Gaze Regimes

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Gaze Regimes: Film and feminisms in Africa.
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Jihan El-Tahri is one of the most recognisable and visible filmmakers on the African continent. Born in Lebanon, as an adult she worked internationally as a news correspondent. In the early 1990s she turned to producing and writing documentaries. She is well known for her politically charged documentaries and her uncompromising approach to her political, visual and creative vision. Her award-winning documentaries include: *House of Saud* (2004), *Cuba: An African Odyssey* (2007) and *Behind the Rainbow* (2009).

The kind of documentaries that El-Tahri has focused on makes her a filmmaker to be reckoned with not just in terms of her subject matter but also for her relentless approach in dealing with complex political and ideological issues. In *House of Saud* she focused on the history of Saudi Arabia and its complex military and economic co-dependency with America. In *Cuba: An African Odyssey*, her subject matter was the important historical and political connection between African liberation movements and their ideological and military support from Cuba. Her sourcing of rare archival footage, coupled with candid interviews, provides the audience with an in-depth and layered understanding of the political significance of these alliances.
Continuing with her exploration of liberation movements, *Behind the Rainbow* is a fascinating account of an exiled liberation movement, the African National Congress, which came to power in 1994 in South Africa. The film charts the compromises and shifts in power and lays bare the influence of South Africa’s political transition on the continent. It is clear from the film that the interviews secured for this documentary were neither easy to facilitate nor without specified preconditions, but once again the conversations are charged and insightfully refreshing. El-Tahri has often said on public platforms that her choice of subject matter seems to create an ‘absence of women’ but her own voice-over as the filmmaker narrating her documentaries not only marks her subjectivity but produces a poignancy in affirming the place of women in the ‘histories that men write’.

Even when she reflects on her experiences as a filmmaker El-Tahri often recounts film projects from which she chose to walk away. If, once she had commenced her research work, she felt the political or ideological investigation of the film would be compromised by funders, broadcasters or the parameters of its participants, she elected not to continue.

Over the years, Jihan El-Tahri has given extensive interviews relating to her various films. The main focus of this interview, however, is to address the personal and the political rather than the body of work she has produced. In this particular instance El-Tahri draws from her personal experiences and challenges to reflect on women’s social movements, and on the place of her individual agency versus a collective feminist struggle in creating political change. El-Tahri’s energy and tenacity are legendary, but in this interview we gain access to the layered complexities and contradictions in her thoughts and approaches to filmmaking. There is an interesting interplay between her positions on personal gender politics and the politically charged films for which she is famous.

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**ANTJE SCHUHMANN:** What role can women filmmakers play in social change?

**JIHAN EL-TAHRI:** When we are talking about social change, what I’m missing is: What is the objective? What is the finality that we as women feel we need to reach to feel we have achieved positive social change? Personally,
I disagree profoundly with modernity as being the goal ... The number, the percentage of women having high-powered jobs as the indicator of social change, I personally believe is wrong. But I do believe that women should be able to be fully fledged members and participants in whatever they want. I was in Sudan some time ago and I went to see a university friend of mine. She is now the Dean of the Arts at the University of Khartoum. I was quite surprised. I couldn’t help expressing my surprise. I thought she was the first woman Dean. She looked at me quite shocked saying she’s not the first but the fourth woman Dean. I think when we’re talking about the bigger things we want to achieve we don’t all need to be striving for the same thing at the same time. I don’t think women in South Africa [should] be striving for the same thing as women in Burkina Faso.

For me, power is in your own hands and you can actually change your destiny. In my case, I was lucky because I rebelled early on and for the right reasons. I’m not talking about rebelling for personal reasons but rebelling against the structure of society. When I was going to university my father didn’t want me to go to the university of my choice because that wasn’t the right university. I had 96% in my Matric and I decided not to go to university if I was not going to go study where I wanted. Six months later my father freaked out because he realised I wouldn’t have an education, so I started taking part-time jobs to pay for my own education like at the library, and registrar’s office. I was 16 and I was at the point of confronting paternal authority: Arab, Muslim, diplomat. For the first time ever I had a conversation with my father. For him, all his concerns were social. For example he said, ‘This is the university that our class goes to.’ These are issues I did not care about. Once I broke all these norms and he didn’t have an option, this changed our rapport, not only as father-daughter but also as male-female. It allowed me to think that if I can break the male paternal authority with good arguments then every other structure that I believe is not right for me, can be challenged.

**JYOTI MISTRY:** Do you translate your personal experiences into collective politics?

**JIHAN:** I don’t like movements because they have a dynamic of their own that needs to be sustained, but I like associations where I can do things. I am in contact with a few females all over the world who want to break the mould. I came to the conclusion that where we’re at as African women...
filmmakers, we’re not at the level of contesting for the bigger picture. The bigger picture is: what are our principles, what are we making, why are we all still fighting for our little film? Movements and trends are still going to come, but at the moment it’s still about getting the one little film done. Getting people to engage and trust one [another] is still a problem.

**ANTJE:** I understand that movement politics are often difficult, but do you not see the value of women coming together, across all internal divides, in order to collectively challenge and battle discrimination targeting women? This is one of the main principles of feminism.

**JIHAN:** I don’t see myself as a feminist. I’m a female but I don’t subscribe to the feminist movement. Maybe because I decided not to engage too closely with it because I think the battles for females are many and the last thing I want to do is to fight for something I’m not. I think we define our battles in terms of what we fight against and what we fight for. The feminist movement, or at least the way I’ve understood it, is a battle against the male domination of the world. I feel that as a female I’m in a society that has its constraints but as long as I see what my personal objective is then I can work against these constraints. I used to be the correspondent for the *Washington Post* (North Africa), which [was] quite … a high-powered job. I was based in Tunisia at the time. It was then that I realised I could write 500 articles and have the scoop of the day, but that a single TV camera could change everything. I had experienced the power of the camera for the first time. This is part of the reason why I moved to film. The power of the lens, I never underestimate it. Representation is very, very powerful!

**JYOTI:** To what extent do you believe that gender is a significant category to be considered when we talk about filmmaking and the aesthetics of cinema?

**JIHAN:** I do not think that gender is relevant when we talk about filmmaking on most occasions. Filmmaking is about storytelling; the art of capturing the essence of a story and maintaining the other person’s interest. This is not at all gender specific. However, the choice of content of a film, which is quite separate from filmmaking as such, can be gender relevant. The kind of stories that women feel are important to tell, and the angle they choose as being the most significant, is often a reflection of how a female sees
the world as opposed to how a male sees it. The aesthetics can also be influenced by the filmmakers’ gender; there is indeed a ‘feminine touch’ in the aesthetics of many female directors. But overall, I believe that it doesn’t matter if you are male or female. A good story is a good story. Telling a good story well from the technical perspective is a matter of professionalism and that definitely has nothing to do with gender.

**ANTJE:** Historically, at least in the field of literature, women claimed, as a response to patriarchal exclusion, to write different stories and with a different, essentially feminine aesthetic. Today this notion is challenged by many female artists and it also seems to be a very different approach to how you describe your practice.

**JIHAN:** Talking about my own work, I am often criticised [because] there are no women in my films. In practically all of my films there are no women. Every Q and A, I get attacked because there are no women in my films. I don’t care about that. I’m addressing a topic and an argument and a whole train of thought. If there were no women, I’m not going to invent them to have a woman’s face.

**JYOTI:** Do you think you approach your work environment the same way as men do?

**JIHAN:** I’ll tell you it boils down to one word: security! Females are more vulnerable. When you don’t have funding and you have to go to Juba [South Sudan], for example, to film, there are questions like ‘where will I stay?’ I won’t go if I don’t have my security organised, whereas a man would say he’s going to stay in a tent. As women we are less capable – no, not capable; women are less prone – to doing that. We’re susceptible to doing that because we have other concerns. Why? Because my first reaction is always security because we’re always protected by males. Security is a big thing. When I was in the Congo I had just had my daughter. She was four months old and the country was still at war. Everyone thought I was nuts. Everyone was worried about my security. If you look at the reality, it’s completely stupid going to Kinshasa. But there are hotels there, women, children and people giving birth in that country. The idea is that you don’t go to places that are unsafe and even [more] so, not with your child. The integrity of your
body is what’s at question! Men never worry about being raped. I think the underlying fear of security is related to rape. I have to admit that sometimes I do hesitate – should I go or not go? But on a personal level, breaking this security code has been one of the main elements of my success.

**ANTJE:** Motherhood has been a recurrent theme in many discussions we have had with women filmmakers. How do you think about the connections which are made between filmmaking, being a woman and motherhood?

**JIHAN:** Filmmaking is a profession and it doesn’t matter if you’re a woman or a man. Filmmaking is [also] much more flexible than most other jobs that women do. So as a mother and filmmaker you have more space in your private life. It’s my profession but also my passion. I find it more flexible but it’s not harder than any other profession. As women we demand equality; we’ve been demanding equality for a long time, so if you demand equality, we have to deal with it. It’s part of our lot. One of the things which I’ve always resisted is hiding behind the womanhood thing because you’re either a filmmaker or you’re not. Your gender or what that implies, in terms of the [level of] difficulty, is part of the deal. Yes, motherhood is hard, but filmmaking is quite an interesting and adaptable job in terms of what we do as mothers.

**ANTJE:** Why do you think the identity of ‘mother’ and ‘motherhood’ has been so important to many of the female filmmakers we spoke with?

**JIHAN:** It’s a status thing. It’s about being able to show that you have been there and you know what you’re talking about. I think there is pressure on women to go for a certain kind of filmmaking which makes them adopt certain expectations. I have seen this from the outside – that women are expected to make better films [about] children because they’re softer or more patient. But I think putting women in boxes is part of what I’ve been fighting against as a woman.

**ANTJE:** Who would you argue is putting women filmmakers in boxes?

**JIHAN:** Commissioning editors.

**ANTJE:** I’d like to reconnect a few things with the bigger question of unequal
gender relations. It is often argued that the underlying problem is a prevailing notion of entitlement, that men ‘own’ female bodies and sexuality. To control the female body is seen as a man’s right.

JIHAN: When I first arrived in South Africa, one of the things that shocked me most was the way women in South Africa exposed their boobs. I spent quite a bit of time observing this: it was white, black, most women, and the notion of beauty was about the exposure. There was a double thing taking place. I was proud of these women for their bodies, but also I felt a sense of indecency, not even moral but purely indecent. There is a difference between the private and the public space. I asked friends about it: they said they’re proud of their boobs. On the one hand, it’s rebellion, but on the other they’re also claiming their own bodies. By claiming your own body, you need to claim it to exist, but for me the question was: ‘Do you have to expose it to claim it?’

JYOTI: It might be easy to talk about the hetero-normative in this context but where is the space for the homosexual/homoerotic experience for women in this context? Is there space for this in this conversation?

JIHAN: I think there’s space but it depends on who you are or [are] not. Film is about expression. For me making a film about lesbians wouldn’t work because that’s not who I am. I could do it but I’d need a reason to do it. I was in Zanzibar having a debate with a group of people. Nodi Murphy [co-founder of the Out in Africa film festival] asked: ‘Where is the space for homosexuality in our films?’ Everyone was quite dismissive because there are bigger issues and in comparison this is a smaller issue. I think the reality is that homosexuality and alternative sexual practices is a minority issue on the continent and even in Europe. In that sense I think it tends to take up minimal space. I don’t think that it takes [up] more space than what it represents.

JYOTI: The way we are talking about women on the continent is hetero-normative. At the heart of the problem, if we’re talking about big issues, is the treatment of all women, homo- or heterosexual.

JIHAN: Nadia El-Fani [Tunisian filmmaker, Neither God nor Master (2011)] has a child and came out, and now they’re trying to kill her. It hasn’t altered
whether there’s violence against her because she lives up to her sexuality. In terms of representation we’re not halfway there. I hate to be a party pooper … I agree, but what I disagree with entirely is imposing too soon things that we’re just not ready to grapple with yet. To get to certain social transformation you need to get the people to believe that it’s necessary … let’s talk about this now – it means alienating … The reason why the rest of the continent thinks SA is an elephant in a china shop is because we’re light years ahead.

_JYOTI:_ I would like to add a question to that idea of industry and perhaps how you would describe the film industry in Africa. Would you describe Africa as having a film industry? Or are there various niches? Even these video niches that have taken off?

_JIHAN:_ On the continent the film industry in Egypt has existed since the 1940s – it’s calculated in the P+B of the country. In the understanding of an industry, an industry existed with studio, export deals et cetera so, yes, there was an industry and there’s a notion of a film industry. However, what’s happened since the 1960s/1970s is a whole new model of production. The film and art production sector became aid reliant, so there was no sustainability and it was practically impossible to build an industry. So the French, on the one hand, allowed the birth of a cinema and film production movement, but in [another] way clipped its wings and hampered its ability to be self-sufficient. So the system from the 1960s to now [has been] largely based on French financial assistance – this has fragmented the notion of a film community. The film industry … I’m not sure if it’s a good or bad thing to have one, I’d rather not say [whether it’s a good or a bad thing]. South Africa aspires to have film industry.

_JYOTI:_ Given that you said how important it is for women to make their films: can a person just walk away from the opportunity of making their film? Have you been able to?

_JIHAN:_ I have. I was making a film on Franz Fanon and I was in Algeria [where] I spoke to the Algerians. I needed archive and shooting permission from them. I had a meeting with the minister and it was all fine. They wanted to co-produce and give me money and as time went on, they started
meddling in terms of content. And I said, ‘No, sorry, I don’t do meddling with content.’ We had a discussion and I knew they were going to meddle content-wise because they needed to hog Fanon. I didn’t even have a fight. I just got up one morning and said I’m not making that film.

**JYOTI:** What are the conditions like for women filmmakers on the continent and what are the differences between the North and the South on the continent?

**JIHAN:** Conditions for women on the continent are generally harder than in Europe, if only because filmmaking as a profession has traditionally been male dominated. The chores women are traditionally expected to fulfil stand in the way of the dedication which is crucial for being a filmmaker. A woman is expected to stay at home and look after the kids rather than run around with a crew and a camera. But I am not certain that this narrow perspective is still the major problem. Women on my continent have always been strong and have always managed to multi-task. So as long as the obligations incumbent on us as women are not neglected, we can do what we want today. There are of course differences between North and South of the continent as to why and how tradition weighs women down. The North of the continent is predominantly Muslim and Islam decrees very specific and confined roles for women. The predominantly Christian South has its own traditional confinements for women, but at the end of the day the difficulty is comparable.

Despite the difficulties, women filmmakers also have advantages that are not given to our male counterparts. In many circumstances women are underestimated and thus they manage to get away with much more than men do. We get access more easily because we are underestimated and we are not seen to pose a threat. Female filmmakers today are much luckier than the previous generation since our world today acknowledges the need for equality and thus the hurdles facing them are not as rigid as in the past.

**JYOTI:** Younger women filmmakers often claim they don’t have sufficient choices because of the socio-political restrictions they face and the cultural landscape in which they work.
**JIHAN:** When I spoke to Tagreed [Elsanhouri], she said she felt like she didn’t have a choice. I had to sit her down and say: ‘Why do you feel like that?’ She responded that it was because of obstacles and challenges of making films. For me, it is important that you stay true to the one thing you’re pursuing. When you strap yourself down to the industry, funding, funders’ choices, or if you think, if I do this, *my culture* will regard me as this or that – all these things, I think, are self-imposed.

**JYOTI:** *What do you see your filmmaking practice as: an industry-related activity, or is it about personal or political or cultural expression?*

**JIHAN:** This is a complicated question because I do not feel that it is either/or! On a personal level I make films out of the desire for personal, political and cultural expression. I feel the need to add my voice and make it relevant. I also feel the need to reflect my perspective in a way that allows others to understand me better. I guess when I say me, I am talking mainly as an African. I want my African voice to be considered and understood on its own terms. So on that level filmmaking for me is about expression.

However, since I have made filmmaking my profession rather than a part-time hobby, it is thus by definition an industry-related activity. What I do is not an afterthought in my spare time; my income and livelihood are connected to my desire for political and cultural expression. It doesn’t matter how different and culturally specific my work is. It is part of my profession and part of an industry that needs to be economically and technically viable.

‘As improbable as it might sound, Africa will prosper.’

On a continental level I do believe this, for many reasons. If you look at [it], for the first time in our history, as filmmakers on this continent we’re dealing with a level playing field. Many people are still bogged down in the old model, but for the first time there is the opportunity for someone who has an idea to do it and not just be bogged down by the financials. For a very long time being a woman and being African meant that conditions were very restrained. But now with an 80-euro camera, you can do your thing and show what you have to offer. We are already seeing films that are outside of the constrained and regulated TV and cinema world. These films will be recognised because they’re good enough. For me, film and filmmaking is mainly about expression and about engaging and transmitting stories.
While Jihan El-Tahri might not necessarily subscribe to movements in its collective sense, her firm resolve to the power of individual will and her tenacity to maintain the integrity of her vision as a visual storyteller are an inspiration to many women filmmakers and not only on the African continent. She has mentored a number of emerging filmmakers, including Taghreed Elsanhouri and, in her capacity on the Focus Features short film competition board, has championed African stories which counter African stereotypes. As a filmmaker, she has found strategic and innovative ways to show how ‘Africa is certainly able to prosper’ by mining its incredible wealth of stories.

NOTES

1 There are a few different titles that refer to the same film depending on the distribution region. Requiem for Revolution: Cuba’s African Odyssey (2007) and Cuba! Africa! Revolution! (2007).

2 Jihan references Thabo Mbeki’s speech ‘I am an African’(8 May 1996). At the time Mbeki was the deputy president of South Africa under Nelson Mandela.