

July 2011

Teaching Aberrance: Cinema as a Site for African Feminism

Corinna McLeod

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McLeod, Corinna (2011). Teaching Aberrance: Cinema as a Site for African Feminism. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12(4), 79-96.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss4/5>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Teaching Aberrance: Cinema as a Site for African Feminism

By Corinna McLeod¹

Abstract

This article examines the influence of colonialist instructional cinema on modern African cinema production. The four films--*Neria*, *Everyone's Child*, *Wend Kuuni*, and *Taafe Fanga*-- differ in national origin, thematic approaches, and cinematic technique, but they share in displaying an element of instructional cinema. The instructional nature of the films asserts the value of women in postcolonial African societies, who, in the space of the films as in real life, are the double-colonized subject

Keywords: feminism; African cinema; postcolonialism

Introduction

Most important is the role of the cinema in the construction of peoples' consciousness. Cinema is the mechanism par excellence for penetrating the minds of our peoples, influencing their everyday social behaviour, directing them, diverting them from their historic national responsibilities. – Med Hondoⁱ

Without the development of African Cinema, Med Hondo writes, Africans will continue to be colonized through imported film.ⁱⁱ Recent African cinema seeks to counter the cinematic imperialism, and as with literature, recreate national identity, reawaken pre-colonial traditions, and advocate societies based on gender equality. Cinema has a strong historical presence in Africa through colonialist cinemaⁱⁱⁱ and through a second type of cinema that Femi Okiremuete Shaka differentiates as colonial, instructional film. Instructional film was first used by colonizers in the early 20th century to aid in what was then seen as “development,” and later as a counterforce to Hollywood’s representation of Africans in such films as *King Solomon’s Mines*, the *Tarzan* series, and *She*.^{iv} Though critics such as Diawara and Ukadike have perceived colonial, instructional films as racist productions, “motivated more by paternalistic attitude than by genuine altruism,” Shaka argues that critics should distinguish between the intentions of the films and the films as a product.^v According to Shaka:

The stated aims and objectives [of instructional films] were to teach Africans modern methods of social development, hence the emphasis on films as a teaching aid, on modern medicine, modern methods of farming, banking, village and urban planning for hygienic purposes, co-operative societies, etc. The films do not represent Africans as lacking knowledge of these things; they merely posit them as doing things in the old and traditional way.^{vi}

¹ Associate Professor of English 229 Lake Huron Hall Grand Valley State University 1 Campus Drive Allendale, MI 49401. office phone: (616)-331-8576

Despite his use of the word “modern” (in this case, meaning Western) Shaka asserts that instructional film showed Africans in a positive manner. For Shaka, the films depict Africans as “knowing and knowledgeable beings, as people with independent minds of their own” and thus a departure from colonialist cinema’s representation of Africans as tantamount to animals.^{vii} According to Shaka, instructional cinema differs from colonialist cinema in that its use of African actors represents an empowering movement for its sub-Saharan audience and portrays Africans in a progressive reform and development.

With this tradition in mind, viewers of African cinema should build the bridge between instructional cinema, traditional oral culture and the development of a modern African cinema. The four films I will examine all display an element of instructional cinema, and the instructional nature of the films assert the value of women in post-colonial African societies, who, in the space of the films as in real life, are the double-colonized subject. In *Neria* (1992), a woman must fight her in-laws to keep her property and maintain custody of her children after the death of her husband. *Everyone’s Child* (1996) tells the story of four children whose parents die of AIDS and the eldest daughter’s struggle to keep the family alive. In *Wend Kuuni* (1987), the director shows that even as women are relegated to the background in the story they still function as catalysts for the three major events in the film. Finally, I look at *Taafe Fanga* (1997), in which a whole village of women seeks to teach men to respect and value the role women play in society. The overarching question that I address is how the “aberrant” woman functions in African film and whether or not her seeming misbehavior signifies an opportunity for the filmmakers to invoke elements of the instructional film genre to advance a feminist position. My use of the term “aberrant” is a self-conscious one. This article reclaims the word from a position on the periphery to where it becomes the center for dialogue regarding the role of women as (re)presented by film.

Perhaps Nwachukwu Ukadike overstates black African cinema’s role in the “revolutionary transformation” of society.^{viii} The films outlined in this chapter advocate a reform of society that returns to an appreciation of women that existed in precolonial society. The films struggle to fulfill Ukadike’s requirement to “decolonize the mind”^{ix} by reinstating traditional culture and reminding the audience that women have long been the keepers of custom. Just as the feminized landscape was devalued by colonists, so too have the women been devalued and depreciated in the wake of colonialism. In each film, a female figure marks her connection to tradition and heritage by employing oral culture to tell a story, recite an historical myth, or pass on wisdom to another generation. The use of traditional oral culture in the films, and its emphasis on a moral or instructional element, informs the African audience’s understanding of the film. By linking cinema to traditional oral culture, the directors bring the past into the present. Thus cinema is a decolonizing enterprise; in bringing traditional oral culture into the forefront of the narratives, the narratives contribute, as Ukadike would want, to the “development of a radical consciousness.”^x Modern cinema employs the strategies of early instructional films to bring about a return and reassessment of traditional cultural values. The films reawaken African mythology and practices by reteaching their position in a modernized society that struggles to find a place for tradition in the wake of violent colonization and refutation of African past. The new language developed in the films I have described

blends instruction with oral traditional culture to produce cinema that empowers Africans and especially African women in a post-colonial society.

The ‘Aberrant’ Woman

In *Neria*, director Godwin Mawuru’s adaptation of a story by Zimbabwean film director and award-winning novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga, the audience is shown the story of Neria and her husband Patrick, a modern couple living in Harare, Zimbabwe. Through the sympathetic lens of the camera that depicts their idyllic home life, we follow the couple and their children as they repaint their house and reflect contentment and prosperity. Mawuru emphasizes the industriousness of both Neria and Patrick, and emphasizes Patrick’s reliance on Neria as an equal partner in the family. When Patrick dies in a bicycle accident, we see how Neria is the victim of tradition as one of her husband’s brothers, Phineas, appropriates her land, her property, and her children. The film takes great pains to correct the “tradition” of land grabbing^{xi} and the assumption of the deceased husband’s property by the husband’s family. Significantly, Ambuyu, the mother of Patrick who had been all too willing to disparage her daughter-in-law, eventually sides with Neria, rebuking Phineas for his greed. This late alliance transcends the burgeoning family feud and unites the two women in the face of a discriminatory patriarchal tradition. Throughout the film Mawuru asks whether it is tradition that is wrong, or whether it is tradition that is abused, or whether it is that there is no longer a place for tradition?

The figure of the woman in conflict does well to represent not just the plight of women in a changing society but how women have been the keepers of tradition in African societies. Women, as the primary caretakers, teach the day-to-day customs to the children. We see through Ambuyu and Patrick’s family that non-traditional women are a threat to social order. Those most threatened, the film indicates, are men such as Phineas who would abuse the system. Other men, such as Patrick, would benefit by the shift in tradition because they are innately good people to begin with and would appreciate gaining a partner who can contribute to the household in a changing modern society. In fact, throughout the beginning of the film, Patrick and Neria laugh a little at their own alienation from village life. Neria can no longer balance a water vessel on her head; when she drops the pot in front of her sister-in-law the two share a shocked moment and then laugh. The effect of this moment is still powerful: Neria has lost her village ways, and when the women return to the village from the well, Phineas’ wife is bearing water while Neria carries nothing. Though the characters in the film do not remark upon this episode, this moment conveys a feeling of foreboding--Neria appears useless, as her mother-in-law has tried to say, and foreshadows a placelessness Neria will later experience.

Conflicting with this representation of uselessness is a story told simultaneously through interchanging scenes by Ambuyu and Patrick. The story is of a man who leaves the village to make his fortune while his wife stays in the village and creates a fortune through her animal husbandry and traditional values. Told by two people in simultaneous switch frames (the film moves back and forth between Patrick in the car (modernity) and Ambuyu in the village (tradition), the filmmaker creates two viewpoints of the story: from the perspective of Ambuyu it reflects the traditional value of a wife who knows the way of the village; from the perspective of Patrick, the story explains how he values Neria for helping to build a home and a financially successful life together in the city.

The dual telling of the story from two symbolically disparate locations, narrators, and perspectives as well as the active camera shift conveys both the universal understanding of this narrative and instructs the audience to consider consciously the position of the narrator. The authorship of the story, shared between Phineas and Ambuyu, locates Neria's subjectivity as caught between these two narrations.

The idea of aberrant womanhood is not left to Neria alone; the other aberrant woman in the film is Connie, the divorcee who provides Neria with emotional and financial support as she battles her husband's family. Neria resists consulting a lawyer because she does not want to "fight the blood of [her] children." Connie's position in the film is one of encouragement for Neria, but she is also a figure of loneliness. At the beginning of the film, we see her watching Patrick and Neria wistfully as they work together on painting the house. Husbandless and childless, Connie foreshadows the moment when Neria is also left alone. But rather than representing a source of isolation and failed womanhood, Connie's ability to rally Neria to fight her in-laws reflects an urbanization and modernization of womanhood. Connie represents the modern Zimbabwean woman able to support herself in a prosperous independent manner in the city; she is a woman who is not dependent on patriarchal village traditions. Already distant from the traditional village life, Connie's encouragement to fight the landgrabbing serves as the final push that severs Neria's allegiance to tradition.

Far from becoming isolated, Neria is shown to have the support of the women around her. The women in her sewing group take up Neria's cause--weeping with her, celebrating with her, presenting a show of force at the courthouse. One woman vows to be there for the hearing "even if I have to lie to my husband". There is still a conspiracy element that Mawuru clearly incorporates into the film: unwilling and perhaps unable to revolt directly against the patriarchy in their own lives, these women must subversively revolt through their support of Neria. Neria becomes the chosen one, the figurehead and the possible sacrifice for these women. As she succeeds, she succeeds for all women. As a sign of this, she is celebrated in song by her brother, Jethro--especially at the ending of the film. The transition of Jethro's song from one he croons to his troubled sister to one he sings in a crowded club signifies that the song becomes a vehicle by which Neria is made an Everywoman.

The theme of patriarchy and abuse or neglect of tradition by men is revisited in *Everyone's Child*, a film directed by Tsitsi Dangarembga. It tells the story of Tamari, her brothers Itai and Nhamo, and her sister, Norah. The opening scenes show Tamari taking care of her failing mother and the two youngest children, Norah and Nhamo. She steals a few precious moments to spend with her musician boyfriend whom she implores to take her away. The mother soon dies, and the film chronicles Tamari's attempts to keep the family together. When their Uncle Oziya takes the family's cattle and plow as repayment for their deceased father's debts, the children are left destitute and with no means to make a living on their village farm. Abandoned, the children struggle for food. The money begins to run out, and Itai is lured away to the big city, Harare, after hearing Uncle Jimmy tell stories of easy money and plentiful jobs. Itai leaves Tamari to care for Norah and Nhamo, and goes to the city, intent upon getting a job and sending money back to Tamari. When Itai reaches Harare, he learns it is not the land of opportunity after all. Uncle Jimmy is nowhere to be found, and Itai falls in with a street gang. Barely able to survive himself, Itai is unable to send money back to the village.

The separate trials of Itai and Tamari are told in a simultaneous and interwoven narrative. Itai's struggles in the city run parallel to Tamari's. Itai represents the thousands of desperate, uneducated youths on the city streets. Tamari symbolizes those left behind in villages struggling to maintain the village values. At his or her lowest point, each sibling is offered the option of prostitution. Itai, starving, depressed, and confused after his first experience with huffing, is solicited by a white man who pulls up in a car at the street corner. Under the influence of the chemicals, Itai gets into the car. In the meantime, Tamari is finally seduced by the shopkeeper, Mdara Shaghi, who promises to be her benefactor if she will only "be nice" to him. In Itai's case, he is "saved" by the gang members who pull him out of the car and berate him for almost falling victim to a male predator. Tamari, despite her location within in the village, has no similar group of supporters, and does become the victim of the shopkeeper.

The film implies that Tamari trades sex for a new dress and food for her younger siblings. She then faces the derision of the village. Former schoolmates and neighborhood women call her a prostitute and shun her, refusing to associate with her. Even the schoolteacher, who had first appeared sympathetic to Tamari's plight, treats her as a woman of ill repute and makes veiled sexual propositions to her when she comes to pay Norah's school fees (with money "borrowed" from Shaghi). Eventually, the tide turns for Tamari after Nhamo accidentally dies in a fire. Forced to accompany Shaghi to a bar, Tamari had to leave Norah and Nhamo alone. The home catches fire, and only the twisted remains of Nhamo's toy helicopter remind the viewers of destroyed promise and a lost future. Nhamo's death sparks Uncle Ozias's realization that he had failed to protect the family. He initially tries to excuse himself from responsibility by saying he was repulsed and ashamed by Tamari's reputation, but an old woman from the village reminds him that Tamari would never have had to resort to prostitution had the uncle respected tradition and taken the four children into his care. The film ends on an upbeat note: Itai has returned from the city (and jail) and he, Tamari, and Norah will be taken care of by the uncle. The final scenes of the film show an entire village pitching in to repair the thatch on a home.

One element of the instructional message of the film is that a village and family should rally to care for the children. However, in this film, one of the most-watched in Africa, the feminist subtext highlights the desperation, isolation and vulnerability of women. Despite her attempts to make mats to sell and her hard work to care for the family, Tamari's fate is largely determined by men. Her uncle abandons her, the shopkeeper and schoolteacher see her as a sexual object, the minister offers prayers and nothing else, and Itai, who hovers on the cusp of manhood, is unable to provide for her. In fact, Itai is feminized because he, too, nearly becomes a sexual victim. Though it may be difficult to see Tamari's prostitution as a feminist action, it should be seen as thus. Tamari's prostitution, which puts her at risk for the very disease that kills her parents, enables her to uphold her responsibilities as an elder sister and provide for her younger siblings. Unlike Itai, who at least had the hope of a job in Harare, Tamari's only option to endure is to subvert the patriarchal system of protection. Her position as the aberrant woman, a prostitute, is the mechanism for her family's survival. Tamari displays her ironic empowerment (despite her victimized status) by actively seeking out Norah's school fees from Shaghi. Her acquirement of the fees and her willingness to face the unwelcome suggestions by the schoolteacher demonstrate Tamari's determination to help

other women by making Norah the beneficiary of her actions.

Wend Kuuni, by director Gaston Kabore from Burkino Faso is another film in which the aberrant woman plays a predominant role in the story line. In this film, a woman refuses to remarry after the death of her husband. As a result, she and her son are chased from the village. They wander lost in the wilderness until she eventually dies. A traveler finds the child and takes him to the nearest village. He is adopted and named Wend Kuuni, or “gift from God,” by the family that takes him in. Only towards the end of the film do we find out Wend Kuuni’s origins and the story of his mother and their flight from their home village. The revelation of Wend Kuuni’s mother’s desire to escape an unwanted marriage, the villager’s accusation that she is a witch, and her flight from the village and tradition make her aberrance the catalyst for the entire film. It is important to the interpretation of the film that Wend Kuuni’s revelation comes after another catalytic episode, the death of a village man. Timboko, the dead man’s young wife, to the shock of the villagers, had condemned her husband as old and impotent. Her behavior, or rather aberrant anti-behavior, is key: this is the second of the three major moments in the film punctuated by aberrant women. In fact, the story of Wend Kuuni’s earlier life is only revealed to the audience as we listen to Wend Kuuni’s griot-like recitation of his story to his younger sister, Pongnere. She marks the third manifestation of aberrant women in the film: having been forbidden to play in the fields and herd the cattle (a boy’s life) she disobeys in order to follow Wend Kuuni. Additionally, she had been forbidden to hear the story of Wend Kuuni’s life before joining her village, but she cajoles him into telling her. The question remains as to whether or not the film has a positive or negative ending for women. It appears that Pongnere, because of her resistance to her mother’s restrictions, is bound to follow in the footsteps of the other misbehaving women in the film. Her *choice* to eavesdrop on the story of Wend Kuuni’s origin indicates that she appears destined to become an aberrant woman who serves as a catalyst for male disaster like the other women in the film. But Pongnere is differentiated from the other female figures in the film because Pongnere is still a girl, and not a woman. She marks a border between the insider and outsider and her position as aberrant makes her the vehicle of transmission: Pongnere’s aberrance is the only way the audience learns Wend Kuuni’s story. Displayed as an active figure in a tradition in which women are allocated a more obedient, static role (Pongnere’s movement outside of the village is juxtaposed to her mother’s location within the village), her active refusal to obey creates the feminist discourse of the film and the vehicle by which we become aware of the masculinist text. In fact, the obedience of Pongnere’s mother, Lale --Wend Kuuni’s adoptive mother -- is at odds with the depiction of all the other women in the film. Lale’s relatively minor role in the film shows that within the confines of a very traditional setting, tradition can still be read as placeless and lifeless for women. This becomes problematic; the tradition/modernity dichotomy set up by the film challenges the privileging of modernity. Tradition and obedience embodied in the mother may appear, through Pongnere’s rejection of traditional women’s roles (as in her desire to be a herder with Wend Kuuni), as at first indicating the director’s rejection of the traditional roles as well. However the mother is a guiding force throughout the film, and her constancy becomes symbolic of tradition’s constancy in the midst of change.

The three major movements in the film *Wend Kuuni* are punctuated by female figures: the other two women are associated with tragedy, so what has director Kabore

done to allow the audience to think that Pongnere's future does not hold the same? Is it that women are the catalysts for society's trials and tribulations? By refusing to remain in place, are these women bringing a localized destruction, if not a cultural and traditional destruction? If rebellious women lead to disaster visited upon men, how can we see this film as a feminist text?

An answer to these questions might be found in *Taafe Fanga*, or "Skirt Power." In this film by Adama Drabo from Mali, the village women rebel against patriarchal authority and seek to redefine power in their society. The film opens with scratchy, phonographic, French music and the camera pans to a crowd of black Africans watching a white, French cabaret on an old, black and white television set. A griot arrives in the hall where the people are seated and, as he passes in front of the television, he switches off the program. His arrival and his dismissal of the French program are significant commentary and a predictor to his impending narrative. He represents someone reclaiming tradition and the past from modernity and colonialism. His gesture of turning off the television is a summons to the people to turn away from colonial entertainment and to turn back to their past. He invites the audience to tell him where he should take them; the audience calls out a few names, but then falls silent at the arrival of a tall, beautiful woman dressed richly in red and gold clothing. Her attire is by far the most expensive and luxurious in the room. She is out of place both by her dress and by her manner. She stands where everyone else is already seated. She looks around for a seat and finds one, but is stopped by one of the men who tells her that she cannot sit in her chosen spot as that is the men's side of the room. She ignores him. He raises his hand, it seems, to slap her, but she catches his wrist in hers, holds it, and then forces it down to his side. Her appearance, her strength, and her silence make her an extraordinary and aberrant figure. But she, too, settles down to hear the griot's story. Like the other aberrant women from *Neria*, *Everyone's Child*, and *Wend Kuuni*, her anti-behavior serves as the catalyst for the film, sparking the griot's story about a women's revolt.

In the griot's story, the women of a village gain the mask of the Andumbulu and use it to frighten the men into submission. The mask is attained when Yoyeme goes out to get firewood after her husband refuses to gather the wood for her, worried as he is that the other men of the village might mock him for doing "women's work." Yoyeme ventures out of the village compound into the hills and stumbles upon the Tellems and the Andumbulus--mystical figures of local lore. In her fright, Yoyeme panics and attacks one of the Andumbulu and knocks it down. Deciding that she had to have proof of this encounter, Yoyeme rips the mask from the Andumbulu and flees back to her village. In the meantime, the Andumbulu calls a curse down upon women as punishment for Yoyeme's theft.

When she reaches the village, Yoyeme shows the mask to her neighbor, and the two begin to plot revenge on men. Part of the legend surrounding the Andumbulu is that men will either die or be driven insane at the sight of the creature, so the two women conspire to use this superstition to their advantage. Tired of their hard work with no support from the men, the women of the village use the stolen mask to organize an appearance of a fake Andumbulu who orders the men to learn to do the women's work and for the women to live the life of men.

The women of the village are delighted with this news, and the men are frightened into submission by the figure of the "demon." The next segments of the film trace the

comical adaptations of the men learning to cook, to care for the home, and to respond to their wives' sexual demands. The women delight in the respite they have been given from their household domain and they hold meetings at the sacred gathering places of the men, they drink wine, and sit and talk late into the night, adopting the very habits they had resented. The transition is completed by the women's decision to wear men's clothes, and the men's are resigned to wearing skirts. The transformation is so extreme that when Ambara goes to meet his new second wife, the men from the other village are confused, and they are unable to recognize Ambara, or understand the reasons for the transvestitism.

Eventually, the men of Yoyeme's village discover they have been tricked with the mask, and things in the village are destined to return to normal. Though the Andumbulu whose mask had been stolen consents to save a woman who is giving birth in exchange for the return of the mask, the curse upon women for taking the mask remains intact. At the end of the film, Yoyeme, the leader in the women's revolt, turns to her daughter Kuuni and says "My child I promised you that things would change. I've failed. Never again will women gain power." To which Kuuni replies: "Mother, you've ignited a flame that will never again be put out. It's not about power, but equality in our difference." The very young female protagonist appears the wisest--having maintained pride in her womanhood throughout the revolt even as the other women eagerly abandoned their identity as women in preference of "being men." Kuuni represents a valuing of women's roles, which even the other women had failed to recognize. Kuuni's optimistic assertion speaks for all three films: that the aberrant woman does not signal so much a fire against tradition as much as it does a spark that will ignite a slow and gradual change.

Above, I had indicated that *Taafe Fanga* would provide the answer to key questions regarding the subject of women in African film. The griot's story functions as a parable. As the muses and/or catalysts for each of these four films, women are central in any analysis or examination of society. Unlike Western feminisms, seen as supporting women seeking independence from men, African womanist thought seeks a return to interdependence between the sexes^{xii} "prior to Western interference, the African woman did not have the need to yearn for a room of her own."^{xiii} Diedre L. Badejo defines African feminism as "[recognizing] the inherent, multiple roles of women and men in reproduction, production, and the distribution of wealth, power, and responsibility for sustaining human life."^{xiv} Badejo adds that traditions and festivals "place women at the center of the social order."^{xv} As a result of this centrality, the women in *Neria*, *Everyone's Child*, *Wend Kuuni*, and *Taafe Fanga* who work outside the tradition or challenge the tradition *appear* to endanger a whole society. Tamari's prostitution, and her decision to acquiesce to Shaghi's demands, leads to Nhamo's death. Neria loses touch with her village values and almost loses her children; Pongnere appears to be walking down a path in which she, too, will bring violence to those in her life; and in *Taafe Fanga*, Yoyeme has called a curse down upon all women for her decision to take the mask. Indeed, it seems from all these films that women who refuse to remain in place do or will bring about a cultural destruction. But let me reemphasize my use of the word "appears." While these women could be viewed as destructive and operating as a counter-culture, what they are really doing is working against colonialism. African feminism involves a reassessment of women's roles in contemporary society. Colonization eroded traditional roles for men and women, and Western feminism can be seen as a type of

imperialism that promotes a relationship between the sexes that will only result in the further destruction of African identity. Gwendolyn Mikell has traced the resistance to Western feminisms expressed by African women as directed “toward what they perceived as attempts by Western academics and activists to co-opt them into a movement defined by extreme individualism. . .and, ultimately, by a hostility to males.”^{xvi}

Mikell’s argument bring to mind Gayatri Spivak’s cautionary words in “French Feminism in an International Frame”:

The pioneering books that bring First World feminists news from the Third World are written by privileged informants and can only be deciphered by a trained readership. The distance between “the informant’s world,” her “own sense of the world she writes about,” and that of the non-specialist feminist is so great that, paradoxically, *pace* the subtleties of reader-response theories, here the distinctions might easily be missed.

This is not the tired nationalist claim that only a native can know the scene. The point that I am trying to make is that, in order to learn enough about Third World women and to develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated and the First World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged *as a woman*.^{xvii}

Spivak’s words serve to remind us that as in literature, the filmmaker is a privileged informant from the Third World^{xviii} whose films have a largely Western influence through 1) the medium of film and physical accessibility of this medium, 2) the funding for this medium, and 3) through the “trained readership” or in this case, trained viewership. Thus if these films are disseminated to a largely Western audience, Western viewers must be aware of the origins of the film and try and localize the theoretical constructions of the films. At the same time, the instructional nature of these films is inherent—in this case, it means these films can create an understanding of African feminism and an opposition to interpreting the films through the lens of Western feminism as indicated by Mikell above.

Films as Feminist Texts

Now that I have demonstrated how the figure of the aberrant woman functions in these four African films, the question lingers as to whether or not these films are feminist texts. In order to answer this question, I turn again to African feminism. In his essay “Women with Open Eyes, Women of Stone Hammers: Western Feminism and African Feminist Filmmaking Practice” Kenneth Harrow offers another way of distinguishing African feminism from Western feminism. He writes:

For the Europeans such issues as the status of the subject, gender identity, gendered language, patriarchy, and above all oppositionality predominate; for the Africans, feminism is more a concern over gender equality and social or economic justice. One would overturn the club; the other would join it.^{xix}

Arguably, Harrow's last sentence presents an oversimplification of the goals of Western versus African feminism; after all, African feminists are not trying to "join" a club, they are instead seeking to re-establish an equal position in a society whose tradition has formerly valued women. African feminists such as Philomena Okeke see the women's movement as much about overthrowing all hegemonies, not just male domination, and thus in postcolonial societies the dominant discourse that must first be overthrown is the colonizer's. In this regard, film becomes a means by which colonialist discourse can be challenged using one of the very forms that was, previously, the vehicle of the colonizer. Still, Harrow's analogy does give some further insight into the divergent paths of these two feminisms. Indeed, as Harrow continues in his essay he identifies that as European feminists seek to uproot the current order and recreate society, African feminists see that "the women's problems lie in an uneven distribution of power, and that that is entirely built into their relations with men. Once power is redistributed, like land, the problems will be solved."^{xx} Harrow continues the discussion of African feminism by pointing out that the distribution system of power is not questioned or attacked and indicates instead that in the situation of African feminism, women's goals are to belong to the current order, rather than subvert or overturn order to create a new one.

By applying this theory of belonging to the four African films cited in this essay one can see that the filmmakers certainly fulfill Harrow's depiction of African feminism as well as the other descriptions of African Feminism described above. In both *Wend Kuuni* and *Taafe Fanga*, the women seek to have access to the world in which men are dominant. Pongnere would like to hear stories, herd cattle, and live the less-fettered life of a boy because she sees the male position as being more valued. In *Taafe Fanga*, the women in the village just want to be valued *as women*. In *Neria* and *Everyone's Child*, the feminist message of belonging and social reform is more complex. While *Neria* is forced to use city/European law to fight the traditional laws of the village, in no manner does this signify a freeing or release for *Neria*. Her campaign to recover her children is less a revolt against tradition than it is a defense against those who would abuse traditional law. One is led to believe that had Phineas and the rest of Patrick's family acted more honorably, *Neria* would have been willing to allow tradition to take care of her and her children. Instead, the film shows how colonialism and imperialism has warped the traditional structures of a society. In *Everyone's Child*, Tamari is able to survive without the protection of her Uncle Ozias, and subverts the male-protector structure of her society by using Shaghi to further the education (and implied future independence) of Norah. But Tamari's survival is at great personal cost, demonstrating that while women can survive without patriarchy, the survival is unfulfilling. Rather than creating a discursive strategy for women's independence from men, *Everyone's Child* emphasizes male-female interdependence, and places special significance on the role of the village in nurturing and caring for its members. The film highlights the insufficiency of imported Western ideals advocating the individual's independence. Therefore, according to an African Womanist perspective, none of these films seek to usurp social order or reinvent the place of women.

Still, what of the aberrant women in *Wend Kuuni*? Perhaps the foreboding of Pongnere's actions that might lead her down the destructive paths of the other women can still be seen as a warning to those who refuse to follow the traditional order. Her actions

can also be seen in a more positive light. Because her aberrance and her action takes place while she is a girl and not a full-grown woman like the other female figures in the film, Pognere can be viewed as an optimistic portrayal of a feminist future. Pognere seeks to be included, to locate the female back in the center of village culture, by symbolically listening to the griot's story along with the men. However, her aberrance can also be interpreted that that warning is directed towards men, as it is men who suffered the consequences of the women's actions when women are neglected, under appreciated or undervalued. When Wend Kuuni's father died and his mother fled the village rather than remarry, she can be said to have acted as a faithful wife in memory of her husband. The film indicates that forcing her to remarry, likely to one of her husband's relatives who would claim the property, was more a desecration by the village of the widow's grief than a sign that Wend Kuuni's mother sought to overthrow social order. Likewise, when the young wife in the village disparages her older husband she can be seen not just as an aberrant woman who refuses to accept traditional order but also as a symbol of the unfairness in a society that marries young women involuntarily.

Manthia Diawara views Pognere's story as representative of an emerging mythology in African film and literature: the myth of the emancipated daughter. Diawara traces the myth back to Frantz Fanon's analyses of Algerian women during the French Algerian war.^{xxi} Diawara also traces the rising myth to the filmmaker Sembene Ousmane and the writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who both "use the myth as a metaphor of the liberation struggle of the oppressed majority in Africa."^{xxii} Diawara lists the three functions of the myth as "1) oppressive order; 2) desire to break out; and 3) success and creation of a new order."^{xxiii} Pognere's position as a young girl in a restrictive society is the first function. Timboko and her tirade against a system that forced her to marry an old man also belong to this first function. Pognere's friendship with Wend Kuuni and her persistency in disobeying her mother's orders mark the second function, a desire to break out. The third function, success and a creation of a new order, is achieved when Pognere becomes the catalyst by which the audience learns Wend Kuuni's story. Diawara's third function challenges the idea that African Feminism does not operate on the principal of creating a new order. Diawara's paradigm offers the contention that Pognere's purpose in the film is to present an alternative order. Diawara writes that "The rise of Wend Kuuni and Pognere above the tradition evokes the desire for a new order which constitutes a preoccupation for African film-makers. . ."^{xxiv} However, Diawara continues on to explain that Kabore's film calls for a postcolonial reordering and the feminist assertions that can be read into Pognere's resistance are merely a metaphorical call for revolution in the state rather than in the role of women:

Where the griot's narrative is concerned with disorder and the restoration of traditional order, the film-maker wants to transcend the established order and create a new one. . . .The traditional functions more commonly used by the film-makers are those that work to create revolution in the state, not those that restore the status quo.^{xxv}

In fact, according to Diawara, the film refutes the status quo because Wend Kuuni's mother will not remarry; the young wife defies her husband, which leads to his death, and

Pongnere's refusal to obey all mark dissent and discord within the confines of the current system. However, despite Diawara's argument I disagree with his interpretation that the film urges a new order. Instead, I continue to argue that Kabore presents a story in which aberrancy leads to conflict with issues of equality, but does not seek to establish a change in social or traditional order; the film does not end with indicators of change, nor have the women earlier in the film created an avenue by which the audience may assume Pongnere's destiny will be divergent from theirs.

Finally, when looking at *Taafe Fanga*, the woman who is the catalyst for the griot's story commits no crime through her aberrancy other than choosing to sit where there is space in the room (which happens to be on the men's side) and proving to be stronger than the man who sought to hit her for not answering him. These aberrant women make no attempted coup against the social order; instead, the women seek to regain an equal place in society rather than construct a new one.

The ultimate hope, that women will be valued for their role as women in society, is common to all four films. The feminism inherent in these films is unlike Western feminism in that it assumes an insistence that the sexes do have their separate roles in society and that each sex should be valued because of these differences. But by focusing on the figure of the aberrant woman in African film, this final hope becomes blurred. If, as Elizabeth Mermin writes, "by the time their (African filmmakers') films make it to the theaters in Dakar, they have been altered to cater to the demands of their European producers" how can the audience be sure of the original intent of the filmmaker?^{xxvi} Could it be that the Western producers demand an element of (western) feminism in these films and the figure of the rebellious woman, a tropic figure in European literature, resurfaces in the newer literacy of African film? Mermin continues:

There is a disagreement over exactly how the pressures of production play themselves out. Some filmmakers say that Europe wants films about a romanticized rural Africa that is of no interest to modern urban Africans, some that Europe insists on funding films about the city when every African could tell or would like to hear a story about the village, and others that European producers play with and create false rural/urban, traditional/modern dichotomies.^{xxvii}

Certainly film critics can be sure from Mermin's point of view of the possibility that filmmakers bow to outside funding pressures and incorporate a kind of westernized instructional social agenda when presenting the dichotomies between the sexes. Despite Mermin's skepticism, which appears to fall into the trap of refusing authenticity to African films, one can view these films as constructed to reflect the uncertainty of the "woman question" all over again. But taking Mermin's argument into consideration, one should look to the origins and politics involved in the films discussed above. Mermin's discussion of Senegalese cinema is applicable to the cinema of Zimbabwe (*Neria, Everyone's Child*), Burkino Faso (*Wend Kuuni*) and Mali (*Taafe Fanga*). Each of these nations shares in the struggle of establishing a national, post-colonial cinema.

Neria's distribution and marketing has been handled recently by Zimbabwean communications organization, International Video Fair (IVF), and the Australian Agency

for International Development as part of an initiative aimed at educating Zimbabweans about inheritance laws and making wills. Distribution has long been the challenge in sub-Saharan Africa. With little government support and even less of an internal film industry, directors and producers of African cinema have had to rely on the support of outside agencies. One can argue that *Neria* is widely distributed and has gained an enormous viewership not for its artistic merit but because the instructional quality serves a governmental and humanitarian purpose that outside agencies will support. The automatic question surfaces: “if there is not instructional value, will a film still find a distributor?” The answer is probably yes, but it will be more difficult and have a smaller audience.

Generally speaking, African filmmakers do not have the superior funding resources that Western distributors have. As a result, Third World filmmakers and African filmmakers have tried to ally themselves to create a force that will improve the distribution of their films. At the Assembly of the Third World Film-Makers Meeting held in Algeria in 1973, filmmakers agreed that the role of Third World cinema is to promote culture through films, and that these films “are a weapon as well as a means of expression for the development of the awareness of the people, and that the cinema falls within the framework of the class struggle.”^{xxviii} Several other organizations have formed as a grassroots effort to support African filmmakers, including international film festivals that some filmmakers say might encourage imitation of Western cinema in an attempt to win festival awards and become successes in the European box office.^{xxix} Maintaining economic independence is difficult for African filmmakers as they must oftentimes depart from aestheticism and choose between making a profit on the film --again, success at the (Western) box office--or at least making a “contribution to freedom”^{xxx} and creating a film that, while not necessarily popular, does further the humanitarian or cultural cause of his or her nation.

In the cases of *Neria* and *Everyone’s Child*, Media for Development Trust (a non-profit Zimbabwean organization that seeks to promote development through “socially conscious” productions)^{xxxi}, the British Overseas Development Administration^{xxxii} and PLAN International^{xxxiii} assisted in the production and funding of these films. Each of these organizations has a different agenda, all are associated with encouraging development and poverty-relief. But having these organizations as “backers” for the film must have included a price, such as the inclusion of instructional didacticism discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Understanding who provides funding for the films gives the viewer clues as to its production and whether or not certain controls were exerted over the film director. Freedom to create films without incorporating the politics or position of those funding its development is a luxury in any country, but it is especially important when viewing African cinema in light of colonialism. In the case of Dangarembga’s films, funding originates from the West, the very West with whom her characters engage as they try to (re)place themselves in their own cultures.

Conclusion

In concluding this article, I must revisit Ukadike’s fourth assumption pertaining to the goals of Third World Cinema, the development of a “new film language.” In “Resolutions of the Third World Film-makers’ Meeting, 1973,” participants agreed in their final report that cinema should not be considered separate from the culture inherent

in their respective countries. Rather, cinema draws upon the everyday realities and cultural methods of expression that compose their countries and should be used as a way to restrain the information media and prevent its propagation of negative cultural constructions (i.e. colonial constructions privileging the west) that interfere with the reclamation of national or cultural identity. The new film language should speak of cultural development, be understandable to the proletariat, and aim to create a language of inclusion that refutes imperialism and the internal alienation it causes and instead fosters economic, social and political development.^{xxxiv}

African filmmakers see cinema as the solution to the post-colonial, post-independence crisis of national identity experienced by many African nations. The actions of a filmmaker to be independent of foreign (western) financial support and outside the locus of the former colonizer's control becomes a symbolic gesture that speaks to the independence struggle embodied by their home nations. Just as the filmmaker seeks independence from the West and western aesthetics, so must the nation struggle to free itself from western cultural imperialism.^{xxxv}

Teshome H. Gabriel calls the cinema produced by Third World filmmakers "Third Cinema" and calls it "a soldier of liberation" in those areas where the battle for history is in process. Gabriel writes "the impetus of Third Cinema was and continues to be participatory and contributive to the struggles for the liberation of the peoples of the Third World."^{xxxvi} Gabriel identifies a second area of struggle as those nations or regions where inhabitants battle over their cultural identity. In both arenas, Third Cinema^{xxxvii} offers the opportunity to "recover popular memory and to activate it."^{xxxviii} According to Gabriel, part of the power of Third Cinema lies in its ability to help the colonized or marginalized the opportunity to distinguish between cultural memory and official versions of written history that are privileged by the imperialist.^{xxxix} Third Cinema taps into cultural memory and offers an alternative to the hegemony's construction of the marginalized Other (native population) and furthers the goal of social revolution and the development of "radical consciousness."

Based on the conceptions of Third Cinema and Third World filmmakers, African cinema, and the films examined, vocalize a reawakening of cultural identity. Will Neria ever have that feeling of belonging to a village community? Will her children be raised without the strong sense of history and tradition that their cousins who live in the village must have? Will Tamari develop HIV? Do Itai or Norah have a future? Is Pongnere doomed by her aberrance to be a marker of male-oriented tragedy? Will the village women in *Taafe Fanga* even have the sense of once again being valued as women, with a productive, worthy role in society? Each of these four films opens the debate of the nature of what it is to be women and at the same time reflects the continued burden of colonialism and imperialism on newly independent nations. Each filmmaker calls to the attention of his or her audience the importance of cultural reclamation in the face of lingering imperialism and neocolonial controls. The films and the filmmakers seek to bring about a "transformation of society" that is both radical and revolutionary in its quest to decolonize the mind of its African viewers and challenge the aesthetics of cinema production to aid in the development of Africa culturally, socially and economically.

Bibliography

- Badejo, Diedre L. "African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent." *Research in African Literatures* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 94-111.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Everyone's Child*. (1996).
- Diawara, Manthia. "Oral Literature and African Film: Narratology in *Wend Kuuni*." In *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, 199-211. London: British Film Institute: 1989.
- Drabo, Adama. *Taafe Fanga*. (1997).
- Gabriel, Teshome H. "Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics." In *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, 53-64. London: British Film Institute, 1989.
- Harrow, Kenneth W. "Women With Open Eyes, Women of Stone and Hammers: Western Feminism and African Feminist Filmmaking Practice." In *African Cinema*, edited by Kenneth W. Harrow, 225-240. Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 1999.
- Hondo, Med. "What is Cinema for Us?" *Framework II* (Autumn 1979). Rpt. in *African Experiences of Cinema*, edited by Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham, 29-41. London: British Film Institute, 1996.
- Kabore, Gaston. *Wend Kuuni*. (1987).
- Kalu, Anthonia C. "Women and the Social Construction of Gender in African Development." *Africa Today* 43.3 (July-Sep 1996): 269-289. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.
- Mawuru, Godwin and Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Neria*. (1992).
- Mermin, Elizabeth. "A Window on Whose Reality? The Emerging Industry of Senegalese Cinema." In *African Cinema*, edited by Kenneth W. Harrow, 201-221. Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 1999.
- Mikell, Gwendolyn. "African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation." *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 405-425.
- "Resolutions of the Third World Film-Makers' Meeting, Algiers, Algeria, 1973." In *African Experiences of Cinema*, edited by Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham. London: British Film Institute, 1996.
- Shaka, Femi Okiremuete. "Instructional Cinema in Colonial Africa: An Historical Reappraisal." *Ufahamu* 27, no.1-3 (1999): 27-47.
- Shaka, Femi Okiremuete. "The Politics of Cultural Conversion in Colonialist African Cinema." *CineAction* 37, (June, 1995): 51-76.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "French Feminism in an International Frame." *Yale French Studies* 62, (1981), 154-184.
- Teno, Jean-Marie. "Freedom: The Power to Say No." Translated by Paul Willemen. In *African Experiences of Cinema*, edited by Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham, 70-71. London: British Film Institute, 1996. 70-71. Trans. Of *Cinéma et Liberté*, FESPACO '93 (Paris and Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1993).
- Ukadike, Nwachukwu Frank. *Black African Cinema*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1994.

END NOTES

ⁱ Med Hondo, "What is Cinema for Us?" *Framework II* (Autumn 1979). Rpt. in *African Experiences of Cinema*. ed. Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (London:British Film Institute, 1996), 40.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a description of the term "colonialist cinema" see Femi Okiremuete Shaka, "The Politics of Cultural Conversion in Colonialist African Cinema," *CineAction 37* (June 1995):51-76.

^{iv} Shaka differentiates between "colonialist cinema" and "colonial, instructional cinema." He defines colonial instructional cinema as "an educational practice dedicated to teaching Africans modern methods of doing things." Femi Shaka Okiremuete, "Instructional Cinema in Colonial Africa: An Historical Reappraisal," *Ufahamu 27*, no. 1-3 (1999): 28, 44.

^v Shaka, "Instructional," 41.

^{vi} Ibid., 43.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} In his introduction to *Black African Cinema*, Nwachukwu Ukadike writes: "A close examination of this [black African] cinema reveals that colonialism, neocolonialism, and their social and political issues dominate its themes. Such trends derive from the Third World cinema's seeking to: '(1) decolonize the mind; (2) contribute to the development of a radical consciousness; (3) lead to a revolutionary transformation of society; and (4) develop new film language with which to accomplish these tasks.'" Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 7.

^{ix} Ukadike alludes to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's canonical postcolonial text, *Decolonising the Mind*, in which Ngugi discusses the effect of imperialism on Africa and African cultures, see Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (London : J. Currey ; Portsmouth, N.H. : Heinemann, 1986).

^x Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 7.

^{xi} I refer to a term used to describe traditional Shona inheritance laws in which the male relatives of the deceased husband could inherit the deceased's wife, children, and, in the case of *Neria*, property.

^{xii} Diedre L. Badejo, "African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent," *Research in African Literatures 29*, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 94-111. and Anthonia C. Kalu, "Women and the Social Construction of Gender in African Development," *Africa Today 43* no. 3 (July-Sep 1996): 269-289.

^{xiii} Kalu, "Social Construction," par. 16.

^{xiv} Badejo, "African Feminism," 94.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Gwendolyn Mikell, "African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation." *Feminist Studies 21* no. 2 (Summer 1995), 406.

^{xvii} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies 62*, (1981): 156-157.

^{xviii} I use the term “Third World” with misgivings and recognize the problematic connotations of this terminology. However problematic, “Third World” is a term used by Gayatri Spivak and others cited in this paper and is employed for the sake of consistency.

^{xix} Kenneth W. Harrow, “Women With Open Eyes, Women of Stone and Hammers: Western Feminism and African Feminist Filmmaking Practice,” in *African Cinema*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow, (Trenton, New Jersey:African World Press, 1999), 226.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 231.

^{xxi} Manthia Diawara, “Oral Literature and African Film: Narratology in Wend Kuuni,” in *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen. (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 203.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 206.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*

^{xxvi} Elizabeth Mermin, “A Window on Whose Reality? The Emerging Industry of Senegalese Cinema,” in *African Cinema*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow. (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 1999), 205.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 205.

^{xxviii} “Resolutions of the Third World Film-Makers’ Meeting, Algiers, Algeria 1973,” in *African Experiences of Cinema*, eds. Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (London:British Film Institute, 1996): 17-24.

^{xxix} Jean-Marie Teno, “Freedom: The Power to Say No,” trans. Paul Willemen, in *African Experiences of Cinema*, eds. Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (London:British Film Institute, 1996), 71.

^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 71.

^{xxxi} Media for Development Trust is a non-profit organization that works closely with organizations from South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States.

^{xxxii} The British Overseas Development Administration is run by a branch of the British government called the Department for International Development. While the aim of this governmental organization is to decrease world poverty and to support sustainable development, it is important to remember that as a branch of the British government it necessarily must support the political aims and goals of the United Kingdom.

^{xxxiii} PLAN International is a child-focused non-profit international aid organization that seeks to help children living in poverty.

^{xxxiv} “Resolutions,” 21.

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*

^{xxxvi} Teshome H. Gabriel, “Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics,” in *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen. (London:British Film Institute, 1989), 55.

^{xxxvii} Gabriel is reluctant to define Third Cinema because of its mutability. He does offer the following as elucidation “Independent film-makers seeking representation through filmic discourse need access to power to express them. Somewhere between this access to power and representation lies the battle between history and popular memory, between cinemas of the system and Third Cinema.” Ibid.

^{xxxviii} Ibid.

^{xxxix} Ibid., 53.