

# Strategising to Succeed: Re(packaging) to Re(present)

Jihan El Tahri

How does one become a documentary filmmaker, especially in Africa? I am sure each one of us has her own story, but I know that getting there, at least for my generation, was rarely straightforward! Personally I took many twists and turns before I made a film that I can call mine!

It all started with my father refusing to allow me to accept a scholarship to Oxford University. For him, a single, “good”, Egyptian girl could not travel and live alone in Europe! Our traditions do not allow this. End of story. I could not really argue then, but his words unwittingly designed a whole new path for my life.

My way out of the traditional cocoon was through journalism. I stayed in Egypt, found a job with Reuters News Agency and started earning my own living. Soon enough I was on the road covering major international conflicts as a war correspondent for various international newspapers. I’m sure my father wished he had never stopped me from going to Oxford! Not only was I now travelling non-stop, but my trips were also often to the most dangerous places on the planet.

Luckily I did not go into journalism just to spite my father; I was genuinely fascinated by the politics of my continent and how it impacted on our lives. I needed to understand the state of the world I was living in and make sense of it, so journalism was certainly a good place to start. However, the limits of journalism very quickly hit me hard. As a journalist, you are required to report what you are told. There is no time to dig deeper; no time to question the implications of your daily story on the bigger picture. You often end up with just bits and pieces of the puzzle, but no means to put them together to see what the full picture looks like. Moreover, when you put these pieces of the puzzle together, it is a collection of other people’s thoughts and other people’s perspectives.

It took the first Gulf War in 1990 to shatter my world and plunge me into a deep identity crisis. There I was, a 26-year-old Egyptian, covering the hottest international story for a major magazine, US News & World Report. I should have been proud of my accomplishments, but I was not. I was doing my job properly and reporting what I was told by US generals and spin-doctors as to why the war was crucial to freedom for the entire world. What they said made sense and they had proof to back it: “their” proof and “their” perspective. I simply felt that all this was wrong and I had no means to analyze why it felt so wrong.

Somehow, I needed to tell a different story. I wanted to discover my voice, my perspective and my world as I see it. I needed to tell the story from our side and I needed to understand how we, as a people, as a continent, got to where we are at. Why did we end up with leaders like Saddam, Mobutu or Idi Amin? What happened to the noble cause of Independence and the struggles that were fought to achieve it? Obviously, I had no idea what exactly I was looking for and why I knew for a fact that journalism was not the route. It takes time to define one’s own questions and even more time to discern how to proceed along that path of discovery.

I could have gone back to academia, or I could have opted to just write books, but I felt that in our day and age, images had the most impact and were the most powerful and accessible tools to making my voice heard. Maybe I could even bring about change. I chose to work with documentary film and opted to delve into issues of our political history. Not exactly the most glamorous choice and, indeed, not not an area that is particularly welcoming for an African woman filmmaker!

I keep talking about perspective and voice. What do I actually mean?

Our stories, our images and our history have been mainly documented by the west. Often we see ourselves through western eyes and proceed to integrate that image as our own. Indeed, it is part of what we have become. However, we hail from an oral tradition and many of the stories that define us have not been told or documented. Does that make them less important? On the contrary, we are lucky to have a rich heritage that remains largely untapped and it is our responsibility today, now that we have the know-how, to forge our own image of ourselves and transmit it as we see fit.

Documentary is a vital tool in that process. Africa, in the consciousness of the world, has been reduced to either the beautiful images of animals that we

see on National Geographic or the image of the starving child begging with an empty bowl. How do we break that cycle of misrepresentation? I chose first to understand. To do so, I had to plunge into each story, not just through the text-books, newspaper articles and easily obtainable archive footage (most of which are written and shot by westerners), but to unearth indigenous texts, images and photos that have been largely ignored.

If one is willing to do the leg work and go the extra mile instead of choosing the easy route, each one of us would be surprised by the quantity of original material that remains untapped on the African continent. However, no one said it's easy!

I recall spending 8 months trying to convince Congolese TV to allow me into their archives; their total refusal was astonishing given that I was to pay for the time I spent there. It took these months for me to finally realize that they would not let me in because none of the archives were logged and no one knew how to start going about this task. It was easier for everyone to just send me to get the footage of the events I was researching from Belgian archives.

A deal needed to be struck to allow me access, a deal that would be beneficial for both parties. Accordingly I offered to go through the unmarked tapes on my own, and log each one of them in a manner that they would be able to use and sell in the future. In return, if there was footage that would be useful for my project, I would be allowed to use it and the rights would be ceded at a favorable rate. Those many months of work were extremely fruitful and my film *'The Tragedy of the Great Lakes'* had footage never used before. But more importantly, the story I was telling and the images illustrating it, were all from an African perspective. I told the story as I felt it and from the perspective I chose to tell it. My voice could be heard.

Obviously we cannot rely solely on local material, but the choice of using it where we can, or rather where we choose to, is an integral part of the "voice" of a documentary. Similarly, the choice of language is part of the "voice", be it deciding to use the local language or the exact opposite, using a western language to make a point direct and accessible. Making such choices and weighing them to the advantage of one's own style and flavor of storytelling is a step forward on the long road to having our voices heard. The choice of footage and language are important items of the package but how we craft our films in a coherent way to transmit what it is you need to say is the essence of

our craft. Directing and narrative structure are the backbone of what we do. A brilliant idea combined with wonderful unique local footage does not make a film. Making a film is about story-telling, so all the techniques and devices that make a film look glamorous are merely tools that allow us to proceed. How one chooses to construct a story emanates from a specific cultural background. Africa is a continent of storytellers and most of us grew up on stories told by our elders: this is how we absorbed our own culture.

It might sound ridiculous but personally, before I even start writing my shooting outline, I sit on my own and pretend I'm telling the story of my film to my children. I formulate it as a fable or a bedtime story that they can comprehend. Accordingly, I am obliged to strip my film/story to its bare bones and articulate to myself what my own punch line is. This is my way of getting clarity that allows me to construct my narrative structure with clear markers on my timeline. It is my device to protect my voice – not only about what I want to say but how I want to say it. It is a strategy that has served me well because like everyone I am swamped with Hollywood-style stories and images, so consciously breaking away from that format is my decision. My device not only helps me plot my film, but it also allows me to stand up to the clutter of people surrounding a film who think they know better what you want to say and how you should say it.

When I started as a young, African, female director in Europe the odds were stacked against me. The producer, the commissioning editor, the “experienced” cameraman assigned to me, and even the editor all believed they knew best how I should make my film. It was intimidating and I often felt confused as to who was right – perhaps they were? I did a few of these films along the way, but I do not consider them mine.

It took time for me to find my own personal device (each one of us has their own) that allowed me to say NO to the clamor of voices surrounding me. I remember clearly how I was pushed - or rather plucked up the courage - to do that! I was working on a film about Food Aid, initially titled “The Ration Trail” in 2002. The story was about a massive famine in Southern Africa that was going to kill 14 million people before the end of the year. I was to follow the route of an Aid Package from where it was originated (mainly in the US) to its destination in the affected community in Southern Africa. A simple, straightforward story that aimed to understand the process that accompanies the recurrent famines on our continent.

However, while I was doing my research in Zambia, one of the worst hit countries according to every single news bulletin for months, I stumbled on a farmer who was skeptical about this whole “famine business”. He took me by the hand and showed me his tomato field! I was shocked and could not understand why the entire world was up in arms organizing a worldwide rescue plan and yet this farmer could ignore it all and have a full crop of tomatoes. Obviously I had to dig deeper. What I found contradicted all the news reports and revealed a huge economic story that I had not planned to tackle. But I had no choice.

My producer and the commissioning editor were furious about the change in story. They insisted that the farmer was an exception and that I should just ignore this detail and go ahead with the documentary I was commissioned to make. I found the courage to say no and proposed that I return all the money they had invested and we part company. I think my uncompromising determination obliged them to sit up and listen. After weeks of showing them proof that there was a bigger story hidden behind the stereotype they wanted to perpetuate, they agreed that I change the angle. I renamed the film “The Price of Aid” and delved into the complicated power struggle between the U.S and Europe to acquire markets in Africa, to dump their surplus and maintain the standard of living for their own farmers, at the cost of destroying the agricultural system of entire nations.

From that day on, I would only work with a cameraman that saw what I saw and an editor who shared the desire to put together the story I wanted to tell. I have been working with both of them for almost 10 years now. But finding a producer and a broadcaster that share or even allow one’s vision is not easy!

The real challenge I have faced in the past two decades has been to get a broadcaster to support and commission the story I want to tell, rather than the story they want me to tell. Our stories are often regarded as “not interesting” for a western audience. Commissioning editors seek “universal” stories to maintain their audience ratings and there is little appetite for African stories that do not confirm the already existing stereotypes. Unfortunately, there are very few broadcasters/ theaters that have documentary slots. Those precious few are almost all in Europe and the U.S. This is a reality that we –African documentary filmmakers – have to live with. Hopefully one day our own national broadcasters will commission our films, but that is not the case for the moment.

The economic crisis that has been evolving over the past decade has hit our industry hard. Previously a single channel would commission the documentary you wanted to make and would finance it until it was finished. This is what happened with *'The Tragedy of the Great Lakes'*. Since then, I've had to struggle to build up a sort of co-production consortium that collectively provides enough money, to make every film. This new funding structure has its advantages and disadvantages. The obvious disadvantage is that getting enough money to produce a film could take years and convincing each commissioning editor to come on board is a challenging task. Moreover, each one of them tells you what "needs" to be in your story for "their" audience to appreciate.

I believe though that this new structure of film financing has played to our advantage and gives us more leeway to make our voices heard. Today, no one broadcaster has more than a simple percentage in your film. None of them can actually tell you what to do or how to do it. The fragmentation of funding has actually reduced the input of the commissioning editor to the power of suggestion; suggestions that of course need to be taken on board, and often, cosmetic changes do the job.

But still, in Africa, we remain almost wholly dependent on western funds. There are only a handful of broadcasters who have the money to co-produce feature documentaries that can take several years to make. The necessary development funds, production funds and post-production funds are usually tied to having acquired a broadcaster in the first place, clearly a case of is it the chicken or the egg first? Obviously there are funds that can finance your project, but without a guarantee of a broadcaster, your film can sit in your desk drawer forever, and that is not why we make films.

So how do we break that vicious cycle?

That is where the tricks of the trade come in handy. It took me many years of frustration and rewriting my proposals ten times over to finally understand the difference between a story that a commissioning editor deems "not interesting", and the same content suddenly regarded by the same commissioning editor as "universal", which in other words means interesting for a western audience. The difference is simple: packaging!

For two years I tried to convince broadcasters (whom I had worked with previously) to support or co-produce a documentary I was determined to make about African revolutions and what happened to the dreams of independence

of iconic revolutionaries like Patrice Lumumba, Amilcar Cabral and Agostinho Neto. My documentary proposal was titled '*Requiem for Revolution*'. I needed to explore and investigate how and why the dreams and struggles of those heroes willing to challenge the mammoth edifice of colonialism, finally ended up assassinated and the countries they sought to liberate plunged into a deadly spiral of civil war. The reaction I got from broadcasters was: who cares? This is a story of the 60s and hardly anyone knows these names or places in far off Africa. So my story was "not interesting" and "not universal". I begged to disagree and tried everything to convince them that it was important, to no avail. It suddenly struck me that they could not hear what I was saying. My references, my perspective and what I thought most important did not match theirs. Of course it wouldn't! I knew that I needed a device, a ruse in order to tell the exact same story, the way I want to tell it, but in a way that "they" could hear.

I went back to my drawing board and researched different angles that allow me to tell the same story. It took a while, but eventually I found an "interesting" thread with which to stitch up the elements of my story. I knew that western audiences are fascinated by Cuba. So, my angle became Cuba's role in supporting African revolutions. In less than a month, four major western broadcasters commissioned my documentary under a new title: "Cuba's African Odyssey"! The packaging was different, but the story I set out to tell was identical; the local images I wanted to use were the same and the perspective from which I chose to deal with the story remained unaltered. Indeed, stitched together with the Cuban element that I had not initially planned, it was up to me to make sure that this ruse enriched rather than took away from my story. *Cuba's African Odyssey* was released in 2006 and until today it circulates at international festivals and continues to be rerun on various TV channels all over the world. Had I not packaged it differently, this story and my "voice" regarding this episode of our history, would never have been heard. Undoubtedly, I could have made "Requiem for Revolution" exactly as I had planned it and probably it would have been selected for a couple of African film festivals here and there. However, I feel it is important, at this stage of our history, to get our stories out of the ghetto. Our work needs to be an integral part of global dialogue. To achieve this, we need to compete and be seen on all global forum.

Packaging our stories is a skill we all need to master if we are to access global forums on the same footing as northern documentary filmmakers. That

of course applies to all documentary filmmakers from the South, both male and female. But women filmmakers from the South usually face additional hurdles. Somehow we are boxed into a specific kind of film that we “can” make or can be “trusted” to make and deliver. It is perceived that women should make films about gender issues or social issues. If we look at the kind of films predominantly made by women filmmakers in Africa, it is true that we tend to perpetuate this stereotype. But, we don’t have to.

Undeniably it is more difficult as a woman to make a film in a conflict zone or delve into the political arena and lock horns with the powerful men who dominate the scene. Another trick of the trade is that every disadvantage can be turned into an advantage. Men regard the domain of local and international politics as their exclusive hunting ground. Political leaders simply do not expect women to be astute in matters of politics, and even if a handful of women are starting to emerge within the political arena, this remains the exception rather than the rule. Accordingly, powerful politicians, or men in general, have a tendency to underestimate women filmmakers when they tackle complicated political stories. All the better! It is precisely because of being constantly underestimated that I believe we’re at an advantage when we decide to explore political stories.

I recall an interview I had with Ugandan President Yowerri Museveni for “The Tragedy of the Great Lakes”. The film was about the regional alliances that ousted President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire from power in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda. It was about a short-lived moment of hope for the continent (1996 to 1998) when countries of the region came together to change the obsolete methods of rule and create a new formula for cooperation. President Museveni answered my questions, slumped in his chair without really thinking of my questions and even less about his own answers. He was giving me the official line and leading me to exactly what he wanted me to regurgitate. For half an hour I played along as the naïve, intimidated female, thus identifying what he wanted me to believe and where he was leading me. Not once did President Museveni suspect that I had done my research properly and saw that his answers were simply a smoke screen. Once he was done, I contradicted what he was saying by providing him with proof of the opposite, with quotes from his own speeches! It was quite hilarious to see his body language shift, this time to pay attention to what I was really asking. I think he realized that he should not have underestimated the



interviewer simply because she was a woman. Only then did the real interview begin. By this time, I had the advantage of knowing where he wanted to lead me, whereas he had no idea where I was going with my story.

As a woman I do not feel I have anything to prove and so, being underestimated and sometimes treated with disdain, can be used to my advantage. Obviously these small victories seem petty, but until the political landscape attains real gender equality that is a reality women need to work with.

Ironically, I am often criticized that there are hardly ever any women in my films. It is true that in my past 5 films there has only been one woman interviewed as a direct participant in the story I was telling. I have often wondered if I should add women just as tokens and to bring their voices in my stories. I refuse to do this. There are no women in my films because the political domain that I specialise in has excluded women and reality needs to be reflected as is. However, I sincerely hope that when my children make their films, they will never be asked that question. I hope that enough women will be playing an active role in shaping our collective destiny so that interviewing them will be a real part of the story rather than a tokenistic gesture, simply to put a woman on the screen.

My real concern as an African filmmaker preoccupied with the continent's political history, is to document our history from our perspective and with our own voices. We have to look at our past as it is - the good, the bad and the ugly- in order to design our future in the manner we wish to pass down our own legacy and reality to our children and future generations.

Making a film that I know will take over my life for at least 3 years, means that the topic is something I need to be obsessed with. I must really need an answer for myself, and that line of questioning is what drives my story. How I make the film is about story telling, but the topics I choose have to originate with a thought or a query that I find important to answer and share.

When the attack on the Twin Towers happened on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, I had a multitude of commissioning editors contacting me to direct a plethora of "ideas" they thought I was well placed to make. I rejected every offer, many of them much more lucrative than what I get for the ideas I propose. I did not want to have anything to do with September 11<sup>th</sup>. It was traumatic enough being a Muslim, an Arab and an African in the west during that period. I shunned every proposition, even to speak on a panel about 9/11. However,

I could not help but realize that each and every “good idea” I was offered for a documentary on 9/11 was concerned with who did it, what they did and how these young men were brain-washed and used tools to destroy the west. Not one single 9/11 proposition cared why such a horrific attack was deemed an option for young men in their prime! I needed to know why no less than fifteen of the nineteen attackers of September 11<sup>th</sup> were from Saudi Arabia. All fifteen were young, educated, rich, handsome and with a bright future ahead of them. How and why would they reach a state of thinking that such an attack was an option for their future? I believed that the answer was somewhere in the origins of the unhealthy relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US. My film, “The House of Saud” was born out of this desire to understand that one, simple question. The film was released long after the spate of 9/11 films and was later nominated for an Emmy Award. The key for me was that I needed to tell the story to my people and my children from a space of understanding rather than a space of conflict. I am both an African and an Arab, there is no either or; I am both, and I needed to grapple with all aspects of my identity, no matter how hard that process would become.

I am often asked why I choose to make long and difficult films about complicated political issues. Even friends suggest that I should choose topics that are more visual and sexier for a wider audience. I know it would be easier to sell such films and that I would attract a wider audience. But, I don't really feel that I have an option regarding the topics I choose. However, I know that many of my colleagues are looking after these aspects of our reality already and producing colourful films that enrich our visual heritage. I have chosen to stick to my obsession with the continents' political history. I just hope that 50 years down the line any African child wanting to examine his past will hear my voice and find my work useful.

## Jihan El Tahri: Filmography

Jihan el-Tahri is an Egyptian-born, French writer, director and producer of several award-winning documentary films. Her films include:

*Behind the Rainbow* (2009). Writer/Director of 138 minute documentary about the transformation of the ANC from a liberation movement to a ruling party. For ARTE/ ITVS (PBS)/SABC / SBS/ SVT.

*Requiem for Revolution: Cuba's African Odyssey* (2007). Writer/Director of 2, 59 minute documentaries about the Cold War seen through African eyes. For ARTE/ BBC/ ITVS (PBS)

*The House of Saud* (2004). Writer/Director of 2, 59 minute documentaries about the political history of Saudi Arabia. For BBC/ ARTE/ WGBH (PBS)

*The Price of Aid* (2003). Writer/Director of 60 min. documentary about the international Food Aid system. For BBC/ ARTE

*Regard Croisé sur le Sida (Viewpoints on Aids)* (2002) . Director of two 60 min. documentaries for France Deux

*Histoire d'un suicide : Pierre Bérégovoy* (2001). Writer/Director, a 57 min. documentary for Secret d'Actualite on M6

*54 heures d'angoisse.* Co-author/ Co-director, 52 min. documentary for Secret d'Actualite on M6

*L'Afrique en Morceaux : La tragédie des grands lacs* (2000). Author/ Director, 100 min. documentary for Canal Plus

*Israel and the Arabs* (1998). Associate Producer and Writer of 6, 52 min. documentaries for BBC 2, and Co-author of accompanying book published by Penguin.

*Holidays in Hell.* Director, 52 min. documentary for Channel Four Television

## Television programs, 1990 to 1994

Director of '*Algerie : La vie malgré tout*' (40 min. documentary for Canal Plus)

Author/Director of '*Abortion in Ireland*' (26 min. France 2)

Author Director of '*The Spiral Tribe: Rave parties in UK*' (26 min. France 2)

Co-Author / producer of '*Voleurs d'Organes*' (52 min. documentary for Planete and M6)

Co-author/ Producer of '*Le Coran et la kalashnikov*' (90 min. documentary for France 3)

Producer on '*Enfance Enchaînée*' (52 min. documentary for M6)

Producer on '*Le Jour de Drapeau*' (52 min. documentary for Canal Plus)