solberg's retrospective at the *É Tudo verdade* Festival in 2014,

and the aforementioned expansion of the field of studies on women in audiovisual—occurred after the filmmaker's death, and there were virtually no interviews with her, which is the case of the Cuban Sara Gómez, who died at just over 30 years of age in 1974.

Without the director's words, it is very likely that the division between personal and professional/public and private spheres, which guides both the formation of personal archives and the constitution of the fonds of women in cinema available for research, as well as most theories and analytical and methodological tools in all areas, would make it very difficult to understand Solberg's recurrent interest in certain themes, some breaks in her filmography, and radical changes of residence, etc.

We shall answer the following questions if we apply our argument to Latin America: How can we understand Maria Luisa Bemberg's or Nora de Izcue's late arrival into film industry without knowing the ages of their children, in the case of the former, and divorce, in the case of the latter? How can we assess the feasibility of Margot Benacerraf's Franco-Venezuelan co-productions in the 1950s, which required the director to spend significant time in both countries, if we do not know whether she ever got married or had children? How can we judge the viability of so many co-directions between Colombian Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva over the course of two decades if we do not know they are a couple? If, as we have argued throughout this text, it is impossible to separate the private sphere and the professional life of women in cinema, how do we deal with the formation of fonds and, within them, series referring to films based on their personal archives (that, as we have previously



stated, are generally constructed within the binary logic of personal vs. professional, which may work for the ostensibly universal subject, but renders the female trajectory less clear)?

After doing an initial inventory of Helena Solberg's personal collection and selecting documents connected to her first five works to be digitalized, we envisioned various pathways that will be tested in the project's subsequent phases.<sup>5</sup> We intend to write about these experiments shortly, including the benefits and disadvantages, mistakes, and accomplishments discovered throughout the process. However, we believe it would be intriguing to discuss some of the possibilities we have already envisaged.

We wish to promote a series of thoughts in this scenario on the particularities and sensitive features that contextualize women's creativity in the audiovisual arena, rather than restrict the range of viable replies. Given the diversity of women in cinema, their contexts, films, and trajectories, as well as the diversity of budgets, physical spaces, the conditions and size of personal collections, the type of documentation that constitutes them, and so on, the answers to the questions posed at the outset of the article will inevitably be varied.

We set out to envisage the inclusion of personal evidence pertaining to private occurrences that had an influence on the filmmaking process in the family trees of documents from each production. Even though we went through this imaginative exercise, since it is necessary not to dismiss

<sup>5</sup> Due to the lack of available information, it was necessary to determine where to begin working with Helena Solberg's personal collection. We therefore opted for documents that were in some way related to her first five films: *A Entrevista (The Interview)*, *Meio-dia (Noon)*, *The Emerging Woman*, *The Double Day*, and *Simplemente Jenny (Simply Jenny)*.

anything in order to think differently, the outcome of such a divergent series of personal collections did not seem the most fascinating for fonds that should cater to the most diverse forms of study. We attempted to arrange filmmaker Solberg's collection based on these dynamics.

We also discussed the inclusion of information about the private sphere of women in cinema in some fields of the *Norma Brasileira de Descrição Arquivística*, NOBRADE [Brazilian Standard of Archival Description].<sup>6</sup> This seemed to us to be a possible but insufficient solution. Frequently, researchers look for specific documents and are either unaware of the existence of this marginalized information or do not feel it is relevant (not least due to the vast heterogeneity in how it is filled in). In the case of physical papers, there would be a significant reliance on the orientation of the person delivering them, who may neglect to specify the description for a variety of reasons. In assessing digital documents, for example, it is possible to establish warnings and hyperlinks and refer to a chronology of personal life, without the researcher needing previous knowledge of the archive description.

So far, we believe that creating a chronology of a woman's private life while developing fonds for a female filmmaker is extremely significant and an archival duty. According to arguments that evolved in archivalology beginning in the 1980s, there is no neutrality in the construction of archives, fonds, series, and so on even prior to the selection process. Therefore, to choose not to incorporate

<sup>6</sup> Brazilian adapted version of International Council on Archives. Isad (G): General international standard of archival description. Ottawa: Secretariat of the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards, 1994.

the private sphere into professional documentation is to continue, consciously or unconsciously, with theories and practices that render the significance of gender in women's audiovisual careers invisible. At the same time, we understand the reluctance to include a document that was not originally part of the personal collection, such as a chronology, in a series containing the family tree of documents from a film.

What about considering gender-sensitive policies for filling out NOBRADE when it comes to women's film fonds? On the one hand, archivists and people who set up archives, whether they are trained to do so or not, should be sensitized, and made aware of the fact that, in the case of these women, information such as marriage, divorce, children, demands for changing residence because of family, and so on, is critical, also for a full understanding of the cinematographic work. On the other hand, with the support of the research community, it would be necessary to stress the relevance of the information included in archive descriptions. This seems to have a favorable potential as well, but only in the medium and long future. In addition, we need to intervene now, since personal collections of women in cinema are increasing and rapidly becoming archives, and all this is wonderful, but nearly invariably following rules that are inadequate to observe the effect of the private sphere on their trajectories.

## **Final Considerations**

We opened our chapter by situating its issues both within the development, approximately in the last ten years, of the area of studies on women in audiovisuals, as well as in our own experience of

researchers of the trajectories of Latin American female filmmakers and their works. Since we began our studies prior to this expansion, we were struck by the number of personal collections that were poorly or not at all organized and only in physical form, in the homes of the filmmakers, and their families, or scattered in different institutions, and which have been organized and digitalized, forming archives.

In many cases, the work was carried out by professionals from outside the field of archivology, with different levels of expertise in film documentation. It seems to us that the organization of the collections took place, more or less consciously, based on some of its best-known principles, and has thus far failed to generate theoretical debates and proposals for new methodologies to deal with the inseparability of the private sphere and professional life, which marks the trajectories of women in cinema.

Rather than attempting to provide answers, we have constructed our contribution in such a manner that it demonstrates the necessity for a debate from the perspectives of Cinema and Archivology. As a result, we decided to begin with a broader discussion of archive principles and conversations that have reoriented the sector, and then segment it until it met with contributions from the field of women's studies in audiovisual.

Even though we have just completed the first step of our work on Helena Solberg's collection, we believe it is necessary to reflect on the concerns that the project has raised so far. Although we recognize that the recurring practice of establishing archives is not entirely adapted to what has been observed in the trajectories of women in cinema, because it drastically separates the private sphere

from professional life, we do not believe that a dramatic change, such as inserting personal documents into the family tree of film documents, is the best way forward.

At least at this point in our consideration, it appears simpler to resolve certain dilemmas with digital collections than with documents that are still only available in physical form. The creation and availability of information that sometimes appears in the archival description in the form of links, which are optional because they are not in the personal collections of women in cinema (who have also been socialized in this culture that separates the public and private/personal and professional spheres), breaks with an allegedly, which is anything but neutral, and enables the archives to continue to correspond to what those who conduct research expect.

At the same time, it appears that revisiting archival description standards and other normative instruments (The FIAF moving image cataloguing manual by Fairbairn; Pimpinelli, 2016 and Rules for archival description by the Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 2008) and developing guidelines for their completion in light of what studies have shown to be consistent in the trajectories of women in cinema is a good bet. Although it is a medium and long-term plan, it may be the most successful if we include both physical and digital collections.

Bolder alternatives are attainable in the case of archives that will only be accessible for consultation in digital form, as is the situation with the project we are working on. We have considered these issues since the development of the interface that will allow researchers to access the family tree of documents from Helena Solberg's films.

Only time and dialogue among those devoted to creating archives from women's own collections will reveal the greatest solutions. And they will always differ depending on the qualities of the professional and her collection, the archival project, the period, and location in which they are created, and so on. But we recognize that, for the time being, presenting questions and conversing is more vital than finding solutions.

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## CHAPTER 6

# Unpacking my Archival Findings: Thoughts on the Chaos of Memory and Archival Resistance to Historical Legibility

Ana Grgić

### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 6, Ana Grgić discusses Marioara Voiculescu (1889–1976), a Romanian actress active in early global cinema. She describes the disorder of the archive, and the materiality of the ephemera in the archive. Among piles of printed illustrations, newspaper clippings, and diary entries that are seeing daylight again after years of darkness, she locates a sense of anticipation – which these archival findings arouse in a collector. These help the author to paint a picture of this fragment of an early *silent* cinema history. The precious, scarce and ambiguous items she finds and compares enable her to construct a careful, fragile life story. This abundance of ephemera stares at me with indeterminacy, resisting legibility.

Every passion borders on the chaotic,  
but the collector's passion borders  
on the chaos of memories. (Walter  
Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library. A Talk  
About Book Collecting")

I am unpacking my archival findings.<sup>7</sup> I ask you to join me in the disorder of photocopies, photographs and notes acquired on my archival visits to trace the cinema activities of the Romanian actress and theatre director Marioara Voiculescu. Join me among the piles of printed illustrations, newspaper clippings, and diary entries, that are seeing daylight again after years of darkness, so that you may be ready to share with me a bit of the mood, – not elegiac, but one of anticipation – which these archival findings arouse in a collector. In hope that, by rearranging and juxtaposing words and images side by side, I may offer the reader a satisfying interpretation, to paint a picture of this fragment of early cinema history. A *silent* cinema history. The story of a woman film pioneer in early twentieth century Romania. I unpack my precious collections before you, the reader, and I am hopeful. My archival findings are abundant yet scarce. They are eloquent yet disturbingly ambiguous. When I attempt to read them, I encounter a void. I turn down a path, which is cut short. This abundance of ephemera stares at me with indeterminacy, resisting legibility.

<sup>7</sup> This paragraph is an attempt to read, think and *write together* with Walter Benjamin through a playful re-appropriation of his reflections and re-deployment of his writing from "Unpacking My Library. A Talk About Book Collecting". I had always imagined that Benjamin's own interest in and curiosity for the popular and the everyday, the undervalued, and the marginal, resonates with my own passion and searching for disregarded histories of Balkan cinema and its past.

Re-reading Walter Benjamin, I am struck by the act of contemplating one's collections, which oscillate between the poles of order and chaos. For Benjamin's collector, each book is a treasure, which is admired as an object, not for its functional, utilitarian value, but representing instead "the scene, the stage, of their fate (2007[1931]: 60)." The object/collection offers an opportunity for *seeing*<sup>8</sup> into a distant past. So instead of trying to juxtapose each element of my archival collection, I begin to see and read them as singular instances, as the scene and the stage of the distant past and of their present fate within my collection, conveniently labelled "Marioara Voiculescu – the early film practitioner", and not "Marioara Voiculescu – the theatre diva." What this archival collection tells me is that history itself is a matter of order and chaos. Of selection and abandonment. Of chance and historical determinism. Of methodical acts and also of burning passions. Of the fluctuation between reason and madness.

I ask myself, inevitably, why this document or photograph have survived, while this other (of whose existence I am aware though not certain) has not? With epistemological scepticism, I ask myself how to acknowledge and narrate the "presence of absence". I am confronted with one certainty, that the early films of Marioara Voiculescu have not been preserved (or at least not discovered, to our knowledge).

<sup>8</sup> At times, studying the past through archival fragments and ruins, seems like a mystical act, close to a sort of clairvoyance, or looking through a crystal ball, as imaginative visions are almost inevitably conjured when trying to reconstruct and visualise past events. These images have the tendency to flash up and disappear as soon as they are invoked. In this case, the inanimate object, archival document or image, seems to come alive for the moment of its interpretation.

Sources indicate that the producer Leon Popescu's film laboratory and all of the film negatives were destroyed, when the warehouses in the courtyard of his theatre Liric caught fire in December 1917 (Căliman 2000, 36; Ripeanu 2013, 457). In an interview with specialist film journal, *Cinema*, in November 1926, Marioara Voiculescu laments: "[...] Of the seven films I worked on with Leon Popescu's company, six burned with my satisfaction, and I can only express my regret that the seventh still exists. Of my memories during the filming, only one remained for me: the profession of a film actor is very tiring." So little remains of women's practices in history, and many questions linger.

Like other fellow travellers, journeying to the land of women's media historiography practices and early cinema archaeology, I tremble with "archival fever."<sup>9</sup> I feel the importance and the futility of my labour, the necessity to give credit, by recovering the lost and the languishing, to reconstitute the historical record. My camera is merely an instrument by which I try to capture, to immortalise, that fleeting moment of enchantment, of anticipation, of excitement, when facing an archival document. The reader will see the documentation of that process, of my meeting with the archival collection. And a collection always

<sup>9</sup> This is a reference to Jacques Derrida's reading of the very concept of the archive, which is due to its nature (and in etymological meaning of the word) authoritatively transparent and concealed at the same time (1996). Further, Derrida argues how the concept of the archive is troubled by "archive fever": "a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement" (1996, 91). One of the theses, proposed by Derrida, is that the archive is shaped by the "archon" (from ancient Greek, translated to "ruler", archon comes from the Greek verb stem ἀρχ- which means "to be first", "to rule"), which is paternal and patriarchal (1996).

presents itself as a heterogenous mess of an individual's life, of what has come to pass, stubborn and incomplete records of a past which crawl and seep into our present. Later, at my computer, these same captured images undergo a secondary intellectual process, which is less haptic, but overflowing with memories of the first encounter. In a manner, the materialism of a collection becomes inextricable from the collection of feelings about the archival objects on the researcher's journey. After all, isn't every collection, a collection of enchantment with the object one encounters?

## Onset of an Archival Fever

The process of writing film history by way of archival findings is first of all a reflective practice of the very act of selecting, collecting and perceiving the material object – the artefact. As Arlette Farge has suggested, the spectacular richness and limitless possibilities – the power of the archive – versus the impossibility of deciphering its contents and reconstructing the past, produces a tension and a conflict (2013). She writes: “[...] for a document to take on meaning it must be questioned pointedly” (2013, 14). Silent cinema scholarship has increasingly been employing methodologies advanced by New Cinema History and Foucault-inspired *media archaeology* in an effort to move beyond textual analysis and readings of film-works, and instead focus on studying the film's contexts, specifically, the spaces of cinema production, circulation and reception. Present research on Marioara Voiculescu constitutes a sustained effort

toward acknowledging women's labour, creative practice and contribution to early cinema (as producers and consumers of moving images) in the Balkans, a region which, alongside Central and Eastern Europe, has historically been considered as lacking women's movements and feminist causes throughout nineteenth and twentieth centuries although a number of women were very active (see De Haan, Daskalova and Lontfi 2006). So, let's begin.

We know that every story has a beginning. In detective fiction, the catalyst which leads to resolving a mystery is often suggested through the cliché "cherchez la femme" (look for the woman). The expression continued to be used widely to indicate that a woman was often the root cause of a problem, no matter the specifics of the situation. This French phrase already indicated the woman's (imaginal and discursive) positionality in popular fiction, of occupying a space in the shadows. So, where does our story begin? From the beginning or the end? With the announcement of the first Romanian fiction film in the arts journal *Rampa* on 14 June 1913 which mentions Marioara Voiculescu as the writer of the script? Or a decade later after the events, with the publication of the 1926 interview with Marioara Voiculescu in the journal *Cinema*, in which she laments her involvement in cinema following a bitter dispute with the producer Leon Popescu?

During the course of my archival research, and after months of correspondence and failed attempts to gain access to archival materials held at the Romanian Academy Library and Archives in Bucharest<sup>10</sup>, I was finally able to look at the preserved copies of two issues of the

<sup>10</sup> Delays were caused mostly by Covid and were exacerbated by bureaucracy.

*Curierul cinematografic/Cinematographic Courier* (specialist trade press published on 4 and 18 January 1916 by the producer Leon Popescu), as well as Marioara Voiculescu's photographic collection, personal archives and the manuscript donated by her son Paul Ionescu-Quintus. Until then, I had been working with other people's collections and writings, and not with Marioara Voiculescu's own personal archive. This moment of archival privilege was accompanied by a tension, at first, awe and fascination, and then immediately, by the oppressive feeling of the passing of time, which led that archival moment, of *being with* the collection, reduced to a creeping feeling of panic and desire to capture everything, and the fear, that somehow, some detail, would be overlooked, and left behind. I recall the atmosphere of the library reading room, the soft light coming through the windows, and me standing, crouching over the time-worn cardboard boxes tied with strings, at the table, third row from the main desk, facing an open door, through which librarians and other researchers walked in and out of the room as in a blur. One continuous movement. Time seemed to stand still, and yet, terrifyingly encroaching on my presence and permanence there, time was flying by with each passing minute. Now, writing, months later, I cannot but feel that every archival moment is haunted by Benjamin's angel of history. And that every archival artefact is a shard, a remainder left aside by History, which "comes back despite everything", as De Certeau so eloquently pointed out, "on the edges of the discourse or in its rifts and crannies: "resistances", "survivals", or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of "progress" or a system of interpretation." (1988 [1975], 4)



Marioara Voiculescu wrote extensive journals and memoirs, pages filled with handwritten records, minute and evocative details of her childhood, personal life and career. Her memoirs underwent revisions throughout time, redacted several times by Voiculescu herself, and then selected and collected in a volume titled *Journals. Memories*, which was edited by theatre scholars, and published posthumously in 2003. Almost a century earlier, an earlier version of Marioara Voiculescu's memoirs, of her childhood and first steps in the theatre world at the turn of the century in Bucharest, was published in 1912 as an illustrated volume, titled "In the Spring of Life".



Excerpts appeared in various editions of the principal arts and theatre journal at the time, *Rampa*. Rich and subjective memories of key moments of her family, love and work life, but not a word on her film activities. Why didn't her involvement in this new visual and mass medium, cinema, merit a dedication or a memory among hundreds of pages of journal entries? What had happened?

My desire was to depart from the archival object, to question it pointedly, and to allow it to testify. I open a dialogue with three artefacts, in a desire to converse with Marioara Voiculescu, and further, in an attempt to reflect on feminist film and media methodologies used for writing early cinema histories. My selection includes the following artefacts:

- An incomplete handwritten four-page document by an unknown journalist containing notes from an interview with Marioara Voiculescu about her experience in cinema.
- A fading photograph from a tour with her theatre company, or perhaps one of her Paris-bound journeys on the Orient-Express.
- An object found among her journal entries, a small white envelope with a small flower, pinned to the page. The patina of time clearly visible. The rust of the pin leaked and coloured the spot on the page, where it was pierced.

*And the story begins...*

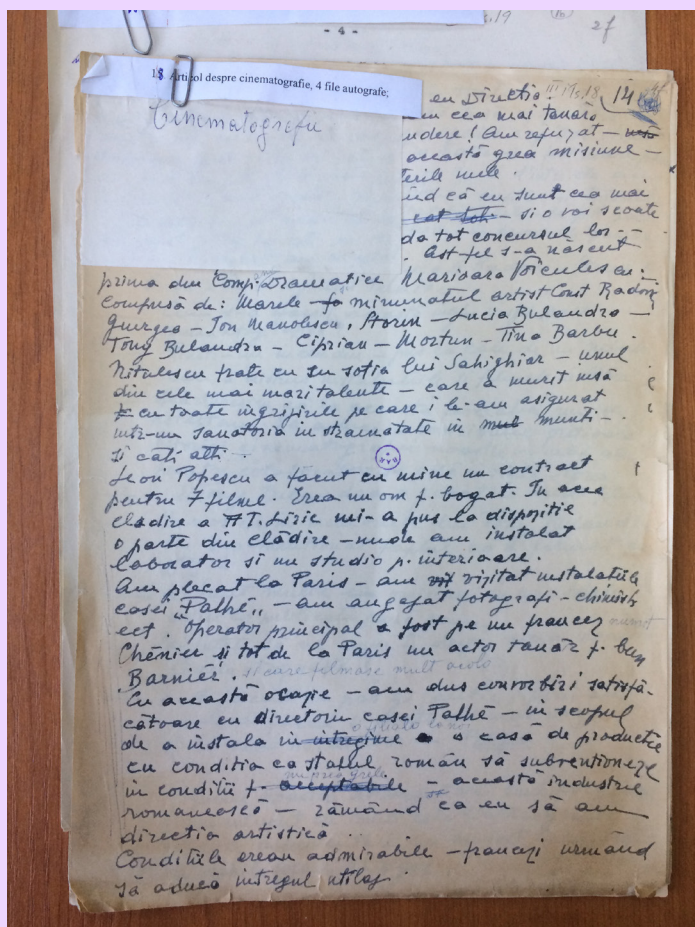
# Trembling with Archival Fever

Leafing through envelopes and notebooks that contain pages and pages of handwritten notes and memories (from the Voiculescu personal collection at the Romanian Academy), I finally come across a single mention of the “cinematograph”. I tremble. The archival fever rises, and with shaky fingers, and with great anticipation, I slowly g(r)aze<sup>11</sup> over the page, absorbing and consuming the imperfections of handwriting, the blue ink and the age-worn yellowed paper. On the top right hand corner, number 14 is circled. A realisation. Pages are missing. Thirteen of them. In vain, I look in the envelope again and once more, and re-check the previous pages, but the missing thirteen are nowhere to be found. I am resigned but hopeful. I stare lovingly at the four pages which are preserved, which offer themselves to me, the researcher, and return my gaze. Very gently, I run my fingers over the page to feel the skin of the paper, its creases and the patina of time. I am curious about all the words that have been crossed out. Because it allows a glimpse into subconscious lapses, and the desire for rewriting. The last page is the most interesting, divided into three loose parts, hand-drawn boxes, subdividing the writing, revealing that moment when you run out of paper

<sup>11</sup> I am borrowing the verb “g(r)aze” from Laura Marks to describe this action, in order to emphasise the affective encounter during the act of looking and perceiving archival images which have been marked by the patina of time and tear and wear. Haptic images, according to Laura Marks, engage the eye of the viewer more intimately, as the viewer is forced to glide over the image multiple times to reconstitute the global vision (2000, 162).

and space, but you need to write more, so you create more space, imaginatively. I see an arrow pointing down from the top right hand corner toward the left, indicating the flow of thoughts and movement for reading instructions...Months later, my colleague Delia Enyedi translates the content from Romanian to English, and here below I reproduce this singular record, the section which contains Marioara Voiculescu's own memories of her film activities in 1913:

Artefact 1 - Page 1  
with the circled 14



“Leon Popescu made a contract with me for 7 films. He was a very rich man. In that building of the Lyrical Theatre he put part of the building at my disposal, where I installed a laboratory and a studio for interiors. I went to Paris – I visited the installations of the Pathé company – I hired photographers, chemists, etc. The main operator was a Frenchman named Chénice, and also from Paris, there was a very good young actor Barniér.

On this occasion I engaged in very satisfactory discussions with the heads of Pathé, with the aim of establishing a production company on the condition that the Romanian state subsidise in very favourable conditions this Romanian industry, I would keep the artistic management.

The conditions were admirable, the French were to bring all the equipment.

After several setbacks, the Romanian state decided to build and realise this industry by itself, without foreign contribution and funding. It all fell apart and it was a great shame.

I made 7 films. Five of them were projected. The films *Island of Snakes (Insula șerpilor)*, *The Spy (Spionul)*... I forgot the titles of the others, but they can be found in the press reviews of the time.

The film *Fedora*, in which Radovici, Storin and me all played parts, could not be finished.

- How did this improvised cinema endeavour end?
- By fire, set up by a mad man, that destroyed the equipment and the films in the works.
- I admit we did not expect this revelation. It brings a valuable contribution to the history for our cinema, especially since among the

- collaborators, Storin is alive.
- Tony Bulandra also played in these films.
  - Curiously enough, the memoirs of Tony Bulandra do not mention that he filmed with you.
  - There are many omissions in the memoirs of artists that have been published until now.”

I start reading the above passages again, which decisively reveal Marioara Voiculescu's strong involvement in these filmmaking activities and attempt to establish a sustainable local film industry in 1913. None of these oral testimonies and memories, recorded by the unknown journalist, have ever made it to the pages of Romanian Film History. As I have mentioned in a previous article (Grgić 2022), local film scholarship only fleetingly alludes to Marioara Voiculescu and her involvement in the making of early fiction films produced by Leon Popescu (see Mihail 1967; Sava 1999; Căliman 2000; Ripeanu 2004, 2013), and the most elaborate discussion of the Popescu-Voiculescu collaboration merely dismisses it as a failed attempt to establish a viable local film industry (see Căliman 2000, 31–35). By shifting the focus from the producer Leon Popescu (about whom a lot has been written in Romanian Film History) to Marioara Voiculescu, we can disrupt the neat order of progress and perturb the historical narrative of this moment in film history.

I proceed to read these notes alongside my other findings. In my mind, I keep Allyson Nadia Field's work on early Black film, in which she argues for “looking and thinking adjacently” given that the films themselves are non-existent and like me, she is dealing with the “presence of absence” and

analysing archival ephemera (2015). I start reading “against the archive” (Frymus 2020). The document is not dated. At first sight, these appear to be notes taken by a journalist or a researcher during an interview with Marioara Voiculescu, who speaks on behalf of the publication “I admit we did not expect this revelation. It brings a valuable contribution to the history for our cinema...[...].” I look through my collections. I compare the contents, hoping to shed some light through the meeting of these archival artefacts. The only published text of an interview with Marioara Voiculescu which mentions her filmmaking activities that I have discovered, appears in the journal *Cinema* on 16 November 1926 under the title “Our Artists and Cinematic Art. Declarations by Marioara Voiculescu, Natasa Alexandra and George Vraca”. The journalist notes how Marioara Voiculescu was the first “among our great artists” to take an interest in cinema, at a time when this “wonderful invention had not yet emerged out of its chrysalis shell” (*Cinema*, 16 November 1926, 911, my translation). This interview contains details of Marioara Voiculescu’s bitter memories of the film collaboration, which had a tragic finale: “I have personally attempted very few times, without the knowledge for the craft and without a director. Of the seven films I worked on with Leon Popescu’s company, six burned with my satisfaction, and I can only express my regret that the seventh still exists. Of my memories during the filming, only one remained for me: the profession of a film actor is very tiring. [...] Returning to Leon Popescu, I have to say that I suggested that he bring a foreign director at my own expense, but he refused, which I still don’t understand to date” (*Cinema*, 16 November 1926, 912, my translation). The film collaboration

between Leon Popescu and Marioara Voiculescu ended in a legal dispute, whose news appeared already in October 1913, a few months after the end of filming. According to the information in this brief news bulletin, the lawsuit was brought by Popescu against Voiculescu, following a disagreement regarding her commitment to play in “cinematographic films” made by his production company (*Rampa*, 9 October 1913). At the time of the interview in November 1926, Marioara Voiculescu was actually running the “Marioara Voiculescu Cinema” at the classy Military Circle Palace in the centre of Bucharest. In the same interview, she reveals her passion for films: “I go to the cinema very often, because the animated screen entertains my eye, without tiring my soul” (*Cinema*, 16 November 1926, 911, my translation). In her published memoirs, I find more information about her staging theatre plays at the Military Circle Palace (2003, 86, 94–97), which allows me to hypothesise that she may have alternated between film and theatre performances in this space during the 1920s. Announcements for Marioara Voiculescu Cinema screenings appeared regularly from 1926 to 1928 in the journal *Cinema*, demonstrating that the cinema theatre ran successfully during this time. American, French and German films, which featured stars such as Dorothy Gish, Asta Nielsen, and Greta Garbo, were shown most frequently. A two-page spread for the “monumental masterpiece” *Fiul Deșertului/ A Son of the Sahara* (1924, dir. Edwin Carewe) starring Claire Windsor and Bert Lytell, accompanied by illustrations and captions where the descriptive text boasts “high production values, superior performances and an extremely interesting subject”, which demonstrates

Voiculescu's entrepreneurial spirit as a keen cinema exhibitor. Voiculescu's cinema offered special entry (reduced) tickets for film fans, which the readers of the specialist journal *Cinema* could find at the end of each issue.

The other unpublished document I conjure and pull out among my findings is Jean Mihail's unpublished manuscript from 1959, which contains detailed information about this historical moment. Jean Mihail was a Romanian director and scriptwriter, and Marioara Voiculescu's contemporary, whose published book on Romanian film history, titled *Filmul românesc de altădată* (1967), completely omitted the passages<sup>12</sup> below which were present in the earlier version of the manuscript:

“Once in the French capital, Marioara Voiculescu proposed to Gaumont, a world-renowned company, to install a film studio in Romania. Having succeeded in convincing one of the main directors of the studios to come to our country to find out about the talent of our actors, the charm of the Romanian landscape, Marioara Voiculescu returned to Bucharest, accompanied by that director, also bringing an experienced technician, the camera operator Chenier from Gaumont, and a young French film actor who performed in Paris under the pseudonym

<sup>12</sup> The editor of *Filmul românesc de altădată* by Jean Mihail (1967), explains editorial choices in the foreword of the book: “Following a wish expressed by Jean Mihail, I requested the expert collaboration of Dr. Ion Cantacuzino, an old and passionate supporter of Romanian film. The interventions were made with special care to respect the author's intentions. Our contribution consisted in operations of stylization and systematisation of the material, in the verification and enrichment of some data and information by comparing the press of the time and eyewitness account, and the elaboration of the artist's filmography.”



of Jean Barnier, both under contract. After driving through the picturesque lands of the Olt, Jiu and Prahova valleys, and attending a series of shows from the French theatre repertoire, the Parisian company representative showed delight in what he saw and accepted the proposal made by the Romanian actress, especially since French cinema was widely shown on cinema screens in the country, but made a condition – which was natural – that the financial contribution of the Romanian state be equal to that of the French company. The conditions set by Gaumont – Marioara Voiculescu told us – were so reasonable that any country in the world would have accepted them without hesitation. But the bourgeois-landlord regime had until then shown its indifference to the making of a national cinema, as it had shown this indifference in other fields: literature, Romanian music and painting, and true – Romanian artistic values. Therefore, the grim officials of the time had not accepted offers from the Parisian company. In this atmosphere of disinterest, distrust, patronised by the governors of the time, Leon Popescu and ‘Marioara Voiculescu Theatre Company’ still started the preparations for their first film [...]” (Mihail 1959, 13–14, my translation).

Reading these passages alongside the handwritten notes, I make a conjecture that the unknown journalist could be Jean Mihail. While the above passages contain a tone of romanticism and embellish the story of this attempt at setting up a Romanian film culture, the handwritten

notes contain only essential information and conversational exchanges. Comparison of both documents highlights inconsistencies of memory: instead of Pathé, it is Gaumont; the technician is Chenier not Chenice; and only the surname of the young actor seems consistent – Barnier. All these surface-level discrepancies notwithstanding, from both accounts, it is evident that Marioara Voiculescu was instrumental in establishing the connections with the French film industry, and that she was expunged from Romanian film histories. Given that she frequently travelled to Paris for her theatre activities, it seems likely that she was the liaison between these two worlds. Along with her theatrical career, news of Voiculescu's travels, performances and activities filled the pages of the local press. The press frequently described her as “our great artist.” She was considered one of the greatest actresses of the first decades of the twentieth century, dominating the theatre and public scene in Romania. Once, upon her return from Paris to Bucharest on the Orient-Express train, she was met at the station by her fellow actors with bouquets of flowers and a journalist who handed her “a package which contained hundreds of letters” from fans sent to the editorial office (*Rampa*, 29 February 1912). In this photograph conserved at the Romanian Academy, Marioara Voiculescu stands next to her son Paul, looking toward the camera and smiling, with a fashionable wide-brimmed hat, fur-lined coat and a scarf adorning her waist. She looks like a diva, a star.

The photograph is not dated. I picture her just having returned from Paris to Bucharest on the Orient-Express train. She looks positively happy. At least brimming with vital energy. I observe the

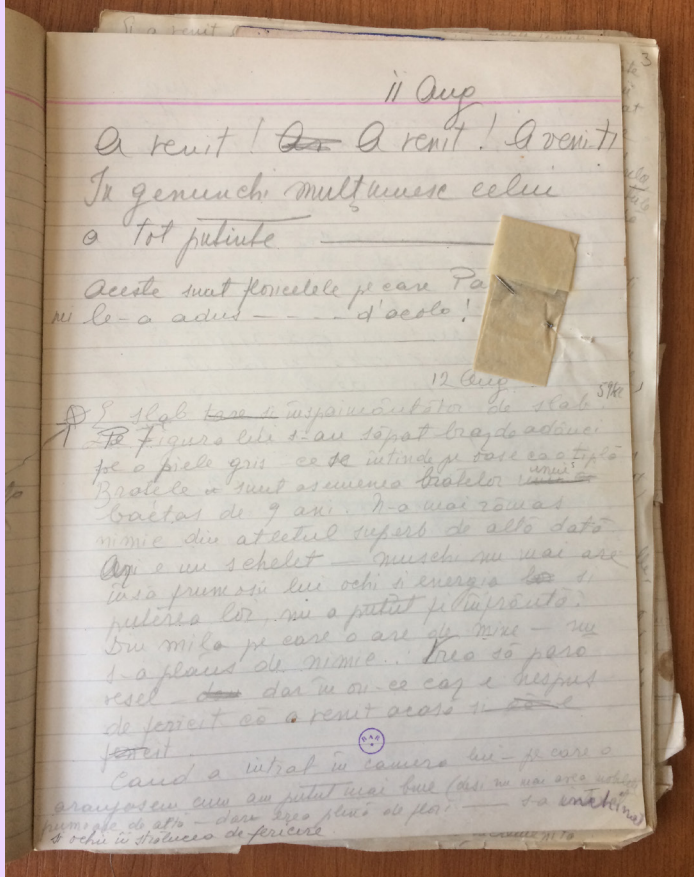


photograph on my computer. The technology allows me to zoom in and out. Pause on details.<sup>13</sup> The absence of leaves on the tree indicates that it was winter or autumn. There is a train arriving behind them to the right. Voiculescu's son, Paul, was born in 1903, so looking closely, he may have been anywhere between 16 and 22 in this photograph. I assume the photograph was taken some time between 1919 and 1925. Marioara

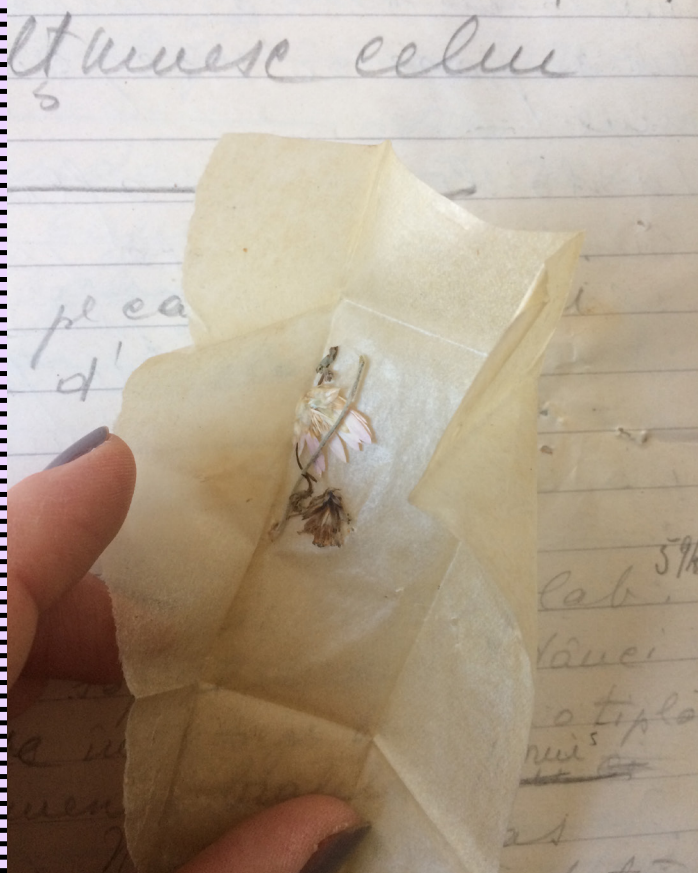
<sup>13</sup> Observing her smile in this photograph, I recall the journalist's words in the handwritten document which recount the conversation between them and Marioara Voiculescu: "Before leaving, I looked at her with an even greater insistence than before and told her: "You give the impression of a... happy person." She looked at us straight in the eyes and answered: "Happy? What is... happiness? The happy man is the one who has no worry, who has a lot of money, who doesn't have any aches, he sleeps as long as he wishes, eats more than others, and sits in an armchair watching as the days and years go by without any problems. If this could be happiness, well, I think nobody is happy and so happiness does not exist. Allow me to reproduce teachings read by me in the books of an old poet whose name is no longer remembered." I transcribed them on the other side of the page. And this great artist spoke about many things on the night of our visit, nothing femininely inferior. Not even her high emotions, a common sense of the pleasant. A repugnance for platitude. A natural easiness. We parted accompanied by the beautiful smile of the hostess. Outside, night and fog, long and unsettling shapes as in a vision by Strindberg." I imagine the journalist may have been referring to August Strindberg's much travelled painting from 1903, *Town*, showing a dramatically stormy sky and expressionistic seascape, with a city barely visible in the distance.

Voiculescu would have been in her thirties. Location is hard to discern, aside from the tower behind them, this could have been taken at any bigger train station around the country. An adjacent photograph in the collection captures one of the train wagons, and reveals large, stencilled writing on the side: “Marioara Voiculescu”, and just above “The famous tragedy company arrives.” I hypothesise that this photograph was actually taken upon arrival at a destination during one of her theatre tours around Romania. Less than a decade after her debut on the Bucharest stage at the National Theatre, Marioara Voiculescu founded her own theatre company in the summer of 1912, which brought together a group of talented actors under her wing. The feminist journalist Ecaterina I. Raicoviceanu, under the pseudonym Fulmen, wrote devotedly about Marioara Voiculescu’s talents as a theatre director, the theatre troupe and their debut on the Bucharest stage, a month before the opening of the season, she noted: “For those familiar with Mrs. Voiculescu’s amiable company, the success of an unrivalled season is evident from rehearsal to rehearsal. The young director is so hardworking and so beloved that the artists have never rehearsed more fondly than under her direction” (*Rampa*, 12 August 1912, my translation). Indeed, Marioara Voiculescu’s theatre company performances were frequently featured in *Rampa*, and other daily newspapers, while she herself was interviewed several times, mainly about the theatre and culture scene, and her many headshots and full figure portraits illustrated the articles.

Turning through pages of her journals conserved in the collections, I come across a peculiar little envelope, fixed on the page with a safety pin. Her own handwriting. In pencil. On top of the page, there



is a date, 11 August. I carefully turn the page, and open the pin, lifting the thin piece of folded paper. Very gently, I open it and look inside. A small pink flower. This diary/journal was written by Marioara Voiculescu in 1953. I read the diary entry under 11 August: “He returned! He returned! He returned! He came! On my knees, I thank... These are the small flowers which Paul brought me... from there!” Her debut on stage coincides with becoming a mother. She would adore her son Paul all her life. Her love for her son seems to abound in this brief entry.



Yet, the flowers reveal both the sentimentality and fragility of this strong, entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan woman. Her memoirs exude a sentimental elegance, and oscillate between lyricism, nostalgia, triumph and pain, and the cruelty of destiny. Though she was awarded the “Artist emerit” (Emeritus Artist) title by the Romanian communist government for her career, she never returned to the stage after 1947. A recent (fictionalised) biography written about Marioara Voiculescu (Nelega 2022), which contains a short chapter on her career as a theatre actress, reveals that the Romanian secret services held a

dossier on the retired actress from 1959 until 1965, and followed her meetings and activities, finally installing a bug on her telephone in 1962.

## The Aftermath of the Fever

The fever subsides. We have come to an end of our story. I have asked you to join me on a mnemonic journey of my library filled with archival findings, orphans. Through fragments and shards, left aside by History. On our journey, I conjured some images, texts and sensations. I invited you to imagine a different kind of film historiography. The possibility of a Romanian Cinema Herstory. One that runs parallel to the dominant, deterministic, patriarchal narrative of the lone creative male genius. A herstory which perturbs the neat order of historical progress and interpretation. Which disturbs us and disrupts the written Historiographies as we know them. Because we cannot deny its Existence nor can we comfortably admit its Truth. It continues to stare at us from the barrel of the past. This methodology relies on subjective memories, on individuals. On human passion and despair. It deals in loss and pain. And love and care. This historical memory is fragile and beautiful. And it opens onto the infinite, increasing the surface area of our experience of early cinema history and the role of women in the shaping of a new visual medium.

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## CHAPTER 7

# Surplus Cinema: Feminisms and Filmmaking in the Context of Greece and its Intertwining Diasporas

Written collectively by Surplus Cinema  
(Maria Christoforidi, Sofia Dati,  
Rabab El Mouadden, Christina Phoebe,  
Elli Vassalou)

### ABSTRACT:

Surplus cinema, an ongoing invitation to form community and non-hierarchical solidarities between those seen as “surplus” within White patriarchal structures, explores filmmaking as a feminist placemaking and space-taking practice. Written by a collective of filmmakers, curators and artists, this chapter includes humour and code-mixing, diasporic sisterhoods, afro confessions, queer joy and mourning, rerooting rituals, cinematic nests and sensory pleasures in its writing, seeking to bridge diasporic communities and celebrate “metasporic” ones.

The victims of neoliberal crisis management are not the “Greek citizens”, but the subordinate classes in Greece, not all of whom are citizens. These subordinate classes are differently affected by the racialized management of borders and populations. (...) Those who do not find safety in this hetero/cis-normative and patriarchal notion of shelter were soon to not find safety in the Greek streets either, as nationalist oppositional discourses were used violently to reaffirm the male “head of family” as the sole signified of the “citizen”.

— Dimitra Kotouza, *Surplus Citizens: Struggle and Nationalism in Crisis Greece* (2019)

## Introduction

Surplus Cinema is a group of itinerant, diasporic makers, artists, activists, writers and friends. We ask questions about feminist filmmaking and decolonial practices within the context of Greece and intertwining diasporas.<sup>14</sup> The project was initiated in September 2021 by the curatorial team consisting of Maria Christoforidi, Sofia Dati, Rabab El Mouadden, Christina Phoebe and Elli Vassalou. The idea for a gathering like Surplus Cinema had been brewing for several years between friends in Greece, on the road, in diasporic kinships, wanting to make a space for femme, women and non-binary artists to gather and support each other in creative processes and struggles. Several women’s circles began taking place, but the time, place

<sup>14</sup> Diaspora comes from the Greek word diaspora/διασπορά; dia-/δι- (prefix-meaning across) and -speiro/-σπείρω (verb-meaning to sow or to scatter). Σπόρος/sporos, which shares the same root as -speiro, means seed.

and team had not yet come together to form a more long-term systematic process of collective research and slow curating that could eventually lead to a public event or program with multiple film screenings, discussions and workshops. During that time, Christina Phoebe had begun to map out films and related readings by women and non-binary artists in Greece and intertwining diasporas, both growing alongside conversations, friendships, and kinships. This list would later be collectively watched, informed, discussed and expanded as an ongoing Surplus Cinema library. In September 2021, the Post (Film) Collective worked together during a residency at Kunstencentrum 404 (Ghent). Their main question: which tools and methods can develop a polyphonic film on belonging and placemaking, which would also be collectively authored? Forming cine kinships, the Post (Film) Collective invited Christina to talk about her experience working on the polyphonic film *Amygdaliá* (2019) and its collaboratively formed script. At the same time, Rabab El Mouadden had recently completed her master's thesis (Mouadden 2021) on diasporic and exilic filmmaking, while Maria Christoforidi's new film *ΜΑΛΘΑ: The thrice burnt archives of unreliable prophecies* (2021), premiered at Beursschouwburg in Brussels in the "Black Archive: A Decolonial Approach to Experimental Cinema"<sup>15</sup> programme. We all went to the premiere of *ΜΑΛΘΑ*, attended the "Black Archive" programme and the closing cine-assembly screening of The Post (Film) Collective at 404. It was

<sup>15</sup> A program formed on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Collectif Jeune Cinéma, in which Maxime Jean-Baptiste and Stéphane Gérard presented a program of films, panels and workshops at Beursschouwburg and Cinematek. <https://www.beursschouwburg.be/en/events/black-archive/>

here that all the Surplusines met for the first time. A dream for old and new friends to live together for a few days, sharing questions and futuring together. A few discussions later and Surplus Cinema was born.

With a desire to explore filmmaking as a feminist placemaking and space-taking practice, Surplus Cinema is an ongoing invitation of forming community and non-hierarchical solidarities between those seen as “surplus” within white patriarchal structures. We form an impermanent, fluid collective sharing questions around collaborative filmmaking, camera work as care work and cinema as community action. We are part of an always-moving process, a continuous rehearsal feeding on accumulation rather than building up to an apex. Through humour and code-mixing, diasporic sisterhoods, afro confessions, queer joy and mourning, rerooting rituals, cinematic nests<sup>16</sup> and sensory pleasures, Surplus Cinema seeks to bridge communities and celebrate “metasporic” ones.<sup>17</sup>

Drawing on Dimitra Kotouza’s “Surplus Citizens”<sup>18</sup>, we propose to shift the attention away from the pedestal to the backstage, situating

<sup>16</sup> In conversation with the question “Can a film be like a nest?” in *Amygdaliá* (2019) by Christina Phoebe.

<sup>17</sup> The Post Collective initially started using the term “metaspora” to describe the difference from “diaspora”, as a term describing scattering of communities, to “metaspora”, an intended creation of cross cultural ones. Later on they discovered the work of Joël Des Rosiers, not translated yet in English or Greek, who gives deeper insights in the term.

<sup>18</sup> Artist, curator, researcher Eliana Otta, member of Mouries Collective, introduced this book to Christina Phoebe in the context of the exhibition “Lost and Shared: Approaches to collective mourning towards transformative politics” and her PhD thesis. A screening of the film “Amygdalia” and discussion of it through the book “Surplus Citizens” took place on 1 November 2021 at One Minute Space in Athens, GR.

our ruminations in surplus, excedent, unruly filmic narratives. In reshaping a lexicon derived from economy, Kotouza translates the surplus value of subordinate classes to signify a type of superfluity productive of non-capitalist (social, relational, common) transactions. She looks at how struggle and solidarity are formulated and acted upon during perceived “crises”, and how bubbles of race, class, gender and nation condition solidarity formations, leading us to question who expresses solidarity to whom and why. Which forms of “surplus” solidarity remain on the margins, or are yet to be formed? This lens was central to our reflections on cinema and feminisms in, and in relation to, the context of Greece. Thinking through Surplus became a way for us to gather, share and bond in narrative spaces allowing for unproductivity and refusal. Kotouza reminds us that “we should not limit our conception to struggles for “inclusion” into an already given regime of rights, especially a regime founded on and delimited by national belonging and the nation-state” (Kotouza 2019: 4). With Surplus Cinema, we intend to take up this invitation to imagine kinships and belonging beyond the “already given”, which problematise the nation as a homogenous, pure, tidy space.

One form of belonging that exceeds the nation-state formation can be crystallised in the term “metaspora”, which the Post (Film) Collective adopts to shift from the unidirectional pathway implied by the mainstream media framing of diasporic movement, as a way to reclaim uprooting mobility into rerooting movements finding joy and solace in polyphonic dispersion. In what follows we alternate between the terms “diaspora” and “metaspora” to refer to the (forced) displacement

of people and imaginaries on the one hand; and to the nurturing of new, multitudinous, choral communities on the other hand.

In Surplus Cinema we have been watching and talking about films made by women, femme and non-binary filmmakers, films that stand outside of canonical representation and industry conventions, with interdependency at the core of their doings. The films featured in the Surplus Cinema programme in Beursschouwburg<sup>19</sup> (Brussels, 2022) outline a practice of failure (Halberstam 2011) that rejects exhaustiveness and nests in dispersion, taking a step aside from dreams of mastery and success stories that pave the way of most mainstream narrative tropes. Surplus Cinema weaves the kind of radical kinship that nurtures ties beyond the homogenising apparatus of state control.

Despite the renewed blossoming of feminist movements, certain geographies remain more frequently centred and discussed in feminist film discourses than others, and as such reproduce dominant structures and hierarchies based on colonial ideas of binary north-south and west-east. Therefore, via our physical (dis)placements, positionality became a crucial point for us to reflect, together with Kotouza's writing, the intersecting imaginaries of gendered, racialized "crisis" and citizenship in relation to our embodied mappings of transitional, rerooted worldmaking. What internal locations and geographies do we carry that remain invisibilized by colonial thinking? What kinds of tools and strategies emerge from dia/metasporeic feminist filmmaking practices? How might we envision futures from and within a Surplus position?

<sup>19</sup> The program can be found online here: <https://beursschouwburg.be/en/events/surplus-cinema>



And how can the cinematic space embrace a wholeness which comes from the unruly, messy, complex, interwoven?

Through Greece's geopolitical location – both borderland (Anzaldúa 1987) and centre – studying and screening films made in relation to this region is a case study in exercising personal/collective understandings of location and positionality. Thinking with activist scholar Surya Nayak in “Location as Method” (Nayak 2017), locating ourselves through shared and differing locations challenges neat narrative categorizations made in quiet acceptance of the border industrial complex of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Paraphrasing Nayak when she asks “who is allowed to inhabit and survive the locations of research, writing and the academy?”, we make a collective call: who is allowed to inhabit and survive the locations of cinema? What cinematic forms are allowed to survive in collective memory as feminist filmmaking? And what forms of ciné-writing contribute to their survival? In the pages that follow, we invite you to our unruly assemblage of singular-collective ruminations mapping out some terms, reflections and conversations that have emerged – and keep emerging – within Surplus Cinema.

## **Friendship in Surplus**

– *Christina Phoebe*

Each of us lives in a different place (Athens, Brussels, Cornwall, Rotterdam), while carrying many other places within us, in our diasporic webs. When our first programme took place we had all been together in person only 2-3 times.

Dia/metaspotic friendships remind us that our worlds are local and global at the same time; they remind us to question distances and borders of varying shapes and sizes. What types of gazes make us feel near, while being far? How do films, like love letters, bridge spaces in light of separation? How can films console and motivate us to voice “feeling diasporic”<sup>20</sup> or find words to speak of unspeakable injustices?

Our friends are often our first audience, reminding us of what we have in common, without erasing our differences. However, antagonism between women upholds a particular pillar of white capitalist patriarchy. Spinning questions around friendship as a central thread of Surplus Cinema, friendship appears as an approach to collaborative research, collective organising, and feminist activism. How do our friendships teach us about the world; move us? bell hooks writes “The life lesson: We all sort of know it, but it’s important to remember that our friends are as important as our lovers” (hooks 2000). When it comes to coming-of-age fantasies and making kin, where does friendship fit in? In the tradition of women’s circles and feminist consciousness-raising groups, how might friendship act as a place to blossom collectively, unweaving internalised oppressions?

Friendship is the protagonist of the film *Girlhood* (2021) by Vania Turner and Maria Sidiropoulou. Three teenagers confide in each other in lockdown Athens: “I feel like I’m more like myself when I’m with the girls”, Nefeli reveals. Sharing passions, insecurities, celebrations, they enjoy acceptance, and feel free in the encouraging space they create together.

<sup>20</sup> “Feeling diasporic” is a text by Lauren Wagner (2012) Rabab El Mouadden brought to the Surplus Cinema library which we read together during the Surplus Cinema residency at workspacebrussels in September 2022.

Making their inner worlds visible, they envision non-normative families. As Vera says, “We make a family, the three of us all together. We’ll adopt children and raise them all together.” Facing uncertain futures, they dream, question, and appease fears with one another. Their friendship is a space to just be, hang out, be themselves.

Childhood archives and memories meet in *MAΛΘΑ* (Maltha): *The Thrice Burnt Archives of Unreliable Prophecies* (2021) by Maria Christoforidi



In *MAΛΘΑ*<sup>21</sup>: *The Thrice Burnt Archives of Unreliable Prophecies* (2021) by Maria Christoforidi, childhood friends weave whispers from their personal archives. In family albums, past and present pulsate. A friendly archive, a kind reminder: *you are not alone, I see you*. Their friendship creates a safe(r) space to utter the public “secrets”<sup>22</sup> of racism, the bleaching of identities in the 1970s and 1980s in post-dictatorship Greece.

<sup>21</sup> Translation: Maltha is a black viscid substance intermediate between petroleum and asphalt also called *earth pitch*, *mineral tar*, that was used in ancient times on wooden boards for everyday writing that can be melted and reused. It comes in contrast to the white permanent writing on marble.

<sup>22</sup> As Maria Christoforidi said on day 1 of the Surplus Cinema program (23 November 2022): “I love secrets.” The phrase “public secrets” is borrowed from the work of artist, filmmaker and writer Crystal Z. Campbell.

*Don't forget another story.* Our friends are often our first confidants, “enlightened witnesses” (Miller 2004) in our grief of displacement; accomplices facing systemic trauma and decolonizing archives. Nationalist narratives insist on erasure. But we know this crossroad, currently baptised “Greece”, has always been a meeting point of languages, cultures, religions, peoples.

Filmmaker Sophia Farantatou pinpoints friendship as a means of survival: “in Greece<sup>23</sup>, where we can't rely on institutional support, we often work with minimal resources. And when social justice fails to exist, our friends help us survive and overcome structural barriers.” In 2018, Sophia lost a friend: Zak Kostopoulos, Zackie Oh!, a Greek-American activist, writer, drag queen and openly HIV+ advocate of human rights, who was murdered in broad daylight in Athens. Like films, Zak's murder had an audience. Bystanders made videos, televised endlessly on the news and social media for over six months, torturously replaying homo/transphobic brutality of shop owner and police.



The opening scene of *Bitter September* (2021) with Zak Kostopoulos and Sophia Farantatou

<sup>23</sup> “Or anywhere really where white capitalist patriarchy normalises violence daily”, the group added participating filmmakers discussed while preparing for the Surplus Cinema program.

Three films in Surplus Cinema mourn Zak/Zackie. *Bitter September* (2022) by Sophia Farantatou treads images before and during grief. Sophia and Zak began filming for a portrait of a young drag community in Athens building in the “crisis” years. Years after Zak’s murder, Sophia interrogates the camera, a tool used for violence or justice. The court case continues to condone perpetrators without consequences. Justice remains out of reach like bitter fruit.<sup>24</sup> *This is Right: Zak, Life and After* (2020) by Gevi Dimitrakopoulou, braids together voices, collectivising loss in the #Justice4ZakZackie<sup>25</sup> movement that erupted in public protests, home sanctuaries and drag obituaries. Claiming public space for the dead and the living, Madonna’s song “Like a Prayer” vibrates like an anthem of another faith. A faith in solidarity, in collective memory as a vehicle for social justice. *No Nos Soltemos Mas*<sup>26</sup> (2022) by Alkisti Efthymiou features the metasporic mobility of a stencil of Zak’s face as it migrates from Greece to Chile, in transnational protest. The walls speak in graffiti of grief. Before leaving home to take to the streets, a godmother and goddaughter paint the contours of Zak’s face.

<sup>24</sup> The title “Bitter September” comes from the bitter orange trees imported and planted everywhere in Athens by the assigned to Greece, Queen Amalia, because of their colour, and as the filmmaker’s father told her, “because its fruits were uneatable for the citizens of this town.”

<sup>25</sup> During the movement, a monitoring initiative began of the court case the murder trial of Zak Kostopoulos – Zackie Oh: Greek page: <https://zackieohjustice.watch/> English page: <https://zackieohjustice.watch/en/>. Today the court case has gone to European trial. The appeal of Eleni Kostopoulou, Zak’s mother, on the killing of Zacharias (Zak) Kostopoulos and police impunity in Greece, speaking in European Parliament can be heard here in the Committee on Petitions (26 January 2023), timecode 16.05.40 min–16.11.41. [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/peti-committee-meeting\\_20230126-1500-COMMITTEE-PETI?fbclid=IwAR08U91585Nt7TB65DtEhXV2FkMKuH8AWlhXJAiEORCCyS WjmK1rFMEyCbA](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/peti-committee-meeting_20230126-1500-COMMITTEE-PETI?fbclid=IwAR08U91585Nt7TB65DtEhXV2FkMKuH8AWlhXJAiEORCCyS WjmK1rFMEyCbA)

<sup>26</sup> Title translation: “Let’s Not Let Go.”

Alkisti: Imagine if someone was painting your face like this...with so much affection.

Would you like it?

Mara: Yes, of course.

Alkisti: I think he would like it too.

The collective Friends of Zak/Zackie in Belgium<sup>27</sup> bears friendship in its name: an entrance to solidarity and action. Knowing each other from near or far: “We believe you”.<sup>28</sup>

Despite distances, friendship makes diasporic mourning possible, especially when justice feels warped, ungraspable. In the triangle πατρίς-θρησκεία-οικογένεια,<sup>29</sup> friendship becomes a force capable of disrupting structures of domination, allowing polyphonic grief and joy to intertwine.

## (M)othering

– Rabab El Mouadden

Alongside friendship, mothering is a space of practice, rehearsal, reflection that we have consistently been circling back to. *The Brides of Maltepe* (2015 – ongoing) by Eva Giannakopoulou and Persefoni Myrtsou, in its four episodes, has been a close companion in thinking about the mother as other, the other as mother, the earth as mother...

<sup>27</sup> The collective took part in the Surplus Cinema Ciné Assembly, screening / discussion, 25 November 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Confronting sexist disbelief of survivors of rape and gender-based violence, the phrase “Sister, we believe you” (“Hermana, yo si te creo” and “αδερφή μου, σε πιστεύω” / “aderfi mou, se pistevo”) started circulating in feminist activist spaces in Latin America, Greece and elsewhere, to empower survivors who are often intimidated into retracting their reports, if they manage to make them.

<sup>29</sup> Translation: “fatherland-religion-family.” Translated from “*patris thriskeia, oikogeneia*.” For further information, see Effi Gazi’s 2013 article “Fatherland, Religion, Family”: Exploring the History of a Slogan in Greece, 1880–1930, *Gender & History*, vol. 25: 3, pp. 700–710. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12034>.

In the third episode, one of the filmmakers chooses to depict a very vulnerable experience of hers; that of giving birth. The separation of bodies: mother and child, during birth. It is a crucial point of the whole series: the kid doesn't belong to the parents but to themself.

After recently experiencing a loss myself – that of my 17-year-old cousin who attempted to reach the Spanish border by entering the Atlantic ocean from Morocco – I got in contact with his mother. She had encouraged him to leave. Despite this brave attempt of separation coming from the mother, and the hope it entailed, the result was fatal.

I mention this personal story because in re-watching *The Brides of Maltepe*, and especially this scene in episode III where Persephone gives birth, I felt a resonance between these two events: leaving – willingly or unwillingly – the mother's body or the motherland to explore what is beyond it. In *Brides*, by showing a moment as intimate as giving birth, the filmmakers/mothers attest to how a very personal experience acquires political meaning. The personal-political conundrum also shines through when the two filmmakers/protagonists talk about their kinships as Greek citizens with their Turkish partners.

What we can see in *Brides*, but also in many other films of Surplus Cinema, such as Christina Phoebe's *Amygdaliá* (2019), is that filmmakers as Others include in their images other Others. In episode IV, *Brides* highlights the challenges of establishing a mosque for devoted Muslims in Greece; another such example is the relationship between religion and transness when referring to the singer Bülent Ersoy. The other Others<sup>30</sup> are also

<sup>30</sup> The filmmakers, having already been excluded from the normative ways of being, choose to embrace in their films other individuals that do not fit the norms of their society.

the protagonists of *Amygdaliá*, where we listen to the voices of several women with migration experiences. This multivocality is also an attribute of the film *Rerooting* (2022). Many voices but also many filmmakers. The cinema of The Post (Film) Collective<sup>31</sup> is a cinema of subversion such as Fifth cinema as defined by Kaur and Grasilli (2018). It is a cinema of art and activism. The filmmakers and creators are in a process of movement; one that can be defined in many ways.

In *Amygdaliá*, we also see images taking us to notions of borders. Specifically, in a very interesting scene where we see Christina entering and exiting a baggage scanner. She crosses the border seemingly effortlessly, implying the insignificance of geographical boundaries, while highlighting the control exerted on the body. Another scene depicts her hand squeezing and applying pressure to barbed wire, emphasising the physical pain of geographical borders.



Christina Phoebe's body entering a baggage scanner in *Amygdaliá* by Christina Phoebe

<sup>31</sup> *The Post Collective* members are Sawsan Maher, Mirra Markhaëva, Alimu Mohhamed, Hooman Jalidi, Marcus Bergner and Elli Vassalou. The Post (Film) Collective is co-created with the artist in kinship, Robin Vanbesien and the project *Metaspora* together with artist Anna Housiada.



This complex passage of in and out, inside the womb and outside the womb, from motherland to foreign land and what is in between, entails a tremendous amount of pain. Nature and the flow of life become a source of suffering. In *Rerooting*, Sawsan Maher emphasises the dangerous side of nature for refugees crossing borders “illegally” in contrast with people carrying out activities such as hiking in order to reconnect with the forest and nature:

I start to understand the privilege of enjoying visiting nature and enjoying hiking and going around.

It is really different from being vulnerable to nature.

In some situations nature can be really cruel and can take over your existence.

That pain and suffering does not only affect humans but non-humans as well.

This reconnection with nature can happen, for instance, by placing focus on the forest. In *Ritual for a Burnt Forest* (2022), Mouries Collective<sup>32</sup> makes a ritual for a forest that was taken by fire on the Greek island of Evia in 2021. The forest, or more generally Earth, is associated with mother as a life-giving entity that is exploited. Instead, in the film, the forest – the earth, the land – is not only there to be observed; she becomes a subject.

<sup>32</sup> Currently in the Mouries Collective are: Maria Juliana Byck, Thalia Dimitropoulou Isabel Gutierrez, Eliana Otta, Sanchez, Sanem Su Avci, and Vasiliki Sifostratoudaki.

Since non-humans have always been in the margins of cinema and cultural representation,<sup>33</sup> I begin to wonder what a non-human cinema could be, and how we can imagine it.

## **Make Kin and Babies (Surplus Babies)**

— *Elli Vassalou*

Between human and non human, there is the foetus and then the baby, a state of being human closer to nature than we will ever be as long as we are alive, before we become humus, earth again ourselves. Babies are not just offspring and heirs of their parents' reality, they are worldmaking entities themselves, with the power to create unexpected, unorthodox, unfamiliar futures. "Make kin and babies" is about understanding childbearing and childrearing, not as peripheral moments in (an artist's) life, "but in themselves, an integral part of artistic and cultural production" (Jirmanus Saba 2020), a production that happens in collaboration with them, as they are themselves important agents of transgenerational solidarity.

The provocative quote of Donna Haraway "Make kin, not babies" (2016) was later rewritten as "make kin, not population" (Angrieski 2018).

<sup>33</sup> However, the genres of animation, documentary, horror, sci-fi are more known for putting on the spotlight non-human species. Although there are many films of the last decades that focus on climate change and eco-disasters (e.g., eco-dystopian) and many types of eco-cinema, in general, most of them have the human gaze as the most prevalent. What do the trees or birds have to say about it? How does a flower feel about it? Anna Tsing's "The Mushroom at the End of the World" (2015) comes to mind here, which by focusing on the mushroom, highlights the worlds of other non-human living beings.

In this chapter are reflected complex issues of intimacy and kinship, from reproductive justice to environmental justice, from human to nonhuman genocides to new practices for making families and kin. Population is usually perceived as unwanted or surplus life—and thus of disposable life. Michelle Murphy states “Population control could hardly be said to “harm” the unborn: Rather, it made the poor across the developing world surplus by definition.”<sup>34</sup> We dare to wonder: Who has the right to make babies? Who makes the right babies? Are there Surplus babies? (Murphy 2017).

I am part of the Post (Film) Collective, a group of transcultural artists, activists and thinkers who have different access to civil and artistic rights due to their legal status in Belgium. Working with the notion of diaspora could not fit our collective. Diaspora often stays in a binary between a here and a there, keeping minorities separated, still able to feed them toxic patriarchal narratives of ethnic nationalism. We wanted to create a place where we could flourish collectively, by committing playfully to each other. As other “children of compost” (Harraway 2016), after escaping wars, poverty and borders, we came together to cultivate our speculative collective garden.

<sup>34</sup> Looking at mainstream media, addressing different mothers, we see very conflicting narratives arise. In the commercial “The Girl Effect” #(2004, NIKE foundation) we see the education of girls in “3rd world countries”, as a way to stop women from making babies, -make money instead- to help their country and save the world from “overpopulation”. In the Greek promotion video for the first Panhellenic Fertility Conference (2021), a white woman with a career is presented as an ignorant egoist, an enemy of the state, who forgot to provide her country (pure) Greek citizens (and soldiers). The conference got heavily criticised by the feminist movement and got cancelled, however the spot is still online [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rtnk1ziljEc&ab\\_channel=BCIMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rtnk1ziljEc&ab_channel=BCIMedia)

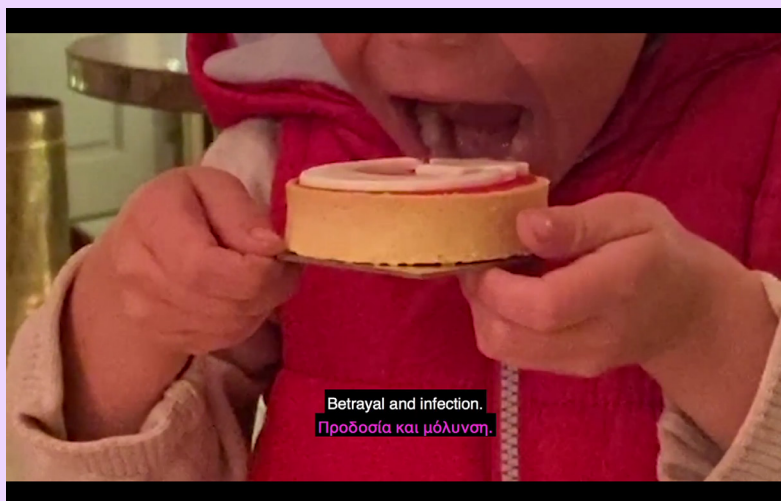
A garden containing our worries, hopes, bodies, experiences, children, the non-human species who live near or with us, our ancestors, the local soil, people and the stories that sprout between us all. We call this process ΜΕΤΑΣΠΟΡΑ (metaspora): creating synergies and new ecologies with care as an open community; to redefine belonging and dream of a common future; and as Joël Des Rosiers would say, to write our “own mythology, and forge post-national spaces, within the general movement of peoples” (2013). The film *Rerooting* is an experiment in how to create these spaces through the medium of cinema.

In the film, dialogues and cine-letters between Sawsan Maher, Mirra Markhaëva and Alimu Mohhamed, members of the collective, their interactions with Sawsan’s young children, and non-human agents in the forest of the Belgian Ardennes, create a world. The form of the film is also shaped by the fact that Sawsan, a refugee mother with no access to networks of care (by social state or family), is participating in an artist residency while being stuck at home with her children, as circumstances made it impossible for her to travel with the collective.

In the films *The Brides of Maltepe*, the two Greek filmmakers are having babies with Turkish partners, committing the “ultimate ethnic betrayal”, having babies with “the nation’s enemy.” The artistic duo responds to the complexity of their shared situation by making a series of episodes, where they digest their experiences in dialogue with each other and the world around them.

In both *Rerooting* and *The Brides of Maltepe*, the filmmakers, who are mothers or in kinship with babies (some of them children of immigrants themselves) are wondering how the children will

develop the ability to grow roots, what stories they should tell them and how to prepare them for a world where dominant narratives will keep them out and tag them as surplus. Sons and daughters of illegalised migrants in one case (stateless babies), babies out of nation-state control (treason babies) in the other. *The Brides of Maltepe* call this new form of family they created “My miserable, infectious family” and fantasise about an island full of people who invent future traditions, people with no devotion to any country, infectious and blessed, “we the ones who swallowed the sperm of national toxicity and by metabolising its toxins into living cells, we gave birth to new organisms... paradox children, so that we piously invent our degenerate traditional futures.”



Betrayal and infection.  
Προδοσία και μόλυνση.

Contemplation on giving birth to a child that does not fit in national narratives in *Brides of Maltepe*, episode IV (2021) by Eva Giannakopoulou and Persefoni Myrtsou

Motherhood (and kinship with babies) in the two films, stands as a worldmaking power that has an affinity with making art. In coexistence, mothering and art produce subversive body politics, methodological tools and research-based practices. Mother – Artist – Stateless are three

identities that were not designed by the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal world to exist together. When women are called out as bad mothers, bad artists and bad citizens, “unloyal to civilization itself,” (LeGuin 2019) they create art forms and family forms that are queer, precarious, and infectious.

But in these forms we can sustain and celebrate our ways of being, creating collective conditions and *traditional futures*, “newly complex and open-ended” (Clifford 2004). They are constantly translated and transitional archives, artefacts, films and lullabies. Being able to build in dreams, every single night, again and again our new home, a place where we belong, as Fluffy the spider does outside Sawsan’s window.



Fluffy the spider weaving his web in *Rerooting* (2022) by The Post (Film) Collective

# Landmarks and Placeholders

– Sofia Dati

A hand caressing a burnt tree trunk of the forest of Evia in *Ritual for a Burnt Forest* (2022) by Mouries Collective.



Let us circle back to Mouries collective and linger a little longer in the company of the burnt forest. Let us be with those bodies devoted to the ashy landscape of Evia. Listen to their silent song as they caress the land and gather in remembrance of an interrupted life cycle. In their collective gesture, Mouries Collective re-members, re-collects, and re-roots the forest. In their attempt to connect with their wounded surroundings, they navigate the landscape as a frontier space, a place of death and regeneration. *Ritual for a Burnt Forest* is a testimony to how the body archive stores and transforms dispersed traces travelling through open pores and spores. It is in such dispersion that Surplus Cinema started making its nest, thinking about diasporic kinships and metaspore. How to imagine

the diasporic not as a stigma imposed on us, but as a condition of circulation, of multiple rootings and rerootings across the suffocating confines of nation, gender, and identity constructs?

As symbolic representations of a place or a nation-state, landmarks constitute a collection of traces or imprints that history deemed worthy of preservation. As such, they are inseparable from notions of borders and boundaries. The forest is one such landmark. Romanticism has depicted forests as one of its preferred motifs. A whole tradition reveres those sublime wanderings in the wilderness, in that place of uncontaminated authenticity – remember Sawsan's and Rabab's thoughts about the hiker and the fugitive? Mouries' ritual, however, amplifies through performance a process of co-becoming that exceeds those romantic ties to the *preservation* of nature as a nationalist drive. With her filmic essay ΜΑΛΘΑ, Maria Christoforidi opens up another doorway allowing to unbind the foreclosures of national identity formations. She summons pop culture, mythical heroines and family portraits to inhabit some of the most iconic sites of Greekness. By inscribing Black bodies within the texture of Greek and European mythology and archeology, the film invokes an invisibilised "we" in the process of reclaiming space and (surplus) value. *Afrogreek, like Aphrodite* – a key character in the myth of Greekness – embraces her *darkness*, her blackness. The black femme body eludes her own codified cinematic representation and comes to signify a disruption in the representational canon of Greekness. Something else infiltrates the reassuring, numbing, and violent image of the norm (Keeling 2007).



Welcome to the nipple at the top of Athena's highest hill. In Eva Stefani's *Acropolis* (2001/2004), the monument speaks and acts in the guise of a woman's *feminine* body – a body that stands in as a generic spaceholder for a representation of femininity constructed and upheld by the male gaze. Like the glitch effect in ΜΑΛΘΑ's soundscape, the frenzied edit of *Acropolis* accentuates a break from “the tourist gaze.”<sup>35</sup> A gaze that consumes and reproduces clichés. In *Acropolis*, the role of the tourist gaze as part of a *reproductive machine* is exacerbated through erotic, consumerist and patriotic associations. The film produces a body (or multiple bodies signifying the female, feminine, body) as a space to be consumed for a fee, enjoyed for a brief moment as visitors come in and out and snap a picture to immortalise the memorable sight. The body becomes encoded within the scripture of monuments and myths. It glitches.

Now, imagine a beach at the feet of the mountain. The sand is warm, the air carries with it a joyous song. It feels like Summertime on a Greek island. In their films *Express Skopelitis* (2020) and *Luxenia* (2021), Emilia Milou and Dimitra Kondylatou respectively look at this consumable landscape in narratives that challenge labour conditions within the Greek tourism industry.

<sup>35</sup> As described by John Urry and many others. Also influential to our conversations was the text by MacCannell (1973). Thank you to filmmaker Dimitra Kondylatou for offering these texts to our surplus library.

But *Lesvia*, *The Herstory of Eressos*<sup>36</sup> chooses to place its focus on the political significance of the mythical island for Lesbians and lesbians. Tzeli Hatzidimitriou offers the portrait of a sanctuary that gives another twist to the tourist gaze. While other films set out to dismantle the exploitative mechanisms of tourism, *Lesvia* tells the story of a pilgrimage that, since the 1970s, has brought women from all over the world to Sappho's birthplace. They sought refuge, community and rest. Rest from a constant search for belonging and recognition; a break from the everyday struggle to just be. "I felt free, I fell in love" – says one of the interviewed women. The kiss at the end of *Enomena* (2022) feels like such a moment of bliss. Away from the bullies waiting outside with a taser, Anna and Jo find in each other an escape route from the suffocating microcosm that school can be – alongside a range of educational institutions. Phaedra Vokali's teenage love story is one of transformation, solidarity, and self-love as self-defence. The desire for intimacy and closeness in the face of adversity emanating from *Enomena* and *Lesvia*, translates a common search for new landmarks and revisited mythologies. Stories where we – lovers, friends, communities – collect, convey, transform, reform common tropes. Picturing the possibility of such narratives invites us to think of a landmark for more than one voice.

<sup>36</sup> At the time of the Surplus Cinema program, *Lesvia: The Herstory of Eressos* was in post-production. The program did not show the final film but featured a work-in-progress excerpt of the film while filmmaker Tzeli Hatzidimitriou was in the final stages of completing the film.



In *Acropolis*, *ΜΑΛΘΑ*, *Enomena*, *Lesvia*, and so many films and conversations within Surplus Cinema, the landmark seems to be lured closer to the body, in resonance with Julietta Singh's ruminations on the unruly alliance between body and archive. Appealing to the body archive as "an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason" is a way of challenging dominant history-making tropes. In contrast with the Derridean archive, this archive performs a gesture of attunement rather than one of commandment; it gathers an assembly rather than engaging in a quest for origin and authenticity. The Mouries Collective engages in such a gathering, while invoking the *chthonic*, the earthly, the grounded.<sup>37</sup> Filming with each other and with the forest, their performance of grief problematises

<sup>37</sup> Donna J. Haraway (2016) takes cue from the ancient Greek terms *khthonios* (from the earth) and *khthōn* (earth), describing "Chthonic ones" as "beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute", p.2.

the myth of “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism” emanating forms of disembodied, unsituated knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Here, knowledge is situated, and it is channelled through sensation.

Perhaps the landmark holds space and place for something else to emerge? If we think of the landmark as one of the tenets of a Master narrative, it is then possible to unlock one layer of the Surplus space-making gesture. These (and other) films shake the grounds where the rock lays, where the building is erected, where the story is told. Together, we occupy symbolically charged places and rewrite them through dia/metasporic kinships.

## ***an archive of errors***

— *maria christoforidou*

Yesterday I was hoping something would go wrong with the machine so I wouldn't have to work. Any machine: the car, the computer, the white supremacist capitalist heteronormative machine- whatever, I need a rest. Today my thoughts wander through film scenes from the Surplus Cinema programme that stand out for their lateral or direct examination of official narratives surrounding work and rest. The scenes speak beyond the historical and cultural context of Greece, whilst being very much situated there. Considering these scenes, I subscribe to Legacy Russell's description of the technological error as “glitch”. Russell celebrates the glitch as “a vehicle of refusal”, a “strategy of non-performance” (Russel 2020). The uniform, literal or abstracted, often features as a remnant of the late-industrial, militarised, racist, and male-dominant workplace.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

*Luxenia* (2021) by Dimitra Kondylatou evolves one Summer's day at a Greek resort. Parallel to the main glitch *de resistance*<sup>39</sup> (where the radio voice of the capitalist colonial tourist machine is extinguished by the push of a button) there is another glitch. One of radical rest, borne out of failure and accident. We recognise the figure as a worker by her pink chambermaid's uniform. She puts her towel on the busy beach. She sits down, then we see ... she sleeps. Her phone alarm goes off, she sleeps. By the time she hears it, it's dark and hopefully too late to work. Morpheus<sup>40</sup> helps the worker override learnt functions of obedience and becomes the "vehicle of refusal". This quiet glitch in the fabric of work time allows the body to belong to life, not to global economic apparatuses. The beach transforms from a site of capitalist neocolonialism to a site of rest.

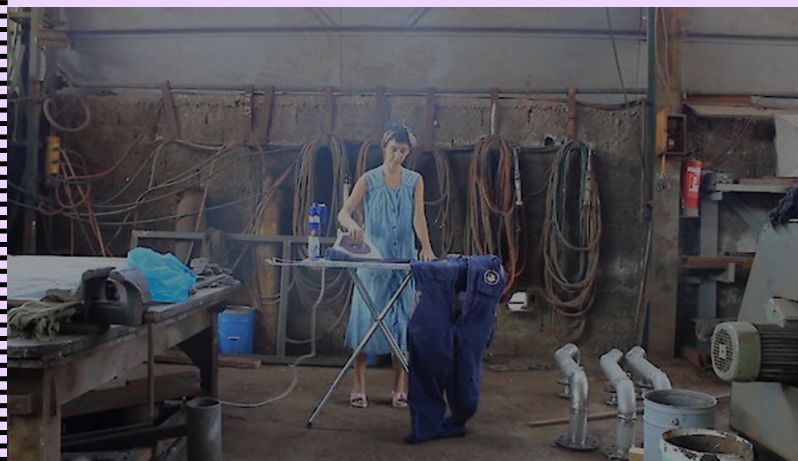


Anous Bogosian lying on the beach in *Luxenia* (2021) by Dimitra Kondylatou

<sup>39</sup> A play on words, from *piece de resistance*, a glitch *de resistance*: the most important or remarkable glitch in the film but also in an open translation it connotes the aspect of resistance in the glitch.

<sup>40</sup> Ancient Greek god of sleep

A socially shaped uniform arises in Prokne and Filtig's video performance *Trud* (2019). A body dressed in the male worker uniform, a blue boiler suit and hard hat, is welding. The worker takes off the uniform to reveal a tender female body; soft, warm and alive amongst unspecified rusting machinery. The moment the breasts emerge, like a light in the abyss, illuminates the mind to see the body as an intersection of possibilities, glitching layers of uniformity and compliance. Seamlessly the worker's body is enveloped in another uniform – the garb of a Greek housewife of a bygone era, housecoat, hair kerchief and *tsokara*<sup>41</sup> – and then irons the boiler suit. Apart from little details this costume has not changed in the last 100 years. Time stands still in the heteronormative patriarchy. This modern-day Sisyphus, caught in a loop between distinct uniforms of male and female labour, never rests. Judith Butler's "performativity of gender" (1990) runs by this scene, cackling.



Prokne ironing an industrial jumpsuit in *Trud* (2019) by Prokne & Filtig

<sup>41</sup> Greek word for wooden clogs, referencing also Prokne's film *Carmela's Garden* (2018)

The glitch perches on the female body in a different way in *I am Afrogreek: Black Portraiture in Greece* (2021) by Adeola Naomi Aderemi. Grace Chimela Ezen Nwoke, an Afrogreek teacher in an international school in Athens, recounts a pertinent, and for us Afrogreeks, recognisable scene of error. Whilst handing out school uniforms to parents at the beginning of term, she listens to two parents who enter her classroom looking for the teacher. They ignore her, assuming she is the cleaner. She says: “Hello, I will be your child’s teacher this year.” I imagine the couples’ faces but the punctum here is Grace’s face,<sup>42</sup> her bitter pursed lipped smile as she remembers. Her composure echoes countless women of colour who develop strategies to deflect an inadvertent “non-performance” of their expected roles in the theatre of employment. The body, due to the hue of its skin, is a glitch so powerful it becomes invisible in the machine that produces students, whiteness, and prejudice.

Kirezi Chakizimana in *I am Afrogreek: Black Portraiture in Greece* (2021) by Adeola Naomi Aderemi



<sup>42</sup> Punctum is a term used by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980) to refer to an incidental but personally poignant detail in a photograph which “pierces” or “pricks” a particular viewer, constituting a private meaning unrelated to any cultural code.

To underline these scenes comes *Ritual for a Burnt Forest*, perhaps itself a malfunction in the archive. In one scene, as the collective is performing rituals to support the lost forest in their regeneration process, bodies come into the frame to gently bestow on a burnt tree body, kisses, strokes, silent wishes, and quietly leave. The ritual as unwavering, methodical, psychological labour with unquantifiable results is a glitch challenging official technological knowledge and labour. Donna Haraway's call for new stories to call forth new worlds (2016) manifests in Mouries' psychodynamic refusal of the expected work. Rather than digging or cutting, it glides, bringing hope to the post-apocalyptic atmosphere. Before, after and during the apocalypse there is repair and care. The ritual counteracts the deluge of news images of the fire, suggesting another story.

*Express Scopelitis* (2020) by Emilia Milou holds a glitch like a pearl in an oyster. After we see men working hard at maritime pursuits, we land in a scene of an ancient looking woman on a sewing machine making bags out of maritime detritus. The female body and voice is a glitch in the male work heroic imagery of the film that ignites a mythological perspective of the error. An Odyssey with several Ulysses and one ancient Penelope. The boat, the men, the work are all sailing towards her, she is folded in the story like a grain of sand (a glitch, an error, a mistake, a pause, a secret!) that grows into a pearl. Wrapped in age, wisdom and stillness, "She" quietly carries on her invisible unofficial work.

Where can we get the power to lie down, to walk away, to make our bodies visible, free in the light, to repair? The error for me always carries the pleasure of its near homophone, the erotic.



I draw strength from Audre Lorde: “Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavours, my work becomes a conscious decision – a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered” (1978): The film space can constitute a pause to the endless labour cycles of exhaustion, a bed we climb into to dream irresistible strategies of refusal and healing.

## Sailing Further Together

In the place of a conclusion we offer a love letter to the Surplus Cinema gatherings. Lingering traces, film quotes and questions as a poem of experience and desire for what is to come. Fragmented memories we take with us as we move in between our dia/metasporic islands.

Summertime, and the livin ain't easy.  
“I'd heard stories from the 80s, 90s, a kind  
of lost paradise”  
“We're not very good at telling our history  
of how we got here”  
“Where do I find that history, my history?”<sup>43</sup>

Who will write our history? Our friends? What is a friend? What materials are friendships made of? A soothing friend's gaze and embrace? A caring phone call, feeling like infinity? How many hours of whispers and secrets clocked in, in bedrooms, boats and beaches? Where on the map can we find borders crossed, between strangers and friends?

<sup>43</sup> Excerpts from the protagonists in the film *Lesvia: The herstory of Eresos* (2023) by Tzeli Hatzidimitriou, a personal glance on the lesbian beach of Eressos in Lesbos.

From distance to proximity, closeness?  
What keeps a friend? What helps mend a friend's  
ruptured heart?

What aquarium antagonism allows for a kiss to  
replace a taser?<sup>44</sup>

For which errors can we make amends, to feel  
connected again -να νιώθουμε πιο ενωμένα;<sup>45</sup>

What landmarks of friendship are heard on the  
horizon? In Errresos or aboard Express Skopelitis?  
A siren song of a working-class mermaid without  
weekends echoes

“Location is an intervention and method rather than  
a place to go or position” (Nayak 2017).

Sowing seeds for friendships enduring,  
surplus cinemas grow like trees that “sprout where  
they are not sown”<sup>46</sup>

– Φυτρώνει εκεί που δεν το σπέρνουν

A (m)other of babies she did(n't) give birth to, who  
nobody owns

one that creates kin and whose body

– from endless labour and exploitation – soothes

Φίλες, φίλο, φύλο...<sup>47</sup>

Ten years ago I asked, είναι φίλος μας το φύλο;<sup>48</sup>

We sat on the floor in a circle in an occupied

<sup>44</sup> In reference to the film *Enomena* (2022) by Phaedra Vokali, a teen love story set in an aquarium on the island of Crete.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Greek expression which can be metaphorically translated as “poking one’s nose where it doesn’t belong”.

<sup>47</sup> Translation: Φίλη – Friend (in the female), Φίλο – friend (in neutral), Φύλο – gender.

<sup>48</sup> Translation: *Is gender our friend?* Posed in a workshop held at Embros Theater, on 14 February 2013.

theatre, equal distance from the centre –  
needing reminders of the peripheries and masters  
we carry within

In grieving Mediterranean waters, a reminder floats  
“Groupers can change sex you know.”  
Not on one side, nor the other  
a metasporic fish  
swims from reef to reef, in the borderlands.  
(Anzaldúa 1987)

“Groupers can change sex you know”  
from *Enomena* (2022) by Phaedra Vokali



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### Filmography

- Acropolis*, Eva Stefani, Greece, 2001, 25'
- Amygdaliá*, Christina Phoebe, Greece, 2019, 69'
- Bitter September*, Sophia Farantatou, Switzerland 2022, 25'
- The Brides of Maltepe*, Eva Giannakopoulou and Persefoni Myrtsou, Greece/Turkey, Ongoing since 2015
- Carmela's Garden*, Prokne, Greece, 2018, 5'
- Enomena*, Phaedra Vokali, Greece, 2022, 19'
- Express Scopelitis*, Emilia Milou, Greece, 2020, 69'
- Girlhood*, Vania Turner and Maria Sidiropoulou, Greece, 2021, 30'
- I am Afrogreek: Black Portraiture in Greece* by Adeola Naomi Aderemi, Belgium, 2021, 21'
- Lesvia: The herstory of Eressos* by Tzeli Hatzidimitriou. Screened as work in-progress, Greece, 15'
- Luxenia*, Dimitra Kondylatou, Greece, 2021, 10'
- Mythology*: The Thrice Burnt Archives of Unreliable Prophecies, Maria Christoforidi, UK/Greece, 2021, 15'
- No Nos Soltemos Mas/Let's Not Let Go*, Alkisti Efthymiou, Chile, 2022, 13'
- Rerooting by the Post* (Film) Collective, Belgium, 2022, 19'
- Ritual for a Burnt Forest* by Mouries Collective, Greece, 2022, 16'
- This is Right: Zak, Life and After*, Gevi Dimitrakopoulou, Greece, 2020, 13'
- Trud*, Prokne and Fitlig, Greece, 2019, 3'

**PART 2**  
**REPRESENT**  
**SELF-**  
**REPRESENT**

**PRESENTATION,**

**PRESENTATION**





## CHAPTER 8

# Abuse, Vulnerability and the Inbetween: Sites of Care in the work of Momoko Ando

Kate E. Taylor-Jones

### ABSTRACT:

This chapter by Kate E. Taylor Jones analyses some of the Japanese filmmaker Momoko Ando's work, (b. 1982). The author explores how using a lens of feminist care opens up a new dimension on the way in which we chart and engage with the work of female filmmakers. In the work of Ando, using a lens of care in its own right, challenges us to reconsider both working practices but also the film text itself and the way in which we interact with it.

This chapter is about the films of Japanese women director Momoko Ando. Via a focus on  $\equiv \cup / 0.5mm$ , I will explore how examining her work via a lens of care opens up a new dimension on how we chart and engage with the work of female filmmakers. I agree with Joan Tronto that “care becomes a kind of lens through which broad and macro-scale decisions and judgements become linked to specific lives and experiences” (2005: 130–1). In the work of Ando, we can see that viewing film via a lens of care asks us to consider both working practices but also “intersubjective dimensions such as affect, emotion or compassion” (Andersen et al. 2019: 569).

This chapter has three core questions: firstly, how is a sense of care important to our reading and understanding of female-centric film heritage? Secondly, when we chart the values that a director holds with respect to wider notions of care, what impacts can that have on our reading of a film text? Finally, how is care presented inside the film that this article is focusing upon?

Care, of course, is not a simple topic, and how we define, process and chart care is based on the social, cultural and historical milieu of the moment of examination. Care is both multidimensional and at the same time highly specific and local. As Tronto notes, care asks us at a fundamental level to question “what it means to be human and to co-exist with others” (2005: 3), it offers us a “perspective from which to think about human life” (2005: 130). The subject of care has received a vast amount of attention from multiple fields in the last decades, scholarship by Carol Gilligan (1982), Joan Tronto (1987, 2012, 2005, 2013), Sarah Ruddick (1995), Nel Noddings (1984, 1987) and Virginia Held (2005) have all contributed to a

complex framework that has allowed conversations around care to move out of the scholarship that is often focused on the act of caring (seen in discussions around nursing, elder care, child rearing, etc.) into a more nuanced and inclusive sense of the term that raised its importance in all facets of scholarship (anthropology, mathematics, engineering, geography, areas studies etc). So it is through this broadly defined lens of care that I am engaging with an examination of the work of Momoko Ando. She holds, as I will explore, a central idea around how ideas of care become a common motivator and frame thought in which the characters see their worlds.

## Women's Film Heritage and Care

“ラボの最後のセッションは、ハラスメントやいじめなど問題多き映画業界で働く上でのメンタルヘルスケアの大切さ

What a great way to end an amazing week – highlighting the need to take care of our mental health and demand better work environment in the industry...  
And more dancing!”

Hikaru Toda, Japanese female filmmaker,  
Twitter post, 2022.

Care as a broadly defined topic, has entered film and screen studies in a wide range of formats – both as a mode and an object of film scholarship. Studies such as David Li's 2016 exploration of Chinese cinema and economy, Chiver's book on ageing and disability on screen (2011), Agnieszka

Piotrowaka's (2013) exploration of documentary ethics and Kupher's (2012) study on cinema and feminist ethics of care are just a few of the myriad of studies to have engaged with both the philosophical framework of ethic of care but also the screen representation of modes of care/caring. "Care" was a central theme for both the British Association of Film, Television, and Screen Studies (BAFTSS) and Network of European Cinema Studies (NECS) conferences in 2023, and companies and roles that privilege care over other modes of engagement are gaining more attention in both written and practice based scholarship. The BAFTSS award to Raising Films for their work in supporting those in the film industry with caring responsibilities is a good example of how ideas around care have moved beyond the philosophical into more practical considerations around how care is actually manifested and structured in a meaningful way in the film and screen industries.

As Brannelly and Barnes state "The ethic of care asks us to think about our relationships with others, particularly those made vulnerable by different forms of oppression or marginalisation". (2022: 7). Their exploration of research methods that can align themselves with this approach concluded that "Such methods aim to include the voices of people who have been silenced, muted or devalued. They offer challenges to assumptions about hierarchies" (2022: 7). In terms of women's film heritage, care becomes central to the desire to develop and promote scholarship that seeks to uncover, understand and preserve often lost minority and hidden voices. Hence, we have need, via the lens of care for an ethical gaze that cuts across cinema in all its formats from production

(ecological filmmaking, intimacy coordinators etc.) to textual questions (“filmic language, modalities of audio-visual expressiveness, critical approaches and investigative tools”). As Gates and Gillespie state, “the field of film studies was designed around the centering of heterosexual white men” (13), and this not only related to subject matter but “the tools of the study” (Frymus 2020). In her study on women and film history, Amelie Hastie notes “women’s histories are inevitably dispersed across genres, forms spaces” and that our intellectual endeavours, as feminist academics, are concerned with “miscellaneous acts of collection” (229). If we see the creation of women’s film history as an act of collaborative knowledge production and co-creation across time and space, care becomes a core element in this. As Juhasz (2001) states when she summarises her goals in a collection of interviews with multiple women filmmakers, “These interviews become part of the larger feminist legacy that they attempt to document, participate in, contribute to, and understand. The community I “study” is the community I feed, the community I know and care about, my own community” (32).

In terms of film heritage, perhaps we should see caring practices not only in the desire to preserve, curate and promote the worlds of women but also to interrogate the often male, western-centric core around which many film studies programs oscillate. Carelessness in this sense also becomes a required topic of study. We need to ask the question: is it acceptable to continually teach and explore works whose creators are known to work from unequal, potentially damaging and in some cases, highly abusive working practices? The endless desire of some scholars and critics to laud,

teach and defend works by well-known directors whilst ignoring both their sometimes criminal activities or the weight of often female authored evidence that has been raised against a director through their careers. Sarah Atkinson's (2023) wonderful video on films where women have been put in danger is an audio-visual rendering of how care has been neglected in favour of perceptions of artistic merit.

In terms of methodology, how can we take ethics of care as a mode of filmic analysis that encompasses both text and context as well as engaging with the wider political discussions that such a topic entails? In terms of practicalities, Mette Hjort's exploration of film and risk gives a good roadmap via a series of questions that contributors engage with as means to navigate such an interdisciplinary conceptual terrain. Topics such as environment, production strategies, conceptualization, spectatorship, economics, and industry are all explored from the angle of risk (or mitigations of). In a similar fashion, a care-based methodology of film studies is one that allows researchers to explore both the text and content of a film and its environment from both a decolonial and a decentred positionality. With a focus on care, we draw attention to the often-unequal structure of power and practices in a specific societal/historical-scape that the films are embedded in. Via the focus on specific sites, relationships and practices we can begin to explore how connections are made, maintained and sustained in sometimes complex conditions and the positive impact that can bring to individuals and communities (Lawson 2007). Most importantly a focus on the relational/reciprocal involves "the

dismantling of larger systemic oppressions that are beyond the singularity of our individual or privileged professional relationships” (Baker 2019, 72). As I argue below, care emerges as being constitutively implicated within the concept of the creation of the film work that is presented to us as well as inside the film text themselves.

## **Momoko Ando and *0.5mm***

“I didn’t want to make a film about nursing care. What was more important to me was to depict how a family faces death, which comes to us all.” Ando Momoko, 2017

Momoko Ando’s *0.5mm* contains a remarkable scene that I show each year to my undergraduate students. An elderly man faces the camera and in a long monologue describes in detail the emotions that he and his fellow soldiers felt during, and after, the Pacific War – events that had taken place over 70 years ago. He speaks of the suffering of all involved and the guilt that has impacted his entire life. Throughout the scene, we hear a few interjections from behind the camera asking the main character to clarify his feelings and experiences. Given the hitherto clearly fictional film’s sudden shift to this documentary-style format, we are left unsure if this is a voice from inside the film’s diegesis. Is this a character speaking or is the voice of the female director, entering unseen from behind the camera? The film seems to enter a new space, outside the linear narrative we have followed

so far. The female voice gently probes, “how did you feel”, and then allows the subject to speak for over 15 minutes with no interruptions, cuts, or edits. This act of listening as a site of care, allows us a chance to enter into a new understanding of the character and his place in the history of Japan. Listening in this way allows the hitherto grumpy and often unreasonable man to be given a voice and his hidden and emotionally fraught experiences are allowed to be heard.

When I watch this with students, I have to present to them a potential framework for their engagement with such scenes. They are used to the rapid, action-focused media that dominates their media usage (most obviously seen in their endless consumption of Tiktok or Weibo content), this longer, static scene requires a sense of patience and focus that many of them are unused to. I ask them to focus on their emotions, their own embodied feelings as they watch, and then ask them to reflect on what they think of then we say the word care.

Kupher notes, “Analyzing care in the context of a variety of cinematic stories grounds the philosophy in the concrete lives, relationships, and responses that feminist ethics itself both commends and requires.” (1) . I show these films inside the context of Ando’s own career and women in the Japanese industry more broadly. Engaging directly with the second question I posed at the opening, I asked when we chart the values that the production team and/or director holds with respect to wider notions of care, what impacts can that have on our reading of a film text? Ando has made fictional feature films, written books and scripts,



both for themselves and other directors, and engaged with television, radio and film, festival and art programming and curation. Whilst I have interviewed Ando as part of the Japan Now North festival a team from Sheffield organised in 2017, the subject of care was never a specific topic of conversation and yet, in her working practices, ideas of care can become apparent both in her texts, her interviews and her wider activities in the film industry. I wish to spend more time on the film *05.mm*, so I will not present an in depth overview here but for those who are not perhaps engaged with the Japanese film industry, it, as with many others, is marked by long hours, potentially low rates of pay and this is intensified if you are working outside the big four film studio system (known as the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan (MPPAJ)). Many directors, particularly women, move between television, film and advertising to construct a sustainable career and this sense of precarity that has only grown since the impact of Covid19 (for more in-depth recent studies I recommend Ben-Ari and Coates (2021), Fujiki and Philips (2020) and Bernardi and Ogawa (2020)).

Momoko Ando trained at film schools in the UK and USA before returning to Japan to make her first feature-length film, the award-winning *カケラ / Kakeru: A piece of our life* (henceforth *Kakera*). *Kakera*, based on the manga by female author Sakurazawa Erika with the screenplay written by Ando, garnered critical and popular acclaim. In 2011, Ando wrote her award-winning first novel, *0.5mm* which became a 2014 film of the same name. Ando has a wide portfolio of work including

writing, radio presenting and television work. After *0.5mm* she reallocated to Kochi and has continued to develop her film works alongside her written outputs including her 2021 book *ぜんぶ愛* *all love/Zenbu ai* focused on Kochi and her relationship with the island, her family and cinema. Momoko Ando's work in Kochi has focused on the development of a wider range of sites of care, from children food cycle projects such as Wassoi to the development of a cinema culture in Kochi via her work with Kinema-M, an arts and cinema space suited in downtown Kochi. This interplay of social and cultural work alongside writing and film is most present in Ando's social media presence where the need to support, curate and enhance her local area is a clear motivation.

Ando's earlier film *Kakera*, focuses on the burgeoning relationship between Haru and Riko. The two women meet in a cafe and on their first date, Haru's period starts suddenly and violently and as she crouches in a public toilet, Riko goes to get her sanitary products and clean underwear. It is as she is changing out of her bloodied underwear that Riko asks her out on a "proper date". The intimacy of the act they are undertaking seemingly brings a new confidence in Riko's desire to pursue Haru. Whilst staying at Riko's family's home, Riko delivers warm, clean pyjamas to Haru as she bathes in her house and we see Haru decorate and plait Riko's hair. Acts of physical and bodily care mark their relationship throughout the film and offer a direct contrast to Haru's relationship with the other figures in her life – mainly her dreadful boyfriend who sexually, physically, and emotionally abuses her.

*0.5mm* was an adaptation of a novel written by Ando. In various interviews, Ando has spoken of how the novel was inspired from experiencing how her own family cared for her elderly grandmother. Her sister Ando Sakura who is the lead actress and in an interview for TIFF Ando notes that “As a family, we took care of her until the end, and I wrote the novel looking back on that experience after I had matured a bit...But I was actually studying abroad at the time and felt quite objective about the situation. Sakura, on the other hand, was right in the middle of that maelstrom” (Ando, 2017).

The length of *0.5mm* is sometimes a challenge when persuading students to watch this incredible film, at over three hours long, *0.5mm* focuses on Sawa, a care worker who falls on hard times and attempts to blackmail a series of elderly men into giving her money and a home. Along the way, the film engages with Japanese legacy of war time events, critiques the patriarchal structures that are threaded throughout society, and offers insight into how economics, age and gender can all contribute to precarity and vulnerability.

*0.5mm* rendering of care that reveals the ambivalences and contradictions in how we view and engage with narratives of care. The film opens with Sawa carefully cleaning an elderly man. She suction his mouth, cleans his privates, removes his adult nappy and then catches his urine when he involuntarily voids himself. She treats him at all times with respect, warning him what she is about to do, giving him as much bodily autonomy as he can given his lack of mobility. If we see care as incorporating what Held notes as both “practice and value” (Held, 2006) care as a concept becomes linked and demonstrated by “affective labours, acts

and gestures” (Fisher and Thompson 2020) it also therefore incorporates intrinsic values, determining how we *ought* to act in relation to other people. What Tronto lists as the four ethical dimensions of care “attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness” (1993: 127) is demonstrated by Sawa in her professional mode of being.

This mode of caring as a profession is a recognised dynamic. In her work on Latin American domestic workers on film, Gabiola notes that we can see a “commodification of care” (2013: 122). We see the sacrifice made by often female care to be justified by the material benefits that their caring labour can afford their families. For the case of Sawa, the material and care are always intertwined, and the film makes clear that care, like all other forms of social structures, are more complex than are often idealised in the figure of the self-sacrificial woman. Sawa is paid to provide these services, and this becomes a key element when his daughter proposes Sawa stay over to provide night-time comfort for her elderly father. Whilst his daughter quickly says she does not expect Sawa to have sex with him, just to provide some additional physical comfort “he missed his mother’s breasts”, the dynamics of this morally dubious provision of care are bound up in finance. This act of care though is perhaps an ideal example of what Nel Noddings (1984) equates to a situation where care for one individual can be an unethical choice at the expense of another. We quickly learn that her desire to ensure that her clearly abusive father receives sexual comfort is to prevent his assumed harassment of herself and her own child (who at this point in the film is presenting as a boy). This seeming attempt to

orchestrate a sexual assault is made even more clear when she asks Sawa to don a specific nightgown that clearly possesses some dreadful symbolism. We learn that her mother had given it to her and that the daughter had been forced to wear it for the father and notes "It was white, but it was stained so I dyed it red" and later in the film we will see her shave her daughter's hair to disguise her as a boy and then dye the dress as a means, we assume, to try to change this narrative for herself and her child. This legacy of male on female abuse hidden behind an act of elder care, undermines and harms Sawa's own bodily autonomy as despite his lack of mobility, the old man does indeed attempt to assault her. The section ends with the old man and his daughter dead and Sawa without money, a job or a home.

Sawa is then forced to move from place to place seeking accommodation and decides the best way is to blackmail older men into letting her into their homes. She uses the mistakes that the men make (Makabe is stealing books from a bookstore, Shigeru is stealing bicycles), to blackmail them into letting her live with them. It is not a simple case of these are innocent men she is taking advantage of. Her access point is from their own errors and Ando is clearly aware of the complex web of gendered expectations and patriarchal structures that surrounds Sawa as she negotiates her blackmail. Most of the elderly men show an inappropriate level of sexual interest in her, from watching her bath to making various lewd and highly gendered comments. Eva Feder Kittay's extortion to see care as something that is a spectrum (2011,

1999) that we will all enter into at some point becomes, as Lury and Holdsworth note, “integral to a more diverse and fluid understanding of subjectivity over the life-course” and in *0.5mm*, this movement of subjectivity is shown in detail as Sawa navigates the relationships she vicariously creates. Within Ando’s film, the recognition that we will all, at some point in our lives take the role of both carer and “cared-for” is reflected in Sawa’s multiple attempts to gain money and a home from the older men she accosts. Her acts of care are a constant development of her desire to hold both positions at the same time, she cares for them (cooking food, support, nursing etc), as they are forced to “care” for her (housing, money, buying food).

Sawa’s care is clearly informed by her nursing background – she cleans her elderly “victims” bodies and homes. She provides food and a listening ear to their recounting of lived experiences. She helps Shigeru return the bicycles he had stolen and sends away a con artist who is attempting to scam him for his savings. When she moves in at Makabe’s she finds that his wife is profoundly affected with dementia but Sawa’s careful ability to listen and respond to her needs allows her to move back into a state of subjecthood. Rather than leaving her just sitting in a bed raving and crying out, Sawa allows her to sing, dress and encourages her to reminisce on her life and experiences. Sawa manages to get her for a brief moment to recognise her husband “he is the man I love”, allowing him in return to once again see his wife as the woman she once was. Care in this way is

not just about providing for someone's physical and mental needs but also for allowing them to rediscover a subjectivity that has been denied to them in some way.

The toll that care takes on the person providing the care is not shied away from. When Makabe's niece arrives and tells Sawa she will take over the care of her aunt and uncle she admits to Sawa that this is an act of atonement. She had been driven by despair to abuse her own mother who had dementia and her inability to conduct self-care led to a breakdown. "I was suddenly in the position of being her caregiver, I took it upon myself to do everything. I pushed myself so hard, I became a mean daughter. I really was doing everything I could for her, but one day, my heart snapped in half".

When she is reunited with Makato, the grandchild for the man who had died in the fire, Sawa once again blackmails to gain access to the ramshackle building that the teenager is living in with their father. This time, Sawa finds a new connection, not with a person at the end of their life but an abused child at the start. Makato is a unisex name in Japanese, although more often associated with male identifying individuals and until this later part of the film, Makato was assumed to be male by Sawa. However, after a violent assault by their father which Sawa rescued them from, Makato's period starts. Sawa provides clean clothes, sanitary products and helps Makato cut their hair properly after their father had hacked at it. It is during this time that Makato's childhood is referenced as we see a flashback of her mother cutting her hair and disguising

her as a boy. The mothers desire to protect her daughter from her own grandfather's sexual abuse by denying them a chance to grow and develop as they might desire is clearly a serious misinterpretation of ideas around a caring relationship. However, the strength of *0.5mm* is to move away from simple understandings of ideas of care. Engsters (201) work on vulnerability is helpful here.

Engster encouraged us to use ideas around vulnerability to “redirects thinking about care away from a narrow focus on dyadic dependency relationships” (2019: 110). Drawing on various scholars, Engster argues that adopting the notion of vulnerability in place of dependence, allows a rethinking of care ethics. Engster makes the important distinction between vulnerability and dependency – arguing the make care theorists have made little attempt to differentiate the terms. He notes that “Vulnerability encompasses real and potential, short- and long-term threats to our well-being that arise simply from being in the world and living in relation to others” (Ibid: 104), in contrast, dependence “connotes a state in which, without some action on the part of others, harm, loss, or blight are highly probable and imminent”. Vulnerability “spans a whole range of potential harms, losses, frustrations, and blights, from the immediate dangers confronting an abandoned newborn baby to the slim possibilities that occupy the minds of the overly anxious (e.g. fear of being struck by a meteorite)” (Ibid: 106) Care in this way becomes a two-way process as we do all we can “to reduce human beings’ susceptibility or exposure to harm, needs, loss, coercion, domination, and other unwanted conditions or events” (Ibid:106).





Sawa is both vulnerable to the world around her and capable of offering care to those who are also vulnerable. In this way Ando presents a complex network of human relations that do not divide people into passive/active, old/young or able/unable. Rather, as the end scene shows us, people are vicariously all these things at the same time. Sawa finds a hidden package of money in the car Shigeru had given her and she screams in relief at finally gaining a way to move away from her precarious status. At the same time, Makato finds the red dress that their mother had dyed and asked Sawa to wear. They finally find their voice and start to cry and wail for their lost family. The film ends with them both driving away over the road bridge in Kochi to a fate unknown. Vulnerability has not been removed but in the act of recognising each other's pain, they have found a way to move forward.



*0.5mm* offers a complex vision of care and chimes with Ando's previous film *Kakera*'s vision of the idea of vulnerability and gendered narratives of interpersonal relationships. With a focus on the vulnerable rather than the dependent, we avoid a gendered dynamic of women as caregivers and move towards the need to recognise care as a core part of human existence.

## Conclusion

I opened this short chapter with three core questions that revolved around the idea of care and female-centric film heritage and how, specifically, the work of Ando and her film *0.5mm* evokes and debates care in a nuanced and critical way. Care has an important part of play in women's film work, both in the textual examination and preservation of women's cinema but also as we seek to preserve, engage and communicate around films and filmmakers that are all too often neglected or marginalised. How we chart and amplify women's cinema inside a system that often restricts budgets for women, demands long and unreasonable hours and ultimately, places oneself into a public field where critique in both formal (newspaper reviews, film festivals) and informal (twitter, forums) is becoming increasingly polarising and potentially toxic. Care should become a core element we consider as we engage with the structures that surround women and the products they make. As I have explored in this chapter, care in the work of Ando is multifaceted and bounded within a sense of the critical framework that women and care operates. Sawa is both a caregiver and herself a

highly vulnerable figure, but she never conforms to what Dee Amiee-Chin writes about the BBC series *Dr Who's* companion Rose Tyler "limited not only by her ability to care, but by her inability to act" (2008: 233). We are shown the positive and negative dimensions of care from the impact it has on the individuals providing care through to the levels of care-lessness that surrounds Sawa. Ando provides characters that are defined by the ability to act and care, to be vulnerable and active in their choices. Care should be a composite part of the film studies experience, from what we show to students but also how we frame that viewing experience. When I show this film to students, the need to recognize vulnerability in their own lives and viewing practices as they engage with a film text that covers complex and often uncomfortable subject matter, become a key element in the constitution of practices of care in film that extend beyond the film itself into the situated experience of watching and engaging with it. Care becomes a vital mode of analysis in women's film and cinema and women such as Ando offer us a vision of a filmmaker who offers insight and inspiration both in their film texts but her wider working life.

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## CHAPTER 9

# Ignored Scream from China in the 1920s: Emerging Feminist Awareness in the Film Scripts of Pu Shunqing

Xinyue Wang

### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 9 Xinyue Wang describes the screenwriting of Chinese filmmaker Pu Shunqing (b. 1902). The historical records of Chinese women filmmakers are notably sparse, reflecting a lack of space in history for them. This examination of Pu Shunqing's life and works aims not only to scrutinise her as an individual but also to uncover a historical space for women's writing. During that time, writing was a space that was hard to access for women, but it was still more accessible than cinematography. Consequently, screenwriting becomes both a metaphorical space for storing female discourse and a tangible, mental space for female creators to survive within the film industry.

If a camera points at the early Chinese cinema industry, female filmmakers, for the most part, are off-screen, relegated to a *space-off* condition (Lauretis, 1987, p. 25). Teresa de Lauretis, in her examination of feminist film theory, proposes that film theory can be categorised into two distinct spaces: the male-centric hegemonic discourse and the alternative realm of women, which can be called elsewhere (Lauretis, 1987, p. 26). This dichotomy is evident where the lack of female theorists or feminist theory has led to female critics remaining tethered to the male discourse. In her discussion of the women's movement, Julia Kristeva extends from women's time to women's space in history. She says:

My usage of the word "generation" implies less a chronology than a signifying space, a both corporeal and desiring mental space. (Lauretis, 1987, p. 33)

Similarly, the historical records of Chinese women filmmakers are notably sparse, reflecting a lack of space in history for Chinese women filmmakers (Salvaggio, 1988, p. 272). This examination of Pu Shunqing's life and works aims not only to scrutinise her as an individual but also to uncover a historical space for women's writing. In her study of early Chinese women filmmakers, Shiyu Louisa Wei highlights the historical omission of significant women filmmakers. "Among the film histories published in mainland China, only *History of Chinese Film Development*, edited by Cheng Jihua, mentions Xie Caizhen, Esther Eng, and Yin Hailing, with only Yin Hailing appearing in the main text" (Wei & Zheng, 2022, p. 105). The study of Pu Shunqing remains absent in Chinese film



historiography. When conducting research on Pu Shunqing, I primarily relied on the “Full-Text Database of Periodicals of the Republic of China (Minguo Shiqi Qikan Quanwen Shujuku)” within the “National Newspaper Index (Quanguo Baokan Suoyin)” database(<https://www.cnbkxy.com>). This database contains over 25,000 periodicals from the Republic of China spanning the years 1911 to 1949. Additionally, I consulted *The History of Chinese Silent Movie Scripts (Zhongguo Wusheng Dianyingshi)* and *Plays in the New Chinese Literature Series (Zhongguo Xinwenxue Daxi)* for early Chinese movie scripts. Chinese film archives encompass both physical and digital storage. Official institutions such as China Film Archive, China National Film Museum, Shanghai Film Archive, Shanghai Film Museum, and the Hong Kong Film Archive are responsible for physical storage, which includes film graphic and textual archives (such as textual art archives, stills, and posters), Chinese and foreign film prints, and filmmakers’ personal belongings. These institutions also employ digital technology for film restoration. These archives provide comprehensive records of the material aspects of Chinese cinema. However, mainstream film history monographs in China, although following a linear historical narrative, are predominantly authored by males and for males. Since 1988, there has been a call to rewrite the history of cinema in China<sup>1</sup>. With the advancement of digital humanities, digital archives, and media archaeology, there has been a growing emphasis on exploring diverse perspectives in film history.

<sup>1</sup> See Li Suyuan, *Drawing Inspiration from History: Reflections on the Study of Cinema History (Cong Li Shi Zhong Ji Qu Ling Gan: Dian Ying Shi Yan Jiu Sui Xiang)*.

Except that Professor Gina Marchetti from the University of Hong Kong has established the digital archive platform Hong Kong Women Filmmakers (<https://hkwomenfilmmakers.wordpress.com/>), the current research on women filmmakers and women's cinema in mainland China primarily focuses on a few well-known female film directors and the portrayal of women in film texts. Women filmmakers in various roles within early and contemporary cinema have not received adequate attention<sup>2</sup>. I use the term historical space of women's *writing* instead of historical space of women's *filmmaking*. This is because, during that time, writing was a space that was hard to access for women, yet it was more accessible than cinematography. Consequently, screenwriting becomes both a metaphorical space for storing female discourse and a tangible, mental space for female creators to survive within the film industry. Simultaneously, the works of female screenwriters occupied only a limited, dispersed space in the film industry.

In her examination of women's writing, Sandra Gilbert poses a thought-provoking question at the outset of her book: "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" (Gilbert et al., 2000, p. 3). She highlights that some novelists have argued that writing is a male-dominated domain, and women are inherently incapable of writing. Gilbert metaphorically links the pen, the instrument of written expression, to the phallus, thereby underscoring the challenges women face in the realm of creation. This notion is equally applicable to early female film creators

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that there is no information available on Pu Shunqing in the Chinese Cinema Knowledge System (CCKS), a digital film archive platform led by Peking University and the Communication University of China, up until July 2023.

in the early Chinese film industry. In contrast to literary writing, a crucial prerequisite for becoming a screenwriter was to produce a film based on one's own work and secure its place on the film screen. Writing necessitated obtaining an education and finding a means of publication. Furthermore, aspiring female screenwriters faced the challenge of either joining a film company or finding someone willing to finance the adaptation of their work into a film, in an industry where men controlled the main resources.

Reflecting on the history of early Chinese cinema, the archive is dominated by male discourse, with only faint traces of women's contributions, thus underscoring the importance of revisiting this era. Early Chinese cinema contains a vast archive, though the study of Pu Shunqing constitutes a mere fraction of this extensive repository, as she is long relegated to obscurity and awaiting further examination. In comparison to her renowned film director husband, Hou Yao, Pu Shunqing's historical significance seems to be reduced to a mere footnote alongside his accomplishments (Vatsal et al., 2002, p. 119). Among the more comprehensive and rigorous investigations are the introduction to Pu Shunqing's life by Shiyu Louisa Wei in the Women's Film Pioneer Projects (WFPP: <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/>) program, and the research conducted by Xu Hang of the Beijing Film Academy. Although scholars have outlined Pu Shunqing's life and filmography, her historical significance remains undervalued, arguably precisely because her work embodies a more progressive female consciousness than that of her contemporaries, something that has, for a long time, been taboo in China and Chinese cinema.

During China's tumultuous years, Pu Shunqing received a quality education and was the only woman in the early Chinese film industry to have obtained higher education (Wei, "Pu Shunqing"). She graduated from Zhejiang Women's Normal School in 1920 and enrolled in the preparatory course at National Southeast University in 1923, where she studied in the Department of Political Science and Economics. During her time at school, Pu demonstrated a keen interest in theatre and co-founded the Southeast Drama Club (Dongnan Jushe) with Hou Yao. In 1924, the Great Wall Film Company (Changcheng Huapian Gongsì) was established and invited Hou Yao to serve as the screenplay director. Pu Shunqing joined the Great Wall Film Company and played a supporting role in Hou Yao's first film, *The World Against Her* (Qifu, 1924), portraying the character Cailan.

After 1925, Pu Shunqing entered a prolific creative period, producing a range of works, including plays, film novels, and screenplays. Her notable works during this period include the four-act play *Cupid's Puppets* (1925) (later adapted and filmed as a screenplay), *Her New Life* (1927), screen play *Divorcee Comedies* (1927), three-act play *Paradise on Earth* (1928), the one-act play *Daybreak* (1928), screen play *Cai Gongshi* (1928), and the film novels *Zhandi Qingtian* (War and Love, 1928) and *Geminjun Hailukong Dazhanji* (Great War of the Revolutionary Army, 1928). Among all, only *Cupid's Puppets*, *Divorcee Comedies*, and *Cai Gongshi* are screen play and made into film. In addition to acting and screenwriting, Pu also

held other positions in film production. In 1926, she was involved in editing the film *God of Peace* (Heping Zhi Shen) directed by Hou Yao, as well as working on the subplot in *Way Down West* (Xi Xiang Ji).<sup>3</sup>

Pu Shunqing's creations are notable for their more developed feminist consciousness, setting them apart from those of her predecessors. The 1920s marked the primary period of Pu's creative output and also represented a time of exploration for early Chinese film production, influenced by the New Culture Movement that began in 1915 and the May Fourth Movement that erupted in 1919 (Li & Hu, 1996, p. 79). During this time, progressive and emancipatory ideas permeated the consciousness of Chinese intellectuals and filmmakers. Despite the efforts of intellectuals from various fields to establish new subjects during the May Fourth period, the discourse on women's independence and emancipation was often filtered through the perspective of male filmmakers. Similar to the male-dominated literary field of the May Fourth period, the core members of the film discourse were predominantly men. Prior to Pu Shunqing's works, several films depicted the plight of Chinese women in semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, such as *An Orphan Rescues His Grandpa* (Guer Jiuzu Ji, 1923), *The Death of Yuli* (Yu Li Hun, 1924), *The Difficult Couple* (Nanfu Nanqi, 1913), *A Shanghai Woman* (Shanghai Yi Furen, 1925), and *A Blind Orphan Girl* (Mang Gu Nü, 1925). While these works addressed the tragic reality faced by Chinese

<sup>3</sup> In addition, she also participated in the preparation, direction, and specific shooting of the film. For more details of Pu Shunqing's production experience, see Xu Hang, *Video Expressions of Pioneers in Female Societies: The Consciousness of Social Genders in Movies Composed by Pu Shunqing*.

women at the time, they often portrayed women as miserable and vulnerable, constructing a narrative of “good women suffering”, as summarised by Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin (1996, p. 136).

Rey Chow notes that Chinese male intellectuals often assumed a pre-modern female identity in their works. Faced with modernity brought about by Western influence, Chinese men consciously identified themselves with women bound by tradition and as objects of needing civilization (Chow, 2003, p. 141). Consequently, their works featured numerous female figures, using these images to discuss the importance of escaping from feudal society. In other words, women’s liberation served as a facade for male discourse, and these works did not genuinely explore the barriers women needed to overcome toward true emancipation. In contrast, Pu Shunqing consistently identified the objectives and aims of female emancipation in her works, providing a more authentic exploration of women’s liberation. Pu Shunqing skillfully employed symbolic content to convey the reality of the situation. From a female perspective, she denounced the unjust system and cultural roots that perpetuated misogyny. She adeptly rewrote traditional fables, tales, and religions with misogynistic overtones, exposing the cultural roots of misogyny.

In her play *Paradise on Earth* (1928)<sup>4</sup>, Pu Shunqing constructed the Garden of Eden on Earth as a space dominated by women. The protagonist Eve is central to this space, and in order to protect another female character, Wisdom, Eve expels God from the garden. In the drama, Eve

<sup>4</sup> This play was collected in the collection of *Plays in the New Chinese Literature Series* edited by Hong Shen.

adopts an active and leading role, while Wisdom exhibits courage and supports Eve in her quest to establish a new utopia. During the construction of this earthly paradise, Eve confronts difficulties directly, overcoming her enemies. When faced with unexpected attacks from tigers and savages, Eve does not succumb to the image of a weak woman in need of protection. Instead, she takes up a stick and drives the enemies away. Meanwhile, Adam prays to God for forgiveness and belittles Eve, but Eve and Wisdom remain steadfast in their beliefs and ultimately succeed in building the earthly paradise. Thirty years later, when the paradise is complete, God requests that Adam and Eve drive away Wisdom, who had always sided with them, so that He can now inhabit the earthly paradise. However, Eve's descendants are outraged by God's request and chant the slogan "We Do Not Believe in God", ultimately driving God out of the earthly paradise. As such, Pu's play daringly portrays independent and autonomous female characters, a unique approach for the era, which often depicted sorrowful girls and incapable women. Through Wisdom's lines, Pu boldly proclaims the message: "Women, do not fear your weaknesses; with perseverance, you can achieve any greatness!" (Pu & Hong, 1935, p. 292).

*Paradise on Earth* showcased Pu's preference of symbolism, in which the characters are portrayed in a realistic manner. The character of God in the script refers not only to the God of the *Book of Genesis* but also represents a certain patriarchal authority and unshakable power, referring to the feudal system and foreign invaders in China at the time. Eve represents the revolutionary woman Pu hoped would emerge in China, lead the country

in a new direction, build a new world, and create a paradise on earth. With this belief, Pu joined the social movement and became a lawyer, providing legal support to women lacking legal knowledge in order to awaken and empower them.

Arranged marriages were another major theme in Pu Shunqing's plays. *Cupid's Puppets*<sup>5</sup> (1925) is a critique of arranged marriages. The story of Ming Guoying, an elementary school teacher, and his lover, Luo Renjun, who are both tied to an arranged marriage by their respective parents, and who break through the shackles of feudalism to pursue a new life together, is a short and concise one.

In this work, Pu spatialized the suffering of women. Ming Guoying is forced into an arranged marriage with Yu Ren, the nephew of her stepmother. Upon returning home to care for her ailing father, Ming Guoying is betrayed by her stepmother, who colludes with a doctor to confine her to a lunatic asylum, preventing her escape from the arranged marriage. The lunatic asylum serves a dual purpose: it is both the physical space where Ming Guoying is imprisoned and a metaphorical representation of the constraints imposed by feudal marriage, which similarly confines women to the home. This spatial confinement symbolises the limitations placed on women's freedom and subjectivity. The new world, however, remains an unexplored, imagined space. At the end of the play, the characters exclaim, "Let's go to a new society to find a new life! After all, young people with ambition refuse to be Cupid's puppets!" (Pu et al., 1996, p. 276). The characters who are

<sup>5</sup> This play was collected in the collection of *Chinese Silent Film History* edited by Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin.



running-away evoke Nora from Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). In her commentary on the play, Pu Shunqing, deeply influenced by Ibsen, compares his and Strindberg's differing attitudes towards women and feminist thought, praising Ibsen's creation and preference for courageous women who embody "new life"(Pu, 1927, p. 22). Yet, the new life sought by the characters in *Cupid's Puppets* is not explicitly defined, and their ultimate destination remains uncertain. Pu Sunqing provides a more far-reaching answer in her subsequent work, *Her New Life* (1927). It could be said that in *Cupid's Puppets*, Pu strives to depict the effort to break free from the old world, while in *Her New Life*, she delves into the exploration of what constitutes a new world and how to construct it.

Pu Shunqing continues to offer a critical perspective on arranged marriages in *Her New Life*. It tells the story of Lin Jinxin, an impoverished woman forced into marriage to Jiang Xiong through a marriage sale. However, Lin saves lives by joining the Women's Association and eventually divorces Jiang to start a new life. Pu does not portray Lin as pathetic or passive but rather as courageous and resourceful. Lin discovers that her husband has colluded with an oppressive warlord to smuggle arms. She risks her life to blow up the arms and save people's livelihoods. Unlike the passive and tragic portrayal of women in male discourse, Pu focuses on female friendship and constructs women's emotional and political alliances. In her works, women are primarily self-aware and assertive characters, and indeed she celebrates female friendship. A new society emerges from the room where the Women Association office is located. The space is dominated by and for women.

Women with different social backgrounds, such as students, female workers, abused wives, and maids, gather in this space, helping each other to fight against the bondage of feudal society and seek a new life. The new life, at this time, is clear and specific, that is, for Lin Jinxin, to leave her arranged marriage and establish a new life by her own volition. Notably, the heroine escapes not just from an arranged marriage, but from one that is traditionally polygamous. Instead of describing concubines as competing for favours, as is done in stereotypical descriptions of the tradition, Pu builds a female alliance among these women with conflicting interests. Through the heroine's lobbying, Lin shows the limitations and detrimental consequences of polygamy. The heroine persuades another concubine to divorce together and leave their cannibalistic marriage.

Pu Shunqing places great emphasis on the concept of newness in her writings. The concepts of new life and new society appear repeatedly in her works. She criticises the bondage of feudal rituals on women, opposes the subtle degradation of women in traditional culture, and denounces the lack of legal protection for women in contemporary society. At the same time, she celebrates women who are courageous and resourceful, who are independent, and who believe that women can control their own destinies without relying on the traditional authority of a patriarchal society, embodying an anti-feudalism quality. The newness in Pu Shunqing's work can also be understood as *elsewhere*. In the female-dominated Garden of Eden in *Paradise on Earth*, and the women's friendship-centred Women's Mutual Aid Centre in *Her New Life*, Pu Sunqing's emphasis on newness

and the construction of female discourse and female space are all evident. The need for newness reflects Pu's realisation that women were excluded from the old world, that is the semi-feudal society and they can only situate themselves in a new world. However, despite the fact that Pu Sunqing's works shaped women's desire for a new space, there was not enough space for female creators in the early Chinese film industry. This is evident from the fact that only two of Pu Shunqing's works were adapted into films, namely, *Cupid's Puppets* and *Zhandi Qingtian*, which were directed by her husband instead of herself.

We try to glimpse the situation of women in the early Chinese film industry through Pu Shunqing's filmography, that is, the exclusion of women filmmakers from the space of film creation, which was centred entirely around male filmmakers. Female discourse is conspicuously absent in film production. Although the film screen itself, the physical space onto which films are projected, captured the body of actresses in early Chinese cinema, the space behind the screen is dominated by men. Since the advent of cinema in China, a male-dominated discursive space emerged, with creative resources primarily controlled by men, while women were consigned to non-discursive spaces within the film industry, especially in behind-the-scenes roles. The first film made in China was *Dingjun Mountain* (1905) directed by Ren Qingtai, a male director. After that, Benjamin Brasky, an American, established the first film company, Asia Film Company (Xiyaxi Yingxi Gongsi), in China in 1909. Asia Film Company hired Zhang Shichuan as its script consultant, who established Xinmin Film Company, the first film company established by

a Chinese film professional in China, with Zheng Zhengqiu in 1913. Other well-known film production companies at that time, such as Star Film Corp (Mingxing Yingpian Gongsì), Great China Baihe Film Company (Dazhonghua Baihe Yingpian Gongsì), Tianyi Film Corp, as well as Minxin Film Corp (Minxin Yingpian Gongsì), were, unsurprisingly, established and populated by men. Men controlled the decision-making processes and the creative development processes, building up a solid and interdependent network among themselves, giving shape to a metaphorical space of film production which hence led to the content in the material space of the film screen. When it comes to space and social relations, Lefebvre points out that:

The study of space offers an answer according to which the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space. (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith 1991: 129)

Filmmakers who hold the means of film production, usually men, form a relatively fixed and secure network of social relations, creating an invisible social space from which female filmmakers are formally isolated. Just as Virginia Woolf had been denied access to libraries, early Chinese women filmmakers were denied access to the intellectual production space of early Chinese cinema. Woolf described literature as an open grass plot, and the authorities who dictated to women creators were like beadle who locked the library, saying to

women who came excitedly to read, that “ladies are admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction” (Woolf 1977: 12). Pu Shunqing was the first female screenwriter in early Chinese cinema because, despite her great talent, her screenplays were the first among the female creative community to be brought to the film screen, while for other female creators, getting their work filmed was a difficult task. After the release of the first Chinese film written by a woman, *Cupid's Puppets*, in 1928, Yang Naimei, an actress who wanted to make her own film, founded the Naimei Film Company under her name and made *A Wondrous Woman* (1928). However, her film company only made this one film and then disbanded ((Wang & Wang 2011: 237). Similarly, Wang Hanlun (Helen Wang), also an actress, made one film *Revenge of an Actress* (Nüling fuchouji, 1929) after establishing Hanlun Films but stopped shooting after that ((Zhang et al. 2011: 271). Compared to the creative prosperity of male directors and screenwriters, and the formation of relatively solid networks of connections, the power of female filmmakers in the early Chinese film industry was fragmented and vulnerable.

In 1930, Hou Yao was invited to the north to participate in the creation of the Film Talent Training Institute (Dianying Rencai Yangchengsuo) and the filming of the *Sad Song from an Old Palace* (Gugong Xinyuan, 1932). Pu Shunqing followed him and set up a law firm in Tianjin, and was known as “the first female lawyer in North China” (Zhucun 1931: 1). She also provided legal advice to women through a column in the newspaper named *Ta Kung Pao* (Da Gong Bao). The reasons

behind her decision to leave the film industry remain undocumented, but it may have been due to exclusion from the industry in her new location, marital difficulties, or a conscious choice to dedicate herself to the protection of women's well-being in real life. In her film work, Pu Shunqing tackled issues such as arranged marriages and limited educational opportunities for women, while her legal career focused on promoting awareness of laws designed to safeguard women's rights. In an interview as a lawyer, she said:

I used to think that women in modern China are mostly in a dark and miserable situation, but I realised that after performing legal services, I have undertaken many cases of painful women being bullied and abused, and I realised that my previous ideal was only one percent, and I would like to protect women's rights with the ability of the law in the future.  
(Xinleng 1932)

Following her career as a lawyer, Pu Shunqing continued to publish literary works in magazines,<sup>6</sup> but they failed to generate significant interest. The historical record of Pu Shunqing stops at her participation in the 1946 Nanking City Senatorial campaign and later in the National Assembly campaign in 1947, and then fades into obscurity (Dongjie, 1947). Pu Shunqing's struggle for women's independence and equality was ignored both in her own time and in the modern era, leaving her voice echoing and then drowning out in the

<sup>6</sup> Pu Shunqing published short literary articles in magazines, including *Start from "Wife in Wartime"* (1945), *Aftermath of "Wife in Wartime"* (1945), and *The Hero Has No Choice but to Be Sentimental* (1946).

space of history. Her emergence and fade in the early Chinese film industry, and her marginalised presence in Chinese film history as well as film theory, represent the *space-off* situation faced by Chinese women filmmakers. By revisiting the works of female filmmakers and subjecting them to rigorous research, we can gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives and construct a female discourse.

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## CHAPTER 10

# Into the Archives: Critiquing White Feminism Through the Work of Katinka Heyns

Lizelle Bisschoff

### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 10 Lizelle Bisschoff looks at South African filmmaker Katinka Heyns (b. 1947) and uses it as a vehicle to both describe the history of Afrikaans women filmmakers but also to critique the roles of White women in the country's film industry. A focus on the role of women reveals the silences and absences left by the apartheid system that ravaged the country for the best part of the last century: the voices of Black South Africans are rare, and those of Black women virtually absent. With a study of *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* (*The Story of Klara Viljee*, 1991), the author here inscribes South Africa's complex and contentious socio-political history with gendered and racial consideration. Heyns' oeuvre, considered from a feminist perspective, prompts us to recognise White feminism, and the place of race in gender politics and debates.

Delving into the South African film archives with a focus on the role of women reveals the silences and absences left by the apartheid system that ravaged the country for decades. As with film industries everywhere, women's voices are few and far between, but specific to the system of racial segregation that controlled the country for the best part of the last century, the voices of Black South Africans are even rarer, those of Black women virtually absent. It is thus striking, if not surprising, to find that it is White South African women who emerge as the pioneers of female filmmaking in South Africa. It has been documented (Botha, 2015: 1) that Truida Pohl, an Afrikaans actress, journalist and director for stage, radio and film, was the first South African woman to direct a fiction feature film in 1962, *Man in die Donker* (*Man in the Dark*). And not until two decades later did three further White female feature directors emerged: English-speaking Elaine Proctor, Helena Noguiera, who is of Portuguese heritage, and Afrikaans director Katinka Heyns.

In this chapter, I want to explore the work and legacy of Afrikaans director Katinka Heyns in more depth, focusing in particular on what is arguably her most feminist film, *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* (*The Story of Klara Viljee*, 1991). Inevitably, discussing the work of a White Afrikaans director in the context of South Africa's complex and contentious socio-political history, necessitates a consideration of not only gender but also of race, which I will attempt to incorporate from an intersectional vantage point. Katinka Heyns' oeuvre, especially when considered from a feminist perspective, prompts us to also consider White feminism, and its place in South African gender politics and debates. I have a particular interest in this positionality because

it aligns with my own, as I am also writing from the perspective of a White, Afrikaans scholar of African cinema, a position that I have increasingly considered and scrutinized in recent years. I grew up watching Afrikaans cinema, and I remember watching Heyns' films as a teenager and then young woman in the 1990s, just as I was coming of age and the country transitioned to a new, post-apartheid era. Considering Heyns' work from my contemporary perspective enables me to re-think the Afrikaans films of my childhood, and to consider questions of gender and race in particular, which I might not have considered as critically in my youth. Thinking through the role and position of White Afrikaans women in South African culture and society reveals their complex positionality of an identity category that straddles both victim and perpetrator – as White women were and still are privileged in the South African context because of their race, but have historically also been oppressed within a conservative, Calvinist patriarchal Afrikaans culture. Thus, vis-à-vis my own positionality, I attempt here to consider Heyns' work within the context of White feminism in South Africa, and also the value of her legacy, grappling with questions such as whether White-directed films from the archives still have significance. Are they worth retrieving from the archives, and what is their contemporary value? I attempt a diachronic view on this aspect of South African film history, to discover how the past illuminates our understandings of the present.

Harriet Gavshon (1992: 251) stated that of the approximately 605 feature films made in the country between 1985 and 1989, only two, *Quest for Love* (Helena Nogueira, 1988) and *Fiel se Kind* (*Fiel's Child*, Katinka Heyns, 1988) were directed

by women. It took almost another 10 years for Black women to enter the industry as directors, with Palesa Nkosi being credited as the first Black woman to direct a short drama, *Mamlambo*, in 1997 (Pillay, 2001: 64). The first feature film by a Black South African woman, Maganthrie Pillay, who is of Indian heritage, was released only in 2005 (Bisschoff and Van de Peer 2020: 40). Her film, *34 South*, deals with issues of rural-urban migration, race and identity. Pillay stated around the time of the release of the film: “With a hundred years history, we only have three other women, all of whom are white, who have made feature films. What does that say about South Africa? What does that say about our industry? To be the first black woman simply highlights the fact that there are thousands of other stories that need to be made” (quoted in Bisschoff 2009: 66–67). As South Africa has been grappling with the opportunities and challenges of a young postcolonial and newly democratic state over the past three decades, this depressing absence of women in the film industry is slowly being redressed, as more and more female directors, Black and White, are emerging. However, the continuing underrepresentation of Black female directors helming fiction feature productions is a troubling legacy of the structural inequalities left by the apartheid era that continues to this day (Bisschoff and Van de Peer 2020: 41). At the 2018 Durban International Film Festival, filmmaker Zamo Mkhwanazi, speaking on behalf of Black women in the film industry, powerfully proclaimed: “There isn’t a single space where I feel that we’ve been treated fairly, we’ve been represented, whether it’s because of our gender or because of our race. We are black and we are women all the time” (Vourlias 2018).

Zoe Ramushu, a South Africa-based Zimbabwean writer, director and producer, also claims that the plight of Black women in the industry is “an intersectional issue that needs to be dealt with as such [...] Although we are fighting for the same thing as women, we have to understand that women are not starting from the same starting point. There are different struggles for women” (ibid.).

In the context of this chapter, these statements intersect with the complexity of White feminism I alluded to earlier: the position of White South African women as both victims of patriarchy and perpetrators of a system predicated on White privilege and supremacy. This complex and problematic positionality also brings to the fore the contentious relationship that Africa has had with (White) feminism, exemplified by Black women’s suspicion of feminism as a colonialist, Western construct, and a resistance against simplistic and misplaced notions of a “shared sisterhood.” The development of feminism in South Africa has faced the same barriers the adoption of feminism in other parts of the Global South has encountered, viewed with caution and skepticism by women of colour. By the end of apartheid in the mid-90s, the movement was criticised for the dominance of White women’s voices in South African feminist discussions (De la Rey 1997: 6). Feminism has been a problematic position for Black women in South Africa to adopt, where it was seen as a colonial importation, White and middle-class. Desiree Lewis, South African professor of Gender and Women’s Studies, stated in 1993 that “local feminist scholarship is largely insensitive to the interaction of race, class, and gender” (535), and, “[b]ecause these paradigms emerged mainly in first-world

and middleclass contexts, they tended to dictate standards to “othered” (black, third-world, and working-class) women, presenting context-bound perspectives under the guise of universalistic notions of sisterhood”.

Writing in 1997, shortly after the official end of apartheid, South African gender and race theorist Cheryl de la Rey referred to the growing awareness of complex interconnected identities as the “difference debate”, which ruptured ideal notions such as non-racialism and the ideal of a shared universal sisterhood. Feminism in South Africa, dominated by White women initially, had to embrace the understanding that gender is not the only or even the primary social category of analysis. The difference debate introduced other categories of social relations, such as class, sexual orientation, ethnicity and so on, a multifaceted view of identity construction that Kimberlé Crenshaw dubbed *intersectionality* (1991). De la Rey (1997: 7) states that “[t]hese debates tested the notion of triple oppression which basically postulated an additive or accumulative model of oppression – race plus class plus gender.” She further argues that the triple oppression model increasingly came to be seen as limited; a positivist view of human experience that objectifies dimensions of social experience through creating unintegrated and isolated categories of identity, devoid from a holistic view of human experience. De la Rey also critiqued White South African men and women who believe, having been active in the anti-apartheid movement, that they are absolved from racism, ignoring the reality that racism is systemic and in-built. The development of feminism in South Africa was further hampered by the fact that anti-apartheid causes and protests

regularly took precedence over gender equality issues. Since the abolition of apartheid in 1991 and the transition to a democracy in 1994, more attention has been devoted to women's rights, and Black South African feminists became more prominent, forging their own feminist pathways based on their specific, particular struggles and aims.

It is important, then, that we situate Katinka Heyns' work – which regularly centralises the experiences of White women, and displays a strong feminine (if not overtly feminist) sensibility in her filmic narratives – within a White feminist framework, and that we understand her career progression to a director within the context of a privileged, educated, middle-class woman during South Africa's politically turbulent transitional years from the 1980s onwards. In a documentary about Heyns, simply entitled *Katinka*, directed by her son Simon Barnard (2018), Heyns declares her love for storytelling, inspired by her father's stories of mermaids and magic. Storytelling also provided an escape during her youth in Afrikaans Meisies Hoër (Afrikaans Girls High), a well-known Afrikaans language high school in South Africa with a hundred-year illustrious history, where bullying was rife. Heyns started her creative career on stage and cites pioneering director Truida Pohl as an early mentor. She was encouraged by actor Kobus Rossouw to do an audition for Jans Rautenbach, the well-known Afrikaans filmmaking pioneer. Heyns' work with Rautenbach established her as one of the most beloved and well-known South African actresses during the 1960s and 1970s for her roles in films such as *Katrina* (1969) and *Jannie Totsiens* (1970), as well as in television series from the late 1970s onwards. South African film journalist

Leon van Nierop ascribes Heyns' prominence and reputation as an accomplished and talented actress to her sensitive acting style and challenging roles (for example that of a young woman struggling with poor mental health and delusions in *Jannie Totsiens*) which contrasted with the majority of female characters in 1970s Afrikaans escapist cinema – “beauty queens”; peripheral and one-dimensional characterisations of women (Barnard, 2018).

Heyns met her first husband, the cinematographer Koos Roets, on the set of *Jannie Totsiens*, and credits him for her becoming a director. While Heyns' collaboration with Rautenbach was extensive, productive and well-documented, and he undoubtedly had a crucial formative influence on her transition to a screen director, it was also Rautenbach's style of directing – at times disorganised and tough, and often haphazard, working with incomplete scripts and improvisation – that encouraged Heyns to found her own production company, Sonneblom Films (Sunflower Films) in 1974. The company produced dramas, documentaries and television series, and also did dubbing for international productions in a small sound studio. Heyns started making feature films after being handed *Fiela se Kind (Fiela's Child)* by famous Afrikaans writer Dalene Matthee (1985), the novel her first feature was based on. Heyns' second husband was the well-known Afrikaans writer Chris Barnard, and both these creative partnerships, with Roets and Barnard, continued throughout most of her filmmaking career: Roets creating the cinematography for most of her films, and Barnard writing the screenplays for all of her feature films. In fact, collaborations remained important throughout her career, a creative process



that South African film historian Martin Botha calls Heyns' "collaborative authorship" (2015: 2). While Heyns undoubtedly developed a distinct filmmaking style, and highlighted narrative themes that often represented a complex (White) female psyche and interrogated Afrikaans culture and specifically female identity, this collaborative process denotes a creative process that aligns with a feminist work ethic. Heyns sees filmmaking as a collective process, as opposed to the "auteurist" approach to filmmaking, often critiqued for being White and male. The gendered aspect of Heyns' career is also revealed in the documentary about her life (Barnard, 2018), when she acknowledges that one of her biggest regrets is not spending enough time with her son, a negotiation between motherhood and a film career that many women deal with, and a primary site of feminist struggle. What we can deduce then from interviews and testimonials from people who have worked with her, is that Heyns managed to create a sensitive, caring, feminist working environment for her cast and crew.

Heyns' first feature film, *Fiela se Kind* (*Fiela's Child*, 1988), tells the story of a small White child lost in the Knysna forest in southern South Africa. He is found and cared for by a poor, coloured (mixed-race) family, who come to regard and love him as their own. The mother, Fiela, is a formidable woman, who takes on the authorities and bureaucracy to get her son back when he is taken away because being White it is inconceivable that he could be raised by a coloured family. The boy, Benjamin, spends his teenage years with a poor White family, mistakenly identified by the authorities as his biological family, who live from selling wood and poaching elephants in the Knysna forest. The two

families are harshly contrasted in the novel and the film, offering a penetrating take on racial issues in South Africa at the time: Fiela's family is deeply religious, has dignity and integrity, and makes a living from hard, honest work, while the White "bos" (bush) family have an illiterate, abusive and racist father, live in abject poverty and do not respect the forest environment. Benjamin is finally reunited with Fiela as an adult, and she offers him his rightful inheritance and ownership of the farm on which the family lives. Although the character of Fiela offers an example of a strong woman prepared to take on the apartheid authorities for what she believes is just, the ending of the film is problematic and endorses an apartheid worldview. By reinstating Benjamin, the white male, as the rightful owner of Fiela's farm, the film is reinforcing the social and economic hierarchies of apartheid ideologies.

Heyns' third feature, *Paljas* (1998, the term refers to something magical, for example a charm or a spell) is set in the post-apartheid transitional period and is about an Afrikaans family in the semi-desert of the South African Karoo region, isolated and dysfunctional in their interpersonal relationships, whose lives are irrevocably transformed when a travelling circus visits their town and leaves behind a clown. *Paljas* is thematically linked to a genre of Afrikaans magical realism, which has been explored in particular by female novelists and playwrights, for example Fransie Philips and Reza de Wet, as well as by the acclaimed South African novelist André P. Brink. Heyns' last feature *Die Wonderwerker* (*The Miracle Worker*, 2012) is loosely based on a period in the life of well-known Afrikaans author Eugene Marais, during which he sought refuge on an Afrikaner

farm while recovering from addiction. His presence creates turmoil in the lives of the family members, serving as a catalyst for hidden resentments and finally reconciliation. Of all four of her features, *Fiela se Kind* is the film that most overtly deals with racial issues specific to the South African context, if in a limited way, and despite the fact that Heyns has stated that she did not consider the story in terms of race, an oversight Botha describes as ironic (2015: 5). From her other films, with their primarily and overtly White, Afrikaans cultural milieus, we can establish that Heyns did not deal with the political and racial situation in South Africa in any depth, if at all. Indeed, in spite of her wish to create a feminist working environment for her cast and crew, Heyns' treatment of characters of colour is problematic in most of her films and as such, her feminism is problematic and non-intersectional.

If Heyns neglected to consider South African racial politics in her work, an oversight which should be critiqued from a contemporary point of view, what is more clearly discernible, is her preoccupation with the societal and domestic roles and pressures of women, a critique of White patriarchy. This thematic trope is the clearest in *Die Storie van Klara Viljee*, of which Botha (2015: 5) has stated that “[i]t was considered by many critics to be a profound feminist statement”. The film tells the story of Klara, a seamstress who lives independently, much to the incomprehension of the villagers with their conservative small-town mentality. She falls in love with a local fisherman, Pietman, a womaniser, who deserts her and has a child with Engela, still in high school. Pietman fakes his own death by pretending that he has drowned and leaves the town. The paternity of Engela's

child is actively speculated on by the whole village because extra-marital sexual relations are heavily frowned upon in this conservative Calvinist Afrikaner community. Klara, not knowing that Pietman has deceived her, vents her anger and grief at the tragedy that has befallen her onto the sea, deciding that the sea will never see her again and building a house behind a dune. When she eventually finds out about Pietman's deception, she decides that she can face the sea again, and embarks on flattening the dune all by herself, by making use only of a stubborn donkey pulling a ramshackle plough. For her, carrying out this punishing labour on her own is a process of purification and emotional healing, as she states: "Every load that I carry away is a load off my shoulders."

Klara continuously rejects the meddling of various men in the village who express concern about her living on her own and attempt to "rescue" her, she "emerges as a woman who determines her own destiny in a completely uncompromising fashion" (Marx 1992: 337). She even sets in motion the emancipation of other White women in the village, who, inspired by her example, reject the yoke of patriarchy in various ways and join Klara in her quest to flatten the dune. A powerful and caring community of women takes shape, and as unproductive and oppressive gender roles are questioned and transformed, even the men in the village appear happier. What is striking about the character of Klara, is the athleticism and physicality of the role, superbly acted by beloved South African actress Anna-Mart Van der Merwe, a resilient and irrepressible female presence that was a rare sight on South African screens at the time. The film certainly carries a clear feminist theme in its

depiction of female emancipation, although the ending, which sees Klara falling in love with the village teacher, Dawid, is rather more problematic. The final shot contains a slow aerial zoom-out of Klara and Dawid, dancing on the sand dunes during a birthday party hosted for Klara by the villagers, a scene that serves to re-establish and restore heteronormativity and Whiteness. Lesley Marx (1992: 340) argues that all Heyns' films end with the regeneration of family and community, albeit in a conservative, White, Afrikaans mould.

Significantly, *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* was released in 1991, the year Nelson Mandela was released from a 27-year imprisonment, and thus a pivotal transitional time in South Africa's history. If one were unaware of this socio-political context, the film's narrative gives very little away of this turbulent period in South Africa's past. Characters of colour are peripheral and have minimal speaking roles; one of the only hints towards the racial politics of the time, is when the builder, a coloured man, refuses to sit down in the teacher's office, stating: "In this town we do not sit down when talking a white man, Sir." While Klara succeeds in freeing not only herself from the burden of patriarchy, but also inspires other women in the village to oppose and break out of their prescribed oppressive gender roles, these emancipatory acts are limited to the White women in the village only. Indeed, in the South Africa of the early 1990s, Black women breaking out of White oppression and Black patriarchy would be almost inconceivable and one could assume that Heyns would not have considered extending the narrative of female emancipation to Black women. Such a narrative turn would also most likely have led to

the film being banned or censored. Throughout the film we encounter people of colour as extras in the background, filling out the societal context of the time, which consisted of multiracial if segregated communities, even in a small, Afrikaans village. At the end of the film, when most of the community members gather on the beach around Klara's house to celebrate her birthday, characters of colour again hover in the background, but are entirely excluded from the narrative. When bringing this film out of the archives and shining a contemporary light on it, we can appreciate it for its accomplished production values, solid acting and evocative cinematography, and herald it for its White feminist message, but from a racial point of view it remains limited and problematic. As an influential, well-resourced and networked woman filmmaker at the time, a pioneer of female filmmaking in South Africa, it is unfortunate that Heyns did not consider using her creative influence and reach to even subtly critique apartheid and Afrikaners' complicity in it.

Today Heyns' films form a significant part of the history of South African cinema, even if they are not widely seen or available any longer. The rights to all her feature films were previously held by the South African pay television channel, M-Net, within their now defunct African Film Library. Today some of her films can be viewed on Showmax, a South African video-on-demand platform, alongside the work of other (White) South African film pioneers, including Jans Rautenbach's films. Thus, there have been some attempts to archive these works, in order to retain their place within South African film history and create access to these films for contemporary audiences, archivists and researchers. They remain an important part of the

country's film history, even if they are problematic from a contemporary point of view. Lesley Marx (Blignaut & Botha 1992) has suggested that the films of the three female pioneers of South African cinema – Proctor, Nogueira and Heyns – should and could have created the vanguard of feminist filmmaking in South African cinema. Although female themes and a questioning of patriarchal norms are central to their films, the notion of a South African feminist film aesthetic in the absence of any Black female voices is inconceivable today. Heyns' films portray the personal perspectives of the lives and experiences of White women, often to the exclusion and marginalisation of Black stories and characters. Recovering these works from the archives enables us to see the gaps that they leave, omissions that are now slowly being redressed.

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## Filmography

*Die Storie van Klara Viljee*, dir. Katinka Heyns, 1992, South Africa.

*Die Wonderwerker*, dir. Katinka Heyns, 2012, South Africa.

*Fiela se Kind*, dir. Katinka Heyns, 1988, South Africa.

*Jannie Totsiens*, dir. Jans Rautenbach, 1970 South Africa.

*Katinka*, dir. Simon Barnard, 2018, South Africa.

*Katrina*, dir. Jans Rautenbach, 1969, South Africa.

*Mamlambo*, dir. Palesa Nkosi, 1997, South Africa.

*Man in die Donker*, dir. Truida Pohl, 1962, South Africa.

*Paljas*, dir. Katinka Heyns, 1998, South Africa.

*Quest for Love*, dir. Helena Noguiera, 1988, South Africa.



## CHAPTER 11

# The Woman's Film: Formations of Feminist Filmmaking within New Left Cinema

Amy Reid

### ABSTRACT:

Chapter 11 by Amy Reid engages with the New Left Cinema of San Francisco Newsreel. Responding to the social consciousness that sprung out of second wave feminism in the late 1960s, a number of women made a feminist film focusing on Black, Chicana, and white poor and working-class women's oppression. They noticed and spotlighted that among the growing body of radically-inspired films being produced, people of colour were being ignored. Their collaborative methods resulted in *The Woman's Film* (1971), and the chapter traces the history of its production and a deeper reflection on the intersections between feminist and New Left politics.

#### SERVE THE PEOPLE

NEWSREEL is a non-profit national organization of radical film-makers and organizers which began two years ago and has expanded to include production centers in San Francisco, New York, Boston, Chicago, and Atlanta. We coordinate our film-making across the country and with groups of film-makers in Europe, Japan, and other parts of the world.

#### FILMS

NEWSREEL FILMS ARE MADE FOR THE PEOPLE. The established media has always favored the interests of the giant corporations, the profiteers and never directly served the people whose lives and work built this country. Our goal is to place the power of the media in the hands of the people, to serve their needs and their interests.

All of our films are made in conjunction with organizers, people in the community, or on the job. LEARN FROM THE PEOPLE, SERVE THE PEOPLE. In the next six months SF Newsreel plans to begin work on several important films; Ecology, Inflation and Day Care Centers. We have already begun work on two major films: *A History of Labor in the USA* and *Women's Liberation*.

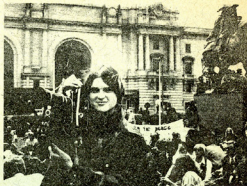
#### DISTRIBUTION

Our films are shown by community organizers, students and teachers in high schools and colleges and thru radical caucuses in labor unions. We are now averaging over 50 showings a week. This means more than 1000 PEOPLE A WEEK SEE OUR FILMS. Whenever possible Newsreel members accompany the films, generating discussion, teaching and learning from the people we serve.

#### FUNDING

Our support comes from the people. However, there are many groups who cannot afford to pay for the films and the need and demand for Newsreel films is growing. Most of our income comes from college rentals and donations. In the past, SF Newsreel has received several large grants from foundations and generous donors. These have enabled us to produce nine major films since January 1969, and triple our library of prints. We now need money to expand our print library and to produce new films, such as the women's film.

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The forty-one-minute documentary, *The Woman's Film*, made by the San Francisco chapter of Newsreel in 1971, was one of the first documentaries to be made in response to the Women's Movement. It was also one of the first films that merged New Left politics with feminism in the United States. Its production team, an entirely female group of first-time filmmakers, were already members of Newsreel, a self-proclaimed New Left film collective that had chapters spanning New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and Buffalo, New York. Responding to the social consciousness that sprung out of second wave feminism in the late 1960s, filmmakers Louise Alaimo, Judy Smith, and Ellen Sorrin felt that amidst a growing body of radically-inspired films being produced at various Newsreel sectors, a feminist film focusing on Black, Chicana, and white poor and working class women's oppression needed to be made.

Following a ten-month production process, which included fundraising, interviewing, filming and editing, the film internationally premiered and won first prize at the Leipzig Film Festival, simultaneously being shown throughout local community and art house cinema spaces in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

My initial interest in this project first began more from my desire to learn about Newsreel itself, and the dozens of films that were made during its heyday period of the 1970s. What emerged during the research however—comprising oral history exchanges with the women of SF Newsreel and archival research—was realising the incompleteness of women's roles within film histories, especially in male-dominated New Left spaces like Newsreel. Though *The Woman's Film* has maintained (minimal) visibility due its Newsreel origin and because of its distribution by what is now known as Third World Newsreel, the history of its production as well as a deeper reflection on the intersections between feminist and New Left politics remain uncharted. *The Woman's Film* offers a rare example of a New Left film both premised on and constructed via intersectional feminism. The techniques and structure of the film parallel its radical political interests – a combination of documentary and experimental editorial choices establish it as work of contemporary counter cinema. Considering the

<sup>7</sup> According to Judy Smith's unpublished text entitled "The Woman's Film" along with conversations I had with Louise Alaimo, *The Woman's Film* also screened in 1971 at The Los Angeles Film Expo, The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art and The New Yorker Theater in New York City. Judy Smith, "The Woman's Film" (unpublished, date unknown currently.)

ways in which women's roles in the production of counter cinema have been obscured, I believe *The Woman's Film* offers a unique complication of the historicized division between feminist and counter filmmaking practices of the long 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Foregrounding oral histories with women from SF Newsreel, this paper uncovers an often forgotten historical solidarity between seemingly disparate camps of decolonization, and reifies the place of women's liberation in the global cinemas of political destabilization.

## A Brief History of Newsreel

Newsreel is often folded into conversations around Third Cinema and counter cinematic movements.<sup>9</sup> These conversations, which glorify men like Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas instead of the collective Grupo Cine Liberación, or Robert Kramer's identification with Newsreel,

<sup>8</sup> With the "Long 1970s" I am referring to the periods roughly between 1968 and 1982 (as these dates reflect the case studies of feminist film practices I am charting in my current research. This period was a critical period for the proliferation of documentary-based, feminist filmmaking that spawned out of the women's liberation movement. It was a time in which feminist cultural production thrived in the form of films, literature, and social spaces geared towards feminist topics such as sexual health, work and money, and childcare. This period also covers a political and economic arch, from the Vietnam War and subsequent protests, neo-colonial regimes, Reaganism, and the rise of neoliberalism that started to emerge in the late 1970s. I am interested in this period because of this history of political events and the transition into neoliberalism that both affected the state as well as feminist filmmaking practices.

<sup>9</sup> During its initial years and even presently still, Newsreel would show and distribute films from Cuba's ICAIC (The Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos.) These films would include works by Santiago Alvarez among others.

mythologize a male auteur in film histories, rooting that artistic genius and radicalism in form and content stemmed from their involvement in these collectives.<sup>10</sup> While aspects of these filmmakers' individual bodies of work are worth considering in the oeuvre of counter cinema of the long 1970s, the perpetuation of these male myths extinguishes lesser known figures, such as the dozens of women and people of colour who participated in the various Newsreel chapters. Furthermore, this history limits the boundaries of how filmmaking as a political tool was taken up by people with little-to-no filmmaking background, as in the case with the women who made *The Woman's Film*. I bring these points up first in order to complicate how collectives such as Newsreel are historicized within an avant-garde legacy, and I advocate that a more socially-engaged feminist reading presents a more expansive, intersectional, and accurate history of these film collectives.

Four white cis-male filmmakers, Robert Kramer, Robert Machover, Norman Fruchter, and Allan Siegel are usually named as the founding

<sup>10</sup> Synonymous with Kramer's involvement with Newsreel, both Solanas and Getino are often cited as the sole filmmakers for the *Hour of the Furnaces* (*La Hora de los Hornos*) though the reality of its making was under the collective heading Cine Liberación. Mario Mestman's extensive work on Argentinian counter cinema locates "Toward a Third Cinema" ("Hacia un Tercer Cine") as being a product of Cine Liberación as a whole and not just Getino and Solanas, though Getino's own research does not indicate if women were a part of this collective. Furthermore, it should be noted *Hour of the Furnaces*, also accepted as a work of this duo, was originally made under the banner of Cine Liberación. For more on this, please see Mario Mestman, "Third Cinema/Militant Cinema: At the Origins of the Argentinian Experience (1968–1971)." *Third Text* 25, no. 1 (January 2011): 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2011.545609>.

members of the group in 1967.<sup>11</sup> Described by Michael Renov, the New York's core group "... matched the profile of Students for Democratic Socialism (SDS) leadership throughout the sixties—college-educated white males, verbal, assertive, confident, with access to funding sources both personal and institutional" (Renov 1987: 25). Inspired by true guerrilla footage filmed in places such as Cuba, Vietnam, and Guinea Bissau, Kramer and other key members thought their films should be like "grenades" inciting confrontation, agitation, and shedding light on the wars waged between the state and oppressed communities (Nichols 1973: 8). Newsreel's films screened in church basements, school dorm rooms, and union halls, and they saw the site of a screening as an opportunity for public forum and engagement into both local and international themes of oppression. Where possible and according to their distance from the screening locations, members of

<sup>11</sup> Still in existence, the New York Newsreel changed its name to Third World Newsreel in the mid-1970s. The information on Newsreel, listings of its members, its production and distribution tactics, are loosely recorded throughout a formal film history of counter cinematic movements in the United States. Though it is known that Bill Nichols wrote his dissertation on Newsreel, in the early 1970s, there has yet to be a conclusive book written about the formation and evolution of the groups and their various chapters, though TWN self-published an online PDF entitled *Third World Newsreel: Reflections on Progressive Media Since 1968*. The information I have been gathering thus far are based on anecdotal conversations with past members primarily in the San Francisco chapter, and the scant articles that were written about Newsreel I have come across in this initial research period. It is worth noting that in my research, which has spanned reading informal biographies of Robert Kramer on his personal website, to noting brief mentions of Newsreel in for example Morgan Adamson's *Enduring Images* or Jonathan Kahana's *Intelligence Work*, there are conflicting pieces of information as to who the "founding" member(s) were, as some claim Robert Kramer to be the sole originator, while others fail to register even specific names of founding members. I am sticking with the historical record of *Film Quarterly*'s 1968 article "Newsreel: A Report" by Leo Braudy.

Newsreel accompanied the films' screenings in order to facilitate conversations around the themes presented.<sup>12</sup> Topics ranging from police harassment to the Black Panthers were discussed more so than the methods and style of the individual films themselves.

The San Francisco chapter started in 1968. This chapter's history, while it stands in notable prominence next to the New York chapter, does not have an auteur figure like Kramer at the helm.<sup>13</sup> Along with all chapters of Newsreel, the collective had its own processing facility in Cambridge, MA. Members like Jo Ellen Rodriguez, a member of the San Francisco chapter from 1970-74, went there to learn to process negatives and produce copies of Newsreel films for distribution on an old Korean War era processor. Along with making copies of films like *Columbia Revolt*, Rodriguez recalls also copying pirated prints of commercial films such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Dictator* (1940) and *Modern Times* (1936) along with the historical drama *Salt of the Earth* (1954) by Herbert Biberman.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Judy Smith (former member of San Francisco Newsreel) in discussion with Amy Reid, 25 August 2022.

<sup>13</sup> San Francisco Newsreel became known as California Newsreel in 1975. Similarly to their east-coast counterpoint, it can be gleaned from my anecdotal interviews as well as each website's self-telling, that these chapters went through transformations in their members, both wrestling with "third world" politics and contending with a more racially and economically diverse membership. Though the founding document on Newsreel, which came out in *Film Quarterly's* Autumn 1968 cites Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross as members, their names do not surface in the reoccurring articles such as Renov's, Nichols', or contemporary accounts I have read. In future research, I aim to examine how and why Robert Kramer gets regaled as the leading figure of Newsreel and how this falls into the historiographic myth of the male-auteur genius.

<sup>14</sup> Jo Ellen Rodriguez (former member of SF Newsreel) in discussion with Amy Reid, 16 March 2021.

These films often got packaged along with Newsreel's own films for "double feature" screenings, travelling on Greyhound buses to destinations that ordered Newsreel films through their catalogue service.

San Francisco Newsreel also operated as a collective in which divisions of labour were strategically created so they could produce and distribute political films. "We were making a product," says Jackie Maughn, a member of the San Francisco chapter from 1968–1972.<sup>15</sup> While reports of the New York chapter speculate that much of the ability to make films came from individual's own financial resources, the San Francisco chapter relied on half of its members working for wages outside the collective and half concentrating on producing and distributing films. This model made it possible for Louise Alaimo, Judy Smith, and Ellen Sorrin to concentrate on *The Woman's Film*, while Newsreel members like Rodriguez and Maughn worked as a telephone operator and a school bus driver respectively.<sup>16</sup>

The women with whom I spoke shared that much of their time was spent supporting the making of films by the male filmmakers in the organisation, but not having hands-on involvement in the filmmaking process until *The Woman's Film*. Instead, as Alaimo explained, "we were relegated to the office," answering phone calls and helping with more distributional aspects of Newsreel's films, for example booking rentals across the U.S.

<sup>15</sup> Jackie Maughn (former member of SF Newsreel) in discussion with Amy Reid, 11 March 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Jackie Maughn (former member of SF Newsreel) in discussion with Amy Reid, 11 March 2021.



Furthermore, Rodriguez's own account of being sent to Boston in order to learn how to make copies of Newsreel films further places women within the Newsreel collective as maintenance workers. Alaimo, who joined the New York Newsreel in 1967 before moving to San Francisco, recalls helping put together a catalogue for the chapter. This echoes the accounts of many women active in New Left spaces, along with how women were generally integrated in work and social domains in the 1970s (Klatch 2001). Though women's roles are often obscured from the historical record in film histories, it is worth considering what legacy would remain of Newsreel had women not been in positions of maintenance, care, and distribution like Rodriguez and Alaimo.

Perhaps most notable is San Francisco Newsreel's development of their own women's consciousness-raising group, developing in 1970. Simultaneously spurred by their confusion and amusement of the women's consciousness-raising group at the chapter, the men began their own group, though as Maughn recalled, "They didn't know what to talk about."<sup>17</sup> The women's consciousness group seemed to naturally form, as all four women I talked to testify. As Alaimo, Rodriguez, and Maughn shared during our conversations, this group – in which women were able to talk openly about issues ranging from sexual abuse, micro-aggressions at the work place *and* in the film collective, and their sexual and emotional relationships with their partners (who for some were other Newsreel members) –

was a “totally new experience” that was both “revealing and liberating.”<sup>18</sup> It was through these meetings that members with children began a cooperative childcare system. Additionally, it was during these meetings that the idea of *The Woman’s Film* became a topic of conversation that eventually led to the film’s fundraising and production.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows, I will contextualise the making of *The Woman’s Film*. It is through examining materials such as ephemera; conversations with the filmmakers, and the film’s reception, that I’d like foreground the conditions under which this film was made in order to complicate the ways counter cinema and feminist filmmaking practices of the long 1970s were and still are treated as separate practices by scholars. Through prioritising a contextual rather than a strictly textual analysis, I hope to show in what ways this film offers a different, feminist lens, to the production of a counter-cinematic film. In doing so, I hope to make visible the marginalised positions of women such as Louise Alaimo, Jackie Maughn, Jo Ellen Rodriguez, Judy Smith, and Ellen Sorrin in history, one of many symptoms of the neglect of women in film history generally.

<sup>18</sup> Jo Ellen Rodriguez (former member of SF Newsreel) in discussion with Amy Reid, 16 March 2021. It should also be noted that this group, as far as attested by the women I spoke with, included only heterosexual women.

<sup>19</sup> Third World Newsreel lists *The Woman’s Film* being produced by “Women’s Caucus – San Francisco Newsreel.” “Third World Newsreel – Film Training, Distribution & Production,” accessed 18 March 2021, <https://www.twn.org/catalog/year/responsive/YearIndex.aspx>.

# The Woman's Film

Women !

We need you help! Here is a chance to help your self and your sisters. When was the last time you saw a film about women that you liked; that was written, filmed, and edited by women?

Well, here it is! S.F. Newsreel women have a script for a 40 minute film about the Women's Movement that is ready to be shot. All we need is money!

Women have the ability to build a humane society, once they move their personal problems into a larger context, that of society as a whole. Women felt that their problems were personal but have learned that these problems are shared by millions of women across the country.

**WOMEN UNITE!**

**WE ARE NOT ALONE!**

**WE ARE NOT SICK!**

**WE ARE OPPRESSED!**

Our film will be personal. We will talk to women where they are—at home, in the factory, in offices, on picketlines, and in the community. We will place today's movement in an historical context—with flashbacks of the early trade union and suffrage movement struggles.

You might ask why should I donate money to a film project when I can give directly to an organizing group. Well, first of all, we think films are the most important tool an organizer has. Films get to thousands of people and a film has the ability to move people into action. And most importantly, women have a responsibility to aid their sisters in the making of this film, which will benefit women in their struggle for liberation.

Film-making is expensive, but only if a few people are giving a lot. We think a lot of people should give as much as they can. We need \$5000 to complete the film and \$1500 to begin. Please send us a contribution today.



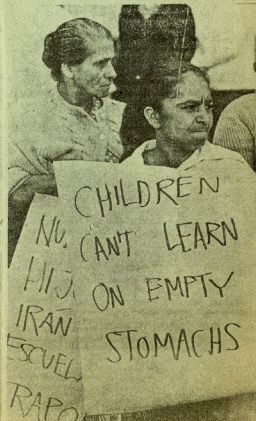
## SYNOPSIS OF THE FILM

1. The oppression of women as housewives and mothers, where it begins, and how women become conscious of it and begin to change their lives. We will trace the development of women from childhood to motherhood.

2. The economic oppression of women as workers, in the home and on the job. We will show how much work a woman does in the home and how this work is essential to keeping the system working. We will show how women are given jobs that are similar to the job she does at home, and how she receives less pay than men for the same job. We will trace the history of women in unions and why they feel they must form their own to be represented fairly.

3. Society divides people and makes them alienated from each other by racism, the schools, the media, the legal system, the army, and welfare. People blame each other when it is society that is at fault.

4. This final section talks about what women are doing about their oppression. We will give some historical background of the early women's movement in this country. We will then show organizations in which women are involved, such as welfare rights, day care centers, women's liberation groups, health centers, peace movements, and other organizations for social change.



Welfare mothers protest lack of funds to feed and clothe their children.



Though ideations of *The Woman's Film* were addressed in the San Francisco chapter's consciousness-raising group, by 1970 all Newsreel chapters were receiving calls requesting films about women's liberation.<sup>20</sup> It was decided based on a nation-wide collective meeting that Newsreel had to make a film addressing the Women's Movement, and that the San Francisco chapter was going to be the ones to make it. As Judy Smith wrote, "Our group decided that our approach would be to invest more money than we had on

previous projects and produce a scripted in-depth film on this subject that would have a longer shelf life than other Newsreel films.”<sup>21</sup> To start making the film, the SF Newsreel women began simultaneously asking women’s collectives across the country for feedback based on an initial script along with asking for financial contributions.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, the women of the San Francisco chapter were not only trying to gain funds but also build a base for “future renters” as Smith wrote.<sup>23</sup> In our interview Alaimo said, “They started to get small donations from women’s groups and individuals ranging from USD 5-10,” and were able to cover the rest of the USD 4,400 budget from “lefty producers” in Hollywood.<sup>24</sup>

A pamphlet was sent to local residents of the Bay and Newsreel subscribers specifically addressing women, which read:

Women! We need your help! Here is a chance to help yourself and your sisters. When was the last time you saw a film about women that you liked; that was written, filmed, and edited by women? Well, here it is! S.F. Newsreel women have a script for a 40-minute film about the Women’s Movement that is ready to be shot. All we need is money! Women have the ability to build a humane society, once they move their personal problems into a larger context, that of society as a whole! Women felt their problems were personal but have learned that these problems are shared by millions of women across the country.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Louise Alaimo (former member of San Francisco Newsreel) in discussion with Amy Reid, 9 April 2022.

The pamphlet then goes on to outline the film, focusing on women's current oppression both at home and in the workplace, while interweaving these stories into the larger history of women's suffrage and women's labour. Without saying that the Women's Movement itself had factions based on race, sexuality, and class, the pamphlet emphasises one major aspect of *The Woman's Film* will be around societal divides and alienation in the form of racism and class, positing a New Left position that was more in line with Newsreel's general themes of anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and decolonial worldmaking. The type of fund-raising model for *The Woman's Film* was not typical for Newsreel films, at least not in the formalised way of mailing off a pamphlet that outlined the film, spoke about the all-woman's production crew, and outlined who Newsreel was as an organisation. Many of Newsreel's films, as Bill Nichols and Michael Renov have shown, relied primarily on member's own financial contributions alongside of the nominal income generated through distribution. Furthermore, the filmmakers were not opposed to receiving their funding from wealthier benefactors, whose own involvement in media was less radicalised.<sup>25</sup> This type of knowledge further complicates the usual narrative that counter-cinematic works were made exclusively

<sup>25</sup> Judy Smith also shared in a 1972 interview in *Women & Film* that the film was supported by "rich liberals." "Interview with Judy Smith/SF Newsreel," in *Women & Film*. no.1, (1972): 34. In the unpublished piece entitled "The Woman's Film" Smith clarifies that the main bulk of funding came from a producer of Jack Nicholson who had recently completed the film *Easy Rider* (1969). The producer's name is not specified but Smith notes a check for USD2,000 was written for the production of *The Woman's Film*.

through righteous and untainted means. Additionally, generating funding through community-wide support, contrasts with the myth of the male individual, making his work out of thin air and cautious of sharing a film's idea for fear of the idea being stolen. Instead, I think the collective of women making *The Woman's Film* wanted to create a feminist transparency. They wanted to include other women in their idea process and share a project other women would also feel was necessary. Nowhere on the pamphlet does the proposal mention Alaimo, Sorrin, or Smith, but instead it does address the future audiences this film was intended for. The direct address in the pamphlet in a way enacts a meeting between the women of Newsreel and the woman receiving the pamphlet, mimicking the consciousness-raising structure of speaking and listening to and with one another.

Alaimo, Sorrin and Smith began meeting with the five main women featured in the film in the spring of 1970 and first started filming at the International Women's Day March 8<sup>th</sup>. The main women of the film were introduced through Newsreel's affiliations with radical groups either because of Newsreel's prior filming relationships with them, such as in the case with the Black Panthers (*Black Panther a.k.a. Off the Pig*, 1968), or because some members of Newsreel had personal affiliations with political groups. This included for example the Revolutionary Union, which helped connect the filmmakers with some of the women portrayed in the film, including Vonda, the wife of one of the Standard Oil strikers in Richmond, CA and Ernestine, who was a member of the United Farm Workers. Over a period of four months, a

series of preliminary interviews was conducted. During this time the group decided to focus exclusively on the personal stories of their main protagonists without interweaving a labour and suffragette history, as the fundraising campaign had initially outlined. In a 1972 interview in the short-lived *Women and Film* journal, Judy Smith says, “We just thought we’d have a whole lot more information about suffragettes. Women have always had a history of struggle and this was just part of it. But we just saw the strength of those women and the vitality was much more important than any kind of facts.”<sup>26</sup>

It is here that I would like to point out a key facet that I feel sets *The Woman’s Film* apart from most Newsreel films of that time. As Alaimo puts it, “*The Woman’s Film* was not a piece of breaking news. It was an analysis film that we considered feature length.”<sup>27</sup> Where other Newsreel films captured an event—a protest, a sit-in, a strike—*The Woman’s Film* tries to unravel the larger history of poor women’s oppression in the United States through the stories of the women featured in the film. The four other feminist-minded Newsreel films at that time, being made by the New York chapter – *Jeanette Rankin Brigade* (1968), *Up Against the Wall Ms. America* (1968), *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry* (1969), and *Makeout* (1970) – all focus primarily on documenting a singular event, and in the case of *Makeout* restaging an event. While these four works speak to the larger sentiments of the Women’s Movement, and at times employ experimental editing (as in the case with *Up Against the Wall Ms. America*), *The Woman’s Film* focuses on historical

<sup>26</sup> “Interview with Judy Smith/ San Francisco Newsreel,” 32.

<sup>27</sup> Louise Alaimo (filmmaker) in discussion with Amy Reid, 8 March 2021.

and present conditions of women's oppression, both through their subject's oral histories and the use of archival materials through a series of three montage sequences.

The primary footage we see are observational modes of filmmaking, using diegetic sound and showing women cooking and cleaning, working on the job, or during their respective support group meetings. There are additionally planned and staged interviews with the five main women: Florence, a white woman who leads a welfare support group called "Why Not Whites?"; Mary, a Black woman who organises a day care programme through the Black Panthers; Vonda, who runs a newspaper advocating for women's and workers' rights through the Standard Oil Union; Ernestine, a Chicana organiser through the United Farm Workers; and Vivian, a Black woman who's on welfare and a member of the Welfare Rights support group. This information is not clearly revealed through the film itself, but rather contextual information I have gleaned from interviews, materials published about the film in the form of local reviews, interviews, and Newsreel's own publicity of the film. While explicit information about who these women are as political leaders in their communities is not shared, what is clear is that each woman recognises her oppression and is liberated through the means of political organising.

Though the film might not focus as much on the history of labour or the suffragette movement, it relies on three punctuating sequences of both advertisements and archival photographic stills and film clips that act as historical overviews for women's oppression. I would like to define these three as the introduction, a section on work and



labour, and a third part on the United States' history of enslaving Black women. The pacing of these sections, the incessant chores, and the proliferation of images, both overwhelm, frustrate and exhaust the viewer. This tactic of fast-paced filmmaking was often an explicit strategy in Newsreel's films. Inheriting this style from other counter-culture films such as *Hour of the Furnaces* by Solanas and Getino, Newsreel's films bombarded the spectator with a series of highly charged and violent images in order to stir introspection and agitation in the audience.

Another distinctive difference that makes this film unique in Newsreel's oeuvre is the omission of Newsreel's logo accompanied with the abrupt and cacophonous sound of machine guns. Though this logo and its gun cry does conclude the film, its exclusion at the start makes this film distinctly its own, apart even from the other feminist films I've cited which did include Newsreel's anathematic salute. Beginning with Florence talking about her problems as being universally experienced by most women, *The Woman's Film* prioritises an unobstructed experience of a woman's testimonial over that of the aggressive branding of Newsreel's films. The combination of both archival materials and the observational camera work throughout the film construct how Black, Chicana, and poor women have been and continue to be viewed as less than their white middle class counterparts. Recorded through observational means, the women in the film reassert their autonomy and dignity. This is exemplified in spaces such as the Welfare Rights group, where Vivian is recorded saying she feels like a human again. Her humour and concise insights about the capitalist and imperialist ideologies in American politics, and her self-determination

challenge the common conservative trope of the welfare recipient as being a freeloading, uneducated woman.

It is because of the observational camera work that this myth, along with other myths the film portrays—women as mothers, brides, wives, sexual objects—is questioned. Furthermore, the details that we receive from each woman on the screen, that is both transmitted through aural and visual means, emphasises a granular attention to the specificities of these women and their lived experiences that is only attained through observational techniques. We hear from Ernestine about her routine from working a night shift to then coming home to take care of her children and husband. We hear from Mary how she was trained since girlhood to take care of the men in her family. We see Florence, wearing her floral muumuu talking about being dirt poor as a child. We see Vonda iron her husband's work uniform. It is through these observational details that we begin to see that the Women's Movement often ignores poor women and women of colour. As Ruth McCormick wrote in a 1971 review of the film, "The women interviewed are not the women you will see, as a rule, in a women's liberation demonstration, nor are they N.O.W. members..." (McCormick 1971: 40). In the spectrum of other feminist films to be made in the same three year period, *Growing up Female* (1971), *Joyce at 34* (1972), *It Happens to Us* (1972), and *Three Lives* (1971), *The Woman's Film* perhaps most of all is conscious of the deeper oppression that women of

colour and poor and working class women face.<sup>28</sup> These oppressions are most salient through the documentary methods the film employs.

In looking at *The Woman's Film* under the umbrella of 1970s feminist filmmaking practices, this film points to the contentious arguments about the use of observational modes of filmmaking as incongruent with feminist counter-cinema. I see this legacy, as cited in Claire Johnston's 1973 essay "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," as strictly against observational techniques such as in the case of *The Woman's Film*. Along with Eileen McGarry's 1975 essay "Documentary, Realism, and Women's Cinema," they posit that a feminist use of realist techniques (such as) in itself dismisses the fact that realism was seen as a conventional tool of the dominant (white cis male) ideology. McGarry foregrounds her argument against realism as it fails to register how life is already encoded in dominant ideologies. McGarry, like Johnston and Laura Mulvey, at the time were starting out as film theorists looking towards the language of semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and an Althusserian inflected Marxism in order to prove there is no real reality "outside of signifying practices" (Kaplan 1983: 74). In counter-cinema, films utilised a realist framework employing observational/ direct cinema and cinema verité approaches. These methods were achieved in a hybridity of experimental and documentary, as well as staged re-enactments, as can be seen for example in Sarah Maldor's *Sambizanga* (1972).

<sup>28</sup> But even this film has its shortcomings. As admitted by Alaimo, Maughn, and Rodriguez, the film did not include Asian-American or indigenous voices and it did not include women who identified as queer. In sharing it with the Los Angeles Newsreel collective for instance, Alaimo said that they received criticism that this film did not include more diverse marginalised voices.

Cinema verité (observational films made with hand-held cameras and grainy film stock) was used in conjunction with voice-over, texts and stills that turned these films into both affectively potent tools and educational devices. These films aimed at educating spectators through the use of statistics, maps, and archival documents as well as igniting emotions through percussive scores, rhythmic editing, and use of montage.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the heated contentions around realism in the feminist film circles of the same period, realist techniques were not seen as being at odds with a decolonial agenda. This was in large part due to the conditions set by texts like “Towards a Third Cinema” and “For An Imperfect Cinema” (Espionsa, 1969) which rejected prescribing an aesthetic formula or dismissing dominant forms such as narrative and documentary. Much counter-cinema mashed up methodological devices at the service of their subject matter and with the intention of eliciting conversations from the audience, as was the case with *The Woman’s Film*.

As many scholars have addressed the feminist “realist debates” of the 1970s, including Waldman and Walker (1999), Juhasz (2001), Rich (2012), and even more recently Erika Balsom (2017) and Shilyh Warren (2020), this period negatively impacted a critical, feminist engagement with the documentary form. The period also ostensibly failed to create solidarities between feminist filmmaking practices and counter-cinema. However, I argue here that, as becomes clear with *The Woman’s*

<sup>29</sup> Here I am thinking of Srour’s use of maps of Oman (*The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived*), Solanas and Getino’s use of archival images of early Spanish colonization (*Hour of the Furnaces*), and Newreel’s use of factual text about NYC school strikes (*Community Control*).

*Film*, historical debates tend to discredit how counter-cinematic theories and the feminist realist debates of the 1970s did interact and resulted in a film and filmmaking practices that caused a politically productive convergence of movements and sentiments. At a recent screening and discussion of *The Woman's Film* by Third World Newsreel, Judy Smith and Louise Alaimo talked about how they wanted to find women who were already active, already fighting for change in their communities. Showing the development of each of these women's lives from being oppressed to being liberated creates a sense of possibility that was felt in the air during the time of the Women's Movement. Revolution was thought to be imminent. While there have indeed been progressive landmarks for women's rights in the United States and beyond, many issues still face women and women-identifying people, and more acutely impact poor women and women of colour.

In the process of this research, I have asked what sustenance can be derived from *The Woman's Film*? For me, some of the answers come through the details, both of the film's production and the infrastructure of Newsreel itself. Learning more about the inner workings of Newsreel, along with contextualising the work, grounds the piece a bit more in reality—in a collective that at times had its dysfunctions and misogyny, in a film that uncovered some but not all of women's oppressions. There is not a perfect package to be picked up and opened in the present around the Women's Movement. Looking at *The Woman's Film* reveals some of the intersections between feminist and New Left politics, which I believe opens up a place in history that has mostly remained ignored.

The solidarities between the feminist politics of the film within a New Left collective allowed this film to be premised on and constructed through intersectional feminism. As a filmmaker myself, this research and the intergenerational relationships I have formed in the process help me think more critically about the persistent challenges to making films from a feminist-perspective, and the ways the women of SF Newsreel sought to create an intersectional feminist methodology for making a film. Additionally, the sentiments shared during the oral history exchanges points to the political, cultural and economic trends that both repeat and contrast with the present moment that both affect how women's films continue to be made and historicized. Lastly, I believe more research through oral histories and ephemera give filmmakers and scholars more room to think in tandem with these historicized divides between feminist and counter-filmmaking practices of the long 1970s.

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# 일상 속 역사적 재구성: 5.18 광주 민주화운동과 오월 여성들의 이야기<sup>30</sup>

김유진 (킹스턴 런던 대학교)

요약: 12장에서는 김유진 씨가 1980년 한국의 광주항쟁을 더 깊이 이해하기 위한 여정, 특히 시청각 아카이브 연구를 통해 발견한 이 사건에서 여성의 역할에 대해 이야기합니다. 군사 쿠데타에 반대하는 민주화 운동으로 "5.18"로도 널리 알려진 5.18 민주화 운동은 역사적으로 매우 간략하게만 언급되는 경우가 많습니다. 영화에서도 이 주제는 지엽적으로만 다루어졌기 때문에 저자는 흔적과 본능을 따라 5.18 민주화 운동 당시 국가 폭력에 희생된 여성들의 고통스러운 기억을 찾아 나섰습니다. 그녀는 시청자가 트라우마를 극복하고, 국가가 승인하거나 가부장적인 역사 사고 방식을 넘어 진실의 근본적인 맥락을 발견할 수 있도록 돕기 위해 사건에 대한 시청각 자료가 역사 속으로 들어가야 한다고 주장합니다.

광주의 오월, 춘기를 머금은 햇살이 아스팔트 바닥 언저리로 지긋하게 내리쬐면 그 온기는 따사롭다 못해 따끔거린다. 혀끝이 아리다. 분수대 아래로 쉴 새 없이 솟구치는 물줄기가 바닥으로 곤두박질칠 때마다 잡음으로 가득한 광장부터 어지러운 시내 풍경, 시퍼렇게 멍든 하늘까지 감싸 맴돌며 여러 갈래로 갈라지는 물방울이 음표처럼 튀어 오른다. 제각각 일정한 음정의 순서로 배열된 음계처럼, 투명한 물방울이 소리 없는 아우성처럼 마음을 적시는 날이었다. 광주에서 보낸 첫 오월은 또 다른 하

나의 계절이었으므로, 우리는 저마다의 오월을 품고 있었다.

해외로 이주한 뒤 줄곧 한인 가정의 일원으로서 살아온 세월은 일종의 장벽이었다. 어느 특정 구역에 귀속감이나 소속감을 느끼기에는 고국을 멀리 떠난 지 오랜 뒤였고, 아프리카 남동부에 위치한 마다가스카르라는 섬나라는 물리적으로나 거리상으로도 우리나라와는 한참이나 동떨어진 곳이었다. 공간적 경계선으로부터 철저한 이방인이 된 듯 바깥으로 물러날 수밖에 없었던 낯선 환경을 자주 탓했지만, 모국으로 귀국하여 학부 생활을 보내면서 국내에서도 실상은 다르지 않음을 깨닫는 데 그리 오랜 시간이 걸리지는 않았다.

나에게도 그러하듯 많은 이들에게 5·18은 역사적 파편이었다. 줄곧 무고한 희생과 열흘간의 항쟁, 그리고 용기와 죽음에 대해서만 강조하는 5·18 민주화운동은 교내 역사 시간에도 짝막하게만 스치는 단편적 국사 배경에 불과했다 (물론 2022년 개정 교육과정에서 5·18 민주화운동이 누락된 사건이 최근까지도 논란이 되었지만 말이다). 타 장르에 비해 다양성이 다소 억압될 수밖에 없었던 영화적 작품성으로도 5·18은 다루기 어려운 주제였고, 40년이 훌쩍 흘러가는 시점에도 사람들은 5·18에 관한 이야기를 유독 “어렵다”고 느끼고는 한다. <박하사탕>, <화려한 휴가>, <택시 운전사>, <아들의 이름으로> 등등 영화관 스크린을 통한 대중의 관심도가 높아지며 5·18이 세상에 노출되는 빈도수 또한 확연히 높아졌으나 꾸준히 진행되는 일상적 이야기는 여전히 과거에 머물러 있다. 한강의 <소년이 온다>를 탐독하면서도 느꼈지만, 5·18에 관한 기억과 재현의 이미지가 필히 민주, 인권, 평화와 관련된 것만은 아니라는 현실을 종종 마주하곤 한다. 우리의 이웃과 별반 다르지 않던 이들의 삶과 조각난 일상, 그리고 매일의 표정이 5·18 이후로는 어떠한

형태로 변했는지 우리는 이야기하지 않는다. 더 나아가 생각하지도, 그리지도, 떠올리지도 못할뿐더러, 앞으로의 방향성을 잃고 빈번히 방황한다.

2020년 2월 4일, 박사 연구 활동의 일부 프로젝트를 진행하기 위해 나는 처음으로 광주를 방문했다. 물론 “처음”이라 함은 5·18에 대해 충분히 숙지하고 난 상태로 방문한 것을 의미하니 광주 송정역에 발 디딘 것은 엄밀히 따지자면 생전 처음 겪는 일은 아니었다. 그날 나는 국립아시아문화전당(Asia Culture Center) 방문 겸 금남로를 거닐었지만, 당시에는 신종 코로나바이러스 초기 비상사태 단계로 활동 반경이 자유롭지 못했기 때문에 주로 서울에서 지내야만 했고, 마포구에 위치한 한국영상자료원(Korean Film Archive)을 위주로 방문해야만 했다 - 무엇보다도 그쯤 <금지된 상상, 억압된 상처>라는 타이틀로 흥미로운 기획 전시가 진행 중이었기 때문에 한국영화박물관의 상설 전시와 더불어 국내 영화사 관련으로 배움이 풍요로웠던 방문기는 비교적 성황리에 마무리했다.

하지만 본격적으로 광주 내부까지 파고들 명분이 생긴 것은 5·18기념재단 인턴십 프로그램에 합류했을 시점이었다. 2021년 4월경, 약 5개월 동안 5·18기념재단 국제연대부 인턴으로서 나는 킹스턴에서 광주로 옮겨가 새로운 여정을 시작했다. 그 시기를 기점으로 5·18에 대한 나의 관점도 많은 변화구를 갖추기 시작했고, 단순히 머리가 아닌 마음으로 광주라는 도시를 사랑하게 되었음은 물론, 1980년 5월 여성들의 활동 범위 및 역사와 정체성이 오랫동안 간과되었음을 깨닫게 되었다.

2021년 4월 19일, 따사로운 봄날이었다. 코로나 탓에 시기적으로는 걱정이 많았으나 입국 과정은 예상한 것과는 달리 순조로웠고, 14일간의 자가격리를 마친 후 첫 출근을 하게 되었다. 직접적으로 광

주에 정착해 본 적은 없었던 터라 모든 일상이 한 편으로는 색달랐는데, 매년 새하얗게 뒤덮인 겨울에만 기회가 닿아 이 도시를 찾았기 때문에 따듯한 햇살이 내리쬐는 봄날의 광주는 일평생 처음이었다.

나는 킹스턴 런던 대학(Kingston University London)에서 문화예술 평론 전공으로 박사 중에 있다. 박사 논문을 준비하며 본격적으로 연구하기 시작한 주제가 5·18과 실화를 바탕으로 하는 대중영화, 그리고 영상 매체 속에서 재현되는 집단 기억과 그 안에서 발현되는 문화적 기억에 관한 고찰이다. 무엇보다도 여러 나라에서 이민 또는 유학을 목적으로 다양한 삶의 형태를 겪어오는 과정 중, 대한민국의 민주주의와 민주화운동의 위대한 정신, 그리고 숭고한 희생은 여러 색깔로 덧칠한 나의 사회·문화적 배경의 핵심이 되어 뿌리를 내렸다. 그런 고로 5·18에 대한 나의 관심은 오래도록 지대했으나, 아쉽게도 5·18은 책과 논문, 저널이나 영화 등의 2차 자료 및 미디어 콘텐츠를 통해 접해본 것이 전부였기에 실질적으로 광주에 남아있는 지난날의 흔적들을 두 눈으로 담아낼 수 있다는 점은 나에게 매우 인상적이고 뜻깊었다. 그중에서도 5·18의 정체성을 더욱이 확립하여 유지하고자 80년 오월 광주를 기념하고 기억하는 재단의 노력은 무척이나 인상 깊었다. 이는 나의 박사 논문과 연구 주제에 큰 영향력을 선사했을 뿐 아니라, 전반적으로 내 삶의 지평을 넓히는 데 있어 중요한 지표가 되었다. 특히 광주 민주 포럼에서 진행된 다양한 세션, 그리고 든든한 동행자였던 참여단체들의 다채로운 배경지식과 세계 곳곳에서 빛을 발하는 여러 가지 노력은 나에게 큰 영감을 주었다. 군부가 국가의 통제권을 장악하여 곤경에 처한 미얀마를 위해 민주화 투쟁을 함께 하던 광주연대의 실천력, 태국과 홍콩을 향해 점차 높아졌던 5·18기념재단의 목소리, 그리고 보이지 않는 곳에서도 마음을 한데 모아 타지

를 응원하던 광주 시민들의 지원 하나하나, 모두 나에게 커다란 감동을 안겨줬다. 희망의 끈을 놓지 않는 열정이 살아 숨 쉬는 그곳에서 나는 여태껏 경험해 보지 못한 새로운 영역을 인지하고 인식하게 되었는데, 그것이 바로 오월 광주 여성들의 이야기이자 발자취였다.

때마침 2021년도는 5월 3일부터 6월 8일까지 <오월의 청춘>이라는 KBS2 월화 드라마가 방영되던 해였다. 광주의 한 외곽도로 공사 현장에서 발굴된 신원 미상의 유골이 등장하면서 막을 올리는 청춘들의 사랑과 우정 이야기는 5·18을 중심으로 하는 저마다의 인생을 담아내며 시청자들과 유대적 공감대를 형성했다. 총 12부작 드라마로 1980년대 청춘들의 로맨스를 주축으로 하는 <오월의 청춘>은 평범한 일상 가운데 역사적 소용돌이에 휘말리는 보통의 사람들을 묘사한다. 평소와 다를 바 없었을 하루하루가 전개되는 이야기를 동시대적으로 공유하며, 비극으로 치닫는 결말을 알고 있음에도 불구하고 많은 이들은 두 남녀와 그들을 둘러싼 주변인들의 일상성을 응원했다. 섬세한 감정선을 덧그리며 지극히 평범한 일상의 모습을 담아내는 작품 속 장면 하나 하나는 5·18 민주화운동이 역사적으로 발생한 사건 그 이상으로 오래도록 지속된 아픔이자 상처임을 대중에게 상기시켰다. 나 또한 드라마를 시청하며 내면으로 날카로이 파고드는 감정 흐름을 계기 삼아 우리가 잃어버린 일상성에 대해 고민하기 시작했고, 기억 속에서 흐려지는 이름을 품으며 날마다 버텨야만 하는 무고한 희생자들과 피해자들의 오늘날을 더듬어 보기 시작했다. 이것은 실로 용기가 필요한 다짐이어야만 했으며, 광주에서의 여정은 외부인으로서 어떤 마음가짐을 다져야만 하는지 여러 각도에서 시선을 달리할 기회로 새로이 거듭났다.

27일까지 광주시민과 인근 지역의 전라남도민이 전두환 신군부의 정권 찬탈 행위 및 계엄령에 맞서 싸우며 전개한 대한민국의 민주화운동이다. 열흘 동안 이어진 민중 항쟁은 씻을 수 없는 역사적 비극을 낳았다. 그사이에 무수한 시민들이 상처를 입고, 숨지고, 고문을 당하며, 투옥되기에 이른다. 이러한 국가적 폭력 사태와 관련하여 진상 규명을 요구하는 운동은 1987년 6월 항쟁을 거치고 여러 고초 끝에 대한민국은 민주주의 국가로 재탄생했으나, 5·18이 민주화운동으로써 명예를 회복하기까지는 고통으로 점철된 오랜 세월을 견뎌내야만 했다. 본분과는 동떨어진 군인들의 무차별적인 살상, 그리고 당시 학살과 집단 발포 최초 명령권자의 책임 소재는 여전히 주요 쟁점으로 남아있으며, 2021년 11월 23일 전두환의 사망 소식과 함께 5·18 광주 민주화운동 무력 및 유혈 진압에 대한 공식적인 사과와 직접적인 책임은 끊임없이 전가되며 미완의 과제로 남게 되었다.

80년 오월 당시 몸서리치던 광주의 상황에 대해서 그때 정부는 아무 입장 표명도 하지 않았는데, 엄격한 언론통제로 인하여 각종 보도 매체 또한 계엄 당국의 철저한 감시망 속에서 어떠한 현장 보도도 하지 못했다. 이렇듯 검열이라는 체제는 일제 강점기 때부터 대중 예술의 밑바탕까지 통제하는 방식으로써 순차적으로 체계화되었고, 군사정권 하의 영화검열은 정치·사회적인 문제에 관해서는 더욱이 치밀하고 엄밀한 제한을 가했다. 창작 활동의 전면적 규정은 자유의 억압을 의미한다. 강화된 검열의 통제력은 다양성을 추구하는 영화 속 장면들을 통째로 삭제하거나 변경시키기 일췌였고, 취지와는 달리 전혀 다른 결과물을 낳기도 했다. 제작 중단 사태가 발생하는 일도 종종 있었다. 한국 영화사에서 검열 시스템은 사상 통제의 수단이나 비판 세력을 차단하기 위한 감시용으로 목적성이 뚜렷했다. 그러므로 5·18 민주화운동에 관련된 모든 주제

는 신군부의 가혹한 검열로 인해 불순분자들의 폭동으로 묘사되었고, 북한개입설로 왜곡되며 문화·예술적으로도 오랫동안 억압을 당했다.

5·18 민주화운동 40주년 특집으로 방영된 SBS 스페셜 다큐멘터리 <그녀의 이름은>은 그런 의미에서 뜻깊은 궤적이다. 40년 전 고립된 광주로부터 전달하는 “그녀”의 이야기로 대중 매체를 통해 세상에 목소리를 낸다는 것은 절대 쉽지 않은 일이었다. 5·18 민주화운동 당시 참여했던 수많은 여성이 국가 폭력에 의한 트라우마 및 사회적 편견으로 그늘에 숨어버린 뒤, 그 실체를 낱알이 폭로하기까지 무려 38년이라는 시간이 걸렸다. 5·18 저항 정신의 주역은 계엄군들과 맞서 싸우던 시민군들의 모습으로 각인되었지만, 이러한 이미지는 대다수 남성이 차지하고 있다. 쏟아지는 총탄에 저항하는 시민군의 모습은 자연스럽게 남성성의 표상으로 자리를 잡았지만, 5·18 저항 정신이란 사실 나눔과 연대의 공동체 정신을 일컫는다. 안타깝게도 오늘의 5·18은 희생, 죽음, 그리고 항쟁이라는 영역에만 초점을 맞추며 “성역화되어 하나의 금기로서 존재하기 때문”<sup>31</sup>에 다양한 측면에서 접근하기가 어렵다. 그중 5·18 여성에 대한 소재는 불안정한 정치적 흐름 속에서 특히나 다루기 힘든 주제였으나, 그 피해 진상을 밝혀야만 한다는 여러 목소리가 실질적인 양상을 드러내고 있다.

<그녀의 이름은>은 국내 방송사인 SBS가 2005년도부터 정규 편성하여 선보이는 본격 다큐멘터리로서 2020년 5월 17일 593회차로 방영되었다. 다큐멘터리 내에서도 언급되었듯 5·18 관련 연구소 자료 및 도서관 책들의 주인공은 대다수가 남성 화자이며, 자신의 경험담을 쓴 저자들도 대부분이 남성들이다. 하지만 5·18 당시에는 혜성처럼 나타난 여성 활동가들도 많았다. 평범하지만 정의롭게 살고

자 노력했던 그녀들의 모습은 20만 군중을 모아 이끄는 리더로서, 주먹밥을 만들어 나눔을 실천한 시장 상인으로서, 마지막까지 도청을 지키는 시민군으로서, 그리고 5월 27일 최후의 밤 도청 스피커를 타고 흐르던 목소리로서 다양한 형태로 우리의 곁을 지켰다. 각자의 위치에서 5·18 민주화운동의 주체로 나섰던 여성들이 역사의 중심으로부터 떠밀려 간첩으로 낙인찍히고 오늘날까지 극심한 트라우마를 호소하며 살아갈 수밖에 없었던 이야기, 그러니까 성별을 떠나서 평등한 시민의 집단 공동체로서 민주주의를 수호하고 평범한 일상을 지키며 우리의 이웃을 사랑하고자 노력했던 각자의 이야기를 담아낸 <그녀의 이름은>이라는 다큐멘터리는 오랫동안 침묵으로 일관했던 이들의 잃어버린 “일상”을 그려낸다.

현재진행형인 그녀들의 항쟁은 오월의 “그날”보다 왜곡된 역사의 진실을 파헤치는 것이 더 힘들다고 표현한다. 5·18 당시 도청 앞 광장을 클로즈업한 사진 속 여성들을 누군가는 보았을까? 가톨릭 센터 앞 큰 도로변에서 쫓기던 시위대의 흔적 중 유독 여성들의 신발이 많았다는 사실을 누군가는 알고 있을까? “민주주의는 피를 먹고 자라는 나무” - 누군가는 오월 그날 불의에 맞서 싸우며 고백했다. 16살 어린 나이에 박미숙 씨는 도청 무기고 앞에서 학교 선생님의 손길을 뿌리치고 끝까지 남아 시위군을 도왔다. 그중 시민 권기 대회에서 성명서를 읽으며 시를 낭송했던 몇몇 여성들은 자취를 감추었다. 여성은 사회운동을 해서는 안 된다는 틀에 박힌 사회적 시선이 가장 먼저 비수를 꽂았다. 당시 총기 탈취 시위대였던 남민아 씨는 중무장한 계엄군에게 대항하며 24인승 봉고차에 올라타 나주 경찰서까지 먼 길을 다녀왔지만, 광주에 보탬이 되고자 했던 용감한 행동들은 어머니로부터 모진 비난을 받고 잊혀야만 했다. 심문할 때는 물론, 5·18 이후 청문회 때도 마찬가지로 많은 이들은 오월 여성



들의 증언을 존중하고 귀 기울이기보다는 단순한 화젯거리로 만들고 비하했다. 무자비한 폭력 속에서 피어난 서로에 대한 배려심은 민주화운동에 참여했던 여고생들부터 노점상 여성들까지 모두를 한데 모아 단합시켰으나, 여성이라는 이유만으로 그 이름은 조명받지 못하고 있다. 위험을 무릅쓰고 가두방송을 하며 가두시위에 적극적으로 동참했던 여성들과 시민군들에게 주먹밥을 만들어 건네며 식량을 조달하던 손길들, 희생자들을 추모하며 검은 리본을 만들고 부상자들을 위해 소매를 걷어붙여 헌혈에 앞장서던 모두가 각자의 일상을 지키기 위해 나섰던 오월, 그날은 오늘날 어디로 향하고 있을까?

기억은 이해·정의·지식을 추구하는 강력한 도구로써 자아를 깨워 의식을 일깨우며, 상처를 치유하고 존엄성을 회복시킨다<sup>32</sup>. 결국 기억이라는 발판을 딛고 경험 삼아 새로운 가능성을 연다는 것은 기존의 억압에 저항하는 것을 의미한다. 이렇듯 오랜 기억을 기념하는 행위는 과거가 현재에게 제공할 무언가를 가지고 있다고 주장하는 방식이다<sup>33</sup>. 그러므로 기억이란 사회적 질서와 연대의 중요한 조건이다<sup>34</sup>. 하지만 안타깝게도 오월 여성들의 치열한 활동과 투쟁, 그리고 짓밟힌 여성 피해자들의 고통은 역사적 단면으로만 치부되어 사회적으로 오랜 시간 외면받은 것이 사실이다. 5·18 민주화운동 진상 규명 가운데에서도 80년 광주 여성들의 주체적 활동 또한 충분히 논의돼야 한다는 지적이 나오고 있지만, 여성 관련 연구자 부족으로 인해 연구 여건 조성이 갖추어지지 않았다는 점에서 지원 및 자료가 불충

<sup>32</sup> Hacking, I. (1995) *Rewriting the Soul*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Olick, J.K. (1999) Genre memories and memory genres. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 64, Issue 3, pp. 381 - 402: 381.

<sup>34</sup> Misztal, B. (2003) *Theories of Social Remembering*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education: 52.

분한 현황은 불가피한 현실이다. 기억이 과거의 산물에서 그치지 않고, 더 나아가 하나의 기록물로서 미래 세대에게 계승되어야 우리가 말하는 역사적 미완의 과제는 완성물에 가까워질 수 있을 것이다.

5·18기념재단 근무 중에 나는 약 5개월 정도 광주에 머물렀고, 학업과 연구 활동을 겸행하며 5·18과 관련된 다양한 사람들을 만났다. 당시 5·18기념재단 연구소 소속이었던 박진우 실장님과 여러 대화를 나누며 심도 있는 인터뷰를 하게 된 시기도 이쯤이었다. 오월 여성의 역할을 항쟁의 주체로부터 제외하고 보조적으로만 노출하는 미디어의 실태와 뒤늦게나마 조명되기 시작하는 성폭력 피해자의 이야기를 포함해서, 나는 사회적 배경과 집단적 트라우마가 어떤 식으로 5·18 여성들의 활동 범위를 제한하고 억압하는지 머리가 아닌 마음으로 조금이나마 습득하게 되었다. 그리고 저항의 기억이 결국에는 잊어야만 하는 기억으로 각인된 이유에 대해서 깨달음을 얻었고, 안타까움을 넘어서서 가혹하기까지 한 현실을 마주해야만 했다. 학습된 배경 지식뿐 아니라, 여러 방면에서 실질적이고도 실체적인 이야기를 듣고 배울 수 있었던 박진우 실장님과의 인터뷰는 나의 관점을 넓히는 데 주요 요소가 되었다.

가장 큰 문제점은 5·18 자체적으로도 사법적 처리와 더불어 진실 규명을 끝마치지 못했다는 부분인데, 발표 명령권자에 대한 구조가 정확히 밝혀지지 않았다는 점이 큰 비중을 차지한다. 국가 폭력에 가담했던 가해자들이 진실을 은폐하고 왜곡하는 과정에서 피해자 명단은 기재되지도 못한 채 사라졌고, 행방불명자 신고가 200건이 넘도록 그 누구도 아무런 조치를 하지 않았다는 것은 잔인한 현실이다. 심지어는 40년 가까이 되어서야 수면 위로 겨우 떠오르는 여성 성폭력 문제는 아직도 우리가 파헤쳐야 할 진실이 해저에 머물러 있음을 증명하는

듯하다. 미해결 과제는 여전히 수두룩하니 넘쳐나는데, 이는 우리가 주목하고 끊임없이 조명해야 할 부분이기도 하다. 반면에 진상 규명이 내비치는 진실만이 유일한 해결책이라고 볼 수는 없다. 5·18에 대한 보상이 일종의 사법적 처리라고 단정 짓는다면 크나큰 오산이다. 피해자들은 여전히 트라우마 속에 갇혀 있으며, 온전한 생활을 누리지 못하는 이들도 많다. 5·18은 역사적으로 완벽하게 해결될 수 있는 문제가 아니므로, 앞으로의 우리가 일상에서 5·18을 어떠한 방향으로 해석하여 애도하고, 기억하고 기념하며 기록해야 할지는 꾸준히 생각해 보아야 할 역사·사회·문화적 과업이다. 즉, 5·18의 문화적 확산은 필수 불가결의 문제이며, 미래 세대와 함께하기 위해서는 일상 속 세대적 연결점을 만들어야 한다는 것이다. 역사적 사실에만 주목하지 않고 그 의미에 대해서 되짚어 보는 과정은 중요하다. “가장 절망적인 순간에 사람이 사람에게 기적이 되었던 5·18”은 박진우 연구실장님이 가장 아끼고 좋아한다는 표현이었다. 무차별적인 국가 폭력 앞에서 무법천지 약탈 한번 없이 치안과 질서 유지를 중요시했던 80년대 오월 광주의 정신은 하나의 문화로 확산하여야 한다. 그 안에서 먹거리를 나누고 피 흘리는 타인을 위해 헌혈하던 여성들의 모습, 절박하고 혼란한 순간에도 바로잡았던 열흘간의 투쟁 정신은 후세대에도 뜻깊은 역사적 사례뿐 아니라, 일상적인 일례로 자리매김할 것이다. 다만 역사적 배경으로써 5·18이 단편적인 아픔과 희생만을 강조하지 않고, 당시의 나눔과 대동단결하던 연대의 문화적 측면으로도 전승되기를 바란다.

나는 개인적으로 “가장 보통의 영웅들”이라는 말을 좋아한다. 보통이란 보편적으로 일상을 상징한다. 일상성을 한마디로 함축하여 그 전부를 정의할 수는 없겠지만, 사전적 의미로는 “날마다 반복되는 성질”을 일컫는다. 일종의 의식 절차와 다를 바 없이 반복되는 일상성은 여러 가지 파편으로 나누어

져 있으나, 기억은 담아내는 것이 아니라 걸러내는 것이므로<sup>35</sup> 우리는 일상적 기억을 날마다 쉽게 잊고 또 잃어간다. 이는 기억에 남는 것들만 골라내어 선택하는 일시적 행위보다는, 축적된 지식을 대대로 대물리고 상속하는 인간의 능력<sup>36</sup>을 최대치로 활용해야 한다는 의미로 귀결될 수 있겠다. 가장 보통의 영웅으로서 우리 주변을 지키는 이웃들의 모습이 순차적으로 거둬 되풀이되어 일상으로 자리매김함으로써 우리는 어제의 일을 무관심으로 일관하지 않을 것이다. 나는 오월 여성을 대하는 태도가 일상에 녹아들어야 한다고 생각한다. 그렇게 되기 위해서는 <그녀의 이름은>과 같은 영상 매체들이 대중들에게 더욱더 높은 빈도수로 노출되어야 한다.

영상은 사건의 서사적 구조로써 진실의 전후 맥락을 시청자들에게 이해시켜 주는 매체이기도 하다. 오월의 정신을 바탕으로 하는 깊은 연대와 헌신의 공동체 형성 과정을 위해서는 대중과 쉼 새 없이 소통해야 한다. 5·18 실화를 중심으로 한 영화 <택시 운전사>의 주요 인물이었던 독일의 기자이자 언론인 위르겐 힌츠페터의 이야기 같은 경우에는 5·18의 서사적 구조를 널리 퍼뜨리는 데에 크게 기여했다. 이러한 영상 매체의 힘, 기존의 영상을 토대로 기획·제작된 영화들은 대중에게 5·18의 이미지를 한 사람의 일상으로부터 시작된 한 편의 이야기로 매끄럽게 매듭을 풀어냈다. 내가 실존 인물이나 실화를 소재로 삼는 영상 작품들을 연구하며 대중의 관점에 초점을 맞추는 이유도 이렇듯 “가장 보통의 영웅들”로부터 비롯된다. 이 시점에서 나는 영화적 이미지를 통한 정서교육의 중요성을 더욱이 강조하고자 한다. 한 사람과 공감대를 형성하기

<sup>35</sup> Botton, A. (2019) *The School of Life: An Emotional Education*. UK: Penguin: 11.

<sup>36</sup> Botton, A. (2019) *The School of Life: An Emotional Education*. UK: Penguin: 1.

위해서는 감정적인 통찰력과 직관이 필요하고, 이러한 능력치는 지성의 일부이다. 감정을 이해하고 받아들인다는 것은 타인과의 관계에서도 중요하고, 이러한 과정은 서로의 마음을 보듬어 주며 아픔을 치유하고 트라우마를 극복할 수 있는 중요한 계기가 될 것이다. 앞서 말한 사회·문화적 정서교육은 교내에서 이루어지기보다는 일상적으로 스미는 대중 매체의 힘을 통해 반복적으로 이루어져야 한다.

대중의 힘을 토대로 5·18에 대한 관점을 더욱이 넓히기 위해서는 여성 활동의 중요성을 과소평가해서는 안 된다. 집합적 공동체로서 나누었던 개개인의 시민 정신은 지도자의 리더십과 이념이 주축을 이루는 엘리트 중심의 시각에서 벗어나야 하며<sup>37</sup>, 풀뿌리부터 시작되는 밑바닥, 즉 일상으로부터 시작되어야 한다. 나 또한 광주를 직접적으로 방문하기 전까지는 외부인으로서 오월 정신의 일상성을 파악하거나 읽어내지 못했다. 5·18학은 이미 융합적인 연구 주제로써 국내 학자들이 학제적·다학문적인 접근을 통해 다양하게 참여한 연구 분야이지만, 오월 여성의 역할을 확대하는 연구 주제는 다소 부족한 편에 속한다. 위에서도 언급했듯 여성들의 사회적 입장이 반영되는 현실상 자료나 지원이 충분치 못했던 것은 사실이다. 공동체로서 오월 정신을 계승하기 위해서는 기억과 기록의 적절한 균형이 필요한데, 부족한 연구 활동량은 세대 간의 소통의 부재를 회복하는 과정에 있어서 치명적이다. 상시적인 연구 활동과 더불어 대중에게 지속적으로 노출되는 매체는 결정적인 중재자 역할을 소함으로써 도리어 상처를 드러내고 또 드러내며 더 큰 병을 예방할 것이다. 우리는 끊임없이 목소리를 한데 모아 드높여야 한다. 계속 이야기해야 한다. 이로써 과거를 재건하고 현재성을 강조하며 미래

<sup>37</sup> Jang, H. (2008) "The Gwangju Democratic Uprising and Women." In: The May 18 Memorial Foundation, ed(s). *History of 5.18 Democratic Uprising I*. Gwangju: The May 18 Memorial Foundation: 461-464.

를 향해 나아가는 새로운 발판을 만들어야 한다. 우리가 살아가는 “오늘”은 집단과 개인의 관계성이자 공동체 유대감으로 화합하는 하나의 커뮤니티여야 한다. 이러한 유동성은 결국 시간이나 장소, 또는 공간에 지배되지 않는 다양한 영상 매체들의 힘으로부터 발생하며, 이를 통해 대중은 정서적으로 교류하고 교감할 수 있다. 영상이 가지고 있는 구조적 전달력은 세대 간의 사회적 격차를 해소하는 데 있어서 탁월한 해결책이 아닐까? 역사의 재해석뿐 아니라, 재구성. 고정된 관점이 아니라, 평등화된 시점. 모두의 오월, 그날의 이야기를 위해 우리에게는 새로운 전환점이 필요하다.

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# Historical Reconstruction in the Everyday: The Story of 5.18 Gwangju Uprising and Women of May

Yoojin Kim

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ABSTRACT:

In chapter 12 Yoojin Kim tells us about her journey towards a fuller understanding of the Gwangju Uprising in Korea in 1980, and specifically about the women's role in this event, which she discovered through audio-visual archival research. As a pro-democracy movement opposing a military coup, the May 18 Democratic Movement, also widely known as "5.18", is often only mentioned very briefly in historical terms. In films, the topic is only ever tangentially discussed, and so – following traces and instincts – the author found her way to the often painful memories of women who had been victim to state violence while they were part of the May 18 Democratic Movement. She argues for audio-visual materials of and on the event to make their way into history, as it helps viewers to overcome trauma, move beyond state-sanctioned or patriarchal ways of thinking about history and to discover the underlying context of the truth.



It was a day in May in Gwangju. The heat slightly exceeds the threshold of a pleasant warmth and hits the skin when the spring sun gently shines on a gray street. The tip of the tongue feels as if it is stinging. In the background, the city square is filled with the noise of the fountain water restlessly moving up and then plunging to the ground. The stream of water rhythmically scatters into tiny particles, like musical notes. The particles from the splash go into many directions, and some of them seem like they could reach the intense blue sky. The transparent drops of water felt like a musical scale arranged in a particular order, or like a silent roar, that was somehow quite touching. The first May I spent in Gwangju was a season like no other. Everyone was carrying one's own May respectively.

Ever since I moved to a foreign country, living as part of a Korean family has been an obstacle of some sort. It has been a long time since I left the mother country, so it felt unfitting to hold on to a sense of belonging or inclusion to a certain location. Also, Madagascar, an island in the Southeast part of Africa, is a country immensely far from Korea both in its distance and physical configuration. Feeling like a total stranger in and out of these spatial borders, I often blamed the unfamiliar setting that surrounded me. However, it didn't take too long to realize that this feeling of estrangement was something that also came up in South Korea, my mother country, where I spent my time in college pursuing a bachelor's degree.

For many, including myself, the Gwangju Uprising was a piece of history. The narrative—emphasizing the sacrifice of the innocent, the ten-day protest, the courage and deaths of those involved—of the May 18 Democratic Movement,

also widely known as “5.18” in short, was often mentioned only briefly as a historical fact in class (of course, the removal of the part about 5.18 from the basic education curriculum in Korea after the revision in 2022 has been a controversial issue until recently). In comparison to other genres of art, the range of topics that film could explore has been relatively narrow. Among those narrow categories, 5.18 has been a difficult topic to properly treat in films, and people still share the sentiment that 5.18 is a story especially “complicated” to tell even after 40 years have passed since the incident. As the public’s interest in films such as *Peppermint Candy* (1999), *May 18* (2007), *A Taxi Driver* (2017), and *In the Name of the Son* (2021) increased, there was more exposure of the topic related to 5.18. But still, the ongoing narrative about this very topic in our everyday lives still remains in the past. In align with the impression I had while reading *Human Acts* by Hang Kang, oftentimes the memories and representations about the May 18 Gwangju Uprising are not always associated with the image of democracy, human rights, and peace. Absent from our discussion is about the changes that took place in the lives of people, who are not unlike the people around us today, and in what faces they would be leading their day to day lives. Because we rarely think and imagine further, or remind ourselves to contemplate about such subjects, we frequently lose track of the direction going forward.

On 4 February 2020, I visited Gwangju for the first time to work on several projects for my doctoral research. What I mean by “first” here is that this was my first time visiting the city with a close attention to the history of 5.18. I did set foot in Gwangju Songjeong Station before, so technically it wasn’t

the first time. On the same day, I visited the Asia Culture Center and took a walk to Geumnam-ro, a street near the institution. Because it was an early stage of the Covid-19 Pandemic, I had no choice but to stay mainly in Seoul, where I frequently visited the Korean Film Archive in Mapo-gu. Both the permanent exhibition and the special exhibition, titled *Forbidden Imagination, Suppressed Scars* (2019), at the museum inside the Korean Film Archive were great resources that enriched my research on the history of Korean film.

The time I started to delve into the heart of Gwangju was when I joined an internship program at the May 18 Memorial Foundation. Around April 2021, I moved to Gwangju from Kingston to start a new journey as the foundation's Intern at the International Affairs Department for about five months. From that point on, my views about the May 18 Uprising have met many points of transformation. I grew to cherish the city not just intellectually but earnestly by heart, and realized that a range of activities, history, and identity of the women of May in 1980 were overlooked for a long time.

It was a warm spring day on 19 April 2021. I was worried that the pandemic would get in the way when I moved to Korea, but the entry process was trouble-free. I began my work at the May 18 Memorial Foundation after completing a 14-day-quarantine. The everyday life at Gwangju was different from my prior experience of the city, as I had only seen the city in winter before. Gwangju shining with warm sunlight was something very new to me.

Currently, I am a PhD candidate at Kingston University London at the department of Critical and Historical Studies. The subject of interest for my doctoral dissertation are popular films that

are based on true stories, including the story of 5.18; collective memories represented in the form of moving images; and cultural memories also expressed through related mediums. Especially the spirit of Korean democracy, democratic movements, and noble sacrifices have put down a firm root in my social and cultural background in the process of witnessing various forms of life as I moved to different countries for immigration and education. Until then, in spite of my long interest in the May 18 Democratic Movement, I had access only to the secondary materials, such as books, academic journals, magazines, films, and various multimedia contents about May 18. So, it was even more interesting and meaningful for me to witness the first-hand materials in person when I was in Gwangju. In particular, the foundation's endeavor to commemorate and remember Gwangju's history of May 1980 in order to promote and maintain the identity of 5.18 even further was very impressive. This experience not only contributed greatly to my doctoral research, but also broadened the horizon of my perspective in life. Discussion sessions held at the Gwangju Democracy Forum and the diverse knowledge and efforts provided by the partnering organizations were exceptionally inspirational. A series of movements organized in Gwangju also moved me greatly. Gwangju Solidarity organized a movement that could show its support to those going through difficult times due to the military coup in Myanmar. The May 18 Memorial Foundation and the citizens of Gwangju have also raised their voices for Thailand and Hong Kong to show their unwavering moral support for the foreign countries. In this place, where hope and passion were still alive, I came to realize a new sphere that I've never

experienced before. And that was the story and footstep of Gwangju's women of May.

At the time, a television series titled *Youth of May* was airing every Monday and Tuesday from 3 May to 8 June 2021, on KBS2. Beginning with an unidentified human remains discovered near a highway construction site in Gwangju, the viewers were captivated by the plot showing love and friendship of the young in the backdrop of a historical event that is 5.18. The series successfully formed an emotional relationship with the viewers. Twelve episodes in total, *Youth of May* portrayed the ordinary people who went about their everyday lives and then soon caught up in a historical turmoil. Even though the viewers are well aware of the pending tragedy in the end, people did not stop from wishing for a happy and ordinary future for the characters. Each scene depicting a very common day to day life accompanied with delicate emotions reminded the public of the pain and scars that linger long after the incident on May 18, 1980. As I was watching the series and following the character's course of emotion, I began to think about the everydayness that is lost in us. I started to follow the trace that allowed me to imagine the lives of the victims, those who are battling historical oblivion, today. This decision was truly a pledge that required courage, and my journey in Gwangju as an outsider was met with multiple occasions that made me rearrange my point of view.

Gwangju Uprising is a democratic movement of Koreans, mostly residents of Gwangju and Jeollanam-do Province, that took place from 18 to 27 May 1980. People fought against the government seized by the military rule of Chun Doo-hwan and the martial law that followed. This 1980 pro-

democracy demonstrations, which lasted for ten days, have resulted in a haunting historical tragedy. During this period, countless numbers of people were wounded, killed, tortured, and imprisoned. Though Korea has evolved into a democratic country after a series of mass movements calling for truth about the state violence and the June Democratic Struggle in 1987, the path to restore the rightful honor of the Gwangju Uprising as a democratic movement was riddled with pain for a very long time. Taking accountability for the military's mass killing and the very first command of the shooting of civilians are major issues, which are unresolved to this day. With the news of Chun Doo-hwan's death on 23 November 2021, the official apology of those directly responsible for the massacre and bloodshed of the May 18 Democratic Movement now remains an unfinished task.

At the time in May 1980, the government did not make any statement regarding the shuddering situation committed in Gwangju. The press was also under strict censorship, so there was no on-site reporting allowed under the authoritarian martial law. This kind of censorship, also covering popular media, has been systematized since the Japanese occupation of Korea. Political and social issues in films were censored according to an even more harsh and austere measure under the military rule. Regulation on creative activities is in itself suppression of freedom. With such harsher control of censorship, it was common to remove or revise a whole set of scenes in films, which then end up with an entirely different outcome far from the original intention. Sometimes, the production itself came to a halt. In the history of Korean film, censorship had a clear agenda of controlling

and monitoring any thoughts that were against the ruling power. Due to the ruthless systemic censorship, the Gwangju Uprising in cultural and artistic productions was misrepresented as a riot instigated by people with political motives or an incident intervened by North Korea.

In this light, the fact that SBS aired a special documentary titled *Her Name Is* (2020), commemorating the 40th anniversary of the May 18 Democratic Movement, is a meaningful accomplishment. Delivering “her” stories from 40 years ago in Gwangju, a city cutoff from the world at the time, through popular media used to be a task that is unimaginable. It took 38 years for a great number of women to speak about the state violence they experienced when they were part of the May 18 Democratic Movement due to the trauma and social prejudice that followed them afterwards. The spirit of the May 18 resistance consists of images of a civilian force fighting against the martial law army, and it is the male figures that occupy these images. Though an image of a civilian force walking towards a heavy rain of bullets is cemented into a representation of masculinity, in fact, the 5.18 spirit of resistance is meant to signify the spirit of a community based on sharing and solidarity. Unfortunately, 5.18 today has become a political topic that is “so sanctified that it became a taboo,” which leaves little room for debate or alternative perspectives (Kim 2021: 4). Women of 5.18 was especially a complicated topic to face in the midst of an unstable political current, but many voices that appear today are calling for truth.

*Her Name Is* aired on May 17, 2020, as the 593rd episode of the SBS special documentary series. As is mentioned in the documentary,

research data and related publications about the Gwangju Uprising are told mostly from the perspective of male narrators, and most essays about the incident were also written by men. However, the truth is that there were many women activists in various places, who were actively involved in the May 18 Uprising. Those women, who tried to lead an ordinary but righteous lives, all stood up in many different ways—as a leader who gathered around two hundred thousand people, as a shop owner who gave out rice balls for the protestors to eat, as a civilian force who protected the building of Jeollanam-do Government Office, and as the voice that came out of the speakers of the building on the last night of the movement on 27 May. In the form of a documentary, *Her Name Is* carries the story of the women of 5.18, who hold severe trauma as they were erased from history and falsely identified as spies to this day even though they were the central figures of the movement. By telling the story of each person who tried to safeguard democracy and protect the daily lives of one's fellow citizens, regardless of gender, the documentary illustrates the “everyday” that was lost as the women activists had to stay silent for ages.

Women of 5.18 express that their ongoing struggle of revealing the truth, which is tarnished by the distorted history, is even more painful than the experience of “that day” in May. Has no one been able to notice the presence of women in a photograph that captures a close-up view in front of the provincial government office building? Does anyone know that there were a large percentage of women's shoes among all the items left behind as the protestors were chased off the wide street in front of the Catholic Center? Someone who was



fighting against injustice on that day in May has confessed the following: “Democracy is a tree that grows on blood.” At the age of sixteen, Misook Park (박미숙) went against her teacher’s advice and went on to the government office, where the weapons were stored, to help the protestors until the end. Several women, who read out the statement and recited poetry, at the public rally went missing. The social prejudice that a social movement is not a women’s place was the first thing that struck these women. Minah Nam (남민아), who was a protestor collecting firearms, was in direct contact with the armed troops. In such hazardous situation, Nam even traveled in a 24-passenger van to the distant Naju police station to collect the firearms. Her courageous decision for Gwangju was only to be forgotten after a stark disapproval from her own mother. During the interrogation, as well as the public hearings after 5.18, testimonies made by women of May were frequently disregarded and scandalized, rather than being treated with respect. Even though these women, from high school girls to shop owners at a marketplace, came together with kindness in the middle of merciless violence, their names were never in the limelight simply because they were women. That May, the women who were actively involved in protesting and disseminating the news in the street with the risk of their lives, the hands that gave out food in support of the protestors, everyone who created black ribbons in memory of the victims, and those who willingly donated their blood for the wounded—all these people came out to the street with the aim to protect each and everyone’s everyday life. Now, in which direction is this day headed to today?

A powerful tool that fosters understanding, justice, and knowledge—memory helps one realize the self and, in turn, renews one's consciousness, heals the wound, and restores dignity (Hacking 1995: 3). Opening up a new set of possibilities with memory as a steppingstone ultimately means that one is resisting the existing suppression. In a way, the act of commemorating old memories testifies that the past is surely connected to the present (Olick 1999: 381). Therefore, memory is an important condition that is essential for social order and solidarity (Misztal 2003: 52). Still, the relentless activities and struggle of the women of May and the pain of female victims of violence have been recorded only superficially and neglected for quite a long time. Some point out that the activities organized by the women of Gwangju in 1980 in relation to 5.18 deserves a more thorough review and discussion. But the reality is that the research condition is insufficient in terms of the amount of relevant materials and institutional support due to the lack of researchers studying subjects related to women's studies. The incomplete task of history that we've been discussing here may get closer to completion if memory is not something that is considered merely as a product of the past, but a kind of record that we must pass on to the future generation.

While working at the May 18 Memorial Foundation, I stayed in Gwangju for about five months and had a chance to meet a diverse group of people who were related to 5.18 as I was continuing my research. It was also around this time that I had several in-depth interviews along with the conversation with Jin-woo Park (박진우),

the director of the May 18 Memorial Foundation Research Institute. Learning about how the media misrepresent or downplay the pivotal role of the women of May and the belated story about the victims of sexual violence, I was able to realize, not just intellectually but also by heart, how the social background and collective trauma had the effect of limiting and repressing the actual extent of the contribution made by these women. And to know that the memory of resistance had to be the memory that must be forgotten was a painstaking situation to comprehend. Interview with Director Park was a chance for me to grasp not only the historical knowledge, but also the practical and substantial stories, which have greatly broadened my perspective at large.

The biggest problem is that the judicial process, let alone the investigation for truth, has not reached its conclusion, and the reason for this is on the unclear structure of command that makes it difficult to pinpoint the figure who was in charge of the initial shooting. The perpetrators of state violence have tried to conceal and distort the truth, and the list of names of the victims was lost in the process as a result. It is a cruel reality that there were no official measures taken even after over 200 reports of missing persons. Cases of sexual violence against women only recently came to the public's attention after about 40 years. It seems that there are still pieces of truth that must be discovered from a deep bottomless pit. So many issues are unresolved, and that is exactly the part that we need to pay our attention and try to illuminate. But, investigative work is hardly the only solution to find the truth. It would be a huge mistake to conclude that the judicial treatment is

the only way to compensate for 5.18. The victims are still suffering from severe trauma, which deters them from enjoying an ordinary daily life. It would be unrealistic to expect 5.18 to be resolved perfectly and become a thing of the past. Thus, it is important for us to examine the ways to mourn, remember, and record as we commemorate the movement. This must be considered as a historical, social, and cultural task that we must think about carefully. In other words, the cultural spread of 5.18 is a crucial and inevitable issue, and we must create a point of generational connection within our everyday lives in order to retain the legacy for the future generation. It is important to focus not only on the historical facts, but also on the process of exploring their underlying meanings. Park, from the May 18 Memorial Foundation Research Institute, once told me that one of his favorite phrases is “May 18, where people became a miracle to other people in the darkest and the most desperate moment.” The spirit of Gwangju in May, 1980, which solely sought after peace and order in the face of indiscriminate state violence, must be wide spread as a form of culture. With the images of women sharing food and donating blood for others, the spirit of this ten-day struggle could be understood as a meaningful historical precedent, as well as an exemplary code of conduct for the everyday that the future generation must know. What I hope is not to fall into the trap of emphasizing the fragmentary truth only concerning pain and sacrifice from the history of 5.18, but to transmit the cultural aspect of sharing and solidarity, which brought the people together as one.

I personally like the expression “the most ordinary heroes.” Being ordinary generally signifies the everyday. Of course, everydayness could not be

defined by a single word, but its meaning is stated in the dictionary as “a quality that is repeated every day.” Repeated everydayness, a kind of ritualistic procedure, divides itself into various fragments. We easily forget and lose those memories of the everyday because memory is something that is constantly filtered, rather than contained (Botton 2019: 11). This could mean that it would be wise to maximize the human capacity to pass down the accumulated knowledge from one generation to another than to linger on a short-term task such as selecting and isolating only the memorable things in the present (Botton 2019: 1). I believe that we would not stay indifferent if we could repeat the images and actions of our fellow citizens, who were willing to protect our community as the most ordinary heroes. I think that a certain way of addressing the women of May should also be part of our everyday life. In order to do so, video recordings such as *Her Name Is* must be in the public's eyes much more frequently.

Video recording itself formulates a structure of a narrative in relation to an event. It is a medium that helps the viewers to understand the underlying context of the truth. In order to form a community of profound solidarity and commitment based on the spirit of May, constant communication with the public is key. The story of Jürgen Hinzpeter, a German journalist who appears as a major figure in the film *A Taxi Driver*, based on a true story surrounding the Gwangju Uprising, contributed greatly to the widespread adoption of a particular narrative structure about 5.18. With such power of the medium, films like this, which incorporates the existing footage, successfully convey the image of 5.18 to the public in the form of a story that begins

and unravels from a person's everyday life. The reason that I am interested in the eyes of the public in studying films and moving images that are based on true stories also begins with the term "the most ordinary heroes." At this point, I would like to further emphasize the importance of emotional education through cinematic images. Forming a consensus with another person requires emotional insight and intuition, and these skill sets are also considered as intellectual abilities. Understanding and embracing certain types of emotions are important in personal relationships in general, and the process itself could become a critical moment to move towards consoling, healing, and overcoming trauma. The power of mass media repeatedly influencing the everyday would be a better way to realize the kind of emotional education in the social and cultural context, rather than depending solely on teaching it in the classroom.

For the public's view about 5.18 to be more diverse, the importance of the contributions made by the women of 5.18 shall not be underestimated. The spirit of the people, once shared as a collective community, is something that must originate from the grass roots endeavors from below, or the everyday, rather than the elitist viewpoint, which is constructed upon a leader's agenda and ideology (Jang 2008). I myself as an outsider wasn't able to grasp the everydayness embedded in the spirit of May until I had a chance to stay in Gwangju for some time. Already a topic of research where there have been diverse interdisciplinary approaches by Korean scholars, 5.18 is still short of research in studying the role of women in May 1980. As mentioned above, it is true that there were not enough research materials or institutional support,

which truly reflects the social position of women. An appropriate balance of memory and record is vital in order to inherit the spirit of May for us as a community. And the lack of research in terms of quantity is a fatal condition for the process of restoring possible communication, almost absent at the moment, between one generation to another. In addition to the ongoing research, mass media with its constant contact with the public could take on the role as a mediator, so that it could expose and eradicate the existing wound and prevent a more severe problem. We must constantly raise our voices together as one. We have to keep the dialogue alive. In doing so, we would be able to rebuild our past, highlight the present, and create a new channel towards the future. The “today” that we are living in should concern the relation between a group and an individual, as well as a united community with a sense of collective bonding. This fluidity eventually arises from the strength of various forms of moving images, which are not controlled by rigid time, place, or space. In this way, the public can interact and communicate emotionally. Wouldn't the ability of moving images, its structural way of delivering a narrative, be the fitting solution in reconciling the social gap between different generations? Reconstruction, as well as reinterpretation of history. An equal point of view, instead of a rigorous one. For everyone's May and the story of that day, we are in need of a moment of truth.

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South Korea: Showbox.

*Her Name Is* (2020) Directed by Lee Yoon-Min. [Film].

South Korea: SBS.

*Youth of May* (2021) Directed by Song Min-yeob.

[Television Series]. South Korea: KBS2.



## CHAPTER 13

# “You too will Marry...”: Inclusion and Exclusion at the Uneasy Wedding in *A Suitable Boy*

Soumya Vats

### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 13 Soumya Vats takes a deep dive into Mira Nair’s (b. 1957) adaptation of *A Suitable Boy* (book 1993, TV series 2020). The chapter discusses the notions of interfaith love and arranged marriage as depicted in the series to focus on how the TV series received its extreme response and calls of boycott from right-wing factions in India. As such, this case study provides a chance to look at the representation of women in adapted novels between the 1990s and 2020, while it also theorises adaptation as a subversive archival act that envisages changes in historical retellings.

“That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.

And how much” (Roy: 32).

“God save us from people who mean well” (Seth: 313).

The first statement above, an excerpt from Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* that speaks of socially forbidden love, ties in with the enforcement of that love in Vikram Seth’s 1993 novel *A Suitable Boy* (adapted into the miniseries discussed below) through parental pressure that eschews female agency by way of endogamy.

On 15 October 2020, jewellery brand Tanishq pulled down an advertisement for their new range named “Ekatva”<sup>38</sup> after right-wing trolls attacked it on Twitter for promoting “Love Jihad”. The ad, which showed a Muslim family throwing a baby shower in line with the Hindu tradition for their pregnant daughter-in-law, who grew up according to the Hindu religion, angered Netizens who considered her marriage into a Muslim household to be “Hindu-phobic” (Krishnan). The description for the advertisement posted to YouTube read: “She is married into a family that loves her like their own child. Only for her, they go out of their way to celebrate an occasion that they usually don’t. A beautiful confluence of two different religions, traditions and cultures.”<sup>38</sup> This incident, I would argue, forms a small part of the wave of

<sup>38</sup> “Ekatva” literally translates to “Unity” or “Oneness”.

hypernationalist responses to saffronise<sup>39</sup> any and all media distributed in India in recent years—a tendency that is also highlighted in the volatile response to Lata and Kabir’s brief union in *A Suitable Boy* (Hereafter referred to as *ASB*).

A BBC produced miniseries, *ASB* was released on Netflix India amidst extreme political distress surrounding the anti-secular Citizenship Amendment Act, marked by violent suppression of protests and the institutional breach of human rights within a democracy.<sup>40</sup> The series, set in 1951 right after the brutal Indo-Pakistan Partition, received online hatred through trending Twitter hashtags along with offline police complaints claiming that the show “hurt religious sentiments” of Hindus by depicting the lead character, a Hindu girl called Lata, kissing a Muslim boy against the backdrop of a temple (Ellis-Petersen, 14 Dec 2020).

In this paper, I will discuss the notions of interfaith love and arranged marriage as depicted in the series to focus on how *ASB* received the extreme response and calls of boycott from the right-wing. My aim is to provide a comprehensive case study of *ASB* and the possibility of subversion through a transnational creation.

<sup>39</sup> Saffronisation, a neologism that is derived from the saffron robes worn in particular by holy Hindu men, is used to denote the conflation of linguistic, semiotic and political actions taken by the far-right Hindu nationalist brotherhood in India to mechanically alter Indian history so that it resonates with the rest of the Hindu nationalist propaganda and policymaking (Biswas: 146–199).

<sup>40</sup> CAB (now CAA: Citizenship Amendment Act) in combination with the NRC is alarmingly exclusionary because the latter recognizes citizens based on their religions and the former provides citizenship to refugees except those of Islamic faith, systemically endangering the citizenship of the Muslim inhabitants (Hausman).

The miniseries is based on the 1993 novel by the same title, that also included commentary on the sociocultural fabric of post-Partition India tinged with its contemporary communal events. Violent events like the 1989 Bhagalpur riots<sup>41</sup> and 1992 demolition of Babri Masjid<sup>42</sup> orchestrated by Hindu nationalist groups trace the country's distressing patterns with Hindutva. Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is the longest Indian novel in the English language, with 1400-1500 pages depending on the edition. Given this considerable length along with the limited reach of an English language novel by a diasporic author, the novel exists majorly within privileged strata. Just as the novel's depiction of nationalism was likely influenced by and relevant to the milieu of a culturally volatile post-liberalisation India, its adaptation engages in meaning-making by selectively retaining, omitting and adding narrative elements. The book itself, its diverse adaptations and the serial digital adaptation are all versions of the same story, archiving both the events of Partition and life in that era, but also of the subsequent times at which the novel was adapted and changed for the times it was made in.

<sup>41</sup> According to official figures, 1,070 people were killed and 524 injured. Fifteen out of 21 blocks of Bhagalpur were riot-affected. At least 11,500 houses in 195 villages were destroyed, displacing 48,000 people. Six hundred power looms and 1,700 handlooms were burnt down. A total of 68 mosques and 20 *mazars* (tombs) were destroyed. (quoted from The Telegraph's article on pending judiciary action on the Bhagalpur riots case)

<sup>42</sup> At the centre of the row is a 16th-century mosque that was demolished by Hindu mobs in 1992, sparking riots that killed nearly 2,000 people. Many Hindus believe that the Babri Masjid was actually constructed on the ruins of a Hindu temple that was demolished by Muslim invaders. Muslims say they offered prayers at the mosque until December 1949 when some Hindus placed an idol of Ram in the mosque and began to worship the idols. Over the decades since, the two religious groups went to court many times over who should control the site. ("Ayodhya dispute," 2019)

As such, the different versions of *ASB* are each an archive enabling us to reflect the historical patterns of Hindu nationalism and its transformations over time. It stretches the relevance of the narrative based in 1951 to the writing of the narrative in 1990s and finally to its picturization in 2020 to archive and highlight its sociopolitical continuities on another medium.



## **“Love Laws”: Transnational Streaming and Diminishing Leeway for Expression**

Laws governing OTT platforms were absent until recently, thriving through the blind spots of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (Gill). Now, these guidelines require the platforms to self-censor and classify their content (Phartiyal and Kalra). While this legislative amendment remains a

relatively new development in Indian censorship, it works to establish the OTT platforms as potential threats to the authoritative state while also presenting a looming danger of weakening their social reach.<sup>43</sup>

Andrew Higson talks about the prescriptive use of national cinema in its very definition. The process of identification of a national cinema is inextricably linked to the assumption of a certain “coherence and unity”, thus becoming a “hegemonizing” and “mythologizing” force that privileges a particular set of meanings to contain or prevent the proliferation of other meanings (37). Through Higson’s definition of Nationalism, it can be inferred that the very label of “national” assumes a common defining trait that must homogenise the population by glossing over its differences. Nationalist discourses, hence, are inherently imperialist in that they attempt to colonise and repressively homogenise a complex but nationally specific formation (Willemen: 34).<sup>44</sup> As the state assumes the power to define the homogenised, united nation and subsequently national identity, it controls the information put out to the citizens to manipulate it into reinforcing its idea of said identity through censorship.

Willemen asserts that any film industry would cater to either an international market or a very large domestic audience (Willemen: 35). This statement is reminiscent of the rhetorical question

<sup>43</sup> The Cinematograph Act 1952 includes guidelines for film and television releases, including the need to get licensing through the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) (“Online content can’t...”).

<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that they are a simplistic offshoot of colonial policies but that the practice of manipulating the meaning-making process of the masses in a nation is one that has an eerie resonance to the authoritarian past.



that Higson poses, “What is national cinema if it doesn’t have a national audience?” (Higson: 46). With the growing presence of streaming platforms, the resultant onset of transnationalism brings these claims into question. *ASB*, for instance, is made by Mira Nair, an Indian American film director, produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and portrays post-Partition India with distribution through various services across the globe. This primarily English-language series is interspersed with flecks of Hindi and Bengali<sup>45</sup> and available in dubbed versions, making it a linguistically palatable viewing experience for both international and domestic audiences. It carves a grey area that is protected by its international affiliation which only slightly escapes the hold of India’s Information & Broadcasting Ministry (Ellis-Petersen, 14 Dec 2020).

<sup>45</sup> The decision to adapt the series in English was a weighted one. In an interview with the film journalism website *Film Companion*, Mira Nair talks about the balance of making the series palatable to the native as well as an international audience. She elaborates on her desire to “return to Urdu, to Hindustani, to Awadhi – to what the characters would have actually spoken” (quote from Mira Nair’s interview with Anupama Chopra for *Film Companion*). As English-language Indian literature has always battled with notions of being “too colonial” despite its constant use of language that is continuously being remade and localised, the question of accessibility arises with the English adaptation. Save for flecks of Hindustani, Awadhi and Urdu language, the series also runs into the danger of being looked at as an exhibitionist product for Western viewers, especially when right-wing critics rush to dismiss its progressive lens as an outsider’s perspective.

# Love Jihad: An Ongoing Partition

Charu Gupta (2015) defines “Love Jihad” as an attempt at political and communal mobilisation in the name of women. It was alleged by Hindu hardliners that “love jihad” was an organised conspiracy, whereby Muslim men were aggressively converting vulnerable Hindu women to Islam through trickery in marriage. Gupta states that “love jihad” was “an emotive mythical campaign, a “delicious” political fantasy, a lethal mobilisation strategy and a vicious crusade – a jihad against love – for political gains in elections” (2015: 292). I perceive this mythical notion in terms of its relevance to the communally determined and violently tragic Indo-Pak Partition of 1947.<sup>46</sup> Through that, I assess its implications on fuelling the BJP’s narrative of “Love Jihad” that is further strengthened through ideologically driven laws based on the ruling party’s vision of a Hindu patriarchal national order.

<sup>46</sup> In August 1947, when, after three hundred years in India, the British finally left, the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nation states: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Immediately, there began one of the greatest migrations in human history, as millions of Muslims trekked to West and East Pakistan (the latter now known as Bangladesh) while millions of Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction. Many hundreds of thousands never made it. Across the Indian subcontinent, communities that had coexisted for almost a millennium attacked each other in a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence, with Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other—a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented. In Punjab and Bengal—provinces abutting India’s borders with West and East Pakistan, respectively—the carnage was especially intense, with massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence. Some seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered (Dalrymple).

To begin with, I would like to take a detour to, first, *Earth* (1999) and *Pinjar* (2003)—the films that capture the gendered violence of Partition and, second, the gendered aspect of the “Love Jihad” conspiracy, before returning to ASB’s particular case. Deepa Mehta’s film *Earth* (1999) looks at the Partition from the perspective of an eight-year-old rich Parsi girl, Lenny, whose Hindu nanny Shanta falls in love with a Muslim masseuse, thereby enraging Dil, Lenny’s favourite ice candy man, who then spurs on a Muslim mob to kill the masseuse and abduct Shanta. *Pinjar* (2003) follows Puro, a Hindu woman who opts to stay with her Muslim captor as they learn to defy cultural expectations and the hate politics of Partition. Puro’s case comprises an example of the personal realities explored by feminist scholars Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin who interview survivors of the Partition. Perpetrators and victims alike described the countless abductions, rapes, and murders of women as an assault on the men of the other community, whose duty it was to protect their wives, sisters, and daughters (Strohl 32). Gendered violence and interfaith relationships have been widely and popularly depicted in Indian TV and cinema, with stories extending from the Mughal era (*Mughal-E-Azam* (1960) and *Jodha Akbar* (2008)) to Partition era (like the ones mentioned above) to contemporary stories set in small towns (*Ishaqzaade* (2012)) or in a post-9/11 islamophobic US (*My Name Is Khan* (2010)) and finally, on a new digital medium like ASB. While this paper uses love in a post-Partition India as a point of departure, interfaith unions remain a major trope for romance with the premise of inherent social conflicts.

A clear pattern can be discerned among the stories of violence during the Partition: the treatment of women's bodies as property to be attacked or protected as tools of valour or revenge. Hindu women's bodies were deemed to be impure if "corrupted" by a Muslim man. The innuendo of penetration resulting in cultural impurification lends itself to 1) communal tension and division and 2) loss of female agency. The Hindu nationalist narrative of "Love Jihad" has alarming resonance to the current Indian state's institutionalised islamophobia.

Writing about Partition, Gyanendra Pandey suggests that "(violence) is a language shared by Pakistanis and Indians (as by other nations and communities): one that cuts right across those two legal entities, and that in so doing, cuts across not only the "historical" but also the "non-historical" subject" (4). The event—or rather the process—of Partition thus lives on in the memory not merely through the writing of history but through the recurrence of the violence that is indistinguishable to it. BJP leaders' outrage at the brief scene showing Lata and Kabir kissing in *ASB* highlights a link to (but not the direct continuation of) the pre-Independence demand of censorship of "the kiss" (Mazzarella: 10). Sexually-charged British films received a similar opposition in colonial India, when the figure of the "pure" white woman in a performative erotic act—arguably as performative as imperial legislation—is threatened through its subjection to the gaze of subaltern brown men (Mazzarella: 45–46). In *ASB*'s case, what is at threat is not Britain's secure imperialist authority but the idea of majoritarian rule that strives to divide the nation in a dangerously similar way. This endeavour of religious subordination through division is hence

threatened by a kiss that hints at a romantic union amidst a larger volatile division of Partition.

D.J. Strohl notes that by invoking the historically perceived need to protect women of the community, Hindu nationalists assert an ideology of Hindutva, or Hindu dominance in India. In doing so, they demonise Muslims as “a foreign, disloyal population living on Indian soil, providing the justifications for attacks on their person and property” (29). The logic brings me back to the basic concept of nationalism: if a faction is considered “foreign” to the nation, then nationalism would naturally seek to eliminate it like it would an “infiltrator”, a word often used by the Home Minister to connote the Muslim population.<sup>47</sup> The narrative of “Love Jihad” thus becomes a tool to promote that notion of cultural purity, with Muslim men as the lure-ers and Hindu women as passive subjects who get lured easily, reducing women to child-bearing wombs without active agency—needing to be protected by the patriarchal protector in the Hindu communities.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> “First we will pass the Citizenship Amendment bill and ensure that all the refugees from the neighbouring nations get Indian citizenship. After that NRC will be made and we will detect and deport every infiltrator from our motherland.” (Tweeted by Home Minister Amit Shah’s account on May 1, 2019)

<sup>48</sup> BJP has been recorded to highlight, misrepresent and carve interfaith romantic relationships as a threat to the nation’s unity and shared past. The Anti-Conversion law implemented in the state of Uttar Pradesh in 2020, followed by three other states as of today, is popularly known as the “Love Jihad” law (Ellis-Petersen, 14 Dec 2020). It “prohibits unlawful conversion from one religion to another by misinterpretation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means or by marriage” (Rashid). The vague description of terms like “allurement”, “misinterpretation” and “undue influence” gives the police and those connected to it the power to disrupt weddings, separate couples and lodge complaints against consensually married interfaith couples. There have been multiple documented cases of such disruptions, with the accused being overwhelmingly Muslim men marrying Hindu women (Apoorvanad).

Having established the deeply communal nature of the laws and dominant ideology forming said laws, I now explore *ASB*'s portrayal of marriage. The first and last episodes of the series feature the weddings of Lata's sister and Lata respectively. In the first episode, Lata's mother blesses her newly married eldest daughter before turning to Lata and proclaiming with a strict voice "You too will marry a boy I choose." In the next episode, Lata's mother is told to keep her daughter in check by the women in her social circle. Enraged, she questions Lata about the boy she has been seen with. Lata replies with Kabir's first name and the mother raises her voice further as she asks "Kabir *What?*" "Kabir *Lal*, Kabir *Mehra?*" she further prompts Lata with common Hindu last names. The camera cuts to a looming close up of Lata's face as she gives in and answers her mother: "Kabir Durrani." As a last hope, the mother meekly asks "Is he a Parsi?" Lata shakes her head no and the mother breaks down. "Dirty, violent, cruel, lecherous" she shrieks uncontrollably, making her opinion of Muslims clear. Lata's "shameful" rebellion is met with two slaps on the face and she is soon taken to another city to look for another, suitable boy. These cuss words are directly taken from the novel, pointing to an deep and unwavering sense of islamophobic distrust and bias over the decades. As an act of archival stretching, the interpretation of the cuss words and the ways they are used vary and change. Here, Nair directly quotes Seth to solidify the parallels between the post-Partition vilification of 1950s, the communal violence of the 1980s and 90s when the novel was being written, and nationalist politics of the 2020s with reference to interfaith relationships as a threat to Hindu purity.

The mother's words here are to be noted. The "cursed" interfaith relationship has happened to Lata, signalling the need to remove her from the vicinity of "lecherous" Kabir. Invocation of words like shame and disrespect seems remarkably close to the rhetoric of protecting Hindu women from presumptuously licentious Muslim men, a sentiment that, while heightened around the time of Partition, can still be seen in a potent form to this day. Gupta states that "the politics of cultural virginity is inevitably shadowed by a myth of innocence, combined with a ranting of violation, invasion, seduction and rape" (Gupta, 2009). Thus, Lata's attraction to Kabir is automatically considered a threat to her passive chastity – symbolising the chastity of her Hindu family – from the seductive image of Kabir; giving way to claims of Love Jihad.

## **The Latent Side of the Arranged Marriage**

At Lata's sister's wedding, the series' other protagonist, Maan looks at the newly married couple amusingly and tells Lata that he is engaged to marry a girl from Benaras. Both Lata and Maan have romantic affairs with Muslim characters and both the affairs fail by the end of the series, restoring them to their almost predestined paths: arranged marriages.<sup>49</sup> Couples are not expected, nor encouraged, to form relationships before they are married, although such attachments are expected to develop afterwards (Allendorf: 453).

<sup>49</sup> Arranged marriages, in very simple terms, can be defined as marriages in which parents and other family members choose their children's spouses.

According to a survey conducted by IPSOS in 2013, about 74 percent of Indians opt for an arranged marriage.<sup>50</sup> Marian Aguiar, whom I will discuss later, notes that arranged marriages are gaining the normativity where “arranged love” popularised by *ladki-lit* (chick-lit in the South Asian context) provides a multifaceted perspective on arranged marriages. I would like to take another detour from *ASB* to explore how mainstream Hindi cinema has dealt with this shift in the understanding of arranged marriages as the results of parental coercion to a form of matchmaking with hugely disparate results. This places *ASB* within this tradition of arranged marriages to see how it diverts from films based in later years in India.

The trend over the decades ranging 1980-2010 can be perceived through popular films *Woh 7 Din / Those 7 Days* (1983), *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam / I Have Given My Heart Away* (1999) and *Namaste London* (2007) – placed years apart and in varied settings – depict women who have lovers but are forcefully married to the men of their parents’ choice. Later, their selfless husbands offer to reunite them with their lovers before the women fall in love with the utopic, kind-hearted husbands. This kind of portrayal legitimises the idea behind arranged marriages by positioning the parents, mostly fathers, as the superior decision-makers for their daughters. While arranged marriages remain popular themes in Hindi cinema, a feminist nuance enters the conversation in contemporary cinema.

More recently, as a departure from this trope, *Dum Laga ke Haisha / My Big Fat Bride* (2015) follows small town couple Prem and Sandhya who have been married without any interaction.

<sup>50</sup> Survey quoted in “Indians Swear by Arranged Marriages...”



It portrays the problems of cohabitation as they collide in their choices and eventually grow fond of each other despite several serious differences.<sup>51</sup> *Manmarziyaan / Desires of the Heart* (2018) deals with a similar premise in a remarkably different way. While the protagonist gets married to the husband under familial pressure, she has an extramarital affair with her former lover. Later, by the time she gets divorced from her husband, they realise they have feelings for each other. However, the film ends before they get together. The ending hints at a possible reunion, one defined by them on their own terms instead of their parents', but leaving it to the viewer's individual discretion to make the choice between a happy ending as a couple and individual or for the family and wider societal norms. The ending becomes a beginning.<sup>52</sup> *Pagglait / Crazy* (2021) on Netflix uses dark comedy in depicting a young woman who cannot mourn her husband's sudden death because she never fell in love with him. During the traditional 13-day mourning period, she discovers a photograph of his former girlfriend. She learns about her husband's affectionate side by meeting with his former girlfriend. The film

<sup>51</sup> Prem, an orthodox and unemployed man with little contact with women, struggles to find Sandhya attractive due to her weight. Sandhya, in turn, is a working woman who gains freedom outside of home only to be suppressed by her intrusive in-laws and narrow-minded husband. The film follows how Sandhya asserts her agency in leaving her in-laws' house and how Prem unlearns his toxic notions of romance to embrace an equal companionship.

<sup>52</sup> The protagonist, Rumi, marries Robbie on a whim when her commitment-phobic boyfriend deserts her. Instead of give in to her family's demands as a form of subservience, the marriage itself is an act of rebellion for Rumi.

ends with her leaving to work in another city after refusing to marry someone chosen by her in-laws.<sup>53</sup> In many ways, the more recent examples foreground the negative implications of arranged marriages in more nuanced ways. *Manmarziyaan*, *Pagglait* and *Dum Laga ke Haisha* explore infidelity, suppression and domestic exploitation through the lens of their female protagonists. However, these subversions do not discount the mainstream media's propagation of arranged marriages.

A recent example of the narratorial romanticization of arranged marriages is seen in the Netflix original reality series *Indian Matchmaking* (2020) that depicts various single, upper class savarna<sup>54</sup> people of Indian origin, many of them Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) from the US, that employ a famed matchmaker to find suitable spouses for them. They assess biodata, go on dates, have typical romantic moments with their prospective partners and attempt to find a match, and *potential* love after a supposed marriage. This sounds similar to Lata's very limited "choices" for the boy she decides to marry. The partially agential aspect of arranged marriage that is documented in the reality show is fictionalised in *ASB* at a different time period. Through such depictions, Aguiar posits that the young NRI population is lured to think favourably about this institution. They do this by "(bringing) in new elements

<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, it is her time with her husband's girlfriend that introduces the protagonist, Sandhya, to the liberties of living an independent life. She spends time with her trying to mourn her husband's demise but, instead, discovers new possibilities of exerting her freedom.

<sup>54</sup> In Sanskrit, literally "those with Varna", especially referring to those in the three higher-ranking Varnas in the caste system (Pritchett's annotation to B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*).

associated with love marriage, such as choice, creating an arranged marriage discourse that is compatible with neoliberal ideals that give shape to this transnational community” (Aguiar, 196). The result, ultimately, is an absorption into an institution that maintains class, caste and religious purity through endogamy. This system of maintaining purity contributes to the larger notion of Nationalism that seeks to contain communities in order to conveniently divide and rule on the basis of homogenous sects instead of a heterogenous whole.

Endogamy and its inherent exclusivity repetitively materialise in Kabir’s marginalisation within the plot of *ASB*. He is the only suitor who features in all the six episodes, present around Lata’s family but remaining on the periphery through his repeated exclusion. In college after their initial separation, Lata and Kabir perform in a production of *Twelfth Night* together, with Kabir playing Malvolio and Lata Olivia. Their characters emulate their relationship as they are separated by the social barriers determined by birth. Olivia marries an aristocratic man while working class Malvolio is left abandoned by the others who deem him mad. Right before the play is staged, Kabir goes to meet with his mother, who is hinted as suffering from hallucinatory PTSD. This places Kabir’s Malvolio with resonance to the real-life createdness of “madness” or social unacceptability. During the play’s afterparty, Lata confesses to Kabir that she still loves him but has accepted the fact that they cannot marry. Throughout the series, there is no particular moment in which Lata claims to have lost her feelings for Kabir. Her other (and final) suitor Haresh shares a similar experience when he was in love with a

Sikh woman who got married into her religion. Lata, initially reluctant to interact with Haresh, later forms an endearing relationship with him as they write to each other through the earlier episodes—presenting the possibility that their companionship was based on shared social restrictions.

To locate *ASB* in the aforementioned heterogenous tradition of marriage, I would like to recall Moodley's thoughts on the postcolonial feminism present in the "accented cinema" of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, both diasporic filmmakers. Moodley proposes that their female characters undergo a journey of identity, stepping outside a tradition of being obedient, dutiful daughters to become decision-making, responsible adults (Moodley: 69). In Lata's case, while she ends up accepting her mother's choice, to Haresh it does not necessarily mean that giving in to tradition makes her a passive subject at the hands of patriarchy. Earlier in the final episode, Lata meets with Ila, a literature professor who has chosen to remain unmarried. Lata talks about her friend Malati who is a part of the Student Socialist Party and "likes to be in the thick of things". To this, Ila remarks that Lata, on the other hand, likes to be an observer from the sidelines. While leaving, Ila imparts a piece of advice to Lata: "The key to a good marriage is to find a man who will give you the space to grow." This scene is immediately followed by Lata writing to Haresh to reconfirm her interest in him.

## The Discomforting “Happily” Ever After

The approximately 4-minute wedding scene is largely filled with characteristic Hindu signifiers such as the *mandap* (altar) adorned with flowers, brightly coloured outfits considered holy and the bride’s smiling family surrounding the couple. However, here is where we see the signs of Bordwell’s notion of an “uneasy happy ending”.<sup>55</sup> The sequence begins with shots of the flowery decor, musicians playing and the marrying couple ritualistically circling the altar before cutting to the patio where Kabir walks into the external area of the house with his cycle along with the other guests. It cuts back to the characters inside the wedding, including another suitor Amit who is also invited to the wedding. The camera cuts to a shot of Kabir who dismally watches the *varmala* ceremony<sup>56</sup> as everyone cheers on the couple and showers them with flower petals. Then, a shot of Kabir riding away from the house. Back at the wedding, Maan and Firoz – characters portrayed as best friends but with homoerotic overtones, rendering their relationship also forbidden – ask themselves if the couple will be happy, lending a sombre tinge to the “happy” wedding scene. A shot of Kabir on the bicycle riding to someplace.

<sup>55</sup> Here, I use this term, inspired by Bordwell’s essay on happy endings, to point to an objectively happy ending with undertones of discomfort created by certain choices to point to certain unfulfilled wishes of the characters under the social system that dictates their desires (Bordwell: 19).

<sup>56</sup> The couple exchanges garlands during this ceremony.

Another sequence of the wedding as Lata's progressive friend Malati flirts with Varun, Lata's unmarried older brother before he is snatched by his mother who cautions him and says that "(he), too, will marry a girl (she) chooses" and "not one like that. A *suitable* girl." For the last time, the camera cuts to Kabir, now at the riverside point where he and Lata used to meet.



In the brief wedding sequence, Kabir's distraught image is inseparable from the seemingly pleasant, celebratory union. He is not allowed inside the house as he watches Lata get married. Similarly, the mother moves on to another child who needs to be told whom to marry. Maan and Firoz are still stuck at fleeting touches of brushing off petals from one another's shoulders in the name of acting on what can only be sexual attraction. The characters remain as trapped as in the beginning. The ending, which could be said to be the stereotypical "happily ever after", is therefore tainted with the unfulfilled desires of the trapped characters who could not break away from societal expectations even at this point.



After the wedding, the couple departs the town on a train, and Lata watches endearingly as Haresh falls asleep in a pose that starkly resembles that of the Sleeping Buddha. Then, Lata gets up to go to the door of the train and throws a mango to a monkey on a passing railway station, watching fondly as the monkey nibbles on the mango. This scene is reminiscent of the very first scene of the series in which Lata's game with a monkey is disrupted by her mother, who orders her to get dressed for her sister's marriage. This scene marks a return to the place of innocence.<sup>57</sup> Essentially, Lata needed to grow up and get married to be able to retain her childlike qualities in a normative sphere.



Through the analysis of this ending, it could be hypothesised that Lata's decision to opt for her mother's choice comes from a consideration of her own independence that would be afforded to her as a married woman. In her tendency to be at the sidelines, she picks her individual freedom over her romantic choice and goes along with society's restrictions in order to achieve that. The sleeping husband marks an authority that is no longer surveilling her actions. Thus, instead of a subversion through an active involvement in defying the communal tension of the time, Lata decides to instead retain her potential personal freedom by assimilating into the normative acceptable mode of marriage.<sup>58</sup> While Kabir returns to a space that represents the former innocence of both him *and* Lata, the *ghat* (riverside) after its significance has been changed, Lata returns to an earlier space of innocence for herself. As in the wedding sequence, the series maintains its focus on Lata as the protagonist. While it leaves the romantic ending with a tonal mystery of sorts, it provides a closure for Lata outside the purview of her attachment to a suitor. Interestingly, the book's portrayal of the wedding differs in its exclusion of Kabir from the

<sup>58</sup> Lata is, in a way, playing from the sidelines like Prof Ila remarked in an earlier scene.



scene of Lata and Haresh's union. In the novel, Kabir never visits the site of the wedding to witness the ceremony. He merely walks on the riverbanks in nostalgia and returns home. This is noteworthy for a major reason: the addition of an element in a series that already grappled with adapting a massive plot into a 6-episode miniseries is a departure that points to an intentional attempt at meaning-making, in enhancing the novel's political lens by foregrounding the theme of interfaith love.<sup>59</sup> Including Kabir's exclusion from the wedding through visuals of him lingering right outside the venue – situated on the margins, looking in – makes his presence tangible to the viewer, symbolising the presence of their love affair and further convoluting the “happy ending” through the unresolved story of a lover estranged by religion.

Seemingly predicated on who gets picked by Lata to be her husband, the series' uneasy ending perhaps highlights a different, more difficult choice. Through the constant inclusion of Kabir's forced exclusion in the instances discussed, *ASB* makes visible the lack of a satisfactory closure of a narrative that extends beyond its six episodes. Lata's choice, ultimately, is not simply between Kabir, Amit and Haresh. Rather, it is also between Kabir and the stability of a life *not* constantly endangered by separatist beliefs. As such, by emphasising Kabir's hidden presence at Lata and Haresh's wedding, the adapted series incorporates an understanding of the submission to tradition, and thus to a

<sup>59</sup> In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Mira Nair details the mammoth task of adapting the longest Indian novel in English into a miniseries. Speaking on how the story has relevance to contemporary politics, she states “the seeds of much of the terrible politics of today were also planted at independence and Partition.” (Chotiner)

canonical experience, while it also challenges that canon's tendency to submit to the status-quo. The question it leaves viewers with, is *why* there even is a necessity to make that choice in the first place. It could be hypothesised that right-wing critics could not find a suitable answer for the question posed and hence preferred that the questioning subject be conveniently banned and the question cast out of the realm of public attention.

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## CHAPTER 14

# Women's Voices in Contemporary Senegal: Khady Sylla's *Le monologue de la muette* (The Silent Monologue) (2008)

Laura McMahon

### ABSTRACT:

Senegalese filmmaker and author Khady Sylla (1963–2013) is discussed by Laura McMahon in chapter 14. A relatively neglected figure in African cinema, Sylla predominantly made nonfiction films, with a particular interest in Senegalese women's voices, experiences and testimonies. She was mentored by Jean Rouch, and her filmmaking is in dialogue with the work of Senegalese filmmakers Safi Faye and Ousmane Sembène. The chapter takes up the proposal – formulated by acts of collective feminist curation in recent exhibition contexts – to understand Sylla's work in feminist terms. In a predominantly male lineage of Senegalese filmmaking, Sylla brings a distinctively female-centred and feminist perspective.

The Senegalese filmmaker and author Khady Sylla (1963–2013) is an important but somewhat neglected figure in African cinema.<sup>60</sup> She made predominantly nonfiction films, weaving together social observation, political analysis, autobiography and poetry, with a particular interest in attending to Senegalese women's voices, experiences and testimonies. Born in Dakar, Sylla studied philosophy at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris, wrote several short stories and a novel (*Le Jeu de la mer* (1992)), and made five films. She was mentored by Jean Rouch, and her filmmaking is clearly in dialogue with the work of Senegalese filmmakers Safi Faye and Ousmane Sembène. Yet she forges her own distinctive aesthetic approach, combining an attentiveness to women's voices and subjectivities with a rich unsettling of the boundaries between documentary and fiction, political critique and poetry.

Scholarly attention to Sylla's work has been relatively sparse, though a few studies have emerged.<sup>61</sup> Her films have received a greater degree of attention through screenings at film festivals, including the African Film Festival in New York, the Locarno Film Festival, and most recently,

<sup>60</sup> My warmest thanks to Mariama Sylla Faye for giving me access to *Une simple parole/A Single Word* (2014) and for talking with me so generously about Khady Sylla's work. I am also grateful to Stefanie Van de Peer for her helpful and inspiring feedback on this chapter.

<sup>61</sup> See also: Bronwen Pugsley, "Ethical Madness? Khady Sylla's Documentary Practice in *Une fenêtre ouverte*", *Nottingham French Studies*, 51:2 (2012), 204–219; Rama Salla Dieng, "Emancipation that costs servitude", *Africa is a Country*, 7 March 2023, <https://africasacountry.com/2023/03/emancipation-that-costs-servitude>; El Hadji Moustapha Diop, "Revisiting the 'domestic ethnography' approach in Khady Sylla's *Une fenêtre ouverte*", in Crosta, S., Niang, S., and Tcheuyap, A. (eds), *Francophone African Women Documentary Filmmakers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023), pp. 65–94.



CINEFEMFEST, “The African Feminist Film and Research Festival”, which took place for the first time in 2023, on the island of Gorée in Senegal. Sylla’s *Les Bijoux (Jewels)* (1997) won the Panorama of African Cinema prize at FESPACO in 1999, and *Une fenêtre ouverte (An Open Window)* (2005), her most well-known film, garnered an award in 2005 at the International Documentary Festival (FID) in Marseille. It was through the screening of *An Open Window* at the 2022 exhibition, *No Master Territories: Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image* (at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin) that I first encountered Sylla’s work. Curation in this context, and in the recent film festival in Gorée, has aptly framed Sylla’s filmmaking as feminist. In this chapter, I take up the proposal – formulated by acts of collective feminist curation in recent exhibition contexts – to understand Sylla’s work in feminist terms. I am also inspired here by conversations that I have had with Khady Sylla’s sister, Mariama Sylla Faye, who is also a filmmaker. She generously made it possible for me to view *Une simple parole (A Single Word)*, which she co-directed with Sylla, and together we discussed the feminist dimensions of Sylla’s work, and the close sisterly bond and artistic interests that they shared (in *Une simple parole*, Sylla Faye’s voiceover speaks of their two minds as “braided” together).<sup>62</sup> The experience of speaking with Sylla Faye, and our shared, collective feminist reflections in relation to Sylla’s work, shape my thinking here.

I also draw here on Valérie K. Orlando’s account of Sylla’s filmmaking as embedded in an Afrocentrist womanist approach. As Orlando notes,

<sup>62</sup> Sylla Faye described how she and Sylla shared “emotions and a vision of life, of cinema, of literature.” Author’s conversation with Mariama Sylla Faye (2023).

“Afrocentrist womanists define feminism and their roles and places in their respective societies on their own terms, irrespective of Western feminist paradigms” (Orlando 2017: 64). As Orlando observes, African women filmmakers “have contended for a long time that sexual difference is but one component of their movement championing the rights of women on the continent and elsewhere in the diaspora.” These filmmakers “underscore the important fact that women’s roles within societies are constantly manipulated by problems and conflicts that arise out of race, class, and economic inequalities, generated within, as well as influenced from outside, the continent” (Orlando: 67). Orlando identifies a broad group of African “women filmmakers working within social-activist, women-centered frameworks”, situating Sylla’s filmmaking in the wake of earlier works by Safi Faye (Senegal) and Anne-Laure Folly (Togo), and alongside more recent work by Fatou Kandé Senghor (Senegal), Fanta Regina Nacro (Burkina Faso) and Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe). She suggests that these “[w]omen cineastes and documentarians [...] use film to support their social agendas and struggles for change” (Orlando: 67). As we will see, Sylla’s filmmaking shares this investment in an Afrocentrist womanist approach, and in social and political activism more broadly. Indeed, at one point in our conversation, Sylla Faye described Sylla’s films as “tools that feminists can use”.

Sylla’s interest in cinema could be said to be matrilineal in its origins: her mother worked at the “Direction de la cinématographie” in Dakar, and various Senegalese filmmakers – Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, Djibril Diop Mambéty, Mahama

Johnson Traouré – visited the family home while Sylla and her sister, Mariama, were growing up.<sup>63</sup> To this predominantly male lineage of Senegalese filmmaking, Sylla brings a distinctively female-centred and feminist perspective. Her first film, a fictional short entitled *Les Bijoux (Jewels)* (1997),<sup>64</sup> focuses on four sisters, their mother and the family's maid; for Orlando, the film “opens a window onto several women's reality one afternoon in one of the countless poorer neighbourhoods of Dakar” (2017: 71). Later films by Sylla explore, in documentary modes, the everyday events on a bus in Dakar, featuring various female passengers (*Colobane Express*, 1999), the mental health difficulties suffered by both Sylla and her friend Aminta Ngom (*An Open Window*, 2005), and the lives of maids and their exploitative labour conditions in Dakar (*Le monologue de la muette (The Silent Monologue)*, 2008). Sylla's final film, *Une simple parole (A Single Word)* (2014) – released after her death in 2013, and co-directed with her sister Sylla Faye – constructs a tender portrait of their grandmother, a griot (storyteller), tracing oral histories and matrilineal genealogies. In various ways, these films foreground women's histories, telling stories, in fictional and documentary forms, about female subjectivities in contemporary Senegalese contexts – stories of female poverty, endurance, labour, suffering, anger and resistance.

In this chapter, I focus in particular on *Le monologue de la muette* – Sylla's most sustained

<sup>63</sup> Author's conversation with Mariama Sylla Faye (2023).

<sup>64</sup> I am grateful to GREC for giving me access to *Les Bijoux (Jewels)*.

portrait of the difficulties faced by women, especially those working as maids, in contemporary Senegal.<sup>65</sup> I am interested in tracing how she frames these issues in political terms – through appeals to female collectivity, while mapping social and economic inequalities – and in aesthetic terms – via a hybrid documentary form and an assemblage of female voices and perspectives. As indicated by the focus on speech and silence in the film’s title (in both the original French and the English translation), voices – especially women’s voices – are key in this film. Filmed in a combination of Wolof and French, *Le monologue* has been read by Cazenave against the backdrop of a history of women being silenced in Africa, bound up as this is with colonial and patriarchal structures of inequality (Cazenave 2018). Conscious of this history of silencing, Sylla’s film takes time to listen to women’s voices carefully, while responding at times with her own voiceover commentary. In this sense, Sylla invests in “vococentrism” as an Afrofeminist strategy that works in counterpoint to a history of consigning Black women to the status of mute visual spectacle, especially in ethnographic film.<sup>66</sup> Yet she also attends to the politics of silence (which is placed in a dialectical relation with the voiceover). My methodology in

<sup>65</sup> *The Silent Monologue* was co-directed by Sylla and Charlie Van Damme.

<sup>66</sup> On the politics of listening to Black women’s voices, see Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2021). Michel Chion criticises “vococentrism” in cinema for privileging the voice over other sounds (see *The Voice in Cinema*, translated by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)), yet Sylla’s work suggests the value of such vococentric strategies in the context of a history of colonial and patriarchal silencing. On female voices in cinema, see also, for example, Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

what follows is to quote at length from the voices in Sylla's film, rather than assimilating them too quickly into my argument – to listen to them in a sustained way, in order to register more fully the stories that they tell.<sup>67</sup> Yet I also suggest that listening does not equate with transparent access or totalising knowledge: Sylla is careful to acknowledge the ways in which opacity remains.

*Le monologue* focuses on the narrative of Amy, a young maid from a rural part of Casamance, who works for a family in Dakar. The film depicts scenes of Amy's almost-incessant domestic labour, often accompanied by an interior monologue through which her thoughts are communicated to the viewer. Amy is played by Amy Diagne, a maid in real life, and the scenes of her labour are hybrid in their positioning between documentary and fiction: the images of housework inhabit a documentary space, while the voiceover occupies a more fictionalised and poetic dimension – this is the imagined *monologue de la muette*.<sup>68</sup> Interwoven with these scenes are various other fictional and documentary elements: a Senegalese female slam poet, Fatim Poulo Sy, who speaks directly to the viewer, addressing employers of maids and calling them to account; Sylla's voiceover, commenting on how Amy's situation (being forced to move from the countryside to the city for work) connects with a broader context of poverty, desperation and rural destitution; documentary interviews with other young women working as maids. There

<sup>67</sup> In our conversations, Mariama Sylla Faye's voice became another one to which I listened in a sustained way, further extending this methodology of durational listening.

<sup>68</sup> The text of the interior monologue was written by Sylla, based on interviews with Amy Diagne.

are other strands too, including a fictionalised staging of a maid's boss being held to account for maltreatment, and towards the end of the film, another slam poet, Joséphine Diouf, who speaks directly and prophetically to the camera. Overall, the film's structure gives the impression not only of hybridity but of a polyphony of female voices and perspectives. This seems key to the film's concerns with female suffering, female collectivity and solidarity, set against a broader background of collective suffering under desperate economic conditions in contemporary Senegal.

*Le monologue* can be situated within a lineage of female filmmakers in Africa who have sought to privilege women's testimonies, including Assia Djébar and Safi Faye. If "[t]he foregrounding of a multiplicity of voices is rooted in Djébar's experience as a writer" (Van de Peer 2018: 117), this is similarly the case for Sylla, and in *Le monologue*, the literary dimensions of Sylla's approach are particularly apparent in the poetic formulations of Amy's interior monologue (in French), and in the words of the slam poets (written by Sylla in Wolof and French). There is a still more direct line of influence from Faye to Sylla: *Le monologue* inherits much from Faye's *Selbé et tant d'autres* (*Selbé: One among many*) (1982), especially its focus on women living in rural Senegal (Cazenave: 54–55). In *Selbé et tant d'autres*, "[t]he economic climate has relegated the men to unemployment and has disrupted traditionally complementary gender roles in the domestic sphere, unsettling marriage and family life" (Bisschoff and Van de Peer 2019: 66). 26 years after Faye's film, Sylla maps the continuation of this climate of male unemployment in rural Senegal, and the pressures that it places on

female workers such as Amy (who migrate to cities for work). In aesthetic terms too, *Le monologue* is clearly influenced by Faye's film – by the attentiveness to Selbé's seemingly endless routines of labour, the linking of this to a matrix of rural women's testimonies, and the use of voiceover, among various other elements. Yet Sylla also forges her own distinctive aesthetic approach, evident not least through the prophetic and poetic dynamics of the film's opening.

*Le monologue* begins with scenes of maids sweeping the porches and pavements outside houses in Dakar, in the early morning. In a whispered voiceover, we hear a plural, collective perspective:

We're a minority, we're marginal. But  
Spartacus is with us.

It seems the world doesn't revolve around us.  
The sun and moon don't shed their light for us.

Well, this Spring will be ours. The  
bougainvilleas will bloom for us. Trees will bud  
and butterflies will take wing.

We see the first shot of Amy – she is sweeping too.  
The voiceover continues in a whisper:

Time is our ally. It flows like a last river. We  
can't throw in the towel. We must dry our  
tears. Our star will soon rise. The black star  
of our Spring will shine forth. For you, Amy.  
For us.

The film opens under the sign of Spartacus, the slave gladiator who rebelled against imperial Rome. It opens with a sense of revolutionary possibility.

Against these scenes of monotonous domestic labour, of pavements swept at the crack of dawn, the whispered voiceover – conveying a sense of secrecy and urgency – poetically conjures forth the possibility of resistance, of collective female insurgency, of a rising up against servitude and oppression. Yet such hopes seem dashed in the next scene as – in a dialectical move that will turn out to be a recurrent strategy in this film – Sylla cuts to the domestic prison. We see Amy in a living room, carrying a tray. A man sits silently on the sofa while a woman quietly, solemnly, issues commands:

Set it in a bit.

Take the butter dish. Take it and put it in the fridge.

Bring the bread.

Put it on the platter. Put the tea down in front.

Push the platter over.

Where's the sugar, Amy? Go get it.

By dwelling on this sequence of commands, the scene registers in detail the banality of this routine exercise of power, and the micromanagement of Amy's every move. It is a scene of power, surveillance and submission. Amy does not turn to look at the woman or speak to acknowledge her commands – rendered docile by her circumstances, she silently obeys. The *mise-en-scène* is cluttered and the framing claustrophobic, contributing to a sense of Amy being hemmed in.

Shortly after this, we hear Amy's interior monologue for the first time: "Here is a prison." The film cuts to the kitchen, with little light. Amy's voiceover continues, outlining the monotony of her labour: "I do the laundry in a small tub in the



courtyard. I sweep the courtyard, the sidewalk, the street.” The *mise-en-scène*, combined with the interior monologue, seems positioned to recall another Senegalese maid from another time: Diouana in Ousmane Sembène’s *La noire de...* (*Black Girl*) (1966). Both Diouana and Amy experience the violence of relentless servitude and exploitation, and both live in forms of exile from home. Yet while Diouana moves from Senegal to France, *Le monologue* maps displacement and violence without ever leaving Senegal, bearing witness to a form of “exile within one’s own country” (Cazenave: 52). For Cazenave, *Le monologue* is a “gendered story of globalization”, reflecting on the exploitation of Senegalese women in the context of the impact of globalization on Senegal and Africa more broadly, especially in relation to the increasing devastation of rural communities (a social and economic landscape sketched by Sylla’s voiceover in the film). While racial and gender difference are key to the French family’s colonial othering and objectification of Diouana in *La noire de...*, it is gender, class and economic status that facilitate exploitation in *Le monologue*.<sup>69</sup>

Sylla, like Sembène before her, deploys film form to enact a political questioning of the conditions of the maid’s existence. As in *La noire de...*, Amy’s voiceover opens up a space of subjectivity that counters the logic of objectification at work in scenes of domestic servitude. Recalling not only Sembène’s film but experimental feminist cinema’s use of dissonant voiceovers and soundscapes to reframe domestic

<sup>69</sup> Sylla’s interest in the mistreatment of maids is evident in her first film too, in the short feature *Les Bijoux* (*Jewels*), in which the maid is wrongfully accused of having stolen the jewellery of the film’s title.

space (Macdonald 2015), here the voiceover functions in counterpoint to the film's images of docile obedience. In *Le monologue*, these feminist reflections intersect with dynamics of exile, recalling the "dialectics of displacement and emplacement" described by Hamid Naficy in his work on accented cinema (Naficy 2001: 152). In *Le monologue*, as in *La noire de...*, there are spatio-temporal oscillations between present and past, exile and home. Following Amy's account, in voiceover, of how her life is reduced to labour, the film suddenly cuts away from the domestic space in Dakar, to shots of dry, rural landscapes in Casamance. The voiceover murmurs: "There is my childhood. Here is my wretched youth." As the film cuts to a river, we hear: "I'm at the river's edge. I rinse my laundry in its clear water. I lift up my colourful pagne." The use of the present tense suggests the vividness of Amy's memory and of her longing. The film cuts to a hut: "My heart's in my mother's hut. It's cool and quiet." Here image and sound coincide, becoming mutually affirming: in Casamance, there is harmony; back in Dakar, only dissonance. As Naficy suggests: "In the chronotopes of the idyll, all temporal boundaries are blurred thanks to the unity of place" (Naficy: 155). These scenes of Casamance function as a temporary salve – for Amy and for the viewer; they conjure forth nostalgia, yearning and an intense, abiding connection to home, linked in particular to the figure of the mother (as in *La noire de...*) (Oliver-Powell 2021). Later on, however, this idealisation of home and family will be complicated by Sylla, as the film reflects on the sense of estrangement felt by maids upon returning home to their villages. In Amy's case, a

return home is described as impossible: “In my village, my mother gives my wages to my brother to pay his debts. I’ll never go back there.”

Sylla’s film might also be read as a critique of Sembène’s: it offers a more nuanced tracing of the oppression of the maid, especially in its relations with social and political contexts in Senegal. In place of the suicidal ending that Sembène depicts – a dramatic, cataclysmic event, even if conveyed in dedramatised terms – Sylla’s film cleaves to the mundane rhythms of ongoing hardship that shape women’s lives (and thus seems closer to Faye’s *Selbé* in this sense). Sembène leaves Diouana’s suicide to be narrated from the perspective of the coloniser (in the *faits divers* of the French newspaper onscreen), as the film critically replicates the forms of silencing and isolation suffered by Diouana while alive. Sylla takes a radically different path: while her film stages Amy’s silencing and isolation, it also directly refuses it, not only through the interior monologue but by allowing the voices of other women (Sylla, Sy and others) to speak in solidarity with her. Sylla’s film constructs a community of women – a political collectivity formed through women’s voices and testimonies – that is absent from Sembène’s film.

We see this as *Le monologue* brings in the voices of other Senegalese women, connecting Amy’s suffering to a broader context. Brief documentary interviews with other young women working as maids unfold further histories of poverty, inequality and a gendered lack of opportunity. Cazenave notes how the maids are interviewed “[w]ith their eyes lowered”, “embodying submission and domination when telling their stories”, which is contrasted with the slam poets who look directly at

the camera (Cazenave: 54). The maids' stories tell of girls leaving school at early ages. One woman recounts the premature death of her mother, which led to her leaving school once she had finished third grade; she decided to become a maid because "[i]t's better to work than to beg or sell yourself." Another interviewee recounts:

My mother made me quit school when I was 11. She considered it unnecessary for a girl. When I disagreed with her, she threatened to hit me. Going to school was pointless for her. [...] I went to school behind my mother's back. Since my mother was a maid, I didn't mind the idea of being one myself.

Here and elsewhere in *Le monologue*, we are given a sense of oppressive relations between women under conditions of patriarchy: a mother denying a daughter the opportunity to go to school, or Amy's boss – the matriarch of the family – treating her as a domestic slave. Yet while the first example is linked to a gendered and class-based sense of dispossession, the second is connected to an expression of social and economic power. The solidarity of women that the film invokes at times, in its appeals to female collectivity, is placed under pressure here, as together these examples map complicated dynamics for women's relations under conditions of social and economic inequality.

Indeed, directly following the interview with the young woman who was forced to leave school at the age of 11, is a sequence showing girls outside a lycée in Dakar. Sylla's voiceover comes in: "Without the young maids, many of these girls would be home cleaning. Their mothers would be

cooking. Why does the emancipation of some result in the servitude of others?”. We understand this as an indictment of the capitalist logic by which low-income female workers enable the flourishing of women and families on higher incomes (a dynamic that has intensified with globalisation) (Federici 2019). The images depict girls smartly dressed in Western-style fashions (rather than traditional dress), walking out of the school grounds. With these images of relative privilege and educational access, Sylla’s voiceover works in critical juxtaposition:

What are the ranks of these girls who slave to feed their families in their villages? They’ll never have the chance to learn how to read, write or count. They’ve no real future. They’ll end up sitting idle at home or begging in the city streets. How many are there? Some 150,000 in Dakar alone.

While Sylla’s voiceover adopts a critical but calm tone here, this is contrasted by the sequences featuring the Senegalese slam poet, Fatim Poulo Sy, who speaks directly to camera, allowing rage at the inequalities mapped by the film to irrupt. Interestingly, this contrast is also marked by Sylla speaking in French and Sy speaking in Wolof: while Sylla comments analytically, at a distance, Sy speaks in proximity and allegiance. She rhetorically inhabits the position of a maid, addressing the viewer like an employer: “You haggle when you hire me as if I were an object for sale. Why?”. Shot at first in a dark inside space, she steps out into the light, towards the camera, in a gesture of confrontation. Against the realms of invisibility and silence to

which these maids are so often consigned, this scene affirms visibility and voice. Sy shouts:

Why am I the last one to bed only to be awakened at the crack of dawn? You don't appreciate my work. I keep your house clean. I keep it squeaky clean yet I'm considered dirty. You don't feed me yet you eat your fill thanks to me. Yes, thanks to me. If something's lost, it's my fault. It's always my fault. But I keep your house clean. I slave away while you relax. I do everything.

This is an enraged indictment of domestic slavery and its material conditions – the exhaustion, the lack of remuneration, the reduction of life to bare existence:

I work like a fool, rushing around. If you could, you'd make me fly. Wash, scrub, sweep, iron. Always in haste. Do the dishes, wash the kids, keep an eye on the house. And you pay me zilch. You think you can work me to death? My suffering doesn't interest you. You don't wait for my tears to dry. You can't pay me? And you think you can work me to death? You don't know how I suffer, how exhausted I am. When I'm sick, you replace me. And when I work I have to beg for my pay.

Reminiscent of Audre Lorde's reflections on Black feminist rage in "The Uses of Anger", here Sylla stages a "symphony of anger", an orchestration of "furies" through Sy's performance. Lorde writes that the anger of women of colour "expressed and translated

into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (Lorde 2019: 120-122).<sup>70</sup> Sy’s words provide a furious indictment of the labour conditions of many working-class women in Senegal – her anger too is a strengthening, potentially liberating, “act of clarification”, in its evocation of the lived experience of domestic slavery. In contrast to the forced submission that she documents, Sy embodies defiance. As Cazenave observes: “Both her gaze and her body express tension, anger, and a determination to refuse any form of submission or exploitation” (Cazenave: 53). Cazenave reads Sy’s interventions in the film in the context of a “new generation of African feminists”, drawing on the work of Touria Khannous who explores the ways in which globalisation – including social media and transnational networks – shapes fourth generation feminist activism in Africa (Khannous 2014: xxi). Sylla beckons this contemporary spirit into her film through the centring of slam poetry – its words and its gestures. It is figured powerfully here as a medium of feminist revolt and reckoning.

This anger carries through also to a scene of fictionalised enactment, in which a mother seeks a form of retribution for her daughter who has been working as a maid under exploitative and abusive conditions. At one point, the mother says: “You crook. You didn’t pay my daughter. You’re in trouble. May you rot in prison!”. A physical fight

<sup>70</sup> Lorde describes how Black women “learn to orchestrate those furies so they do not tear us apart” (122). Lorde’s keynote lecture, delivered to the National Women’s Studies Association Conference in the US in 1981, is a critique of anti-Black racism, especially within white feminist movements.

breaks out. The scene foregrounds maternal rage and a quest for justice for the daughter. It is a speculative, wished-for scene of reckoning, one that resonates on a collective level, given the wider issues documented by *Le monologue*. Towards the end of the scene, we see the women dispersing and stepping out of their roles. The woman who played the mother now relaxes, laughing. The woman who played the boss says: "It's the same old story. The police arrest you but nothing comes of it." Moments later, she says: "In the end, it's not so easy to act." Here the film acknowledges the constructedness of the scene, but the woman's comment about the police suggests that this fictional enactment has been rooted in the everyday experience of these women. The hybrid form of Sylla's approach makes possible the inclusion of this scene: seemingly improvised, and distributing authorship, it stages a collective imagining of a political scene of reckoning.

Elsewhere in the film, testimonies of exploited women abound. One maid says in interview: "Sometimes I want to cry when I see what I get paid. We're human beings too." Washerwomen are also interviewed. One says, while scrubbing away: "I'm tired of washing clothes and making no money [...] 15 cents for a pair of jeans, 8 cents for a t-shirt is nothing [...]. It's back-breaking work, scrubbing clothes all day long". Another woman says: "You take them their clean laundry, but they can't pay you. It's morning and you haven't eaten a thing." A recurrent theme among the female interviewees is the issue of extremely low wages and often unpaid work. The film allows the time to listen to these women, to record their lived experience, their claims and complaints. At the same time, the film works visually



to register the exhaustion, the strain, the back-breaking work they describe – whether by showing Amy bending over to wash the floor or the women bending to scrub clothes. A washerwoman with a baby speaks: “It’s hard to scrub clothes with a baby on your back. You work hard to support your family. You do it with dignity. You work all day to the point of exhaustion, then they promise to pay you. I wash laundry and feed my son in the hot sun.” She smiles ruefully as she starts to breastfeed him. These are scenes of unremitting labour and exhaustion, of “endurance” (Gorfinkel 2012), rooted above all in a female perspective. We see this also in *Colobane Express*, where the first interview is with a group of women – including one woman breastfeeding her child – who have been waiting for the bus since 3am, on their way to work at the market. There too Sylla’s interest is drawn to the exhaustion and resilience of women struggling with the burdens of work and caregiving.

While *Le monologue* attends to issues of labour and hardship in ways that cut across gendered difference (Sylla’s voiceover also describes the difficulties faced by men locked in cycles of poverty and unemployment), it insists on the particular difficulties faced by Senegalese women in such situations, especially maids working in homes where they may be at risk. This is explored in another furious monologue delivered by Sy. As she walks along the street, her dreadlocks now loose, she proclaims:

They slave away like slatterns, paying with  
their lives. What other choice have they?  
Sometimes they pay with their bodies. Can  
you blame them for being so alluring? Can

you blame the men for being so attracted?  
These young girls can be quite desirable.  
And very available. And easily taken  
advantage of. And they'll never tell.

The sequence cuts to Sy on another street, as she continues:

But if they get pregnant, ha ha, what a scandal! The evil temptress is thrown out in the street. Disgraced, her hopes of finding a husband vanish. She becomes a source of shame. Her parents often disown her. She's forced to go away, where she's not known, in search of an abortionist or quack witch doctor. Or she makes herself drink detergent or gas. She swallows pills, anything...She even mutilates herself.

Through Sy's words, the film bears witness to the unbearable conditions, including the possibility of rape and violation, suffered by women in such circumstances. It registers the gendered dynamics of their powerlessness and shame, the foreclosing of their futures, the unseen scenes of desperation.

Amy is not shown to experience such violations, but the film traces the gendered dynamics of a sequence of events through which she gets stuck, her plans for the future – her dreams of owning a restaurant – stalled. Through her interior monologue, we learn about her marriage to Omar, a man from her village, and her pregnancy. A few scenes later, the film jumps forward in time to Amy, living in the countryside again, washing a baby. We hear in voiceover: "It'll be hard with my little girl to find work as a maid.

I could be a washerwoman". Perhaps here we imagine her joining the legions of washerwomen witnessed earlier in the film, in a perpetuation of cycles of poorly paid work for Senegalese women.

To the threat of an endless reproduction of the same, the film responds with the possibility of imagining things otherwise, as another slam poet, Joséphine Diouf, speaks directly to the camera, in a defiant voice. She addresses Amy:

Reclaim your life force. Speak up. Join your voice to ours. Soon the black star of our Spring will shine forth. For you, Amy. For us. A new morning will dawn over our sufferings. Spartacus is with us. Our cry will be heard afar. Your voice joined with ours and those of our sisterhood, what a storm it'll unleash!

Here the film returns to the prophecy of collective female insurrection with which it opened. But the next sequence also undercuts these riotous, rebellious hopes. Inhabiting the dialectical logic seen also at the start, the film holds this dream of future insurgency alongside a present state of oppression. Over images of Amy preparing food, we hear: "Omar still hasn't sent any money home. I do the laundry. I wash the dishes. I clean the house. I work in the fields. But I make nothing." The enumeration of tasks echoes that with which her interior monologue began, when she was working as a maid, confirming a sense of the film's framing of marriage as another form of servitude, especially for women in poverty.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> There are echoes here too of the lack of help that Selbé receives from her husband in Faye's film.

The final stages of *Le monologue* insist on a broader political analysis. Citing “5% economic growth in Senegal since 2000”, Sy shakes her finger at the camera, in outrage at the lack of any fair distribution of wealth. Next, we hear Sylla’s voiceover:

It’s too easy to blame nature, point your finger at the sky, call it destiny, while you dry your crocodile tears. It’s too easy to rely on NGOs with their stopgap measures. Desertification doesn’t explain everything. We need to question the rules that govern the global economy. The few exploit the masses and profit greatly from it. They ruthlessly exploit an exploitable workforce of oppressed, submissive, expendable human beings. Maybe the maids don’t have it so bad. They’re not really enslaved. They’re free to go elsewhere.

While suggesting that women working as maids still have some degree of choice,<sup>72</sup> Sylla keeps in view the systems of global economic governance that have contributed to such widespread poverty in Senegal, insisting on a political analysis of the injustices documented by the film. This exemplifies what Orlando has described as Sylla’s Afrocentrist womanist approach, particularly as it resonates with sociologist Filomina Chioma Steady’s observation that “African feminism operates within a global political economy in which sexism cannot be isolated from the larger political and economic processes responsible for the exploitation and oppression of both men and women. The result

<sup>72</sup> However, trafficking into forced domestic servitude takes place within Senegal and elsewhere; see for example: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/senegal/>

is a kind of feminism that is transformative in human and social terms [...]” (Steady 2004: 58). As the film draws to a close, it stages an Afrocentrist womanist refusal to cordon off concerns specific to women from broader economic and political issues affecting Senegal.

Sylla’s voiceover returns at the very end, over an image of Amy sitting in silence, looking pensive: “This story took place in Dakar, but it could happen anywhere. If ever we want things to change, good intentions won’t be enough.” In these final stages, the film moves between Sy’s anger, Sylla’s analysis and Amy’s silence. Despite the access to Amy’s subjectivity offered up by the interior monologue, the film suggests here that opacity remains. In this sense, the film registers the limits of what it can see and hear. Like Édouard Glissant, Sylla affirms “the right to opacity”, recognising that “[t]o feel in solidarity” does not mean to assimilate or grasp (Glissant 1997). We sense the opacity of suffering subjects also in Sylla’s *Une fenêtre ouverte (An Open Window)*: as Khady and Aminta each give voice to their struggles with “madness”, the documentary creates a viewing encounter shaped by contact and distance, intimacy and unknowability.

Sylla’s final film, *Une simple parole (A Single Word)* (2014), is also about women’s words. Khady and her sister Mariama travel from Dakar to the rural village of Barale Ndiaye, to be reunited with their grandmother and to record the oral histories that she tells, before those words disappear. The film is devoted above all to listening to the grandmother’s voice as she passes on proverbs, stories, family histories and genealogies. Mariama says at one point: “The word is what unites all of us.” Later, Khady will reflect in voiceover: “We

are trying to save the last vestiges. But are we not betraying the spirit of it?" The film stages an act of archiving oral history that it also recognises as impossible. Here, as in *Le monologue*, there is an acknowledgement of Senegalese women's identities as plural, as to be ceaselessly negotiated across apparent divides (such as tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban).<sup>73</sup> Above all, Sylla's final film, like *Le monologue de la muette* and the rest of her filmmaking, insists on listening to the voices of women and the stories they tell, while also registering that which remains opaque, unknowable.

With the archival impetus of *A Simple Word* in mind, we might also see *Le monologue* as an important act of archiving. From the hushed prophetic whisper of the film's opening to the defiant shout of the slam poet Sy, and from the documentary interviews with maids and washerwomen to Sylla's political analysis in voiceover, *Le monologue* offers a particularly rich archive of Senegalese women's testimonies – an oral history of women's suffering, anger, hopes and dreams. Kate Eichhorn writes of archives as sites through which contemporary feminist activism grapples not only with the past but with "legacies, epistemes, and traumas pressing down on the present" (Eichhorn 2013: 5). In archives, we find the "cultural debris" of "incomplete, partial or otherwise failed transformations of the social field" (Freeman 2010: xiii). In turning back to *Le monologue* and

<sup>73</sup> As Van de Peer and Bisschoff observe: "female identity in Africa, as elsewhere, is fluid and plural. The positioning of identity is further informed by the effects of tradition and modernity, of rural versus urban spaces, often depicted in conflict with one another but often actually interacting in a complementary way." *Women in African Cinema*, p. 68.

its archival acts, viewers also turn forward – to ongoing collective feminist struggles for change, in Senegal and elsewhere.

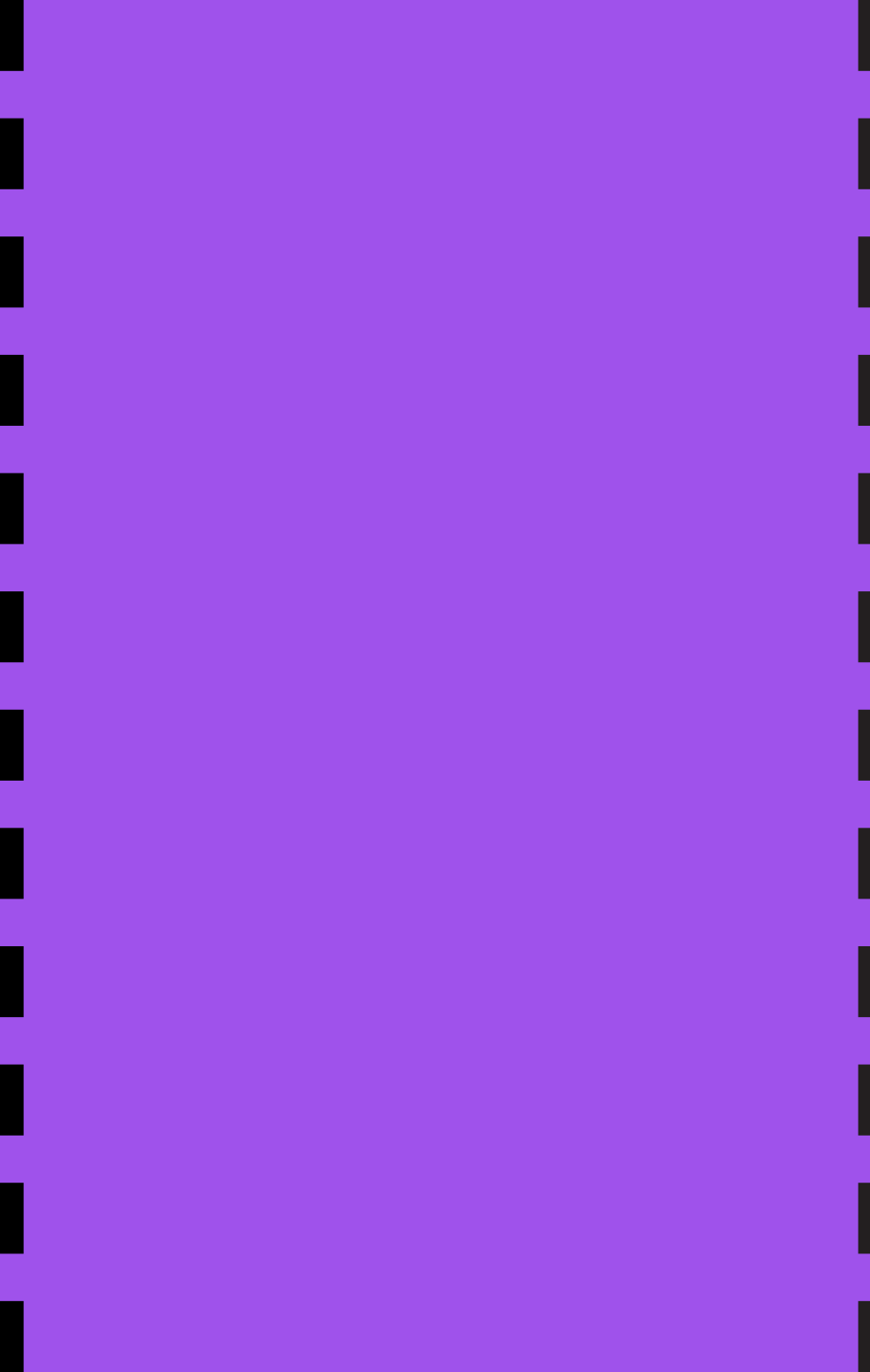
Released in 2008, *Le monologue* can be situated as emerging during a period of significant legislative gains for feminist movements in Senegal: “mandatory schooling in 2004, the parity law for men and women in 2010, and the criminalisation of sexual abuse in 2019” (Gueye and Ba 2001). Yet the fact that such fundamental rights for women have been written into Senegalese law only recently points to the extent to which structural inequalities continue to persist and require ongoing debate and redress. In June 2023, CINEFEMFEST, “The African Feminist Film and Research Festival”, took place on the island of Gorée. Organised around the theme of “Legacies”, the festival screened films by Khady Sylla and Safi Faye alongside one another, showing *Le monologue de la muette* followed by Faye’s *Mossane* (1996), and *Une simple parole* just before Faye’s *Kaddu Beykat (Lettres paysannes)* (1976). Rama Salla Dieng, one of the festival organisers, spoke of wanting to “claim these films as tools of popular education”. Referring to Sylla and Faye, she said that the festival was “building upon what our mothers, our ancestors, have left behind for us”. Matrilineal histories, archival acts and feminist politics thus shape not only the making of Sylla’s films but also their continued reception, as women in Senegal continue to claim rights and struggle for better futures. With Sylla, they might say: “The black star of our Spring will shine forth.”

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# **PART 3 REVISIONING THE PAST**



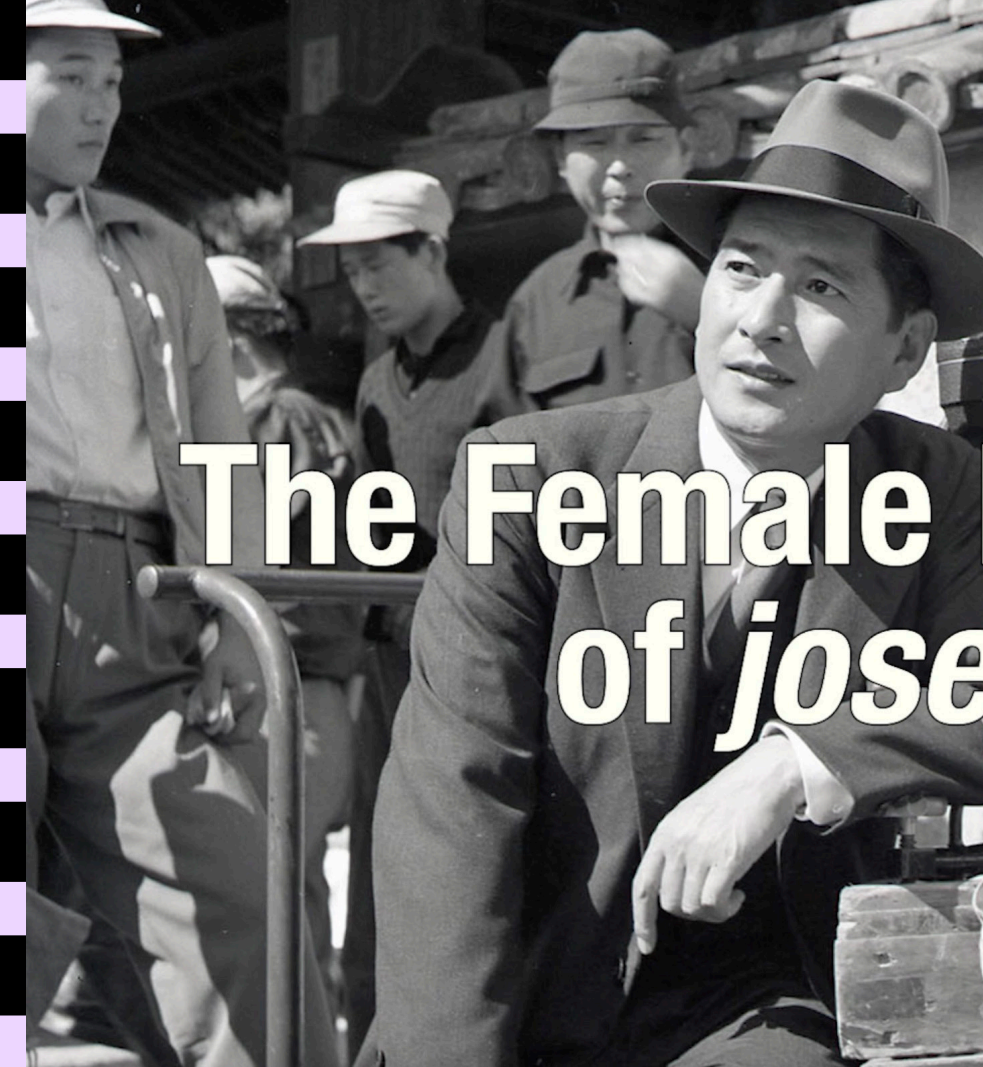
## CHAPTER 15

# The Female Filmmakers of *Josei-Eiga*

Vivian Wenli Lin

### ABSTRACT:

Chapter 15 is a video essay by Vivian Wenli Lin, in which she looks at what the pioneering women of Japanese cinema contributed. Josei-Eiga was an era of the women's film and one of the most popular genres of the wartime period. In this chapter, the video essayist discusses the work of Sakane Tazuka (1904–1975) and Taneka Kinuyo (1909–1977), and the way in which they defied Japanese gender and genre norms, both on and off screen.



# The Female of *jose*

The Female  
Filmmakers of  
*Josef-Eiga*



Filmmakers  
*ei-eiga*





# Pola Negri: The “New Woman” as a Transnational Film Star<sup>1</sup>

Małgorzata Radkiewicz

ABSTRACT:

In chapter 16 Małgorzata Radkiewicz delves into the life and career of Polish actress Pola Negri (1897–1987) who was active as an international actress and star. She is considered one of the most recognised female faces in silent films, a femme fatale on the screen and a mysterious multi-ethnic and transnational performer. She was Poland's first film star, but her most outstanding achievements were on a European and then a global scale. This chapter argues that she can be seen as a strong and independent “New Woman” who wants to make her own decisions regarding her life, feelings, and her partner. This chapter, then, is an engagement with star studies and the persona of the early screen diva.

<sup>1</sup> This text was prepared for a project by the Polish National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute (FINA), translated by Wojciech Góralczyk and edited by Katarzyna Wajda and Michał Oleszczyk. It may be re-published in the future by FINA in a special volume on Pola Negri. Photographs from the collection of National Digital Archives in Poland.

Pola Negri is considered one of the most recognised female faces in silent films, a femme fatale on the screen and a mysterious multi-ethnic and transnational actress, who deliberately changed her life story and professional career into a legend. She was Poland's first film star, but her most outstanding achievements were on a European and then a global scale. Negri was born on 3 January 1897 in Lipno, as Apolonia Barbara Chałupiec (Chalupiec) had to make several transgressions to overcome difficulties on her way to a film career. The first one was a social transgression, when as the daughter of a washerwoman and tinsmith, she went to Warsaw to take ballet lessons, followed by acting courses. Secondly, Negri overcame the limits of her own physicality, adapting her naturally low, rough voice and developing an entirely individual style of dance and performance, emphasised through costume and facial make-up.

In 1913 as a teenager Negri gave a successful performance in the pantomime *Sumurun* directed by Ryszard Ordyński, who worked as an assistant to Max Reinhardt in Berlin. The young actress, spotted by film producer and director Aleksander Hertz, almost immediately became a local film star, debuting in *Slave to Her Senses (Niewolnica zmysłów, 1914)*. Pola's distinctive look and expressive dance style started to define her image and the type of roles she was offered. After leaving Warsaw in 1917, she headed to Berlin, where she got a chance to work for theatre with a famous Berlin theatre reformer Max Reinhardt, and for cinema with Ernst Lubitsch.



In the atmosphere of Berlin's avant-garde and in its multicultural environment Negri truly established her individual style and became the persona identified with roles in films by Lubitsch, including *Carmen* (1918), *Madame Dubarry* (1919) and others. Her suggestively erotic and exotic roles attracted the attention of Hollywood, where, together with Lubitsch, she successfully repeated the European successes, making *Forbidden Paradise* (1924).

Pola Negri's personality and charisma were fully displayed in an American production *A Woman of the World* (1925), directed by Malcolm St. Clair. She was cast to play the European Countess Elnora Natatorini: fashionably attired, with a cigarette in her mouth and a tattoo on her shoulder (a memento of an unrequited love). The melodramatic plot – far less original than the title character it features – begins with a dramatic split, after which the heroine decides to escape to the American countryside. Her arrival upsets the status quo of a small sleepy town, as she immediately comes into conflict with the law, or rather with a lawman who is in equal parts appalled and fascinated by the casual manner of this strange woman. In the end, fascination prevails, and in keeping with the requirements of a romantic story, the Countess' encounter with the district attorney ends in a wedding.

On one hand, Negri's temperament and expression slot her extravagant heroine right into the Hollywood archetype of a seductive vamp, "culturally and sexually predatory" (Negra 2001: 61–62) who, while representing "uncontrollable female desire," (ibid.) is ultimately doomed to submit to a man. On the other hand, the actress' personality and style force us to see Elnora as a strong and independent "New Woman" who wants to make her own decisions regarding her life, feelings, and her partner. In one scene, faced with the betrayal of her lover, the heroine pronounces resolutely: "I am a woman of the world, not the world's woman."

Therefore, St. Clair's film mixes two extremely disparate concepts of femininity, a

fact that is echoed in its ambiguous original title: *A Woman of the World* signifies a person with such extensive life experience that nothing can surprise, astonish, or shock her. Meanwhile, in the film, the members of the local community visited by the European aristocrat treat her “worldliness” with irony, and some are even scandalised, speculating and gossiping about the many voyages and dalliances of their exotic guest. Interestingly, the Polish translation of the title – literally “Shameless Woman” – refers to an ironic and stigmatising perception of the character and her carefree manner. Critics at the premiere of *A Woman of the World* also picked up on the non-cohesive construction of the main character and the incompatibility of this schematic role with Negri’s potential as an actress. In their opinion, the Paramount production was the “worst material that an artist of her ability could be given” (Danny 1925) and was dramaturgically inept, making it impossible to showcase “the real talent of the screen’s best actress” (Anonymous 1925).

Such a negative opinion of the film’s plot and of the vision of femininity it contains begs the question: what was the relationship between the cultural model of the “New Woman” of that time and the film production system and preferred models of stardom? And within that context – what was the trajectory of Negri’s career in Hollywood, where most saw in her merely an exotic beauty from Europe?

To answer all these questions, it is necessary to closely examine various archival materials, including (press) reports and images from the collection of the Polish National Film Archive (FINA), and data collected by The National

Digital Archives – the state archive network in Poland. As it was suggested by Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight in the introduction to their co-edited book *Doing Women's Film History. Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (2015), “doing women’s film history” and “reframing cinema” is not about putting women back into history alongside men or about creating a separate space called women’s film history apart from “men’s film history”. It is rather about putting in questions traditional ways of doing film history and elaborating such methods of film studies (including production studies and audience studies) and feminist studies that would serve to recognize and acknowledge the roles women did play in film history. All these methods of research and tools of analysis should be based on different sources of facts and data – sometimes found in archives, but also already functioning as a part of existing histories of the film schools and film studios, filmmakers/filmmaking of films, or found in autobiographies, interviews, reviews, etc. There are also informal materials of various types, that expand film history, including “unorthodox sources of evidence” (Gledhill, Knight 2015): gossip, novelistic constructions of cinema-going women, testimonies of influence of the domestic on the workplace; practices disregarded or marginalised in traditional film history such as partnerships, co-creation and collaboration, and experimental multimedia work. All these sources seem to be particularly important in the case of Pola Negri who actively participated in re-creation of her own life story.

# The “New Woman” in Hollywood

Pola Negri’s arrival in America came at a very particular time in the development of the film industry. Hilary A. Hallett’s 2013 work on the history of early Hollywood bears the meaningful title *Go West, Young Women!* This was the slogan used at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to urge citizens of the United States to migrate within the country in order to gain education, employment, and economic independence. As statistical data from the 1920s used by Hallett shows, women moved to California wanting to join a population of emancipated professionals. That was when the term “New Woman”, which had been already used in the previous century in opposition to the Victorian ideals of femininity, gained real meaning. In a modern world, educated and working women who favoured their careers over family life, became visible in the public sphere and entered it as consumers of goods and popular culture. It was film-going in particular that proved, especially for the “New West Women” (Hallett 2013: 11), an attractive and inspiring form of entertainment, since early Hollywood film stars such as Pearl White or Mary Pickford provided them with ready-made role models. Hallett notes that it was when Hollywood and its complex production system really expanded, women in the film industry grew marginalised – both as creators and as an audience.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This was in large part influenced by the policy of defending the morality of American cinema initiated in 1921 (after the first lawsuit against movies) by an official named William Harrison Hays sent from Washington. He orchestrated in 1930 the compilation of a code that regulates the American film industry, particularly in matters of sexuality, sexual identity, and the image and behaviour of overly “liberated” screen heroines.

However, before that occurred, at the moment of Negri's arrival in the United States, American women constituted over two thirds of the film-going public, which led to the outright "feminization of the film fan culture" (Hallett: 14) Furthermore, the so-called "Pickford's revolution" (Hallett: 29) – as one producer described the transition from a starless production system to one based solely on star power – was underway in Hollywood. The use of Mary Pickford to characterise this phenomenon signifies that female acting had shifted from the sphere of mere craftsmanship to that of popular culture, dominated by categories of "fame" and "personality". Negri experienced the consequences of this shift when – as a newly-arrived European citizen – she had to start building her career and public image immediately. Following the rules of the Hollywood system turned out to be difficult for her for personal and professional reasons because, as she writes: "The more this alluring place called to me, the more I instinctively withdrew within myself. (...) The all-night revels, awash in bootleg whiskey, were not for me. Hard work was the only thing that had ever given me complete happiness and I rejoiced in it" (Negri 1970: 232).

Negri's confessions betray an attachment to the idea of female acting that formed in Europe under the influence of the transformation that took place in 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeoisie culture, later described by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*. In her analysis, the French scholar points out the emancipatory features of the acting profession and labels it – along with dancing and singing – a form of going "beyond the very given that they constitute" (de Beauvoir: 834) and a way to achieve self-realisation. In her opinion,





the work of a professional actress who becomes “a real artist, a creator” by achieving professional fulfilment should be treated as a type of female authorship and seen as one of those creative female endeavours – next to writing memoirs, novels, poems – that allow women to capture and convey the particular nature of their experiences and biographies.

But Hollywood had its own vision of women in the pantheon of stars forged under the system of “modern publicity” (Hallett: 29). It was a vision based on the “new rituals of fame” (Hallett: 29), consisting of publicised photo sessions, interviews, and participating in high society life.

Negri treated these “rituals” with reserve, seeing them as a danger rather than as a bonus to her career. Consequently – or at least so she claims in her memoir – she cut herself off from those circles, placing her work above participation in revelries. As she claims: “The careers of the self-indulgent minority were mercilessly short. Mine was all I had in the world, and I was determined to not to throw it away” (Negri: 233).

It was Ernst Lubitsch who pointed out to the actress that the way the American film industry works, such a form of self-defence may negatively affect her career and future contracts: “You had better watch out, or you’ll find yourself sitting in thin air. You are acquiring a bad reputation. (...) They call you a high hat. A snob. Exclusive seems to be an operative word” (Negri: 233). When Pola admitted that she was not very good with crowds, but her work in the film studio was satisfactory, and thus the opinions of the rest were of no importance, Lubitsch explained to her that: “[o]pinion is all there is. Hollywood is a Babel with a tower of small talk. They don’t trust people who refuse to live in their limelight” (Negri: 233). Pola protested that she posed for pictures and gave interviews, but the director said to her: “And you only talk about art. Don’t you know nobody here is interested in artists? They want you to go out. To be seen. To be glamorous. They want you to act like a star” (Negri: 233). Finally, he added: “Pola, once the press begins to turn on you, your days in Hollywood are numbered” (Negri: 234). By her own admission, the actress decided to follow that pragmatic advice: “I began to pose for ridiculous picture spreads at home. I went to big parties. I granted interviews, carefully shading my words so that no glimmer of intelligence filtered

through. It was a vacuous existence but, gradually, Hollywood began to forgive me and take me as one of its own” (Negri: 234).

Negri’s reconciliation with the “rituals of fame” resulted in the appearance of posed pictures of her in her dressing room, on a beach in a fashionable bathing suit, in an elegant coat during a car ride, which reached Polish viewers through industry magazines and the indispensable *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* (an illustrated daily magazine popularly known as *Ikac*). These photos often served a double function: being both informative and illuminating. They provided information about how it was that “our star” fared in the great wide world (where she evidently shone among other stars), while at the same time providing a template of “modern publicity” for Polish actresses. Jadwiga Smosarska and Maria Malicka also got photographed in the latest fashions, behind the wheels of luxurious limousines, in popular resorts. All these photographs presented on the pages of *Ikac* created a fairytale-like narrative about the lives of great stars. The owners of the publishing company made sure to have Negri pose with the current issue of *Światowid* magazine in her hands during her 1935 visit in Poland.<sup>3</sup> After all, who better to advertise a local travel magazine than a homegrown star of international renown? Additionally, the image of Pola Negri in a fur coat, with a string of pearls around her neck, was immortalised on canvas by the Polish artist Tadeusz Styka. His work was displayed in the actress’ Californian apartment as a fine art counterpart to her iconic film portraits.

Years after her last important film performance, Negri wrote her autobiography, selectively re-calling places, events and people. Subjectively written, however, her story is an original record of her very own experience as a professional woman, working independently in a transnational film industry. Judging by Negri's memories (from her memoir and interviews), although her American career was quite successful, she never fully identified with the Hollywood star system and its demands, especially in the context of the untimely death of star actor Rudolf Valentino. After finishing work on *Hotel Imperial* (1927), directed by Mauritz Stiller, Negri admitted that she derived none of the usual satisfaction from the final shot: "I was completely indifferent to the public critical reactions to it. Ironically, it turned out to be one of the greatest pictures of my career. Its success guaranteed me a still greater eminence in a world from which I was finding myself more and more estranged" (Negri: 286).

Negri's insistence on setting herself apart from Hollywood, while at the same time occupying a special place in its pantheon, could be seen as her way of building her legend. However, if we compare her memories of the 1920s with writings about the American film industry from that period, we find many authors who echoed her critical stance. The British critic Iris Barry for example wrote about schematic plots and rampant female stereotypes, analysing particularly those American plot devices that ran against the idea of a modern woman. She especially stigmatised tropes that catered to a conservative, puritan mentality, and compiled a list of "conventions and morals"

followed in such films: “The marriage tie must seem to be inviolate. (...) Even if a woman gets so far as to pack her bag in order to run away from her husband, she has a child (...) and therefore she does not run away. (...) Husbands and wives even if they have married for money, (...) must fall in love with each other by the end of the film” (Barry: 346–347). Similar principles can easily be spotted in the plot of *A Woman of the World*. The main character’s life choices can be boiled down to abandoning travels and adventures (and not only the romantic kind) in exchange for the static existence of a model wife.

Hilda Doolittle, an American novelist and poet who lived and worked in Great Britain and signed her work with the initials H.D., wrote an incredibly insightful analysis of the film world and its mechanisms at the time. Her thoughts on cinema were published in the British magazine *Close-Up* (1927–1933) which was known for publishing essays and film reviews authored by prominent female intellectuals and writers of that period. H.D. was interested in questions of style, avant-garde film form, and acting, which she debated within the context of modernist artistic and literary trends. One of her most hotly discussed topics was the screen ideal of female beauty personified by Hollywood stars. The author’s approach was original in that in her critical assessment of the types of beauty of film stars, she analysed both the producers’ and the audience’s preferences. In her opinion, according to the rules of the Hollywood machine, the audience “is perforce content, is perforce ignorant, (...) is hypnotised by the thud-thud constant repetition until it begins to believe (...) that his god, his totem (...) is the only totem.

America accepts totems not because the crowd wants totems, but because totems have so long been imposed on him, on it, (...) that it or him (...) is becoming hypnotised" (HD 1927: 22–23). As H.D. argues, the images of film stars used by the studios to shape the public's tastes and expectations have a particularly hypnotising potential. The audience's awareness is influenced by popular culture to such an extent that it is also willing to accept "a new European importation of a star" (HD 1927: 22–23), particularly when she is beautiful. Hollywood producers therefore had no problem "discovering" Greta Garbo for a public that was perpetually starved of "beauty or this totem of beauty" (HD 1927: 22–23). As H.D. ironically comments, in this case the "totem" was a girl from the north which caused everyone to go crazy over Nordic features: "A Nordic beauty has been acclaimed and we all want to see her" (HD 1927: 338).

Similar mechanisms can be also observed in the – chronologically earlier – career of Pola Negri, who was also promoted as an exotic European beauty and who perfectly fit the role of an intriguing vamp or an eccentric, tattooed aristocrat. Analysing the types of femininity preferred by 1920s Hollywood, H.D. notes that "a beauty, it is evident, from the Totem's standpoint, must be a vamp, an evil woman, [...] must be black-eyed, must be dark, even if it is a Nordic ice-flower" (HD 1927: 22–23). Interestingly, interpretations of Pola Negri's image written nearly a century later reference the same mechanisms of cinema and popular culture phenomena. Delgado called the actress a "silent Hollywood temptress", underscoring how extreme reactions to her often were: from rejection to adoration. As an European

newcomer, unaccustomed to the American cult of celebrity, she was seen by the press, and consequently by the audience, as “cold, aloof, and difficult” (ibid.). At the same time, she was the perfect personification of “the fiery and exotic Continental actress that most Americans had heard about, but never seen in person” (Delgado 2016: 7).

Hindsight allows Delgado to appreciate the spontaneous and natural talent of Negri who, when put in front of a camera, “was light years ahead of her competition in dramatic potential” (Delgado 2016: 6). Contrary to most actresses of her era, she did not limit her acting to repeatable gestures and poses, but developed her own, original means of expression. She was able to step outside the constraints of the acting style of her era and embody strong, independent women who were aware of their sexuality. Even when, as was the case with *A Woman of the World*, the plot seemed to lag behind the identity and lifestyle of the character she played. Diane Negra points out this incompatibility between film standards, cultural reality, and Negri’s personality, claiming that “Hollywood’s first imported international star was culturally located midway between the passive, pure ideal woman of the late 1800s and the “New Woman” of the 1920s” (Negra: 55). In effect, the vamps she played drew on both models and their accompanying stereotypes of femininity.

## Poles in the Dream Factory

Polish film magazines from the interwar period competed to publish fresh reports about Pola Negri's global career, displaying genuine pride in her success in Germany and in Hollywood. The actress herself approached the American myth of stardom with scepticism, as she was able to see that it was governed by commerce. Recalling the height of her popularity in America, she wrote: "The Hollywood I knew at that time was the Hollywood of dreams. It has long since vanished. But even then there was, beneath the illusions, the harsh reality of a desperate place. The surface was so glitteringly beautiful; the underside, an amalgam of fear and personal tragedy" (Negri: 223).

Even if we take into account that Negri's words reflect her personal disappointments and tragedies, we can still see in them an image of the American reality that multiple emigré filmmakers had to face. Similar conclusions appear in Janina Smolińska's account of the year 1933 in Hollywood, where she hoped to continue her career as an actress. In an autobiographical essay published in the Lviv film weekly *Awangarda*, Smolińska is just as rational and disillusioned as Negri: "To the layman reading beautifully edited film advertisements and biographies of stars [...], work in film seems to be a paradise and a source of great wealth. Although as an artist I shouldn't be too quick to reveal backstage secrets, here, as a journalist, I am compelled to write openly. Work in Hollywood is hard, very hard; the road to fame is steep and dangerous – but it also brings moral satisfaction" (Smolinska 1933: 1).



When she was leaving Europe for the United States, Pola Negri had already spent some time in modernist Berlin among the artistic crème de la crème of theatre and cinema, which influenced her sceptical attitude towards Hollywood. Smolińska also travelled around Europe, Russian Siberia, Central Asia and Japan before going to America, and had honed her craft in Paris at the famous Folies Bergère cabaret. The same as Negri in her memoir, Smolińska emphasised that her perception of the Californian coast is filtered through the rich experience of a traveller: “I’ve seen too much of the world over the course of my artistic career. (...) I came to Hollywood with a hefty luggage of past experiences” (Smolinska 1933: 1).

From Smolińska’s “journalist” story emerges a model of an international acting career based on going from place to place in search of employment and interesting opportunities – a model that will be sharply redrawn by the end of the silent era and the arrival of sound. The similarity of her trajectory to that of Pola Negri is evident in the international calibre of their career, but also in both women’s professional activity and independence. Negri might even be considered the bearer of the gold standard of a goal-driven actress who, like a true “New Woman”, wants to find fulfilment in her work by taking autonomous decisions regarding her style and craftsmanship. Therefore, it is difficult to reduce her to a mere Hollywood star or cinematic vamp. The actress herself also refuses to be locked into any schematic identity – be it related to her film image, her heritage, or her nationality. In a note published in *Kino* magazine in 1932 (no 7, 1932), we read that due to being hospitalised, Pola Negri was unable to attend the premiere of her

film *A Woman Commands* (1932). Excellent reviews doubtlessly sped up the actress's recovery, as she summarised the healing process thus: "I don't know what blood runs in my veins anymore. My father, Chałupiec, was a Hungarian Gypsy, my mother, Kiełczewska, a Pole, during transfusions I received American, German, and Dutch blood. But the voice in my veins tells me to keep thinking in Polish" (Anonymous 1932: 3). As such, she expresses her transnationalism in a heightened fashion, and indeed it seems central to her self-actualisation and her persona. In this context, it seems best to see Pola Negri as a transnational actress whose talent and style transcend the conventions of her era.

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# Gendering the Screen, Rewriting the Past: On the Early Cinematic Career of Shahla Riahi, the First Iranian Woman Filmmaker

Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi

ABSTRACT:

In chapter 17 Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi shows that, while Iranian cinema has received relatively in-depth attention in the past few decades, there is a scarcity of historical studies and archival materials of women in Iranian cinema before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Here, the author discusses the life and career of Shahla Riahi (1927–2019), the first woman filmmaker whose work reveals something about pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and the gendered structures in today's Iranian cinema as a response to this historical past. Her continuous presence in cinema as an actress from the 1950s to the early 2000s reflects the continuity of female subjectivity in this medium necessitating a historiographic reconfiguration and a historical re-reading of Iranian women in Iranian cinema.

For the most part, film histories have been written by men and predominantly included the accounts of various developments in the cinematic medium achieved by men; a historical approach that film historians Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery highlight as “the ‘great man’ theory of history: the belief that history is ‘made’ by the inspired acts of outstanding individuals, whose genius transcends the normal constraints of historical context” (1985: 53). This gendered construction of the past through male-dominated historiographical approaches becomes even more complex when the discussion of a national cinema is considered. The issue here, aside from a gendered historiography, is the hegemonic discourse of film studies in regard to film history itself. The history of cinema within an academic context has been predominantly defined through the configuration of Hollywood cinema as the “standard,” conventional history based on which other histories of national cinemas are argued. Furthermore, within this context, the historical discussion of national cinemas is often limited to the cinematic history of a small number of European countries (mainly Britain, France, Italy, and Germany). To write a feminist history of a national cinema is thus to break away from a doubly excluded historical past: to re-look through the thickness of Western hegemonic discourse and rewrite a nation into history, and to closely investigate and reinterpret the existent history of a national cinema in order to write women into it.

Film scholar Lauren Rabinovitz in regard to gendering the history of a national cinema suggests, “By foregrounding women’s roles in many media industries, we may recapture a world history that recognizes cultural imperialism and hegemony,

but avoids a binary divide between a first world and everyone else” (2006: 40).<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the formation of a feminist history of Iranian cinema is a particularly difficult task as the emergence of cinema in Iran through the importation of audio-visual technologies, such as camera, projector, and phonograph, from the “West” is entangled with the general project of Iran’s modernization in the nineteenth century in order to reconstruct a new national identity. Furthermore, the gender hierarchies and the religious and political contexts of Iranian society as well as the imperial history of cinematic medium in Iran and its relation to class divisions, are all interwoven in such a way that the collection and reconstruction of a national identity through visual culture have found prominence over a feminist history of Iranian cinema. In other words, a glance at major scholarly works on the history of Iranian cinema, chief among them Hamid Naficy’s four volumes of *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (2011 & 2012) and M. Ali Issari’s *Cinema in Iran, 1900–1979* (1989), shows that while these works provide valuable and crucial insights into the gender dynamics and women’s roles in Iranian cinema, their historical accounts of women allocate a portion of a male-driven cinematic context, and are thus subject to historical gaps. Regardless of the scarcity of historical information and archival materials as well as the small number of women filmmakers prior to the 1979 Islamic

<sup>1</sup> Cinema came to Iran in 1900 during the reign of Mozaffar al-Din Shah, the Qajar King. And by the support of the monarchy, who was fascinated by Western photographic, cinematic, and audio technologies, cinema entered the domain of the court and circulated to some extent within the higher class and intellectual sector of the society. For more information on the imperial history of cinema in Iran see: Negar Mottahedeh, “Collection and Recollection: On Studying the Early History of Motion Picture in Iran,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 6.2 (2008): 103–120.

Revolution – only 4 women directed films<sup>2</sup> – comprehensive historical studies on these early women filmmakers and their works seem crucial for understanding both the female subjectivity in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and the gendered structures in today’s Iranian cinema as a response to this historical past. Iranian studies scholar Hamid Dabashi, based on various female activisms within social, literary, and cinematic contexts of Iran, underlines a “sustained history” of female subjectivity and “a succession of [Iranian women] visionaries defying the banning of their body and blinding of their vision to create bodily, visual, and agential memories for an entire nation in which they can imagine and place themselves” (Dabashi 2012: 138). How then might female subjectivity in Iranian cinema prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution be studied to generate insights into tensions and negotiations of gender roles in a filmic setting and to shed light on the gendered structures of Iranian society itself? In this regard, the case of Shahla Riahi is significant not only because she is the first female filmmaker in the history of Iranian cinema, but also her continuous presence in cinema as an actress from the 1950s to the early 2000s reflects the continuity of female subjectivity in this medium necessitating a historiographic reconfiguration and a historical re-reading of Iranian women in Iranian cinema. Shahla Riahi has come to be mostly known as one of the stars of *filmfarsi*, a body of films that emerged after the Second World War in Iran. Therefore, before

<sup>2</sup> Each of these 4 women filmmakers was able to make only one film in the pre-revolutionary cinema which include *Marjan* (1956) by Shahla Riahi, *The House Is Black* (1962) by Forough Farrokhzad, *The Sealed Soil* (1977) by Marva Nabili, and *Maryam and Mani* (1979) by Kobra Saeedi (aka. Shahrzad).



proceeding to Riahi's early artistic career, two brief explanations regarding *filmfarsi* seem necessary. First, *filmfarsi* was "a form of popular cinema that embodied the aspirations and illusions of a modernising society" (Khoshbakht 2019), through a focus on melodramatic narratives. As Ehsan Khoshbakht explains,

The term "filmfarsi" was coined to ridicule the sloppiness of these films. Today, they can be more properly judged in the broader context of Iranian mainstream cinema: genre films with popular stars; village girls lured by the big city but eventually returning to the tranquillity of home – as if everybody knew from the start that the modernisation project wouldn't last. A miniature of Iranian society, foreshadowing things to come. (Khoshbakht 2019)

Second, women's representation in *filmfarsi* was mostly based on a dichotomy: either sexualized (as dancers, singers, mistresses, or prostitutes), or subservient to men (as mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters), both of which differed from the nuanced reality of women's lives in Iranian society at the time as individuals who were gaining an unprecedented subjectivity in various cultural, social, and economic contexts. In this regard, Iranian studies scholar Kamran Talattof mentions, "The more men lost control over women's bodies in real life and the more the law limited them in the courts, the more they gained control over the female body in cinema" (Talattof 2011: 125). While acknowledging the limiting representations of women in *filmfarsi*, Khoshbakht, however, recognizes a possibility for women's visibility, "agency and power" in these films. He writes, "If the

forced unveiling of women under the first Pahlavi was a crucial point in the history of Iranian women, the real unveiling, although highly fetishised, was through these movies, in which women travelled, taught, fought and settled their scores” (Khoshbakht 2019).

This visible, yet constrained, women’s representation can be also connected to the use of screen names for women, instead of their real names, which was a common practice in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, especially in *filmfarsi*. The practice allowed the separation of women’s characters on the screen from their real-life personas, perhaps as a way to withstand the negative socio-cultural impressions associated with women’s acting in the cinematic medium by maintaining a name-barrier between the women’s artistic careers and their real personal lives, and thus supposedly granting these actresses the possibility of a freer mobility and visibility. This tradition began early on when an Iranian Muslim woman was selected, for the first time, to act in the first Iranian sound film, *The Lor Girl (Dokhtar-e Lor, 1933)*, directed by Ardeshir Irani and produced by Abdolhossein Sepanta and the Imperial Film Company in Bombay, India.

Prior to this film and during the silent era, a few women appeared in Iranian movies as actresses, but according to M. Ali Issari, “they were generally Armenian Christian girls” (Issari 1989: 105).<sup>3</sup> The aim of the director to cast an Iranian Muslim woman thus

<sup>3</sup> In fact, since the emergence of cinema in Iran in the early twentieth century, it took some time before Iranian women appeared on the screen. In this regard, Dönmez-Colin writes, “The first Iranian silent feature, *Abi and Rabi* (1930) by Ovanes Ohanian, was a comedy with no women in the cast or the crew. The second Iranian film, *Brother’s Revenge* (1931) daringly introduced two women characters, but they had to be played by non-Muslims. The third film, *Haji Agha, the Film Star* (1932) by Ohanian, cast an Armenian woman in the lead. Abdolhossein Sepanta broke the taboo with *Dokhtar-e Lor / The Lor Girl* (1933), the first sound film, ... featuring a Muslim woman, Ruhangiz...” (Dönmez-Colin 2004: 11).

proved highly problematic within both the aesthetic and cultural contexts of Iranian cinema. According to the script, and as the title of the film also implies, the actress of the film should be of the Lor ethnicity or at least be potent to imitate the Lori dialect. As Issari explains, finding a Lor woman in India “was an impossibility, since Lors were tribal people who stayed largely secluded within their area of migration in the south-central part of Iran” (Issari 1989: 105). The aesthetic imperative of hearing the language as the result of cinema’s new sound technologies was thus combined with the gender imperatives of Iranian culture making the casting of an Iranian (Muslim) woman for *The Lor Girl* highly difficult. Sepanta thus convinced “the wife of [his] driver to take the lead role” (Milani 2011: 82). Hesitant and reluctant at the beginning, Sedigheh Saminejad, apparently due to the support and presence of her husband on the set, accepted to play the role of a Gypsy girl, named Golnar, on the ground that she would be introduced on the screen and to the audience by the alternative name of Ruhangiz Kermani instead of her main name. This pioneering female appearance in *The Lor Girl*, however, proved controversial. As Persian literature scholar Farzaneh Milani writes, “Golnar, the beautiful, on-screen Gypsy girl, who sings and dances in teahouses, delighted Iranian moviegoers. But Saminejad, the real Muslim woman who had the audacity to flaunt her face without a veil ... shocked them. Ostracized and isolated, she quit the cinema” (Milani 2011: 82). Saminejad changed the course of women’s presence in Iranian cinema through her role, however, reflecting on this acting experience years later, she identified “the experience as a nightmare” given various socio-cultural pressures that she encountered (Milani 2011: 82). *The Lor Girl*

was thus the first and the last film Saminejad played in cinema. Indeed, it is because of these highly contested cinematic and social spaces that the career of Shahla Riahi, a prolific actress and the first woman filmmaker in Iran, finds a special significance.

Shahla Riahi (actual name: Ghodrätzaman Vafadoost) was born in 1927 in Tehran to a middle-class family. Her mother was the second wife of Sheikh Agha Vafadoost who after his death remarried another man (Riahi: 1). According to Riahi's nine-page autobiography, Riahi had an arranged marriage to her step-cousin, Esmail Riahi in 1941 when she was only 14 years old (Riahi: 2). Regardless of being an arranged union, Riahi considers her marriage an intimate one, that without it, her presence in cinema could not have happened. In fact, it was Riahi's husband, Esmail, a writer and journalist at the time, who regardless of familial pressure and isolation, introduced Riahi to theater and recruited himself and Riahi for acting on the stage in 1944, when Riahi was seventeen years old. As Riahi in her short autobiography mentions, while she and her husband did not have any professional experience, "due to the lack of women players [in theater at the time]" she, along with her husband, got hired with a simple audition (Riahi: 3). Riahi, therefore, started her acting career in 1944 by performing as the lead actress in a play, named *Haroun Alrashid Politics*, directed by Moezdivan Fekri. After seven years of successful theatrical performances, Riahi was invited to cinema as the lead actress in *Golden Dreams* (1951), directed by Moezdivan Fekri, and since then, she managed to act in over 100 films and television series.

In the 1960s, Esmail Riahi himself became an active filmmaker making 10 films, in some of which

Shahla Riahi played the lead actress (Riahi: 4). The introduction of Riahi to theater and cinema through her husband, and the selection of the name Shahla as her screen name by Esmail Riahi, point to the great amount of support by her husband as both a partner and a colleague. Within the historical context of Iranian cinema, however, Shahla Riahi is mostly remembered as one of the stars of *filmfarsi* who, like her peers, maintained a screen name and played mostly subservient roles as a mother, wife, or a good woman. In regard to the female stars of *filmfarsi*, Hamid Naficy writes that “these women’s ticket to fame was their youth, the careers of actresses were short and crowded. For example, during only one decade, between 1959 and 1969 ... Shahla Riahi [acted] in eighteen [films]” (Naficy 2011: 208). Riahi, however, had a long professional career that spanned till the early 2000s. Furthermore, aside from the breadth of Riahi’s cinematic career, the richness of her work is also important, in particular as she is one of the few early Iranian women artists whose working trajectory involved cinema, theater, radio, and television. In her autobiography, Riahi does not mention when she started her career in television or radio, but she writes that she “worked for radio as an actress and director for 14 years” (Riahi: 5). While the exclusion of this unique multiplicity of activities across four major media regarding Riahi’s artistic career is noticeable in historical accounts, the historical distortion particularly shows itself in regard to her filmmaking career.

As the first female filmmaker in Iran, Riahi produced and directed *Marjan* in 1956. For making this 110-minute black-and-white film, in which Riahi was also the lead actress, she established a film studio named Arya Film in 1956. According to Issari,

“The film was made in four months. The technical tasks, including laboratory work, were done at Iran Film Studio. It was released in Tehran September 9, 1956, in three cinemas (Diana, Park, and Khorshid)” (Issari 1989: 283). Issari further mentions that the film “did fairly well at the box office” (Ibid.). *Marjan*’s story presents a complex love story:

A young gypsy girl falls in love with a teacher who has just captured her father trying to steal a sheep from the school in which he teaches. The teacher gradually leaves his village and moves to the city, followed by the young gypsy girl. She cannot find him and ends up working as a nurse in a hospital where some time later the teacher brings his young wife to deliver their child. Disappointed in her love, Marjan returns to her tribe. (Dabashi 2012: 140)

The mobility of female subjectivity in the film’s story, the class struggle and divide, and the subversion of a happy ending, make *Marjan* a considerable film in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema. The work is also the first film made by an Iranian woman, and is Riahi’s only filmmaking experience, which gives *Marjan* a significant place in the history of Iranian cinema. Yet, Hamid Dabashi explains that “masculinist historiography has twice compromised [Riahi’s] achievement: once by giving only her first name, a mere “Shahla,” as the director, and another time by completely denying that she even directed *Marjan*, asserting that she was the producer of the film and that her [male] costar, Mohammad Ali Ja’fari, directed the film” (Dabashi 2012: 140). Regarding the second claim, Dabashi refers

to Mas'ud Mehrabi's *History of Iranian Cinema* (*Tarikh-e sinema-ye Iran*, 1984), in which Mehrabi claims that Shahla Riahi's name was also added "on top of theater doors," which supposedly attracted audiences through the use of a female name as the director (Quoted in Dabashi 2012: 140). A further search regarding other accounts on the film shows that Hosein Sharifi's *Half-a-century Memories of Iranian Cinema* (*Nim-gharn khaterat-e sinema-ye Iran*, 2005) takes Mehrabi's claim to a new level by arguing that "In the titles of *Marjan*, there is no name of Ms. Riahi as a director. Rather, her name is mentioned twice as the producer and the actress. Ms. Riahi herself mentions that the reason for this exclusion was a professional attribute to veteran actor [Mohammad Ali] Ja'fari." (Sharifi 2005: 128). Therefore, Sharifi here implies that the exclusion of Riahi's name was intentional and voluntary on the part of Riahi. The different accounts of Mehrabi and Sharifi regarding Riahi's directorial role question the authenticity of both historical claims. Furthermore, Shahla Riahi in her autobiography, without affirming any of these accounts, clearly asserts that, "In 1956, I directed *Marjan* that came to be a satisfactory and unique film and obtained me the title of 'the first Iranian woman director'" (Riahi: 5).

The legacy of Shahla Riahi in today's Iranian cinema can be seen in the professional careers of women filmmakers such as Rakhshan Banietemad, Tahmineh Milani, and Poursan Derakhshandeh, to name a few, as well as in the professional careers of popular actresses such as Niki Karimi, Mahnaz Afzali, and Pegah Ahangarani, who in addition to acting, have become prominent filmmakers as well. In regard to the support and encouragement that she received from Shahla Riahi, Iranian filmmaker

Tahmineh Milani says, "When I was directing my first film, *Children of Divorce* (*Bache-haye talagh*, 1990), Shahla Riahi and Hamideh Kheirabadi were among the pioneers who, without paying attention to my lack of experience, joined my work and played a role. ... They encouraged me to continue my directing, and even Shahla Riahi, after the screening of the film, invited me to her house and encouraged me with her words" (*Film Newspaper* 2004). Niki Karimi also attributes her professional career to the path-breaking works of Shahla Riahi. Karimi, in November 2015, and concurrent with the screening of her recent film at the time, *Night Shift* (*Shift-e Shab*, 2015), in an official ceremony in Tehran's Charsu Cinema Complex, recognized Shahla Riahi. In an interview with the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) regarding the event, Karimi said, "I congratulate [Riahi] for being the first woman in Iran who made a film almost 60 years ago. She was really courageous in doing so and paved the way for people like me to continue the path" (The Iran Project 2015).

As Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey remind us, "Rather than being simply about the past in any straightforward way, screen histories are of necessity concerned with past-present relations with a view to the future" (Kuhn and Stacey 1998: 9). Thus, the celebration and acknowledgement of Shahla Riahi after more than six decades of her professional activities by Niki Karimi should be read as the historical continuity of Iranian women's presence in a cinematic setting, where the historical past and present merge, reminding us that in order to move forward and change the course of the future through a feminist perspective, we need to create a vibrant interaction between the past and present.



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## CHAPTER 18

# The Burden of Representation: Ethnic Minority Women in the “Seventeen Years” of Chinese Cinema

Rena Raziye-Ekrem

### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 18 we read about the “Seventeen Years” (1949–1966), a period in Chinese history between the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the Cultural Revolution. Rena Raziye-Ekrem shows how the vast array of films and other artwork became an essential means of propagating the ideology and policies of the Chinese Communist Party. In particular, the author is interested in the way in which women and ethnic minorities were portrayed on screen during this time. The argument is that these films give shape to a body of essential archives, otherwise inaccessible under Communist Party rule, for investigating the topics related to ethnic minorities in China.

The “Seventeen Years” (1949–1966) refers to the seventeen-year period between the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the Cultural Revolution. The vast array of films, literary works, operas, songs, and other types of art produced during these seventeen years became an essential means of propagating the ideology and policies of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP). Cinema played a particularly significant role as a form of mass culture. More than a thousand films were produced during this period. State-run studios receiving government funding produced forty-nine feature films revolve around eighteen ethnic minorities (Lu 2020, 64). These films won popularity among audiences in China and abroad and were later rereleased in Chinese cinemas and official media. The period of the “Seventeen Years” also saw the establishment of the ethnic minority film as a distinct theme in China (Wang 2008). Since then, films related to ethnic minority groups are often classified as belonging to this theme in Chinese cinema. As a specific subcategory of Chinese cinema produced during the first seventeen years of the Communist Party’s rule, these films naturally form a body of essential archives for investigating the topics related to ethnic minorities in China. This short paper focuses on the intersectionality of minority women’s gender and ethnic identities to explore how this intersectionality affects ethnic minority women’s representations in Chinese cinema.

A number of studies have addressed the topic of the representation of ethnic minorities in Chinese cinema. In Paul Clark’s article on ethnic minorities in Chinese films, he notes that the post-1949 boom in films about ethnic minorities was an alternative to the exoticification of foreign films

before 1949. These films about ethnic minorities in socialist China gave rise to the stereotype of ethnic minorities who were only superficially different (1987). Marginalised and exoticised representations of ethnic minorities are also considered to reinforce Chinese cultural hegemony (Zhang 1997; Yau 1989). Vanessa Frangville studies the cinematographic presentations of non-Han peoples during the socialist and contemporary eras of China. She argues that the socialist logic behind the representation of non-Han peoples in Chinese films has not changed in contemporary production, even though contemporary films attempt to cast more ethnic minority actors and are made in ethnic minority languages (2012). Some also explain the othering of ethnic minorities through the lens of orientalism.<sup>1</sup> Louisa Schein uses the concept of “internal orientalism” to reveal the cultural and political dominance of the Han majority in China in the creation of images of ethnic minorities. She also suggests that ethnic minority women are objects of otherness not only with regard to their ethnic identity but also their gender (1997). Dru Gladney uses the term “orient orientalism” to point out how the objectification of an ethnic minority other and majority self in China parallels the portrayal of the East by the West (2013, 97–98).

These scholars bring to light the unequal power relation between ethnic minorities and Han Chinese on the issue of the representation of ethnic minorities. In this short essay, I intend to use ethnic minority women as a departure point to demonstrate how the interweaving of film

<sup>1</sup> “Orientalism” is a critical concept introduced by Edward W. Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism*. He applies the concept to investigate unequal power relations in terms of how the Western representations of the East are produced.

narratives and use of film language in the body of films belonging to the Seventeen Years period contributed to the paradigmatic image-making of ethnic minority women. I will also consider how this paradigm of portraying different ethnic minority women has resulted in the construction of a vague, unified, and singular image of the “ethnic minority woman.” Yuval-Davis accurately points out women’s “burden of representation” as “the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively” (1997, 45). I hope this short essay is able to show how misrepresentations of the “minority” identity, as a sub-identity of the “national” identity, led to ethnic women bearing the “burden of representation.”

## Represented and Unrepresented

China’s population is made up of Han Chinese and fifty-five ethnic minorities. The fifty-five ethnic minorities were officially identified during China’s ethnic minority classification project. This project began in the 1950s and ended in 1979 whereby 1964, fifty-three ethnic minorities had been identified (Lu 2020, 66–67). Although described as “ethnic minority films,” the forty-nine films about ethnic minorities made in the Seventeen Years period do not include all of the ethnic minority groups within China. As noted above, these films represent eighteen ethnic minorities, only a third of all ethnic minorities.

It is also notable that certain ethnic groups, such as Tibetans, Mongolians, Uyghurs, and Dai, appear in a greater number of these films, whereas others have only one or two films about

them. For instance, there were ten films about Tibetan people produced during this period. This distribution reflects the differing political attention and attitudes of the CCP towards different ethnic minority groups at the time. In addition to the relative underrepresentation of some ethnic groups, ethnic minority characters in these films are mostly played by Han Chinese professional actresses and actors. This lays the foundation for a problematic representation of ethnic minorities.

In this context, there is a question of how these films achieved great popularity and set the trend for the stereotypical representation of ethnic minorities. Li has noticed that ethnic minority films were allowed slightly more narrative flexibility to more effectively express the requisite political ideology that would otherwise be awkward in ethnic settings. Therefore ethnic minority films offered more room for filmmakers to achieve their cinematic goals than they had with mainstream films (Li Ershi 2005, 339). Thus we can see that ethnic minority films created their own narrative subparadigm within that of mainstream cinema. At the same time, they also created a visual paradigm for representing ethnic minorities. In these films, the representation of ethnic minority women played the most important role in the construction of this narrative and visual paradigm.

## **Power Relations: Gender and Ethnicity**

Cui argues that the representation of femininity and female sexuality is repressed for “the ideological constitution of revolution history” under a “disguised

women's emancipation" in socialist Chinese cinema and state discourse (Cui 2003, 90). However, while this may be so for mainstream Chinese cinema more widely, ethnic minority women's femininity and sexuality are on the contrary highlighted in ethnic minority films, contributing to a myth of ethnic minority women's beauty and femininity derived from the visual construction of ethnic female bodies.

Such dismissal of the femininity and sexuality of Han Chinese women in mainstream Chinese cinema is also seen in the portrayal of Han Chinese women in ethnic minority films. Han Chinese female characters appear in similar professional outfits as Han Chinese male characters in these films. They often appear in the doctor's white coat, the nurse's uniform, the military uniform, or the de-gendered monotone costumes that were also commonly seen in mainstream films of the time. However, these de-gendered Han Chinese women in ethnic minority films nevertheless differed from the women represented in mainstream Chinese cinema. Han Chinese women represented the new Chinese woman who had completed her socialist transformation and emancipation and been given (ostensibly) equal rights with men. In these films, Han Chinese women are no longer the subject of rescue and transformation as in many mainstream Chinese films of this period, but rather become rescuers and transformers of the ethnic minorities. They share almost the same position as Han male characters in these films as representatives of authority, while ethnic minorities are placed in a subordinate position.

The oppressed proletariat is represented by the minority masses, and the Han oppressed class is not shown in these films as it is in mainstream



films. The portrayal of oppressed classes including peasants and workers, which are typically represented by Han Chinese in mainstream films, is substituted by ethnic minority mass in ethnic minority films. In these films, the ethnic minority identities are often linked primarily to their proletarian status. What is also worth pointing out here is the lack of Han female villains in these films. Han villains in these films representing the Kuomintang (Chinese National Party; KMT hereafter) or traitors of Japanese invaders are all played by men. At the same time, there are many female ethnic minority villains in these films, such as the fake Gulendem in *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* (冰山上的來客, dir. Zhao Xinshui, 1963), the wife of the Tibetan Tusi Jai Luo Jia in *Red Sun of Ke Mountain* (柯山紅日, dir. Dong Zhaoqi & Su Fan, 1960), and the Dai female spy Dao Ailing in *Meng Long Sha* (勐垵沙, dir. Wang Ping & Yuan Xian, 1960).

Han Chinese women in ethnic minority films are constructed as a group of good and spotless representatives of the CCP and share a similar position of power as the Han Chinese men. This change of power relations in film narratives compared with mainstream cinema establishes a gaze towards the ethnic minorities. It especially shifts the male gaze onto minority women, and this male gaze intertwines with the ethnic minority gaze that places minority women at the bottom of the gender and ethnic power relations in these films. Ethnic minority women thus become the medium for presenting the CCP's political, ideological, and revolutionary achievements, which were represented using Han Chinese women in mainstream films.

## Age as the Ethnic Boundary: Young Ethnic Minority Women

In these films, most of the main ethnic minority protagonists are young adults. On the contrary, the Han Chinese characters are usually cast as middle-aged. Except for the handful of villain characters, young ethnic minority women in these films are wholeheartedly accepting of being liberated and transformed by socialism. Young men, on the other hand, often go through a phase of distrust of Han characters and are ultimately happy to accept the liberation and socialist transformation as well.

In some films, ethnic minority women are the representatives of liberation from the oppression of their own community. They are liberated by the authorities represented by the CCP, such as happens to the Jingpo girl Dainuo in *Jingpo Girl* (景頗姑娘, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1965), the Dai girl Yilaihan in *Moya Dai / Daughter of Dai* (摩雅傣 / 傣族的女兒, dir. Xu Tao, 1961), and the Uyghur woman Anarxan in *Anaxan* (阿娜爾罕, dir. Li Enjie, 1962). They are empowered not only as women but also as the oppressed class within their own community. In films about socialist transformation, young ethnic minority women are presented as active participants in socialist transformation and construction. They are young, healthy, and energetic in these films. This physical representation also echoes the image-making of “iron girls” in China in that period in which women were often presented as de-gendered and strong to suggest a similar physical capability as men. However, ethnic minority women are not presented

as de-gendered “iron girls” in mainstream cinema.<sup>2</sup> Thus the age difference between the middle-aged Han and young ethnic minority women in the ethnic minority films functions as one of the main differentiations between them.

The visual construction of the femininity of the ethnic minority women is evident, especially when compared to the Han Chinese women in these films. A small number of films feature ethnic minority actresses and actors in key roles, and in these films the differences between ethnic minorities and Han Chinese are highlighted in how they look. For instance, films made about ethnic minorities in Xinjiang usually have ethnic minority women playing ethnic minority characters, and their “exotic” appearance is emphasized.<sup>3</sup> One of the most obvious examples of this is the role of the fake Gulendem in *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* (冰山上的來客, dir. Zhao Xinshui, 1963) as played by Gu Yuying (谷毓英). As a professionally trained actress of mixed Russian and Chinese descent, her exotic appearance is an important part of her role as a Tajik character in this film. Another example is the Jingpo girl in *Jingpo Girl* (景頗姑娘, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1965), whose darker skin colour makes an obvious contrast to the Han women. Interestingly, in these films, while the ethnic minority female characters are all played by ethnic minority women, some

<sup>2</sup> See more about “iron girl” representation in the article Zheng, Wang (2017) “The Iron Girls: Gender and Class in Cultural Representations,” in *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1964*. University of California Press: pp. 221–41 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ggjhsp.13>.

<sup>3</sup> Xinjiang, a province located in the northwest of China, was established as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region since 1955. The province is home to thirteen ethnic groups including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Mongols.

male ethnic minority characters are played by Han actors, such as the Uyghur grandfather Ashim (played by Gao Yan / 高巖) in *Two Generations* (两代人, dir. Chen Gang & Ou Fan, 1960), as well as Niyaz (played by En Hesun / 恩和森), Aman (played by Ma Loufu / 馬陋夫), and Kala (played by Wang Chunying / 王春英) in *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* (冰山上的來客, dir. Zhao Xinshui, 1963).

Except for a few limited roles, most of the ethnic minority roles are played by Han professional actresses and actors. For instance, even though there are ten films about Tibetans in the Seventeen Years, only in one—the most famous—*Serfs* (農奴, dir. Li Jun, 1963), are all the Tibetan characters actually played by Tibetans. Compared with the Jingpo girl mentioned earlier, the Tibetan characters' skin colour in *Serfs* is depicted in even greater contrast to that of the Han characters. Thus, the physical exoticism of the ethnic people's bodies is shown in very few films; when it is, it is done mostly with female characters. Since Han Chinese actresses are used to play ethnic minority roles, the demarcation of the boundary between the Han and ethnic minority women by their age differences and costumes (discussed below) becomes visually significant.

## Ethnic Attire

Ethnic attire is the most visible and important signifier of ethnic minority identities in these films. The careful use of costumes functions not only as the extension of making “authentic” the ethnic bodies but also to establish a cultural boundary between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities as well as between ethnic minority women and men.

As mentioned earlier, Han Chinese characters who represent the CCP in these films are often shown in uniforms and professional or plain-toned outfits. The Han villains (all men) may appear in ethnic clothing in the form of disguises in some scenes. On the contrary, the ethnic minority characters, no matter whether villains, heroes, or members of the masses, mostly appear in their ethnic attire. Male ethnic minority characters, such as the Dai soldier Xiaoyan in *Two Patrolmen* (兩個巡邏兵个巡邏兵, dir. Fang Huang, 1958) and the Tajik soldier Amir in *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* (冰冰山上的來客, dir. Zhao Xinshui, 1963), may appear in uniforms like those of the Han Chinese characters in these films. However, this is never the case for female characters. Even if the ethnic minority female characters are party cadre or work group leaders, they are all shown in ethnic attire, such as is the case for the Uyghur Women's Union officer in *Anarxan* (阿娜爾罕, dir. Li Enjie, 1962) or the five Bai women named Jin Hua in *Five Golden Flowers* (五朵金花, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1958). Thus, while there is a sense of brotherhood accentuated by the sharing of the same uniform among male Han and ethnic minority characters, there is no similar sisterhood between Han and ethnic minority women. Ethnic minority women's image is fixed by their symbolic ethnic attire in these films.

This distinction in costumes highlights the role of minority women not only in terms of their ethnicity but also their gender. On the one hand, the use of costumes belonging to different ethnic minorities for women ostensibly reflects

the policy of respect for different ethnic minority cultures at the time, but on the other hand, the homogenising treatment of the minority women as a category completes the production of the image of the “beautiful ethnic minority women.” We also need to note that this careful use of costumes reflects and contributes to the hierarchy of power—with Han Chinese men at the top, Han Chinese women below them, ethnic minority men third, and ethnic minority women last.

## **Doubly Oppressed Women**

Similar to the portrayal of the proletariat in mainstream cinema, ethnic minority films depict the emancipation of the ethnic minority masses from the historical oppression and servitude imposed by the former ruling class, under the leadership of the Communist Party. Furthermore, these films represent minority women within the narrative structure as empowered and emancipated individuals. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that empowerment and liberation as such are still subject to certain constraints and incompleteness. Their oppression as proletarians can be adequately addressed, yet as women for whom empowerment is limited, they are not fully liberated in these films. This is particularly highlighted by the contrast with the Han Chinese women in the films.

As mentioned earlier, the love story is an important narrative through line in ethnic minority films. The relationships of the young couples

are often plagued by hardship and conflict. In revolutionary films, it is often the obstruction of local powers within the couple's own ethnic community or the KMT that imposes difficulties on them (such as in *Moya Dai / Daughter of Dai* [摩雅傣 / 傣族的女兒, dir. Xu Tao, 1961] and *Reed Pipe Canso* [蘆笙戀歌, dir. Yu Yanfu, 1957]). In socialist reform films, it is the misunderstanding of reform within the ethnic community that leads to conflicts between the couples (such as in *Red Flower in Tianshan* [天山的紅花, dir. Chen Huaikai, Liu Baode, & Cui Wei, 1964]) In either case, the male characters often escape and leave the women in misery, or even create obstacles for the women due to some kind of misunderstanding. Ultimately, the CCP is always given the role of supporting the women and solving their problems. These films attempt to portray ethnic minority women as empowered under Chinese communist rule—they are given rights equal to those of men within the framework of the national emancipation of women. However, the oppression rooted in patriarchal power or heterosexual relationships within their communities is not explicitly challenged in the films.

Young female characters are portrayed in these films as active participants in revolution and socialist transformation. They are also often shown as brave, kind, lively, cheerful, and intelligent. In this sense, they are not different from the Han Chinese women who are liberated and have gained rights equal to men in the public sphere. In contrast, the young male characters are often shown as resistant to or suspicious of the CCP's rule or socialist transformation. They are often portrayed as more childish, suspicious, and stubborn at the beginning of the films. When

they become a direct or indirect cause of ethnic minority women's misery, these women have to rely on the intervention of the Han Chinese, no matter how strong and capable they are or have become in the films.

Compared to the mainstream films of the time, there is more room to show ethnic minority women's femininity and sexuality in the romantic storylines of ethnic minority films. However, this incomplete empowerment confines the ethnic minority women's image to the domestic space signified by the romantic relationship. This restricted role, in contrast to the role of Han Chinese women, becomes a fate that only happens to ethnic minority women. It is in this way that the Han Chinese in these films are modern in every way, while the minorities are never fully modernised. On the one hand, the role played by the CCP of standing by the ethnic minority women is meant to reflect the party's omnipotence. Yet it also constructs a subdiscourse of gender equality among ethnic minorities—the patriarchal domination of ethnic minorities does not need to be addressed.

## **Women's Confined Space: Belonging to the Ethnic Minority Community**

Ethnic minority women in these films are not only trapped in relationships of patriarchal power but also confined to the space of the community they belong to. Unlike the male ethnic minority characters who are presented in more varied settings, ethnic minority women are hardly shown



leaving the land of their own community. In the revolutionary films, while ethnic minority men often escape from their own land to join the Red Army or People's Liberation Army, ethnic minority women's transformation and liberation only happens at the local level. In some cases, even if they manage to flee their own village, the farthest they can escape to is another village close by, and often they finally return to their own land, which is what happens to the Dai girl Yilaihan in *Moya Dai / Daughter of Dai* (摩雅傣 / 傣族的女兒, dir. Xu Tao, 1961) and the Jingpo girl Dainuo in *Jingpo Girl* (景頗姑娘, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1965). The two female protagonists escape from their village and are saved by Han female doctors, only to finally return to fight bravely for justice and take up leading positions in the socialist reform of their own villages. In the films in which women are not able to escape from their oppressors, the only way out for them is suicide. Anarxan intends to commit suicide by jumping into a river with her baby, while Kurban, her husband, runs away. She is shown as helpless in this scenario, no matter how tough and capable she is presented as in the film as a whole. In films about socialist reform and modernisation, ethnic minority women play a leading role in their community. In *Daji and Her Fathers* (達吉和他的父親, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1961), Daji, a Han girl who is adopted by a Yi man and grows up as a Yi girl, chooses to stay in her village when she is offered an opportunity to live in the city. Women are portrayed as belonging only to the local space and community, no matter whether they are in fact confined to it or choose to remain in it.

## Conclusion

The forty-nine ethnic minority films produced during the Seventeen Years period have played a pivotal role in shaping the image of ethnic minorities. These films were given creative space that was not allowed to mainstream Chinese cinema, and this limited space was used to portray the lives and images of ethnic minorities. However, it also contributed to the homogenised and paradigmatic representation of the ethnic minorities in both narratorial and visual terms and created stereotypical images of the ethnic minorities with far-reaching impacts. As the object of the male gaze and the ethnic gaze, minority women are portrayed as a unified group in the process of presenting their ethnicity and femininity. In these films, this “burden of representation” becomes a mechanism by which representation does not stop at that of one’s own ethnicity but includes the entire category of “minority women.” Minority women are portrayed through the young age of their characters, the careful arrangement of costumes and makeup, and the narrative constraints on women’s power structures and spaces. Young, beautiful, local, gender-unequal women are portrayed as a unified group. These paradigms have not only been represented in films and other artwork after the Seventeen Years but also become part of the mainstream understanding and perception of ethnic minority women. In the context of a monolithic concept of minorities vis-à-vis the majority, the representation of minority women cannot break through and escape the “burden of representation.” In other words, the images of the ethnic minority women in these films fail to raise their subjects from the lowest rung of social relations.

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## CHAPTER 19

# ***Reassemblage* (1982): A Feminist Account of Pushing the Boundaries of Ethnographic Documentary**

Nusrat Zahan Chowdhury

### ABSTRACT:

Chapter 19 revisits Trinh T. Min-ha's (b. 1952) experimental film *Reassemblage* (1982). It poetically depicts communities of Senegalese rural people and illustrates their daily activities employing artistic cinematic techniques. The social roles and the daily lives of the Senegalese women occupy most of the documentary. In this chapter, then, Nusrat Zahan Chowdhury stretches the boundaries of our understanding of a feminist film archive, by engaging with genre and form, through which this particular film showcases a feminist artform and endows powerful agency on the ethnographic subjects by making visible their struggles and resilience through the unique feminist filmmaking techniques it adopts.

The 1982 documentary film *Reassemblage*, by renowned Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, theorist, and Professor Trinh T. Min-ha, poetically depicts communities of Senegalese rural people and illustrates their daily activities employing artistic cinematic techniques. Although the film features men, women, and children of rural Senegal, the social roles and the daily lives of the Senegalese women occupy most of the parts of the documentary, making women the documentary subjects. The film primarily uses observational footage along with a woman voice over with unusual repetitions, hesitations, and silences, and a non-linear visual montage of landscapes, animals, people, and their activities. By resisting the adoption of a linear narrative and accessibility of understanding, Minh-ha inscribes her film within the framework of Third Cinema, which rejects the consumerist ends of dominant commercial cinema (Guèye 15). In this paper, I argue that the film *Reassemblage* (1982) essentially renders itself as an alternative ethnographic documentary that problematizes practices of Western masculinist ethnographic knowledge production through documentary filmmaking. In this present world, where patriarchal oppression is apparent everywhere – from domestic violence to, on a broader level, imposing Western beliefs and standards on non-Western contexts, resulting in local and regional exploitation – a study of a non-Western documentary film from the viewpoint of feminist anthropology in terms of how ethnographic knowledges are produced, stretches the boundaries of feminist film archive. To support my argument, throughout the essay, I show that the documentary is not only a feminist

ethnography that problematizes the masculinist ethnographic knowledge production but also a feminist documentary that endows powerful agency on the ethnographic subjects – the Senegalese women – by making visible their struggles and resilience through the unique feminist filmmaking techniques it adopts.

To elaborate on the primary argument of the essay which claims *Reassemblage* as an alternative ethnographic film, it is important to reflect on ethnographic film as a genre of documentary. *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert J. Flaherty is credited as the first ethnographic film that not only marked the beginning of ethnographic film but also the beginning of documentary film (Ruby 67). The rubric which supports *Nanook of the North*'s categorization as an ethnographic film, according to Jay Ruby, is that it "constitutes the most widely understood variety of ethnographic film – an epic-style narrative film that is a humanist portrayal of an exotic culture" (69). Ethnographic filmmakers depict culture in their films the same way trained anthropologists do (Ruby 86). Bronislaw Malinowski, an anthropologist who is credited for the development of modern ethnographic field method maintains – "The final goal, of which an ethnographer should never lose sight [,] ... is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relations to life, to realize his vision of his world" (cited in Ruby 85). According to David McDougall (1978), ethnographic films are the presentation of ethnographic works before an audience. He maintains, "Films are analogous in this sense to an anthropologist's public writings or to any other creative or scholarly productions. Footage, on the other hand, is the raw material that comes

out of a camera, and no such expectations attach to it" (406). In accounting for what gets counted as ethnographic film, or gets perceived as visual anthropology literature, Paul Basu (2008) reflects on the British television documentaries, specifically Granada's *Disappearing World* strand, which ran intermittently from 1970 to 1993 (96). These films combined observational styles with subtitled interviews and expository voice-over narration. Some of those films include *Masai Women* (1974), *The Kawelka: Ongka's Big Moka* (1974), and *The Last of the Cuiva* (1971). Dealing respectively with gender relations among the Masai, gift exchange in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, and conflict and social change in the Columbian rainforests, these films reproduced the "stereotypical public perception of anthropology as a discipline concerned with remote, tribal peoples, whose traditional ways of life were threatened with extinction" (Basu 97).

Min-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982), however, is an alternative ethnographic documentary that disrupts the formal techniques used in traditional ethnographic documentary. Although in a somewhat-opaque manner that resists an easy narrative or interpretation, which is part of Minh-ha's cinematic aesthetic choice<sup>1</sup>, the film features the Senegalese people in their cultural attire, presents the tribal language combined with observational footage of their daily life, offers visual and aural evidence of tribal music and performance, and depicts social relations. The

<sup>1</sup> In an interview, Trinh Minh-ha contends that the soundtrack (including some other cinematic forms) is poetic, and she thinks that the silences and pauses are meant to give the audience time to think about what is being presented before them (Trinh Minh-ha 167).



content of the documentary, being the depiction of “exotic culture” of the Senegalese tribal people, especially women, places it within the purview of ethnographic film. However, what makes the film distinct from traditional ethnographic films is its rejection of the formal techniques of the traditional ethnographic documentaries. One of the most remarkable features of Minh-ha’s film is the unique juxtaposition of sounds, voiceover, and visuals of various sorts. The opening scene of the documentary presents a dark screen with percussive tribal music and indistinct chattering of people in the background. Through a series of mid shots, wide angles, and close-ups, the next scene presents silent visual footage of tribal men working with handmade tools. None of those shots presents flawless details of the subject, which leaves the audience with a sense of imperfection in terms of handling the camera and amateur editing by the filmmaker. The editing features several out of focus shots – for example, a shot where a person is seen riding a horse is blurred because of intentional blurred focusing. The blurred and out-of-focus shots challenge the ethnographer’s ability to fully grasp the native point of view. It is also suggestive of the lack of complete comprehension of the indigenous culture and ways of life by the “outsider” ethnographer. The documentary combines footage of men cutting down trees and making crafts, women doing domestic works and taking care of children, children playing, eating, and smiling, animals ploughing land, animals dying in the droughty fields, wildfire in the forest etc. to create a montage of observational footage without any sync sound. There are some bizarre juxtapositions of the sounds and visuals such as the sharp sound

of insects chirping paired with the visual sequence of the footage of the dead or nearly dead carcasses of cattle and animals, the rural houses, the face of women and children, and the braided hair of an African child. The uneven pattern of sounds and silences of the documentary is often interrupted by the non-expository voice over commentary of Minh-ha. Commenting on the poetic mode of documentary film, Bill Nichols (2010) contends that the poetic mode of documentary sacrifices the “conventions of continuity editing” and upsets the sense of a spatial and temporal agreement that derives from the editing of the film (162). The abrupt silences, employment of tribal music, conversation of Senegalese people without translation, sound effects in the background and the inconsistency of both the soundtrack and visual sequencing of repeated shots, and the non-expository voice over make *Reassemblage* an alternative ethnographic documentary which is poetic in nature.

Minh-ha’s film *Reassemblage* not only challenges the Western conception of ethnographic “objectivity”, and the “truth” ethnography claims to depict but also problematizes legitimacy of ethnographic inquiry. Acknowledging anthropology’s close relation with cinematic forms in terms of dissemination of knowledge, Winston maintains “[a]nthropology (by which I mean social or cultural anthropology) is one of the few social science disciplines to have seriously explored the use of cinematic, and, later, televisual, and digital video technologies as both a tool of research and a medium for the dissemination of knowledge” (Winston 170 as cited in Basu 94). It is important to note here that unlike traditional ethnographic expository documentaries, the voiceover in Minh-

ha's film never guides the audience through the sequence of the visual, rather it leaves the audience with uneasiness and discomfort with Minh-ha's witty remarks on ethnographic traditions with the repetitions, silences, and hesitations in her voice. Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) in her article "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" accounts for the critique of "objectivity" from the disciplinary viewpoints of both anthropology and feminism. She presents a critique of the anthropological notion of "objectivity" by acknowledging how the "facts" from the field in anthropology is constructed through the particular social and cultural interactions that derive from the relationship of distance and inequality between ethnographers and subjects. Referring to James Clifford's *Writing Culture* which depicts the six factors that shapes ethnographic writing, Abu-Lughod concludes that ethnographies are situated, and none represents reality objectively. She also presents the contested notion of objectivity within feminism and shows how feminist theorists have argued about objectivity within science. According to feminist theorists, the objectivity within science is part of a dualism that is gendered and a mode of power (Abu-Lughod 13). In *Reassemblege*, the objective, complete, positivist and scientific truth of ethnography has been called into question by apparently imperfect shots and scenes such as off-focus footage, close-ups and mid shots that do not give a complete view of the subject with their surroundings. The voiceover commentary of Trinh Minh-ha reflects on the ethnographic documentary's construction of reality and draws attention to the assumption that objectivity is sought by recording every single detail through the camera. However, later in the documentary

voiceover, when she says “Stressing the observer’s objectivity, circles around the object of curiosity. Different views from different angles. The ABC of photography” (*Reassemblage*, 1982), she points towards the individual standpoint of the observer and that reality differs from perspective to perspective. Moreover, in the ethnographic documentary, reality and objectivity are depicted through the mediation of the camera. Different reality can be encountered through different camera angles and photographic positions.

*Reassemblage* resituates the politics of representation between the ethnographer and the ethnographic subject which renders it an alternative ethnographic documentary. Traditional ethnography has long been criticized for its hegemonic binary between the “self” and the “other”. Paul Basu maintained, “Like their textual counterparts, ethnographic films have not typically been concerned with representing all peoples equally – they are largely films made by “us” (urban white westerners) about “them” (our non-urban, non-white, non-Western *Other*)” (94). Diane Walden and Janet Walker also took up this self-other duo in the field of anthropology in the introduction of *Feminism and Documentary* and assert that this self-other duo “imbeds a power imbalance that is...[u]ndergirded by the whole history of colonial imperialism and the maintenance of a First World – Third or Fourth World Split” (15). Similarly, Khadidiatou Guèye (2008) also acknowledged that scholarship in African literature has a tendency of not transcending the insider-outsider perspectival binarism (14). While exploring the ethnocultural voices and African aesthetics in Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage*, Guèye (2008) argued that Minh-ha has used a Western media to subvert

the anthropological “I/eye” and this subversion is “aporetic, yet [it] uncontaminates her aesthetic purpose” (14). In the film, through the voiceover, Minh-ha challenges the Western ethnographic tradition by saying – “First create the need, then help”. The Western ethnographers make the case that the non-Western ethnic communities need the help of Western ethnographers to be spoken “about”, if not “for”, the subjects, as if the ethnic communities do not have their own voice. Trinh Minh-ha critiques this assumption and chooses to “speak near” them and refuses to “speak about” them considering that they already have their own voice and hence no one else needs to give them voice. Moreover, the film presents conversations of people in their local tongue without translating them to demonstrate the complete lack of understanding of an ethnographer of the language and ways of life of the people they study when they first encounter their subjects. According to Minh-ha, the idea of “giving voice” is an illusion and hence she decides to refuse using sync sound or translating the indigenous language for the audience (Trinh-Minh-ha 167). While accounting for a feminist alternative of masculinist anthropological inquiry, Abu-Lughod maintains that the attempt to translate and contextualize the cultural practice and meaning of femininity in any specific cultural context to another would only end up in an unacceptable failure because of different cultural codes in different contexts (22). Trinh Minh-ha deliberately chose not to translate the non-Western cultural practices and codes into the Western context and by doing so she endeavours to rehabilitate the power asymmetry between the ethnographer and the ethnographic subjects in the film.

Through a striking visual portrayal of the female subjects – the rural Senegalese women, *Reassemblage* disrupts the conventional masculinist ethnographic documentary tradition that represents women from a particular viewpoint. The soft female voiceover reflecting on the documentary form itself subverts the “voice-of-God” commentary of the expository documentary tradition. In the film, the conventional male voice-of-authority commentary giving verbal information about the visuals in traditional documentary is taken over by a woman voiceover. In the film, there are several scenes that create a striking effect by featuring women without tops or women with bare breasts. The repeated appearance of women with their breasts exposed while doing domestic chores and caregiving in *Reassemblage* demands critical attention. The camera angle focusing on female bodies and the portrayal of female breasts from various angles problematizes the Western male gaze of the conventional ethnographic documentary. Laura Mulvey in her essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) theorizes that women in the media are viewed from the gaze of a heterosexual man where women are represented as passive objects of male desire. Mulvey’s male-gaze theory reinforces the idea that men are the lookers, and women are to be looked at. In conventional ethnographic documentary, the ethnographic subjects are portrayed as sexualized objects, and the nudity and nakedness are presented as exotic and glamorous. This is evident in *Reassamblage* where a Senegalese man, after watching a slideshow on Africa, guiltily confesses to his wife that he has seen pornography as narrated by Trinh Minh-ha’s voiceover. Trinh

Minh-ha contends “Filming in Africa mean to many of us colorful images, naked breast women, and fearful rides”. She critiques and reflects on this representational politics of Western-centric ethnographic documentary by deliberately exposing female bodies in front of the camera. Minh-ha, being a non-Western, non-White woman, exposes the male gaze employed in the White masculinist ethnographic documentaries that objectifies non-Western ethnographic subjects and presents them as sensual exotic objects to create shock and thrill among the Western audience. This is how she subverts and salvages the masculinist anthropologic male gaze by focusing on female bodies. It is an act of reclamation of the female body and female sexuality by salvaging the white male gaze of conventional ethnography through the mediation of camera angles.

*Reassemblage* is essentially a film that celebrates feminine vitality and womanhood. The subtitle of the film “A Complex Visual Study of the Women in Rural Senegal” indicates that it pictures the everyday life of rural Senegalese women. The celebration of femininity and womanhood is evident through the motifs, imagery, and symbols in the film. One of the very powerful and recurring motifs in the film is fire, and the vigor of womanhood is often associated with it. The voiceover narrative repeatedly articulates that it is the women who possess fire, it is only women who know how to make fire. The symbolism of fire as in hearth and as wildfire appears frequently. Fire in the film stands for feminine vitality and strength of the independent rural women. It is also a metaphor for power, courage, and resilience. In her account of the historical production of feminist ethnography,

Kamala Viswerwaran explores how women's identity as subjects has historically inspires the production of feminist ethnography. From a gender essentialist critique position, she maintains that "feminist ethnography can be defined as ethnography that foregrounds the question of social inequality vis-à-vis the lives of men, women, and children" (Viswerwaran 594). By posing the critiques and the critical junctures between the two fields of feminism and anthropology, Abu-Lughod defines feminist ethnography as

[e]thnographies that try to bring to life what it means to be a woman in other places and under different conditions, ethnographies that explore what work, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, education, poetry, television, poverty, or illness mean to other women, can offer feminists a way of replacing their presumptions of a female experience with a grounded sense of our commonalities and differences. (27)

It goes beyond question that the subjects of the documentary *Reassemblage* are the rural Senegalese women. However, unlike many other conventional documentaries, in *Reassemblage*, women subjects are not victims<sup>2</sup>. They appear as a strong political agent with self-agency, and powerful subjectivity where they take charge of their own lives as opposed to being victims. Women play major roles to sustain the lives of their families. The large number of children that the film

<sup>2</sup> A major part of documentary tradition being attentive to social amelioration and the disadvantaged social actors, the portrayal of victims remains vital as a trend of documentary practice. (Winston: 764)



features glorify the reproductive and caregiving ability of women. Women are presented doing all the laborious jobs such as hand pounding millet, building thatched roof, ploughing land, and pulling groundwater from manual wells. Other than doing the domestic work, women also take charge of the economy. In the film, women are seen to hold a market where all the buyers and sellers are women. Another scene preceded by a woman bathing an infant and followed by a scene of nursing her child features the moon and the landscape with native conversation in the background. The full moon with the landscape stands for the celebration of femininity, eternity, and the cycle of life. In Minh-ha's film, women actively engage themselves in various domestic and public activities, and their representation is vivid, strong, and vital.

In discussing feminist film studies' relative lack of attention to the documentary form and the discourses that describes it, Waldman and Walker (6) address feminist films being a critique of dominant cinema and supported for the development of an alternative cinema. Although the *cinema vérité* style of filmmaking associated with the invention of the 16mm camera and lightweight equipment was initially applauded by some feminist film scholars considering that they allow reality to happen on the screen, other feminist writers rejected the realism in favor of a modernist, feminist counter cinema (Waldman and Walker 7). The authors present Claire Johnston's critique of realism as the strategies of oppositional women's cinema and offer Johnston's argument that views cinema as a *mediation* and "not a neutral record of reality" (Waldman and Walker 7). According to Johnston, "[w]omen's cinema cannot afford such

idealism; the “truth” of our oppression cannot be “captured” on celluloid with the “innocence” of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film” (Johnston 2014 as cited in Walker and Waldman: 7). Drawing on the anti-realist stance of Johnston and others, Eileen McGarry discussed the mediations at the levels of both production and reception of the documentaries. She addressed how many political (including feminists) filmmakers adopt less realistic techniques “such as intellectual montage, expressionistic sequences, music, voice-over, and dramatization” (Waldman and Walker7). Minh-ha rejected the rigid, realistic norms of documentary filmmaking and deliberately chose to make a montage of disruptive images and disjointed sounds to exclude “correct, pure, and linear syntactic cultural representation and exudes the fragmented, heterogeneous, and heterotopic nature of images, sounds, and ethnic voices in the film” (Gueye 15). She decided to call into question the objective, complete, positivist and scientific truth of ethnography by apparently imperfect shots and scenes such as off-focus footage, close-ups and mid shots that do not give a complete view of the subject with their surroundings. Refusing to provide a complete and “perfect” view of the subject is Minh-ha’s feminist intervention to expose the constructed and manufactured reality of the camera.

By making visible the often unrecognized and undocumented care work of women, Minh-ha’s film appears as a feminist documentary. The film not only acknowledges but also celebrates this care work. Women breastfeeding their babies while pounding millet appears repeatedly in the film.

Domestic work such as cooking, bathing children, grinding, and peeling nuts are not recognized as formal works, yet the film documents them with great emphasis. Minh-ha's commentary contends – "Fireplace and women's face, the pot is the universal symbol for the mother, grandmother, the goddess". By reclaiming the traditional roles assigned to them women take charge of their own lives and render them as independent agents. Motherhood is given a unique distinction in the film and the women have the agency of taking care of their children while doing all sorts of laborious jobs. Care work provided by a mother is further depicted when the female voiceover mentions a child who lays on a mat with their mother's headscarf on their face when a sandstorm hits. The affection, sacrifice, and ways mothers provide protective shelters to their children are not only visually presented but also celebrated in the film. At the end of the film, the voiceover reveals that the women are not content with the practice of polygamy of their husbands, and they think it is beneficial for men. This reflects the feminist consciousness of the Senegalese women who are aware of the privileges that patriarchy allows men to enjoy. Nevertheless, the depiction of these women taking charge of the economy, household, farming, and so on is a resistance to the patriarchal domination. The poetic depiction of womanhood and the daily life of Senegalese women in the film is Minh-ha's feminist interventionist yearning for resisting paternalistic domination – both of patriarchy and of male bourgeoisie cinema. Therefore, the film could be considered a feminist intervention that produces alternative feminist knowledges with all its poetic techniques.

While there are some motifs and symbols in the documentary that uphold femininity and appreciate womanhood, other symbols and formal techniques can be interpreted as ones challenging patriarchy. Men receive a small amount of screentime given that the film is essentially about women and their daily lives. There are occasions when male members of the community are shown doing work such as making crafts or ploughing land with cattle. However, the final products made by men are never depicted through the filmmaker's camera. The depiction of dead and nearly dead animals in the film, especially a donkey falling on the ground with the legs wide open exposing the male organ poses a direct challenge to patriarchy and paternalistic domination of women. The millet pounding of women can be read in the film as women thrashing the social fabric of patriarchal domination by salvaging and reclaiming feminine subjectivity.

In conclusion, the chapter has demonstrated how Minh-ha's film challenges the objectivity and taken-for-granted truth of traditional ethnographic cinema. The female non-authoritative voiceover, the non-linear montage of observational footages depicting the culture of Senegalese ethnic community, and the use of the non-sync and discontinued sound combine together to render the film a feminist ethnography that disrupts the conventional practice of ethnographic documentaries. The film challenges the white Western male gaze of the ethnographic documentary tradition and subverts patriarchal oppression by reclaiming and salvaging the roles and attributes historically assigned to women. It also deconstructs and destabilizes patriarchal oppression by empowering women in both their

domestic sphere and the public sphere, by making the care work of women visible, and by celebrating womanhood and feminine vitality. Overall, the film is Trinh Minh-ha's call for a psychic reassemblage to think differently and to reweave the fabric of our social dynamics by challenging patriarchy and masculine modes of knowledge production.

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## CHAPTER 20

# Anthropological Documentary Making in Niger: Mariama Hima Yankori and Baabu Banza (1984)

Kate Ince

### ABSTRACT:

In chapter 20 Kate Ince focuses on Nigerien filmmaker Mariama Hima Yankor (b. 1951), the pioneer of women's filmmaking in Niger in the 1980s. As one of the many sub-Saharan Africans to have been in some way influenced or indeed taught by Jean Rouch, she made the film *Baabu Banza/Nothing is Thrown Away* (1984) and thereby contributed to reinforcing her place in the international archive of women's filmmaking. The author enquires into how her work as a filmmaker should be understood in its contexts of Nigerien cinema and pan-African and international women's filmmaking in the 1980s and early 1990s.

If one name suggests itself in relation to anthropological filmmaking in Niger, it is surely that of Frenchman Jean Rouch (1917–2004), whose initial arrival there in 1941 and return after the Second World War fell in the early part of a filmmaking career of over fifty years. Rouch had made his name with films such as *Les maîtres fous/The Mad Masters* (1954) and *Moi, un noir/I, a Black* (1958) by the time Niger gained its independence from France in 1960, at which point Niger-born directors Oumarou Ganda (1935–1981) and Moustapha Alassane (1942–2015) took the cinema of their country in new directions; Alassane as the creator of the first animated films to be made in sub-Saharan Africa. It would be the 1980s before Mariama Hima became the first woman to direct a film in Niger, giving her a “pioneer” status among African women similar to that of Senegalese Safi Faye (1943–2023) who directed her first short film *La Passante* in 1972. Faye had met Jean Rouch in 1966 and taken an acting role in his 1971 film *Petit à petit* (something Hima would do in 1985’s *Cousin, cousine, pirogue, gondole*), and the careers of Oumarou Ganda and Moustapha Alassane could similarly hardly have flourished without the infrastructure for film production and technical training that Rouch’s work in Niger’s capital city Niamey had helped create. One of the aims of this essay, principal among which is to present Hima’s film *Baabu Banza/Nothing is Thrown Away* (1984) and thereby contribute to reinforcing her place in the international archive of women’s filmmaking,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Baabu Banza* is also sometimes used as the name of the set of four documentaries Hima made in the 1980s, all four of which are about recycling, and in such instances *Taya* (meaning “tyre”) names the first of the four (see Ilbo 1993, p.89), but here I employ the standard practice of calling the first 18 minute film *Baabu Banza*.



is to enquire into how her work as a filmmaker should be understood in its contexts of Nigerien cinema and pan-African and international women's filmmaking in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Safi Faye and Mariama Hima are two of the three African women directors<sup>2</sup> whose careers were profiled by Nancy J. Schmidt in a late 1990s essay calling for more research on sub-Saharan African women filmmakers (Schmidt 1997 and 1999). In her essay Schmidt poses the question "Is Safi Faye a role model for African women filmmakers?" (Schmidt 1997: 174), having already supplied the reasons why Faye might not hold this status by describing her as "atypical of most African women filmmakers working in the 1980s and 1990s" (Schmidt 1997: 174) because of her lifelong "exile" in Paris, which afforded her better access to international film networks than is enjoyed by most African directors, female or male. Like Faye, Hima benefitted from "contact with and encouragement from Jean Rouch" (Schmidt 1997: 178), but unlike her, made films in her own country that were locally funded, and from 1989 onwards worked in its service, first at Niamey's National Museum<sup>3</sup> where she had previously volunteered (Moutari 2014). In 1990 Hima was appointed National Director of Culture, a role she combined with that of director of the National Museum from 1992 to 1996, when Niger's new president Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara, who had seized power in a *coup d'état*, appointed her State Secretary for the Promotion of Women and Protection of Children.

<sup>2</sup> The third is the Nigerian Lola Fani-Kayode (Schmidt 1997: 179).

<sup>3</sup> This is now known as the Boubou Hama Museum (Moutari 2014).

The diplomatic career on which Hima had been surprised to find herself launched<sup>4</sup> reached a peak in 1997 when she was appointed Niger's ambassador to France, a role she remained in until 2003 despite the replacement of Maïnassara by Daouda Malam Wanké when Maïnassara was assassinated in Niger's 1999 military coup.

Hima's many years of service to Niger as museum director, director of culture, and diplomat followed an extended academic training undertaken both locally (she obtained her *baccalauréat* and bachelor's degree in Niger<sup>5</sup>) and in France, where she studied sociology, anthropology and museum studies at the *École du Louvre* and *Musée de l'Homme*, and ethnolinguistics at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) (Moutari 2014).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Souley Moutari reports how surprised Hima was to learn of her appointment as a Secretary of State from people who came to congratulate her on it (Moutari 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Ousmane Ilbo differs from most sources in maintaining that Hima's BA in museum studies was awarded by the Institut de l'Art et d'Archéologie at Paris IV University (Ilbo 1993: 71).

<sup>6</sup> Most sources give the *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (EPHE) as the institution that awarded Hima's Masters degree, which is explained by the fact that the EHESS is a constituent part of the EPHE, from which it gained independence in 1975. Manthia Diawara makes a parallel between Faye and Hima as academically trained filmmakers when discussing the "largely male hegemony" in African cinema, writing "One reason for the dearth of female filmmakers in Africa is women's exclusion from the apprenticeship tradition. Several male film-makers trained as assistants to gaffers, camera and sound persons and even directors before going on to film school. Women, on the other hand, tend to study first. Safi Faye, Senegal's first female director, earned a PhD in anthropology before becoming a film-maker and often brags about being over-qualified, or more educated than her male counterparts. Mariama Hima, the first female film-maker from Niger, earned a superior degree in anthropology before directing her first film" (Diawara 1993, p.26). The reason why it is inaccurate to say that Hima was awarded her doctorate before directing her first film is explained in the next section.

Having gained a Masters degree, Hima went on to a higher Masters or DEA (*diplôme d'études approfondies*) in visual anthropology at Paris Nanterre, then to a doctorate in anthropology titled "Etude filmique de l'artisanat de recuperation au Niger "Baabu banza"/ "Film study of the salvage industry in Niger, 'Baabu banza'".<sup>7</sup> Four of her five films, *Baabu banza/Rien ne se jette* (1984), *Falaw/L'aluminium* (1985), *Toukou/Le tonneau* (1986) and *Katako/Les planches* (1987) were made during Hima's doctoral studies,<sup>8</sup> and exposition of at least the first two of them that includes hand-drawn diagrams forms a part of the thesis. This is preceded by introductory chapters on the industrial context in which the films were made (the salvage of tyres, aluminium, barrels and boards), on how recycling and salvage worked in Niamey in the 1980s, on the decisions Hima had to make in advance of filming, and on her co-operation with the workers who were to be filmed. The four documentaries, which are all shot on 16mm film and are between fifteen and thirty minutes in length, observe and record the skilled artisanal work carried out on the materials named in their titles, and their French-language commentaries, narrated by Hima herself, detail the processes employed by the artisans, who also describe and explain their work in their own language(s).

*Baabu Banza*, which is dedicated to Hima's mother (who had died just as the film was being shot) opens with shots of lorries arriving at a

<sup>7</sup> The version of Hima's thesis consultable on microfiche at Paris's Bibliothèque du Film is marked Lille: ANRT 1989, whereas other sources also dating it to 1989 say that the doctorate was awarded by Paris Nanterre (formerly known as Paris X).

<sup>8</sup> The fifth, a documentary called *Hadiza et Kalia*, was released in 1994.

market in Boukoki, Niamey where goods of every imaginable kind are bought and sold and recycling of some of these is part of the market's business. A zoom in to the tyres of the arriving lorries indicates that the salvage and re-use of various parts of tyres (unknown in industrialised countries, where they may be reused as a whole or re-treaded, but are otherwise destroyed) is the documentary's subject, and a sign saying "Vulcanisation, battery charging, tyre inflation" locates the garage where it takes place. As we see the metal hub mechanically forced out of a tyre's heavily corroded exterior and the external wheel being rolled some distance to a workshop in a straw hut, Hima's narration announces "work on tyres is rather like the ritual butchering of sheep", and alternating medium shots and close-ups show us the artisan's highly skilled deployment of pairs of razor-sharp, curved knives on the tyre's rubber. Regular dipping of the knives in water both cools them and softens the tyre, and the artisan, who tells us he has two wives and children and has been doing this work for ten years, explains that the small pieces of rubber he is cutting from the thick tread that remains on the tyre will be sold to farmers to chase insects and birds away from their crops by fumigating their fields. The main product of this part of the recycling process, however, is superbly comfortable-looking rubber flip-flops whose soles he cuts using a mould, a large pile of which lies nearby, on sale for F300 a pair.

Action then switches to the recycling of the tyre's inner tube, which we are told has multiple uses and see being sewn into a bag or container of some kind by a second artisan wielding a large needle: most of this worker's explanation of what he is doing is untranslated, but after a tie is threaded carefully round the rim of the "bag" and we see two

women using two of them to draw water from a well, its intended function is revealed. We are told that these rubber *puisettes* are crafted in varying sizes with capacities of between five and twenty litres, and the camera pans round the workshop to show dozens of them hanging up next to flip-flops and other off cuts from the tyre that serve as straps to hang or attach all kinds of objects. Two single shots follow of a truck driver's water supply attached to his vehicle in an inner tube that is now crescent-shaped rather than circular, and a catapult fashioned out of a rubber strap and wooden fork that a young boy demonstrates to his two companions. An emphasis on children's involvement in tyre recycling concludes Hima's record of its processes as her narration explains that they get pocket money for sorting the side-products of tyres that are burnt once all their usable parts have been cut away, and she ends the documentary with an upbeat scene of a group of eight children playing with tyres that we first see them rolling towards the camera. The last lines of the film's narration are "Baabu Banza...in this world of perpetual motion, the creative genius of the artisan will bring forth other techniques...and who knows, this child's play may give rise to another game" [and as the playing boy falls out of the tyre] "Whoops a daisy, you fall over, get up again, start again, and life goes on". But continuity of life and community is only part of the continuity *Baabu Banza* has documented, which is sustainability in a near-ideal form: so efficient is the recycling of tyres demonstrated in the film that it approximates to what we now call a "zero waste" economy, albeit a motor-industrial rather than a food-based one. "Anthropological documentary" remains

an accurate label for *Baabu Banza* and its three companion films about industrial salvage and recycling, because the artisans are presented as skilled workers who are part of a community, but the film can more contemporaneously be placed in the genre or mode of “ecocinema” that hardly existed in the 1980s.

The small but expert set of documentaries constituted by *Baabu Banza*, *Falaw*, *Toukou* and *Katako* is a vital piece of Nigerien national heritage and of contemporary ecocinema only occasionally viewed internationally via copies that have been deposited in libraries and archives, and which deserve to be much more widely screened and appreciated. Although it may seem from my account of Hima’s directing at the start of this essay that her filmmaking career was entirely displaced by her diplomatic one, she did resume participation in Niger’s cinematic culture after 2003, for example through involvement in commemorations of Rouch’s career after his death in 2004 and participation in a set of documentaries made for his centenary in 2017. One of the best examples of this involvement was her much earlier acting role in Rouch’s *Cousin, cousine, pirogue, gondole* (1985), which was filmed in Venice during the Venice film festival she was attending in order to be awarded a prize for *Falaw/Aluminium*. A witty riposte to French auteur filmmaking and to the Eurocentrism of film festival culture of the time, *Cousin, cousine, pirogue, gondole* features Hima and Rouch’s lifelong friend Damouré Zika as supposedly distant cousins who rendez-vous in Venice in order to search for a relic such as a fragment of the True Cross featured in paintings by Venetian artist Gentile Bellini (c.1429–1507), Mariama having suggested the

city's canals as the place to look. As they meander along in a gondola explicitly paralleled with the "pirogue" canoes used by fishermen on Niger's River Niger, Mariama teaches her supposedly ignorant cousin about the Venetians and how gondolas are constructed, until Damouré, diving into the Grand Canal, resurfaces in the Niger next to a pirogue carrying Mariama, to whom he presents not a relic but a fetish, an iron axe of the sky and thunder spirit Dongo. They are back home in the river valley where Zika had played the central character in early films by Rouch about the valley's culture, ecology and traditions,<sup>9</sup> and Hima has returned to the Nigerien setting she only ever left to conduct research that would allow her to expertly film her country's cultural and commercial practices on or to represent it as Ambassador to its former colonial power.

<sup>9</sup> The first of these was *Bataille sur le grand fleuve* (1952), for which Rouch spent four months travelling with Sorko fishermen in pirogues.

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## CHAPTER 21

# Sandra Ng's “Matterphorics”: A Feminist Approach to Recent Hong Kong Cinema<sup>1</sup>

Elaine Kim-mui E. Chan

### ABSTRACT:

The final chapter of the book, by Elaine Kim-mui E. Chan, looks at contemporary Hong Kong cinema, and how veteran actress-producer, Sandra Ng (1965), has impacted women's roles in the booming industry. In her thirties, Ng began to push beyond the limits of what the male-dominated film industry had considered viable. She altered her physical appearance through changes in image and weight to better fit serious dramatic roles. This chapter examines the significance of Sandra Ng's creative contribution to Hong Kong cinema. Her practice is not only socio-culturally significant, but also, perhaps belatedly, feminist.

Veteran and well-renowned Hong Kong actress-producer, Sandra Ng, has been gaining more international recognition over the last decade. She began her career as a comedian in television and film playing minor roles. Later, she became well-received as a slapstick comedy artist in the 1980s. However, she found it difficult to secure leading roles in the industry. Therefore, in her thirties, she began to push beyond the limits of what the male-dominated film industry has considered non-viable. She altered her physical appearance through changes in image and weight to better fit serious dramatic roles. Despite her subsequent efforts in *4 Faces of Eve* (Kam Kwok-leung, Eric Kwok and Jan Lam, 1996) not paying off, she persisted. Her creative contribution in *Golden Chicken* (Samson Chiu, 2002) and *Golden Chicken 2* (Samson Chiu, 2003) appeared to be a turning point in her career. Ng's portrayal of a female sex-worker, Ah Gum, from her teenage years until middle age, broke new ground in her film career. With *Golden Chickiness* (Matt Chow, 2014), or *Golden Chicken 3*, she pursued other creative endeavours outside of acting, such as producing. She has since gained international recognition, receiving the Asia Star Award in 2014 at New York Asian Film Festival. In *Golden Chickiness*, Ng is both an actress and producer. She redefines and transforms the body of the same character by giving herself fake breasts which do not, however, lead to concretizing the patriarchal male gaze. The three *Golden Chicken* films, or so-called prostitute trilogy, tell stories about the highs and lows of Hong Kong, which strike a chord with audiences.

More recently, *Zero to Hero* (Jimmy Wan, 2021), co-produced and performed by Sandra Ng,

was selected as the Hong Kong entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 94<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. This biopic tells the story of a paralympic champion, in which Ng plays the role of mother of the male protagonist. Her superb performance in the film won her the award of Best Actress in a Leading Role (or Golden Angel Award) at the Chinese American Film Festival in 2021. In 2022, she became the first Hong Kong actress invited to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science in the USA. In the same year, she was selected to be the “Filmmaker in Focus” at the 46th Hong Kong International Film Festival.

This paper aims to critically examine the significance of Sandra Ng’s creative contribution and her trope of cinema. Ng’s practice is not only socio-culturally significant, but also “matterphorically” feminist.

## Methodology

For over half a decade, psychoanalytic theorization has been a popular practice well-received by film scholars in the academia. Laura Mulvey (1975, 1981, 1989) was the first film scholar who incorporated the Freudian idea of “phallogentrism” into her critique on the male gaze that constitutes visual pleasure in film. Mulvey’s pioneering analytical tool can be best applied in criticism against ideological representation that directly and indirectly indicates or instigates stigmatization of woman in film. However, the strength of Mulvey’s analysis has necessarily brought with it a weakness which is integral to her specific scope. She has a representational logic that females are definitely positioned as “the other”.

In fact, women do not necessarily appear as objects of desire. During production, film directors, actors and actresses—male or female—may distract and/or disrupt the “male gaze”. They may creatively turn around the notion of otherness in the cinematic practices. Their creative works could subvert or challenge the grand narrative of “phallogentrism” and stereotypical representation. In this paper, I propose a new methodology for our understanding of such an interesting aspect of cinema.

The semiotic and psychoanalytical approaches that used to dominate the debate of representationalism gradually diminished in significance when Foucault in the 70s and 80s changed people’s way of understanding power. Since many scholars have been convinced that the power of sexuality can be transformed discursively, they move on to theorize an object of knowledge, who may refuse to engage in any totalizing discourse. Third-wave feminist scholars, including Judith Butler in the 90s, complements such a theory with an onto-epistemological approach which studies how the object’s body and its “performativity” may challenge convention. Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2014, 2021) also does not agree that the world makes sense entirely through a system of signification, which is not of being. Barad asks,

How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture? How does one

even go about inquiring after the material conditions that have led us to such a brute reversal of naturalist beliefs when materiality itself is always already figured within a linguistic domain as its condition of possibility? (Barad 2003: 801)

Drawing on Barad's understanding of subjectivity, agency and causality, I propose a different onto-epistemological approach for analysis of a feminist cinematic practice of Hong Kong that refreshes our understanding of power. Barad says,

*A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real. (Barad 2003: 802)*

In the following, I delve into a new area of performance and performativity by studying Sandra Ng's screen personas, and the way in which her creative works challenge and disrupt conventional ideas and expectations. With a new approach, this paper critically examines Ng's style of acting, physique, appearance, costume design, gesture and posture, and movement in relation to her body. It provides a new cutting-edge angle to re-examine a kind of cinematic activity that has not yet received enough critical attention.

In a close study of Sandra Ng's brilliant works in Hong Kong, this paper aims to examine how she persistently and consistently portrays objects of desire differently while upsetting and turning around patriarchal viewpoints. Her films' intricate plots and her layered portrayals of the female protagonist in *Golden Chicken* (Samson Chiu, 2002), *Golden Chicken 2* (Samson Chiu, 2003), and *Golden Chickeness* (Matt Chow, 2014) are allegorical of Hong Kong people's survival experiences against all kinds of adversities in life since the 60s or 70s of the last century till now. Taking on the approach of material feminism, this paper rereads the materiality of woman representation and critiques its material condition.

## **Socio-Cultural and Historical Background**

Ng's prostitute trilogy reveals a collective memory of Hong Kong people overcoming hardships in life. Representing such an experience, the films epitomize an essence of the people that can be described as the Hong Kong spirit. Historically, such spirit embodies good attributes of humanity that the locals of colonial Hong Kong have acquired since WWII. Cantonese Hong Kong films of the 50s and 60s used to portray the beauty of the Hong Kong spirit. Such spirit embodies strong compassion and empathy for the people's fellow-countrymen. The Hong Kong people then, diegetically and extra-diegetically, persevered and supported one another during disasters and other crises of life. Sharing the attributes, the character of Ah Gum becomes a prominent figure who represents a person of high

human values. Ng's sex-worker role is also seen as a personality emblematic of Hong Kong people who underwent socio-cultural changes after the United Kingdom had handed over the sovereign right of Hong Kong by 1997. 1997 saw an end of the period of colonization in Hong Kong. Before and after the changeover, local people have been perplexed by critical issues revolving around renegotiating their national and cultural identity. In my book-length study of the pre- and post-1997 Hong Kong cinema published in 2019, I explain,

In the mid-1980s, as soon as the Joint Declaration between Britain and China had laid out a blueprint for the changeover, Hong Kong people needed to negotiate for a better understanding of a national identity. Since birth, many of them had been very much accustomed to their British colonial subjectivity. However, in the run up to 1997, Hong Kong people were driven to reflect on, cherish and critique their colonial experiences. They were under pressure to sort out for themselves a notion of national identity with a sense of continuity. (Kim-mui 2019: 64)

In the case of post-colonial Hong Kong, a unified concept of historical subjectivity—both colonial and national—would no longer apply. Hong Kong people became more conscious about their crisis of identity in the run up to 1997. As time goes by, Hong Kong people are taking on a single national identity as officially Chinese and acknowledge their Hong Kong Chineseness in their cultural identity. The Hong Kong Chineseness is

conducive to a particular set of characteristics, behaviours, social values, and human virtues. Ng's portrayal of the sex-worker is socio-culturally relevant to the interpretation of such Hong Kong Chineseness or spirit.

## **Sandra Ng's “Matterphorics” Trope of Cinema**

This paper aims to critically examine the significance of Sandra Ng's creative contribution and her trope of cinema. Ng's practice is not only socio-culturally significant, but also “matterphorically” feminist. Drawing on Karen Barad's onto-epistemological methodology, I argue that Ng's practice is materially discursive, and that her performance should be studied seriously. Her “matterphorics” or trope of cinema is established by redefining “intra-actively” the boundaries of the ontic bodies of the screen, protagonists, and audience. Ng asks how prostitution makes sense socially and cinematically through “mattering”, and how the meanings come to matter differently. In this paper, I analyse her prostitute trilogy as case studies to demonstrate my argument.

Artists' dedication and commitment to their crafts have not received enough criticism in the academic study of film. As a skilled actress, Ng contributes professionally to her area. In my observation and opinion, she always outstandingly redefines the materiality of her roles and body. Her portrayal reveals the dynamic and the evolving nature of Hong Kong cultural identity. In this analysis, I shall study Ng's material



discursive approach, rather than the director's or script-writer's narrative approach, by drawing on Barad's perspective of agential realism. Such an approach is best applicable in understanding how the artist can captivate the audience's attention with a compelling performance. I shall also analyse how her film art makes an impact from a feminist point of view.

It is important to understand agency and its mechanism which allow an artist to act intentionally or make choices that can diegetically change the significance of things and hence represent her understanding of the world. This is indeed an analytical angle that contemporary film scholars have neglected.

In C. Taylor's description of Barad's theory, the status of such an agency is clearly defined. She says "An agential realist ontology maps the mutual constitution of subject-object always and only in/through the dynamism of their intra-active entailment; objects and subjects do not exist before or outside intra-actions" (Taylor 2016: 209). Applying such a perspective in understanding Ng's contribution will help us decipher how the dominant ideological structure has hampered artists' creativity in general and how Ng's cinematic strategy breaks new ground. Key to such understanding is that nothing "exists before or outside intra-actions". That is to say, the statuses of the subject and object are indeed mutually constituted. Such a "dynamism" of constitution is derived from Ng's trope of matterphorics. It is resulted from Ng's investment in the materiality of her body which unleashes an alternative dynamism of subject-object intra-acting.

As a comedian in the last century, she needed to keep her body slightly overweight so as to portray comedic roles. In Hong Kong, female comedians then usually looked chubby and a bit weird diegetically. However, later, Ng innovatively created attractive and smart movie roles for herself. Yet, most of her friends discouraged her and speculated that she would lose her position in the local market of film comedy if she continued to deviate from the conventional image of female comedians. Staying focused on her unique strategy, she eventually secured major leading roles in the industry with, what I call, a material-discursive approach in portraying comedic roles.

In the first two episodes of the *Golden Chicken* film series co-produced by Peter Chan, she transforms the mainstream “dumb blonde” sexy image for her comedic role called Ah Gum by swaying between her portrayals of pretty and grotesque bodies for the same character. Accomplishing this, she blends the styles of acting for both serious dramatic roles and slapstick comedian roles. Through this strategy, she redefines the Hollywood female “dumbness” by incorporating an additional attribute of passionate sincerity in the comedic character. As a result, she conquers the audience with an overwhelming sense of sensibility that refers to the acute sensitivity of the female protagonist’s material body.

In the following, I take two scenes from the films as examples. Firstly, a night club scene in which the protagonist, at a younger age, is required to please her male clients with a performance during work. Secondly, inside her own closet in her middle age, while watching a promotional video on television, she is inspired by the presenter Andy

Lau, a famous male film star. In the video, he is sharing a kind of work attitude that is applicable to Hong Kong people who aspire to excel in the service sector. Ah Gum is inspired and she adopts Lau's advice. In this scene, she practices dedicatedly how she may fake orgasm differently and please her clients with the same attitude.

## ***Golden Chicken:* The Night-club Scene**

In an interview, Ng shares that she had correctly predicted that she would not be given any detailed instruction about what would be required on the set of the nightclub scene (Chang, Wong, and Tze 2022: 47). She has faced similar challenges throughout her career and is often left to design the choreography, facial expressions, gestures, etc. of her character herself.

The nightclub scene requires that Ah Gum, in her teens, should improvise something interesting and exciting to please a group of male customers. Therefore, she demonstrates Chinese kung-fu or fist-fighting by imitating Jacky Chan's performance. Her visual reference is borrowed from a male martial artist's choreography for *Drunken Master* (Woo-ping Yuen, 1978). Instead of luring her male clients with a sexy female body, she diegetically performs kung-fu fighting for them. That is to say, the character does not conform to the industrial norm of sexual objectification. Ng, therefore, successfully creates immense comical effect out of such a design. In the interview, she shares that she always finds it difficult to develop comical effects all by herself

although she is happy about the opportunities. In such a scene, she alters the materiality of the female sex-worker's body. As a result, Ng includes subtle nuances in the screen persona both diegetically and extra-diegetically.

Extra-diegetically, the masculinization of Ah Gum's body inspires the local audience to ponder over the history of Hong Kong people who went through difficult times from the 60s onwards. The kung-fu star persona of *Drunken Master* belongs to Jacky Chan originally. The visual reference in *Golden Chicken* (Samson Chiu, 2002) implies extra-diegetically and allegorically that a diligent young person is striving to acquire a significant role in the industry. The purpose of the scene is to reveal a strong sense of determination and resilience. Ng does not only surprise the audience by incorporating diegetically and humorously an attribute of masculinity in the screen persona, but her creative approach also reminds the local audience extra-diegetically that Ah Gum is a diligent Hong Kong citizen.

Ng develops such a unique style of acting by mildly twisting and distorting her bodily gestures and postures so as to give nuance to regular spectatorial interpretation. Since the Hong Kong audience generally does not expect a slapstick comedian to take up any serious dramatic role, Ng hopes to turn around the stereotype and break new ground. She mixes realistic and grotesque elements in her choreography and image design. The protagonist she portrays is naturally beautiful, passionate, resilient, and diligent. The most intriguing point about her hyperbolic performance is that her screen persona is also conducive to a strategy of serious dramatization.

She shares that the art of comedic performance requires very accurate calculation of subtly choreographed body movement because the right rhythm and timing should match the particular gesture and posture. Otherwise, the required comic effect would not be fulfilled. She contends that such a kind of performance should be seen as a form of film art.<sup>2</sup> Engaging herself “matterphorically”, Ng critiques the nature of sex work and ethicality.

## ***Golden Chicken:* The Closet Scene**

There is a hyperbolic scene depicting Ah Gume striving to satisfy consecutively a number of male customers by displaying “sexual pleasure”. The scene begins with a video of a public service announcement on television starring Andy Lau who is encouraging Hong Kong people from all walks of life to provide quality services in their respective areas. While watching the video alone on television inside a flat decorated with old furniture and kitsch, Ah Gum in her middle age is complaining to herself that people of her age could hardly achieve the goal suggested by Andy Lau. In Ng’s portrayal, the sex-worker’s body is out of shape. Her outfit is old-fashioned but colourful. In a close-up shot, she scratches her big belly that is bulging out under her blouse. Her gesture explains visually that the protagonist is no longer fit for her career. Suddenly, Andy Lau crawls out from the television and appears in front of the protagonist. He encourages her by showing her how she should

<sup>2</sup> See the interview on Youtube: [https://youtu.be/befXCqFe\\_KM](https://youtu.be/befXCqFe_KM), Accessed June 2023.

serve her clients and fake orgasms with sincerity. Then he magically takes on various personas in front of Ah Gum requesting that she should practice with him and develop the right skill and attitude for work. Therefore, Ah Gum needs to show how she gets orgasms in front of a number of men who are all of different ethnic origins, ages, backgrounds, temperaments, etc. This scene is one of the most entertaining scenes of the movie. With her superb choreography and comical vocalization, in a series of medium shots, she moans, fidgets, changes her facial expressions, stretches her neck, waves her torso and shoulders, opens her mouth, makes eye-contacts, shows intense pleasure and relaxation, etc. in manifold ways until Andy Lau finally acknowledges her achievement.

Engaging herself “matterphorically” in her image design and performance for the film, Ng questions the nature of ethicality and otherness. Ng’s practice is not only feminist “matterphorically”, but also socio-culturally relevant to her interpretation of Hong Kongness. Her performance intra-actively redefines the boundaries of the ontic bodies of the screen, protagonists, and audience.

First, there is the boundary between the televised video starring Andy Lau and the home of Ah Gum. Later, the boundary is blurred when the ontic bodies of Andy Lau and Ah Gum are brought to the same semantic level of understanding. Second, there is the boundary between the screen and the audience. The ontic body of Andy Lau appeared to be more real from the audience’s point of view. Such a video starring Andy Lau was still showing on television in reality extra-diegetically when the movie was released then. This is how the ontological being of Andy Lau as a personality of

*Golden Chicken* and a celebrity in real life makes sense both cinematically and socially.

The nuanced ontology of the personas—male and female—is conducive to a process of “mattering” which redefines the notion of sex work. Therefore, at the end of the scene, the meaning of sex work comes to matter differently. Andy Lau has a line at the end of the scene. He affirms Ah Gum as the “Golden Chicken” of Hong Kong, which suggests diegetically that Ah Gum is a role model for Hong Kong people due to her perseverance. Neither the subject nor the object “exists before or outside intra-actions”. When the agency, or the mechanism that connects the subject and object, allows the audience to interpret Andy Lau’s persona as a male-dominant character, he is indeed a digital image perceived by Ah Gum as an object of desire. Ah Gum finally concludes in the scene that all men can be manipulated. Hence, the film upsets the subject-object dichotomy.

Ng’s “matterphorics” was never derived coincidentally or accidentally on the set. Both her script-writer, Samson Chiu-matt Chow, and co-director, Peter Chan (also Ng’s husband), recall that Ng used to struggle psychologically and cry while filming. There were moments in which she felt lost while giving responses to many cameo characters on the film set (2022: 43, 82, 101). When she portrayed the role of sex worker, sometimes she needed to convince the audience that the character sexually desires many male customers whom she did not know in real life. She found this difficult because there were so many of them and they were all different in culture, background and age. It was not easy to stage such a brilliant closet scene.

## ***Golden Chickeness:* Breast Prosthetics**

In *Golden Chickeness*, Ng creates an appearance of a more curvaceous figure for her role. She uses breast prosthetics that exaggerates the size of the protagonist's big breasts on screen and indicates that Ah Gum has begun a new stage of life. In reality, the audience have known of Ng's thin build and slender body through most of her works in film for many years. Therefore, when Ng redefines the character materially, the local audience is able to understand her "mattering" of the body rather than objectification of the body. Before Ng made the film, her husband, Peter Chan, had discouraged her because he thought that Ng's creative plan would not be commercially viable. However, Ng persisted with her career plan. What had happened eventually surprised Peter Chan. *Golden Chickeness* became a blockbuster success.

The film tells a heart-warming story of Ah Gum helping an uncompromised former gangster hero who suffers from a series of transformed social norms of Hong Kong after being released from jail. The former head of the mafia is comically portrayed as a rare human species that has maintained a simple mind of "righteousness". After many years of imprisonment, he could no longer make sense of the world which has changed beyond recognition. For him, the post-colonial city is a new world that has blurred the boundary between the good and bad. Obviously, the film presents an oxymoron by portraying that an evil gangster is paradoxically more loving and righteous than a normal human being. While Ah Gum is willing to help him adapt



to a new life, she demonstrates an aura of superb psychological strength and love. The character also impresses the audience with her selflessness and faithfulness to an old and poor friend. The sex industry is indeed emblematic of any kind of business in post-colonial Hong Kong. What intrigues me most is that a sex worker's attributes had never been taken seriously enough as a quality of humanity. In the trilogy, Ng transforms the character into a subject by endowing her with subliminal qualities of a modest achiever, contended individual and fulfilled Hong Kong citizen.

## **Matterphorics: Mattering the Breast Prosthetics**

Ah Gum's screen persona reveals how the intra-action between the screen, protagonists and audience is derived materially, which problematises the meaning-making process. In *Golden Chickiness*, Ng plays a role as a sex-worker-turned-pimp, yet she has never been truly represented and objectified as a sex object. Her fake breasts are employed materially to prompt the audience to think differently. For example, she used to publicise the making of her fake breasts in the media so as to draw some attention from her potential audience prior to the film's release. Below, I demonstrate the workings of Ng's "matterphorics".

In Barad's terminology, the agency (or connectivity) of "mattering" refers to a relationship of things rather than a film or medium of communication. The film is a material-discursive hub that favours intra-action among things that include the screen and the material existence of

the artists and spectators. The agency would not just favour one-way communication between the director and the spectators. However, the agency of intra-action accommodates a dynamism of forces that include various kinds of ideologies that would derive manifold driving forces respectively (Barad 2007: 141). In the process of mattering, notions of subjectivity and objectivity are not fixed. Rather, they are mutually and continuously constituted, which create tension between the film characters and multiple dimensions of interpretation that could evolve. Next I study the tension created in Ng's cinematic practice which upsets the mainstream ideology by refreshing the onto-epistemological meaning of the woman character.

Ng reshapes her body diegetically so as to offer nuances to the traditional ideological representation of sex worker. She is not reinforcing the otherness of the character with the fake breasts. Rather, she is critiquing the notion of otherness or the dominant subject-object dichotomy. In a beach-party scene, she is a pimp rather than a sex-worker. Yet, she is not exempted from work. Being scantily clad like her other sex-worker colleagues, she is working day and night. She has to pose provocatively for her client who is a frenetic male photographer. With her fake breasts, Ng portrays Ah Gum's compliance and tolerance so as to highlight her diligence and dignity at work. When the male client assumes the status as a subject or dominant male, Ng's film aesthetics or "matterphorics" has turned around the subjectivity of such a male role by objectifying him light-heartedly. At the end of the scene, she perceives him as a tool that facilitates her work.

Portraying an ethics of thought about her being and becoming a Hong Kong Chinese striving to survive at different periods from the 70s till now, Ng reveals in her cinematic practice an honourable quality of Hongkongness in the trilogy. Ng's mattering is a process of entanglement because her idea of otherness is not fixed. Ng deconstructs the cinematic practice of making meaning by entangling the meanings about being a sex worker and asking how being a sex worker comes to matter. Furthermore, she asks how such a matter comes to mean differently. As a result, Ng is able to question the nature of ethicality by engaging herself matterphorically in the film. Hence, the cinematic form of prostitution does not only represent the woman as a sex worker, but also an ethical entity who is growing, changing and transforming.

Being bound to her body of "otherness", extra-diegetically and diegetically as the second sex, Ng displays the working of such ideology under the influence of patriarchal culture in the first instance. With her fake breasts that the audience know extra-diegetically, however, she creates new room for reinterpretation. In this instance, the audience may choose to reread and negotiate what they find real according to their former understanding of a sex worker as the other. Mattering the fake breasts, the film exemplifies the hard life of the female protagonist. While watching, the subjects—the male character and the spectators who have identified with him—"inhumanity" may thus surface for scrutiny. The film, therefore, offers the audience—both male and female—an additional chance to reread the representation of woman through a glimpse of the suffering of the other. Barad says,

How truly sublime the notion that it is the inhuman—that which most commonly marks humanity's inhumanity as a lack of compassion—that may be the very condition of possibility of feeling the suffering of the other, of literally being in touch with the other, of feeling the exchange of e-motion in the binding obligations of entanglements. (Barad 2012: 219)

The main point about mattering is an obligation to display the dynamics of entanglement. The fake breasts would remind the audience that the otherness is not “real” and not “ethically correct” as well. Within such a process of entanglement, the film summons the power of materiality. According to the movement of the fabric of Ah Gum's dress, the scene enables the audience to feel the morning breeze which is gently touching the skin of Ah Gum's body. With the power of materiality, the fake breasts, in general throughout the whole film, do not only enhance the haptic visuality of the protagonist's skin texture, but also enable the audience to be in touch emotionally with the “other”. As a result, the audience may empathize with the “other”.

Ng's matterphorics exemplifies a feminist approach, which has not received enough critique. In this paper, I have acknowledged Ng's contribution for allowing the local audience of Hong Kong to reread woman representation and its otherness. With the power of materiality, the film does not only engage the audience ethically, but it also empowers the local audience emotionally. The power of materiality is revealed in the aura of Ng's screen persona which is associated with a personality of strength, passion of life, and

flexibility in handling crises at all times in the face of challenges and changes.

Ng reinvests the materiality of the stereotypical female roles given to her. She blends the materiality of corporal bodies of both genders for reinterpretation of the powerful. She has a bottom-up approach to offer nuance to the stereotypical cinematic representation of the powerful and she speaks for the powerless. Blending attributes of grass-root and middle-class local people, she always turns around the female protagonists' statuses as the other. As a result, she does not only offer a feminist rereading of the other, but also a notion of Hong Kong Chineseness that is cherished by Hong Kong people.

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## Contributors' Biographies

**Lizelle Bisschoff** is a researcher in African film and the founder of the Africa in Motion (AiM) Film Festival, an annual African film festival taking place in Scotland, founded in 2006. Lizelle holds a PhD in African cinema from the University of Stirling in Scotland, in which she researched the role of women in African film. She has published widely on sub-Saharan African cinema, women's cinema, film festivals and film curation. She is currently a senior lecturer in Film and Television Studies at the University of Glasgow, where she teaches African, anti-racist and anti-colonial film, with a focus on EDI (Equalities, Diversity and Inclusivity).

**Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco** is a professor in the Department of Cinema and Video and Coordinator of the Postgraduate Programme in Cinema and Audio-visual at the Fluminense Federal University (Brazil). She has been researching the history of women in Latin American cinema for 15 years and has published several books, chapters and articles on the subject. Her most recent works on this subject are "The Women's Film Project: an international collective in the career of Helena Solberg", "Margot Benacerraf: (not) a pioneer of Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano" and "Pioneering feminist cinema in Latin America between the 1960s and 1980s".

**Kim-mui E. Elaine Chan** received her PhD degree in film studies from University of Kent, United Kingdom. She currently teaches film theory, film aesthetics, film history and digital media culture for MFA and MA degree programmes at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her monograph entitled *Hong Kong Dark Cinema: Film Noir, Reconceptions, and Reflexivity* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019. The Chinese-language edition of this monograph received in 2019 the 15<sup>th</sup> Hong Kong Biennial Awards for Chinese Literature, Recommended Prize in the Category of Literary Criticism. Her area of interest is feminism, postmodernism, film studies, cultural studies and Chinese opera studies.

**Nusrat Chowdhury** (she/her) is a doctoral candidate in the Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication program at the University of Texas at Dallas. She works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Bangladesh University of Professionals, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She received her master's in applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching, and Bachelor's in English Language and Literature. Her research interests lie in feminist film and media studies, postcolonial and global South studies, disability studies, and critical menstruation studies. Her work is geared toward social justice issues and her doctoral dissertation is about menstrual justice for subalterns in Bangladesh.

**Maria Christoforidi** is an Afro-Greek artist, writer and researcher. Motivated by a persistent interest in metaphor and embodied fiction and how images produce realities, Maria uses research and collaboration in different formats – lectures, workshops, exhibitions, publications – to question the neutrality of various canons and loosen knots of othering. She was the co-curator of the Decalcomania curatorial experiment in 2010, founder of the T-Rex community's cinema project, director and producer of her local Penryn Arts Festival 2013. Since 2011 Maria lectures art history, visual culture and art practice in Plymouth University and Falmouth University, UK. Her video poem about Afro-Greek experiences, *ΜΑΛΘΑ: The Thrice Burnt Archives of Unreliable Prophecies*, was presented in the Almanac of Transmediale 2021–22. Maria lives and works in Cornwall and Athens.

**Ainamar Clariana-Rodagut** is a postdoctoral research fellow and part of the ERC project Social Networks of the Past. Mapping Hispanic and Lusophone Modernity, 1898–1959, at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC). Ainamar is part of the GlobalS research group (Global Literary Studies Research Lab), where she leads the Global Cinema research track. She is currently writing her second thesis project focusing on film clubs and women during the first half of the twentieth century in Iberoamerica. She has published and presented her research internationally.



**Rosa Inês de Novais Cordeiro** is a full professor in the Department of Information Science at Fluminense Federal University (Brazil). At the University she is involved in research, teaching and supervision of doctoral and master's programmes in Information Science, and undergraduate programmes in Archaeology and Library Science and Documentation. Her research investigates the organisation, analysis and indexing of images, films and audio-visuals in various social and cultural settings, particularly in personal film collections.

**Maria Corrigan** is Assistant Professor of Media Studies and Comedy at Emerson College. Her current book project, *Monuments Askew: An Elliptical History of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor*, provides a cultural history of the Soviet collective FEKS. Her work has been published in *Uncanny Histories in Film and Media* (2022), as well as in the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* and *Television and New Media*.

**Sofia Dati** is a Brussels-based curator working at the intersection of visual arts and moving images. She programs visual and audio-visual arts at Beursschouwburg since 2021, and was previously part of the curatorial team in WIELS (2019–2021). She is also involved in collective curatorial processes with Black Archive, Surplus Cinema and Kinostories. Her practice is rooted in writing and translation. She worked with the Christopher Okigbo Foundation; and is co-editor of Alexis Blake's monograph *Allegory of the Painted Woman* (Archive Books, forthcoming). Moreover, she has published articles in magazines such as Po&sie, Arshake and Conceptual Fine Arts.

**Chrystel Elias** is a Colourist based in Beirut. She started off her career as a Post Producer after graduating from film school, which enabled her to have a technical understanding of filmmaking workflow prior to her colouring experience. Her journey with archives debuted with capturing and restoring home videos collections with artists in Beirut, and later developed to become strictly colour correction both for restoration purposes as well as creating new materials while using different

archives as art installations and other showings. Her work includes collaborations with filmmakers like Akram Zaatari, Mai Masri, Rania Stephan, and the Jocelyn Saab association.

**Mounzer El Hachem** is a sound engineer specializing in sound restoration and sound design. He worked for five years at the Amar Foundation in Lebanon, digitizing and restoring Kamal Kassar's collection of Arabic music records, the oldest elements of which date back to the end of the 19th century. In particular, he has restored all the material presented in the Orient Sonore exhibition at the Mucem in 2020. He trained with specialists from the INA and the Cinémathèque Suisse as part of the Jocelyne Saab association's workshops on sound restoration for film.

**Rabab El Mouadden** is a Moroccan-Greek person currently living in Rotterdam with research interests in diasporic exploration through audio-visual media. She is a member of the working group of the United African Women Organization Greece and has been a participant in the inaugural Community Course on Intersectionality at the Feminist Autonomous Centre in Athens. She runs *rai.rebetiko*, an Instagram account, as an online space for comparative analysis and mapping two genres of music (North-African *rai* and Greek *rebetiko*) to explore the intersections of image and sound in pop culture. Her recent work includes the paper "Can a Film be Like a Nest?: Revisiting History, Constructing Utopias and Heterotopias of a Borderless Future in the Hybrid Film *Amygdaliá*" (2019) which argues for the necessity of spaces of belonging for displaced women within the context of contemporary Greece.

**Ana Grgić** is Associate Professor at Babeş-Bolyai University and Associate Editor of *Studies in World Cinema*. Her research on Balkan cinemas, archives, and film history has appeared in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, *Apparatus* and *KinoKultura*. She is author of *Early Cinema, Modernity and Visual Culture: The Imaginary of the Balkans* (AUP, 2022) and co-editor of *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* (EUP, 2020).

**Kate Ince** is Professor of French and Visual Studies at the University of Birmingham, where she has taught French, European and world cinema and French civilization since 1990. She has written books on the performance artist Orlan, the post-Surrealist director Georges Franju, and the contemporary director Mia Hansen-Løve (*The Cinema of Mia Hansen-Løve, candour and vulnerability*, Edinburgh Univ. Press 2021), as well as numerous articles on Francophone and female filmmakers. Her work on Francophone and Anglophone women's cinema is best represented by *The Body and the Screen: Female Subjectivities in contemporary women's cinema*, Bloomsbury plc, 2017.

**Invisible Women** is an archive activist film collective which champions the work of women and filmmakers with marginalised identities from the history of cinema through screenings, events and editorial. Since our first event in 2017, we have screened film programmes sourced from collections around the world at cinemas, festivals and galleries across the UK and Europe. We have presented events and screenings with partners including Edinburgh Art Festival, Flatpack Birmingham, Cinema Rediscovered, London Short Film Festival, Glasgow Film Festival, HOME Manchester, EYE Filmmuseum Amsterdam, Balkan Can Kino Athens, Sheffield DocFest, Edinburgh International Film Festival and BFI Southbank. In 2021, we were invited to be part of Berlinale Talents. The current members of the collective are Camilla Baier, Lauren Clarke and Rachel Pronger.

**Nadim Kamel** is a videographer and an editor. He followed the trainings organised by the Jocelyne Saab association and started working as a digital film restorer. He is currently working on his first feature documentary in Lebanon.

**Yoojin Kim** is a doctoral candidate at Kingston University London, in addition to being a film critic and curator. Her research interests relate to modern Korean history, society, and contemporary cinema in the form of memory and identity arising from historical trauma. She is conducting research into approaches for discussing the potential of contemporary Korean cinema in relation to an expansion of digital curatorial practices in museum

exhibitions for in-depth historical reconstruction. This convergence of cinema and curation would serve as a substitute for the undocumented past in terms of recovery and redemption.

**Laura McMahon** is an Associate Professor in Film and Screen Studies at the University of Cambridge. She is the author of *Cinema and Contact* (Legenda, 2012) and *Animal Worlds: Film, Philosophy and Time* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). She is currently working on a project on feminist historiography and moving image practice, examining engagements with memory, temporality and the archival in recent feminist film and video work.

**Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi** is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. She holds a Ph.D. in Film and Media Studies and a Graduate Certificate in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from the University of Kansas.

**Christina Phoebe** is an artist, filmmaker and researcher. Intergenerational gatherings, cinematic nests and watercolour notetaking are some of the forms she moves through in her work. Central to her practice is the formation of collective spaces for sharing (experiences, skills, knowledge) in workshops, public spaces and homemade residencies. Her work has been shown, among others, at the 15th Venice Biennale of Architecture; YNKB (Copenhagen), Flux Factory (New York), The Greek Film Archive (Athens). Her writing has been published by *kyklàda.press*, *Photogénie*, *feministiq*, *visAvis: Voices on Asylum and Migration*, *Media and Art Education*, *The New Nomadic Age* (2018), *The School of Infinite Rehearsals* (2022), and *Prologues* (2022). *Amygdaliá* (2019) is her first feature film. She is a member of the working group of the United African Women Organization and was George Stoney Fellow at the 64th Flaherty Film Seminar *The Necessary Image*. She lives in Athens.

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and practice of women directors and artists (Halart, 2010), and a book about writings on cinema of women filmmakers (MSN, WUJ, 2022). In her book on Polish female film critics of 1920-1930s (Halart, 2016), she analysed original articles and archive materials. In the period 2015–2018 she coordinated a research project on pioneering women in cinema and photography in Polish Galicia 1896–1945. She is a member of the Board of the Museum of Photography in Cracow. She blogs at <https://pionierkizkamera.blogspot.com>

**Rena Raziye-Ekrem** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Translation, Interpreting, and Intercultural Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. She completed her bachelor's degree in Ethnology and Journalism at Minzu University in Beijing, China, in 2008. Following seven years of experience as a TV news producer in Beijing, she pursued her studies at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, where she obtained her MPhil degree in Anthropology in 2017. Her current doctoral research involves comparative analysis, exploring the representation of ethnic minority women in Uyghur, Kazakh, and Kurdish cinemas. Rena's research interests revolve primarily around the intersectionality of women and ethnicity/nationality, examining how these intertwined identities contribute to the construction of representations of ethnic minority women in film.

**Amy Reid** is a feminist filmmaker and scholar whose work examines the intersections between gender, national identities, and labour. Reid's work questions how labour is constructed in the filmic form as seen in their film *Long Haulers*, a 16mm and video experimental feature documentary on female truckers. They have participated in screenings, including Los Angeles Filmforum, I See Video Film Festival, Shanghai, and the Workers United Film Festival in New York. Reid is a PhD Candidate at the University of California, Santa Cruz in Film and Digital Media. Their dissertation research, *Feminist Relationality*, traces feminist documentary practices of the long 1970s in the US and Latin America. As a part of Reid's dissertation, they are also working on a feature length experimental documentary called *Grandmother's Garden* that looks at women, quilting, and US history.

**Mathilde Rouxel** holds a PhD in film history, specialising in Arab cinema. She is currently the artistic director of the Festival du Film Franco-Arabe de Noisy-le-Sec and co-artistic director of the Aflam festival in Marseilles and an independent researcher and curator. In 2019, she co-founded the Jocelyne Saab Association to preserve and promote the work of the French-Lebanese filmmaker throughout the world.

**Isabel Seguí** is Lecturer in Film Studies at St Andrews University. She specialises in women-led film processes and practices. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Feminist Media Histories*, *Jump Cut* or *Latin American Perspectives* and in edited collections such as *Feminist Worldmaking* and *the Moving Image* (Balsom & Peleg, MIT Press, 2022) or the forthcoming *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film* (Beeston & Solomon, University of California Press, 2023).

**Kate Taylor-Jones** is Professor East Asian Cinema at the University of Sheffield. She is Senior Researcher on the Screenworlds Project: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies. Her last monograph *Divine Work: Japanese Colonial Cinema and its Legacy* was published by Bloomsbury Press in 2017 and she is editor-in-chief of *The East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*. She is co-editor of *International Cinema and the Girl* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and *Prostitution and Sex Work in Global Cinema: New Takes on Fallen Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and has published widely in a variety of fields. Her current project – *Ninagawa Mika, Miyake Kyoko and Ando Momoko: Shōjo Dreams and Unruly Idols* will be published by Edinburgh University Press.

**Stefanie Van de Peer** researches feminist film histories from the Global South. She is Reader in Film & Media at Queen Margaret University. She specialises in Arab and African women's cinema, with a special interest in the period of the 1970s and non-fiction cinema. Her publications include books and articles on topics related to women's presences and absences in film history, and her monograph *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary* appeared with Edinburgh University Press in 2017. She is currently preparing her second monograph, on the year 1975 in global feminist film history.

**Elli Vassalou** is a Brussels-based transdisciplinary artist, architect, activist, and researcher. Her work intertwines the concepts of migration, diaspora, intersectional feminism and decolonial pedagogies: empowering minor narratives on the experience of space and collective memory, creating place for their inclusion in the public space and dialogue. She works with filmmaking, movement, sound, discursive and multi-sensorial tools, storytelling, and archival art: designing polyvocal, cross-cultural environments of critical dialogue, knowledge production and co-creation. She has co-founded *Surplus Cinema*, *the Post Collective*, project *metactora*, *Sasé Istwé*, *Parallel Perceptions*, *School of Love* and *Syntrofi*. She has taught at KASK, Ghent and was the artistic coordinator of *Espace Fxmme*, *Globe Aroma*, Brussels. Her work has been published and presented across Europe and has been steadily supported by institutions in Belgium.

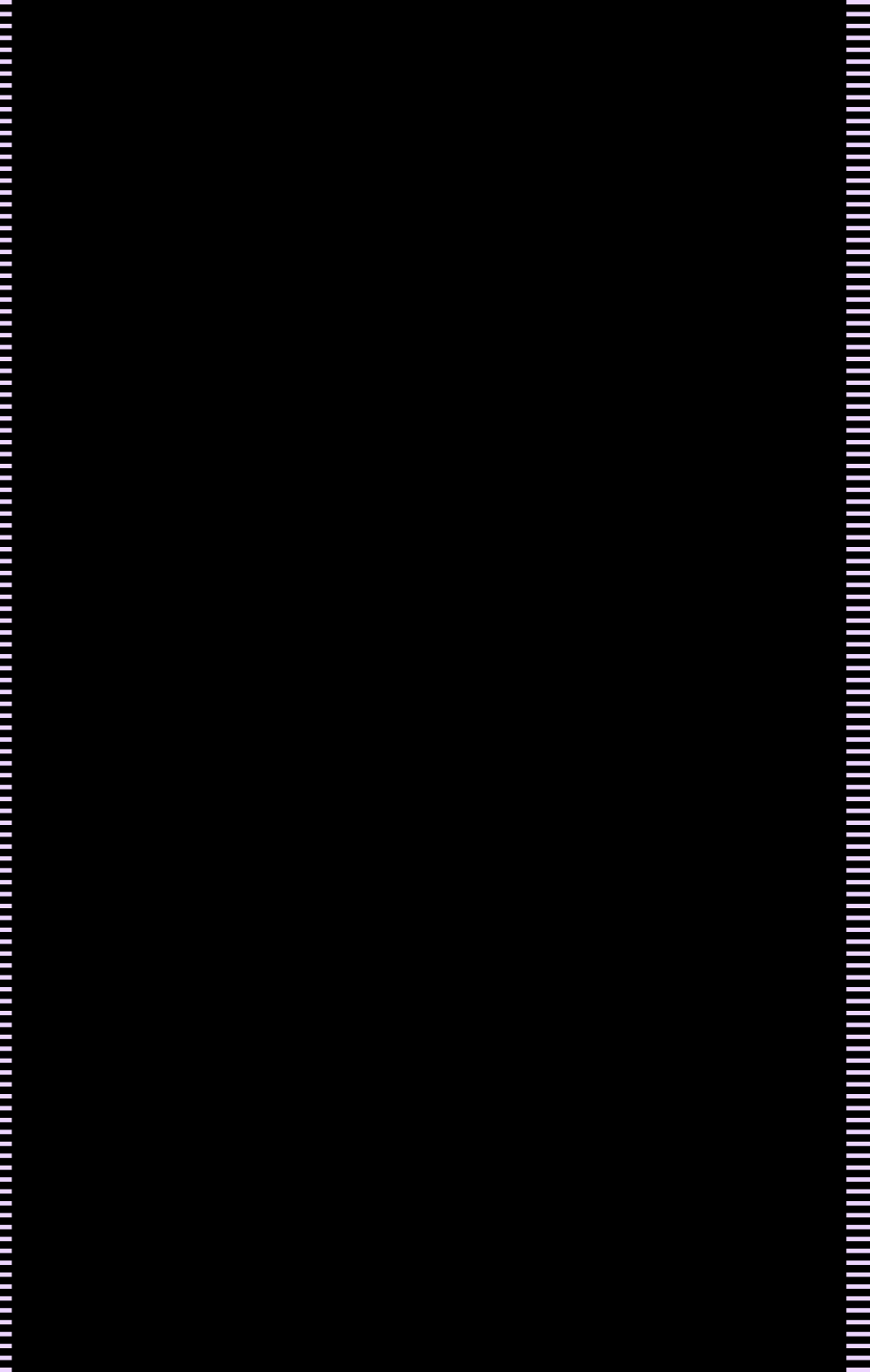
Originally from Delhi, **Soumya Vats** holds an MA in Film and Media Studies from the School of the Arts at Columbia University. Her interests include nationalism in popular Hindi cinema, representation in Hollywood, censorship in film and media, South Asian diaspora films, and OTT streaming platforms. With a background in literature and experience working with nonprofit cultural organizations in Delhi and New York, she is committed to making art more accessible and equitable. She believes that dissent through filmmaking, distribution, and criticism is vital in India's current authoritarian climate. Soumya currently resides in Delhi and works as a Writing Tutor at the Centre for Writing and Communication at Ashoka University.

**Xinyue Wang** is a graduate student from Beijing Film Academy with research interests in feminist film studies, East Asian cinema, industrial studies and production studies. She has a particular focus on women filmmakers and is now expanding her research to explore female practices within the film industry, with a special emphasis on feature filmmaking and genre filmmaking.

**Vivian Wenli Lin** is a media artist and educator with a background in documentary film, video art, and interactive installation. She founded Voices of Women Media, an organisation that utilises visual participatory methods to facilitate communities of migrant women and allies in media literacy and authoring their own narratives. Lin received her Ph.D. in Media Art at the City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media. From 2017–2021 she was based in Tokyo, Japan, where she taught at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and served as an Associate Professor at Tokyo Christian Woman's University. From 2020-2023, Vivian was appointed as the Visiting Assistant Professor in Media for Social Change at Occidental College's Media Arts and Culture department where she developed the course Media Activism Through Participatory Video. From 2023 onwards, Vivian will continue at Occidental College as an Assistant Professor.

After studying cinema, **Manal Zakharia** trained in digital film restoration at INA (France). He now works as a digital restorer for cinema.





Stretching the Archives  
Toward a Global  
Women's Film Heritage

Edited by Lizelle Bisschoff,  
Ana Grgić and Stefanie Van de Peer

Contributions by Mathilde Rouxel, Manal Zakharia, Nadim Kamel, Chrystel Elias, Monzer El Hachem, Ainamar Clariana Rodagut, Maria Corrigan, Isabel Seguí, Invisible Women Collective, Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco, Rosa Inês de Novais Cordeiro, Ana Grgić, Maria Christoforidi, Sofia Dati, Rabab El Mouadden, Christina Phoebe, Elli Vassalou, Kate E. Taylor-Jones, Xinyue Wang, Lizelle Bisschoff, Amy Reid, Yoojin Kim, Soumya Vats, Laura McMahon, Vivian Wenli Lin, Małgorzata Radkiewicz, Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi, Rena Raziye-Ekrem, Nusrat Zahan Chowdhury, Kate Ince, Elaine Kim-mui E. Chan

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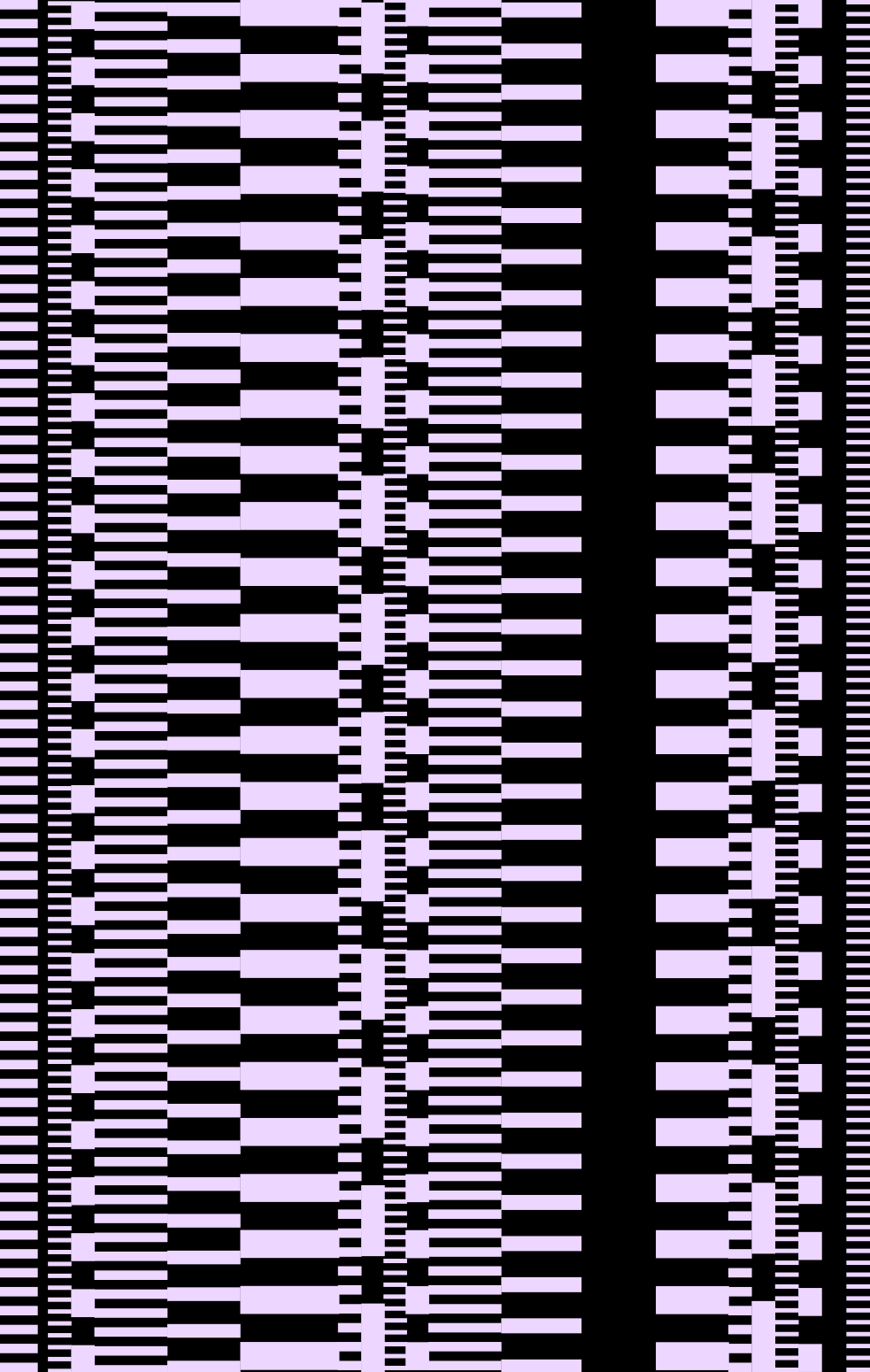
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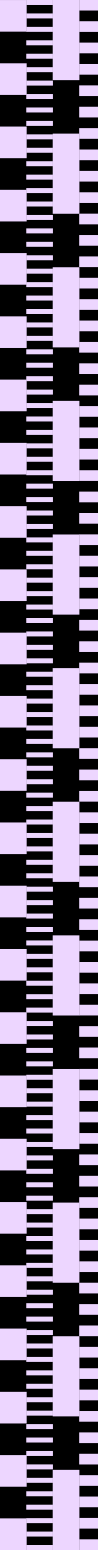
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The book is the result of two years of networking, workshops, and conferences that aimed to bring together scholars, archivists, and filmmakers. The focus was on addressing gaps in our shared histories, with a particular emphasis on feminist cultural memory and film heritage in the Global South. This book combines feminist and anti-colonial research, and through the network, women and individuals identifying as female from around the world came together to share passions, frustrations, knowledge, and experiences related to film archives and restoration projects. These projects have often neglected the work of women from the Global South. Recognizing that the intersection of the anti-colonial movement with second wave feminism and the rise of film studies in the seventies provided a rich framework, the authors collectively decided to focus on that era to find a workable methodology for their diverse approaches to film history.

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