

# New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers

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In this article, I draw on my experience not only as a researcher and teacher of African film, but also as an African film programmer and film festival director over the past ten years, from 2001 to 2011. The article thus shifts between descriptive and prescriptive registers; at turns analytical, it also takes on the tone of a feminist manifesto at times. I draw on the approach of discourse analysis, offering critique of three of the (male-authored) films that were screened as part of the Africa-related film programme at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), to suggest what is potentially lost through a lack of attention to African and African diaspora women's filmmaking, in both the scholarly and programming realms. The article can thus be considered as, on the one hand, a gender-based analysis of three recent, celebrated films by and about Africans, and, on the other hand, as a justification of why I made the decision to make 'African Women Filmmakers' a focus of my programming of the festival Film Africa 2011 (see [www.filmafrica.org.uk](http://www.filmafrica.org.uk)). I do not address the structural and institutional barriers here, as these are yet to be properly studied.

## **A Male-authored, Feminist Cinema?**

It is an understatement to call the body of work generally termed 'African Cinema' profoundly feminist. From the earliest days of non-commercial, expressive, African-authored film production on the continent in the 1960s, to the present moment, there has been a consistent stream of films that focus on strong women characters, powerful and positive matriarchal cultures, and a critique of tyrannical, patriarchal cultures – whether colonial, neo-colonial or postcolonial. The feminist basis to much 'African Cinema' is one of its most remarkable, common features – and a feature that has not been highlighted

and discussed sufficiently in African film scholarship, which is still relatively impoverished when it comes to gender analysis (see, however, Dovey 2009, Ellerson 2000, Garritano forthcoming, Magogodi 2003, McCluskey 2009, Murphy 2000, Ouzgane 2011, Tcheuyap 2005, and Thackway 2003). While the idea of an 'African Cinema' is a myth – it is now generally acknowledged that there are multiple African cinemas (Barlet 2000) – it is, nevertheless, important to recognise how rare it is in the history of cinema that filmmakers from a particular region have *collectively* paid such attention to upholding the value of women and to critiquing patriarchy. When watching African films such as *Borom Sarret* (dir. Sembene, 1963), *Black Girl* (dir. Sembene, 1966), *Emitai* (dir. Sembene, 1971), *Sambizanga* (dir. Maldoror, 1972), *Ceddo* (dir. Sembene, 1976), *Sarraounia* (dir. Hondo, 1986), *A World Apart* (dir. Menges, 1988), *Finzan* (dir. Sissoko, 1989), *Flame* (dir. Sinclair, 1996), *Fools* (dir. Suleman, 1997), *Taafe Fanga* (dir. Drabo, 1997), *Karmen Geï* (dir. Ramaka, 2001), *Sia, le rêve du python* (dir. Kouyaté, 2001), *Kare Kare Zvako* (dir. Dangarembga, 2002), *Moolaadé* (dir. Sembene, 2004), and *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (dir. Dornford-May, 2005) – to name only a few of relevance from the canon – one begins to sense how differently African directors (or those who have lived for long periods in Africa and worked with Africans) have tended to centre women in their films compared to, for example, French directors. Jean-Luc Godard once said that cinema revolves around two atavistic imageries and imaginaries: war and women's beauty. Women's beauty may be featured in certain African films (such as *Karmen Geï* and *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*) but the kind of voyeuristic, pleasure-driven male gaze identified by Laura Mulvey thirty years ago (Mulvey, 1975) and used as a tool of critical analysis by countless feminist film critics to date has simply not been present in most African films – at least until recently, with the advent of Nollywood and its spin-offs across the continent (see Garritano, forthcoming, for the first sustained critique of gender representations in African video film).

The female characters in the classic African films listed above are unconventional, rounded, sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes fighters – in the broadest, most positive sense of the word: they are women prepared to go out to work to support their husbands and families (for example, the wife of the cart driver in *Borom Sarret*, who – when her husband comes home empty-handed – leaves their compound in search of work); they are women willing to stand up for their beliefs and convictions (for example, the women

in *Emitai*, who resist the French army attempting to forcefully recruit their husbands to fight in World War II; and Maria, in *Sambizanga*, who walks for days to find her husband, Domingo, who has gone missing in the Angolan Liberation War); they are women unafraid to engage in political combat or to critique patriarchy and corruption (for example, Queen Sarraounia in *Sarraounia*, a historical figure who bravely fought against the French colonial forces, and who is celebrated in West Africa for the sensitive and compassionate way in which she treated Africans from tribes other than her own; Karmen in *Karmen Geï*, who critiques government and police corruption in contemporary Senegal; Collé in *Moolaadé*, who risks her life by protecting young girls who do not wish to be circumcised); they are women who – if they have no other choice – courageously sacrifice themselves to save their children and communities (the mother in *Kare Kare Zvako*, who – in the face of her husband’s greed at a time of drought, remains resilient and courageous), or to make a statement (Diouana in *Black Girl*, who chooses to commit suicide rather than resign herself to the bondage in which she is held by her white French employers in Antibes); they are women who claim ownership of their own sexuality and power (the women in *Taafe Fanga*, who make use of their power when one day they are magically transformed into the men of the village; U-Carmen in *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, who invests in her sense of self even in the face of abuse by men; Karmen in *Karmen Geï*, who is luminous in her polysexuality). They are women who speak out, stand up, and even take up arms when they see necessary. They are not always easy to characterise as ‘positive’ or as straightforward ‘heroines’; but the creation of perfect women has never, of course, been the aim of feminism. The aim of feminism has been to establish the humanity of women – women’s fundamental equality to men where human rights are concerned (as Gloria Steinem has noted, in this vein, feminism is much more a celebration of women’s differences from one another than their similarities, since the ultimate goal of feminism is to have women recognised as unique individuals rather than as part of a stereotyped group).

As I have begun to suggest, then, the record of African male filmmakers is astonishing when it comes to the representation of women. Furthermore, African male filmmakers have long engaged in stringent critiques and censures of patriarchy by parodying men and ‘masculine’ antics in their films (see Tcheuyap 2010 for some discussion of this trend). In this sense, they

would seem to have worked in concert with African male writers, who have tended to (self-critically) represent men – across generations, social and ethnic and class groups, and races – as problematically mired in destructive cycles of violence, often initiated through the impotence occasioned by colonial violence, but also integrated into contemporary cultures in Africa. The recent edited collection, *Men in African Film & Fiction* (Ouzgane, 2011), reveals the startling prevalence with which African male writers have taken it upon themselves to challenge the dominance, arrogance, and violence of their own gender group. Both tendencies on the part of African male filmmakers and writers – to celebrate women and to critique men – can be considered part of a broader, progressive postcolonial trend of self-critique by African artists, a trend that I have analysed in depth elsewhere (see Dovey 2009).

Given the overwhelming feminist approach by many African male filmmakers, how does one begin to offer valid or useful critique of the relative absence, historically, of female-authored perspectives in the African film *oeuvre* without becoming obstructed by identity politics? Such a critique would probably best be grounded in a thick description, arising out of several deep ethnographic studies, of the institutional and structural constraints to women entering and remaining within the film industry, within Africa and internationally. What it is possible to emphasise, even in the dearth of such studies, is that Africa is no exception when it comes to the relative lack of a female presence in the most glamorous and important jobs in the industry. There are many women involved in film administration, in the running of film festivals, and working as actresses, but there are far fewer working as film producers and directors. Distributors such as Women Make Movies (<http://www.wmm.com/>) and film festivals such as Birds Eye View (<http://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk/>) exist in some of the most populous and cosmopolitan global centres – New York and London respectively – precisely to rectify the significant gender imbalances that one finds across all aspects of the film industry, globally; according to the Birds Eye View festival organisers, women make up less than 10% of film directors and less than 15% of screenwriters internationally (<http://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk/198/about-us/about-us.html>). Specific, ethnographic studies of various African film and media organisations and institutions are urgently needed to begin to understand why it is that, in the African context, African women have not enjoyed a sustained presence.

In the absence of more thoroughgoing studies, what can be said in general terms is that filmmaking in Africa in the postcolonial period has been dominated by men, with very few women directors emerging – particularly in the realm of feature-length fiction filmmaking – until recently. Most of the films listed above – which could be characterised as feminist – were made by male, not female, directors. Many of the great women directors who emerged on the continent in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – such as Sarah Maldoror, Safi Faye, and Anne Mungai – have made very few films. Those that they have made have not been widely screened, and sometimes do not exist in modern, digital formats. For example, Sarah Maldoror’s film *Sambizanga* (1972), which was the first feature-length fiction film to be made in Africa by a woman, exists on one, sole, 35mm copy with French subtitles. When we screened this print at the festival Film Africa 2011 in London, we needed to simultaneously project English subtitles on to the print, which is also not in a very good condition. One wonders, under such circumstances, why a film such as *Sambizanga* has not been deemed worthy of restoration by, for instance, Martin Scorsese’s World Cinema Foundation (which recently restored Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambety’s classic film, *Touki Bouki* [1973]) or the Cineteca di Bologna in Italy (which, in the past few years, took on the task of restoring the first anti-apartheid film, Lionel Rogosin’s *Come Back Africa* [1959]). A film such as *Sambizanga* should, quite simply, be available. Made at the height of the Angolan liberation war, by a woman who had worked on films such as *The Battle of Algiers* (dir. Pontecorvo, 1966) and been involved in liberation movements across the continent, the film is a treasure of human history not only because of its artistic and creative merits but also because of the significant events that had to be confronted in, and were incorporated into, its production. Analysis of why it has been so difficult for leading female filmmakers such as Sarah Maldoror and Safi Faye to make as many films as their male counterparts requires critical attention if we are to write a comprehensive feminist critique of the history of filmmaking in Africa.

At the same time, studies are needed to explain the more encouraging, positive recent developments when it comes to gender equality in the African screen media industries – such as the interesting fact that women are at the forefront of the contemporary rebirth of filmmaking in Kenya, where young female directors such as Hawa Essuman, Wanuri Kahiu, Judy Kibinge, Ekwa Msangi-Omari, and Zipporah Nyaruri have been the pioneers of this

movement. In general, a shift appears to have occurred in the past decade that has seen many new, dynamic African and African diaspora women filmmakers appear on the screen media scene, such as (and including those above): Yaba Badoe (Ghana/UK); Jihan El-Tahri (Egypt); Osvalde Lewat (Cameroon/France); Branwen Okpaku (Nigeria/Germany); Zina Saro-Wiwa (Nigeria/UK); Akosua Adoma Owusu (US/Ghana); Caroline and Agnes Kamy (Uganda); Rungano Nyoni (Zambia/UK); Ariane Astrid Atodji (Cameroon); Minky Schlesinger (South Africa); Khetiwe Ngcobo (South Africa); Sara Blecher (South Africa); Fanta Regina Nacro (Burkina Faso); Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe); Dyana Gaye (Senegal); Omelga Mthiyane (South Africa); Peace Anyiam-Fiberesima (Nigeria). The fact that a Facebook group called 'I'm African. I'm a Woman. I Make Films' has recently been started also seems to suggest that African women are now taking control over their own representation (in both senses of the word). It is the work of many of these African women directors that I have programmed for Film Africa 2011, in acknowledgement of this exciting flourishing of female directors on the continent and in the diaspora, and also to combat some of the ongoing problems inherent in certain male-authored visions of (African) women, which I discuss in the next section of this article.

What factors have led to this rise in African women making movies? Why have major international film festivals –such as Cannes 2008 – finally started paying attention to these directors? ( A number of African women were invited to participate in a special focus on women directors there by the French organisation Cinémas du Sud).

### **What Women (Don't) Want: Representations of Women in the Toronto International Film Festival's African/Black Programme**

It is with the assumption that it is easier to analyse problematic rather than positive gender representations that this next, analytical section of this article proceeds. This is because, as I have pointed out above, it is not homages to African women that feminists seek as much as a natural acceptance of women's humanity, in all its facets. It is far easier to point out when this humanity is not being respected than when it is being summoned, for in the latter case it becomes unremarkable.

Most scholars of African screen media agree that the representations of women in many African video films, and particularly those made in the Ghanaian and southern Nigerian video film industries, are highly problematic

(CODESRIA conference at FESPACO 2011). Carmela Garritano (forthcoming) has done extensive research on the representation of women in Ghanaian film which, I hope, will set the scene for further, probing research into the representation of women in popular, mass screen media across Africa. While such research is urgent, my own concern here is not with such popular African expression but rather with the insidious representations of women that creep into films that would seem to self-consciously fashion themselves as artistic, avant-garde, theoretically informed, intellectual, and even feminist, and which circulate in that largely “closed-loop”, elite environment of prominent international film festivals (see Ogbechie 2010).<sup>1</sup>

I do not have the space here to adequately theorise the kind of spectator produced at such film festivals, or the way that a specific kind of cinematic ‘taste’ is often peddled and reinforced at such events (see Bourdieu 1984). The construction and place of audiences within filmic worlds and contexts is central to my current research and will be the focus of my next book, which aims to analyse (international and African) film festivals and their relationships to African films, filmmakers, and audiences. But I do want to acknowledge that there is a kind of tacit contract established between filmmakers and audiences at renowned film festivals (such as the Toronto International Film Festival, Cannes, and Rotterdam) that recognises similarity in class background and educational level. Most of the filmmakers and audiences are well versed in cinema and can speak in sophisticated, analytical ways about it. The filmmakers who attend such festivals to show their work would thus seem to invite the kind of critique that I am going to offer, as would the programmers.

The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), often cited as the most important film festival both in industry, artistic, and audience terms, currently employs nineteen film programmers to select the roughly three hundred films that make up its annual programme. Of these three hundred or so films, in 2011, about twenty films had some relationship to Africa (through having an African director, African setting, or African characters). For films with Africa-related content to occupy approximately seven percent of the programme is a relatively positive statistic where a major international film festival is concerned, given the general lack of interest in African cinema by the global film industry. TIFF is rather unusual in this respect, largely due to the fact that its co-director and the person responsible for TIFF’s programming vision is Cameron Bailey, who has a background in and passion for African and black

cinema. Although Africa is no longer one of Bailey's programming regions (he now focuses on the US, UK, Europe, and Asia), seven of the forty films he programmed for TIFF 2011 had some relationship to African and black culture. TIFF also employs a specialised African and Middle Eastern film programmer, Rasha Salti; at TIFF 2011, ten of Salti's fourteen selected films had an African focus.

While the attention to African and black cinema at TIFF is to be highly lauded, and the 2011 programme of Africa- and black-related films was on the whole impressive and progressive, a gender analysis of three of the male-authored films screened can help to give a sense of what may be lost on the front of gender equality in representational terms by privileging male-authored works about Africa, Africans, and black identity, and what may be gained through more gender balance in screenwriting and directorial perspectives in the industry when it comes to African and black identity. I do not have the space to engage in a comprehensive, close analysis of these films here; my interest is more in giving a sense of the collective impression the viewer gains of contemporary gender relationships, and representations, through them.

There are two important points to be made before I begin my analysis. First, none of the films which I am going to critique was made by a sub-Saharan African male director, and – given my overview of the feminist perspective of many sub-Saharan African male filmmakers above – this would seem significant. Related to this point is the fact that Rasha Salti is Lebanese and is much more versed in Middle Eastern cinema than African cinema. The second point relates to who, beyond TIFF, is likely to have access to and watch the films I discuss below. It is important to note that each international film festival has a particular identity, and that TIFF prides itself on being an *audience* festival (Bailey 2011) – open to the public (as long as people can afford the high price of the tickets, and are prepared to wait in very long queues for them). Most significantly, sales agents and distributors closely monitor audience reactions during screenings at TIFF because the festival is considered a litmus test for which films are likely to play well to a global audience and therefore which films to pick up for mainstream distribution.

*Dark Girls* (dir. Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry, USA, 2011), *Death for Sale* (dir. Faouzi Bensaidi, Morocco, 2011), and *The Invader* (dir. Nicolas Provost, Belgium, 2011) are all well-made, entertaining films with – on the



whole – significant aesthetic and ethical value. *Dark Girls*, made by veteran director Bill Duke in collaboration with first-time director D. Channsin Berry, is a documentary that deals with the phenomenon of what the filmmakers call ‘colorism’ – prejudice *within* a generally demarcated ‘racial’ group against those with darker skin tone.<sup>2</sup> *Death for Sale* is a moody, Moroccan film noir, set in the impoverished seaside town of Tetouan, that focuses on three young male friends – Malik, Allal, and Soufiane – who are attempting to escape their poverty; the film is the third feature by rising Moroccan director Faouzi Bensaidi.<sup>3</sup> *The Invader* marks a stunning debut feature film by the young Belgian director Nicolas Provost; it stars the up-and-coming Burkinabé actor Issaka Sawadogo as Amadou, an African migrant to Belgium, and his relationship to a wealthy white woman, Agnès.<sup>4</sup> And yet, all three of these films – as important as they are – embody, to some extent, problems that one can associate with a long history of the stereotyping of women in cinema, as identified and analysed by Mulvey in 1975.

The website for the film *Dark Girls* calls it ‘*the* story of color, gender, and race’ (my emphasis; <http://officialdarkgirlsmovie.com/>); the indefinite pronoun ‘a’ would have been a more appropriate marker, acknowledging what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi has called the ‘danger of a single story’ ([http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)). By emphasising their own subjective approach to the topic, the male filmmakers might have cleared themselves of the possible critique that one could level against this film, which is that it partly participates in the very thing that it attempts to critique: prejudice against people based on their appearance (and, in this case, specifically skin hue). For, in its valuable critique of the shocking bias against women of darker skin tone – not only by people outside of their ‘racial’ group, but also from within it – the filmmakers unwittingly end up emphasising the (stereotyped) connection between women and physical appearance. In their Third Cinema-like attempt to encourage women of darker skin tone to (re)claim their beauty – the film ends with the militant injunction ‘Dark girls rise!’ – the filmmakers, in some moments, would seem to suggest that the most significant problem that a woman can encounter in her lifetime is to be deemed unattractive by men.

The film lays bare the problematic of colourism and also the great pressures on women of all skin tones to live up to a (generally media-produced) notion of beauty. In terms of the problematic of colourism, the film focuses in

particular on the extent to which African American men (seemingly) reject choosing African American women as their long-term partners, which has led to the (perhaps) concerning statistic that 41.9% of African American women in the US have never been married as opposed to 20% of white women in the US. (There may, of course, be other factors at play that enable one to view this as a statistic not of victimhood but of agency).<sup>5</sup> In terms of the pressures on all women to conform to a particular aesthetic ideal, the film cites a Dove survey that points out that 75% of women experience self-loathing related to their appearance at some point in their lives. While these statistics can ignite important discussions, the assumption that arises from the conflation of these statistics within the film, it must be acknowledged, is somewhat problematic: the assumption is that women are victims (darker-skinned women are not *in charge* of their relationship destiny, but are *rejected* by men; women are victims of a false consciousness imbued by media stereotypes surrounding female beauty).

This representation of women as passive rather than active in their fate is reinforced through several revealing comments by men and women in interviews throughout the film. 'The darker the fruit, the sweeter the juice' is a refrain that arises in the film via the voices of both men *and* women. While, on the one hand, the inclusion of and emphasis on this refrain would seem to be a well-meaning attempt by the filmmakers to encourage darker-skinned women to feel more positive about themselves, it can – on the other hand – be read in a more sinister light, in its obvious association between women and food to be consumed. In one of the interviews in the film, a young African American man takes this metaphor even further, arguing that darker-skinned women are 'more organic' than lighter-skinned women and, since he personally prefers darker-skinned women, he must therefore be 'vegetarian'. While this statement appears rather harmless – and, in fact, made the audience at TIFF 2011 laugh – it does make the viewer ponder, afterwards, what the more general significance of this comment is within the entire film. The placement of the comment reveals no scepticism on the part of the filmmakers; rather, it forms part of one strand of the film – a politicised strand that urges darker-skinned women to feel better about themselves. Darker-skinned women watching the film are thus asked to appreciate this young man's comment as an assurance that there are *some* men out there – *even* African American men! – who in fact prefer women like themselves.

However, at the same time, all female viewers of the film are asked to accept hearing themselves spoken about as food to be consumed. Perhaps I am more sensitive than I should be on this point, but such metaphors conjure in me memories of other films made by African directors that critique the use of these very metaphors, particularly in South Africa – the country that I come from, and which has one of the highest rates of abuse of women by men. In South African director Lovinsa Kavuma's film *Rape for who I Am* (2005), which deals with 'corrective rape' of lesbians in the country, a father justifies raping his daughter with the following saying: 'If I grow a peach tree, I should be allowed to eat the peaches off it.' And in leading South African filmmakers Ramadan Suleman and Bhekizwe Peterson's film *Fools* (1997), the male discursive practice of linking women to food to be consumed is suggested as one of the justifications used by men to rape women, and is severely critiqued.

The films *Death for Sale* and *The Invader*, as fiction rather than documentary films, are problematic in their treatment of gender in a slightly different way. Whereas *Dark Girls*, in its (commendable) attempt to critique colour prejudice, ends up contradictorily emphasising the importance of women judging themselves based on their physical attractiveness, *Death for Sale* and *The Invader* rehearse stereotypes on the level of characterisation and narrative. In both cases, the blow to the directors' otherwise profoundly complex representations of gender arises in the final sequence of the film, as a kind of atavistic return to the male suspicion that women are both the access to everything valuable in the world (and access to Life itself), and inaccessible in that they are not to be trusted. *Death for Sale* is, until its final moment, a very moving – even heart-wrenching – tale of how young people living in small-town Morocco, with few financial resources and no employment opportunities, are trying to make lives for themselves. The romantic relationship between Malik and Dounia, a prostitute with whom he falls in love, is given the central and overarching place in the film; Malik and Dounia's innocent love for one another appears to be the one reprieve in an otherwise sad and compromised world governed by police corruption and the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. This relationship is also the catalyst for much of the conflict in the film, however.

The film's opening scene involves one long continuous shot of the three young male friends and partners in crime – Malik, Allal and Soufiane – wandering down a street, arms affectionately thrown around each other, talking and laughing. In one of the following sequences, Malik notices Dounia

standing at a look-out point and is struck by her beauty. They fall in love, and start a relationship. Much of the film's narrative from here on revolves around Malik and his male friends' scheming as to how they can make some money to escape their situation; and Allal and Soufiane's jealousy that Dounia is depriving them of more time with Malik. Allal frequently warns Malik that Dounia, being a 'whore', will betray him. One night Malik returns to the room he shares with Dounia and finds Allal there; Dounia is in the bathroom, crying. Allal tells Malik that Dounia agreed to sleep with him for money and leaves. When Dounia emerges from the bathroom, however, she tells Malik that Allal raped her. As a spectator made to see Malik and Dounia's love as the redemption for the desperation surrounding them, and to desire their escape from this context, one willingly believes Dounia. At the end of film, Malik and his male friends embark on the robbery of a jewellery store that will give them their freedom; both Allal and Soufiane are shot dead. Malik escapes the police with the jewellery and manages to reach the bus station where he has planned to meet Dounia and from where the two will flee to happier pastures. It is with delight that the spectator witnesses Malik's escape and anticipates the film's happy ending, with love winning out over police brutality and social repression. But then the blow comes. When Malik and Dounia meet at the station, Dounia suggests that it is dangerous to carry the jewellery in a bag; she says that she should hide it on her body. Malik agrees and Dounia races to the women's bathroom. When Malik finally realises that something is wrong, it is too late. He enters the women's bathroom and sees the jewellery bag lying on the ground, empty. Dounia has betrayed him. The final shot of the film shows Malik return to the look-out point where he first spotted Dounia. The camera follows Malik but then continues tilting and tilting until it shows Malik upside down, his world turned topsy turvy – not by what one expected – the poverty of his town, the police corruption and violence, the social injustice, but by a woman – and, furthermore, a prostitute. This final shot of the film is directly opposed to its opening, in which one is reminded of Malik's closeness to these two, male friends. The implicit suggestion is that his male friends would not have betrayed him; he made the wrong choice by falling in love with a 'whore'. Most worryingly, one is left – after Dounia's betrayal of Malik – wondering whether she in fact told him the truth when she said that Allal raped her. We are thus confronted with a rehearsal of the oldest stereotype of women in the book: the 'whore' who cannot be believed or trusted.

As is well known, the other side of the coin of this stereotype is the woman as perfect, intact, virgin territory; the woman as Myth and Motherland; the woman as openness, innocence, and access (see Stratton 1994). This is the stereotype of the woman that Nicolas Provost takes up, plays with, and complicates in *The Invader* – until the final moment in the film, in which he compromises the complexity of his gender representations. The film's opening sequence is bound to become legendary; the first shot is an overhead close-up of a very white, naked woman's body, focusing on her vagina. The shot tilts down then pulls out to show the woman, who we then learn is lying on a nudist beach, rise and walk confidently towards the water. She gazes intently at something. The director cuts to show us what she is gazing at. It is two black men in the waves, one flailing, the other heaving, trying to help the other. The one who is trying to help is bare-chested, and undeniably beautiful. It is clear that he and his friend are illegal immigrants who have swum to European shores from wherever their boat deposited or abandoned them. The director cuts back to the striking white woman; her expression is one of wonder and desire. One assumes that the gaze of the camera is now conflated with the gaze of the beautiful black man in the waves. The camera looks slightly up at the white woman via a low shot. She is not only desiring but powerful. She is the threshold to Fortress Europe.

The viewer soon realises that the film's opening sequence is a preamble, almost imaginary. We do not see the striking white woman again. However, she becomes replaced, in the main narrative of the film with another arresting, white woman: Agnès, an extremely wealthy woman whose exact profession remains unclear, but who it is subtly suggested is a patron of the arts. Amadou (the black man we see in the opening sequence of the film) meets Agnès accidentally, after he wanders in to an open lecture from the street. At this point in the film we have seen Amadou's cherished, sickly friend disappear and his attendant anger at his boss (who smuggled Amadou and his friend into Belgium) for doing nothing to help his friend when he was ill. Amadou destroys his boss's car, then heads out on to the streets of Brussels. After their meeting, Agnès tries to set Amadou up with a gay male friend of hers who is attracted to him; but Amadou only has eyes for Agnès. Eventually Agnès gives in to Amadou's persistent attentions and they share a night of passion in an apartment that she owns (kept precisely for conducting extra-marital affairs with different men, we later learn). The scene is visually astonishing

in the way that the colour palette of celluloid enhances the difference in Amadou and Agnès' skin and hair tone: she is as white and blonde as he is black and dark-haired. They are both beautiful in a conventional way. However, the scene of their lovemaking has something sterile about it. With Agnès holding herself up against the floor-to-ceiling glass wall of her high-rise apartment, and Amadou and Agnès not looking at each other, there is no tenderness or softness in the experience. It is glassy, transparent and superficial. One feels that the sequence is shot from Agnès' perspective that it is she who is approaching the experience in this way. This is confirmed in a later scene, when Amadou observes her ferrying a different man into the car park of the apartment building. Amadou, in contrast, appears to develop real feelings for Agnès. The smouldering intensity of the way he looks at her does not seem opportunistic; the narrative does not appear to be developing, at this point, into a story of how a black African man and illegal migrant to Europe attempts to use a wealthy, white, European woman to gain access to European resources. It seems to be a narrative about (one-way) love and desire in spite of huge discrepancies in wealth and social class. Amadou most probably loves Agnès and is using all that he has – his physical beauty, and his charm – just as anyone would do to try to win her affection.<sup>1</sup> The moment when Agnès discovers Amadou's real situation is painfully intense and one can almost empathise with Amadou's descent into despair and fury after Agnès rejection of him. These are complex characters and the profound individuality and uniqueness of the story sets it apart from many other contemporary films about African migrants living in, or trying to come to, Europe.

It is only in the final sequence of the film that Amadou and Agnès devolve into stereotypes. In a semi-imaginary scene, Amadou walks naked into Agnès bedroom. He stops and stares at Agnès, who lies sleeping beside her (also sleeping) husband. This scene reminds the viewer of the opening scene of the film, in which the naked white woman on the beach stares at Amadou with desire and power. While one remains sympathetic towards Amadou and his outsider position within the clean, glassy, inaccessible world around him, it's as if the filmmaker has after a compelling film lazily (or excessively) resorted to an ending that is as opaque as it is stereotyped. One finds, in this ending, the conventional 'auteur' tendency not to want to even try to explain what has happened in lieu of elusiveness and intrigue. One also finds, however, the predictability of a certain type of representation of women; we are

confronted with a reversal that repeats the longstanding, tenacious narrative that associates women with land with territory to be conquered, with the 'nation' itself. The (feminised) black Africa that white colonisers wanted to 'penetrate' is converted here into the white woman representing Europe both the barrier to entry and the best means of access. While the film might be attempting to offer a postcolonial critique of this conflation between (black and white) women's bodies and the nation, the fact that Nicolas Provost has emphasised in interviews and Q&As that the film's opening credit sequence image (a beautiful, doubled image of cars moving through a tunnel that resembles the Stargate sequence in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*) represents both Amadou's passage towards Europe and the vagina, does make one question whether the stereotype is not being activated rather than critiqued.

### Conclusion: The Other Half

While one would certainly not want to argue that all men fall into sub-conscious sexist patterns when representing women, or that all women inevitably make films that treat women as human beings (there are plenty of examples to the contrary in both cases), there is an ongoing need to remain alert to the ways in which (heterosexual) male desire for women might filter into male-authored films and compromise otherwise progressive representations of women. What is at issue here is not characterisation in and of itself. There is no inherent problem with a male director making a film about dark-skinned women's sad desire to try to lighten their skin; about a prostitute in a small Moroccan town; about how a black African migrant desires a white European woman. The problems arise in the unwitting contradictions in a film's message (*Dark Girls*); in the repetition of the age-old narrative of female deceit trumping even the deceit of the state (*Death for Sale*); and in the (postcolonial) reversal of the sexist (colonial) myth that women's bodies can stand in for geographical territory that men will ultimately conquer or attempt to conquer (*The Invader*). The fact that all three of the films analysed in this article are extremely complex, and have feminist elements, makes these problems all the more sinister, and all the more in need of separating out and analysing. The so-called 'post-feminist' era in which we are living thrives precisely on such contradictions, feeding women – on the one hand – with messages of liberating themselves from being

shackled to an emphasis on physical appearance and sex appeal, and – on the other hand – with messages that suggest to women that their chief asset will always be their physical appearance and sex appeal. While feminists such as Catherine Lumby have convincingly argued that modern women should feel justified in claiming ownership over their physicality and sexuality, too much relative emphasis on the superficialities of physical appearance will surely encourage anti-intellectualism in the younger female generation.

While sub-Saharan African male directors, as I have argued above, have tended to offer progressive, feminist representations of African women, it appears that male directors from other contexts have not necessarily learnt from their sub-Saharan African counterparts. There is constantly the danger of monolithic male views of (African) women – what Adichie calls ‘a single story’ – presiding. Furthermore, one simply cannot have a heterogeneous view of the African continent and its diaspora if fifty percent of its population does not have a cinematic voice. As I have argued above, it is nearly impossible to articulate the characteristics of a ‘positive’ representation of African women; however, in conclusion, I do want to say that I hope that the collective impact on audiences (however ‘elite’ these audiences may be) of the films by African and African diaspora women that I have selected for Film Africa 2011 is an understanding of how much more varied and diverse a perspective we gain of Africa when the films of its women are included. A third of the films that we showed at Film Africa 2011 were written and/or directed by women, not as an act of charity or affirmative action, but as a real reflection of the great rise of African female filmmaking talent, on and beyond the continent.

Notably, very few of the films made by African and diaspora women that I watched in my programming for Film Africa 2011 focus directly on ‘women’s issues’. Rather, what one appears to find here is something similar to what is happening more generally in the field of African filmmaking, as South African director Teddy Mattera alluded to, when he said at the 2007 New York African Film Festival: ‘We have been the object of the gaze. We don’t want to return the gaze, we want to look elsewhere.’ While some recent films by African and African diaspora women filmmakers that were screened at Film Africa 2011 – such as the experimental, alt-Nollywood films of Zina Saro-Wiwa, *The Deliverance of Comfort* and *Phyllis* (2010), and Yaba Badoe’s *The Witches of Gambaga* (2010) – offer important, urgent feminist critique, others – such as Salem Mekuria’s *Square Stories* (2010), Akosua Adoma Owusu’s *Drexciya*



(2011), Nadia El Fani's *Lenin's Children* (2007), Rungano Nyoni's *Mwansa the Great* (2011), Sara Blecher's *Surfing Soweto* (2011), and Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009) – display a different kind of confidence, the confidence that seems to say 'Don't make assumptions about what or who I am, or what kind of film I want to make.' Many of the films focus on male protagonists (for example, *Square Stories*, *Lenin's Children*, *Mwansa the Great*, and *Surfing Soweto*), something which would seem to suggest that these female directors (whether consciously or not) position themselves as 'nego feminists'. Nigerian feminist scholar and activist Obioma Nnaemeka coined this phrase to refer to 'a feminism of negotiation' and a 'no-ego feminism' in which women do not see men as the *other* but as the necessary *other half* to any conceptualisation of what it means to be human (2004). Similarly, the Senegalese director Joseph Gai Ramaka has posed a provocative question about the nature of ways in which people (and especially filmmakers) look at other people: 'is it to be the Other as what [she] is and whom I am going to dissect or, alternatively, the Other in so far as I feel an affinity with [her] and [she] with me?' (quoted in Barlet 2000: 9). While African male directors have, on the whole, upheld the value of women in their films, contemporary African women directors are giving us a 'new look' in African cinema – one that suggests an affinity between filmmaker and subject and which is rooted in the profound respect for each human individual that is necessary to overcoming the scourges of racism and sexism.

## Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Neal MacInnes for introducing me to Ogbechie's work.
2. Bill Duke has long been involved in the US television and film industries, as an actor and director. He is best known for his direction of some episodes of the television series *Hill Street Blues* and *Miami Vice* in the 1980s. In the 1990s he directed crime dramas such as *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), and comedies such as *Sister Act 2* (1993). Notably, he mentors young African Americans in the film business.
3. Faouzi Bensaïdi is a middle-aged Moroccan filmmaker, actor, and installation artist. His entry into the international film circuit occurred in 2003, when his film *A Thousand Months* screened in the 'Un Certain Regard' section at the Cannes Film Festival. The film does not appear to have had a wide mainstream release or to have attracted much critical attention, and Bensaïdi did not make another feature film until *Death for Sale* premiered at TIFF 2011.
4. Nicolas Provost is a middle-aged Belgian filmmaker and installation artist who spent ten years living in Norway. He trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium, and calls his work 'a reflection on the grammar of cinema and

the relation between visual art and the cinematic experience.' *The Invader*, which he calls 'a social thriller about an anti-heroic illegal immigrant and his struggle for economic and emotional survival in the new world', is his debut feature film (see <http://www.nicolasprovost.com/#/bios>).

5. See the work of feminist legal scholar Angela Onwuachi-Willig for comprehensive engagement with the racial politics surrounding love, romantic relationships, and marriage. In her work more generally, Onwuachi-Willig challenges, from a critical race perspective, 'the accepted notion that whiteness is pure and blackness is impure' (2007: 2454). She highlights the fact that 'Among racial and ethnic minorities, Blacks have the lowest rate of intermarriage with Whites' (2007: 2456) and that 'even in 2005, the historical process of the United States disallows biracial individuals, who may be just as much white as they are black, to claim that they are white, while fully allowing them to assert a black identity' (2007: 2453). In other work (2009) she critiques the 'invisibility' of and implicit discrimination against multiracial couples in US law. Collectively her work provides a clear picture of continuing institutional racism against Blacks in the US context (and just how much of an institution 'whiteness' itself is); she thereby provides telling clues as to why 'colorism' exists and why African American women, in particular, might find themselves excluded from the institution of marriage more than women of other racial identities.

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