

In Conversation:

Tsitsi Dangarembga, Filmmaker, Writer, Cultural Activist
speaks to *Beti Ellerson*

It has now been over 20 years since Tsitsi Dangarembga was catapulted to international attention with her first novel Nervous Conditions. Shortly after its publication she began work in filmmaking as a mode of communication. She has become a cultural ambassador for Africa and Zimbabwe in addition to other capacities in the area of cultural production and scholarship. Here she discusses her role and experiences as writer, filmmaker, scholar, producer, film organizer, and cultural professional.

Beti: Tsitsi, you have had a parallel trajectory as writer and filmmaker, how did these interests take shape?

Tsitsi: Initially my idea was to develop another skill, besides prose writing, that would enable me to earn a living. At that time, in the mid 1980's, I could already see that skills in moving images narration were essential to the national agenda. Our then Minister of Finance, Bernard Chidzero, also saw a role for motion picture in development. That was good in that he incorporated film as an important medium for sending out development oriented messages (such as *Neria* – women's rights, and many HIV films such as *More Time*, *Everyone's Child* and *Yellow Card*. The down side of this was that film became identified with social messaging in the minds of the local public. We had a strange dichotomy: film was either frivolous, meaningless entertainment, or it was disseminated as didactic and developmental. The study of film theory and the way the medium speaks to the individual and shapes the individual consciousness, was still a specialist area. But I had a premonition about these matters, so I decided to study film as an adjunct to making my living. I was aware I could read up the theory on my own, but needed guidance in practical matters. So I researched schools in

filmmaking. It was one of the great blessings of my life that I was accepted at the German Film and Television Academy, Berlin, where I received excellent tuition.

Beti: What do you find to be similarities and differences? What relationship do you see between literature and cinema?

Tsitsi: At first I could not see any parallels in prose narrative and film narrative. I was surprised at how my approach to creating narrative simply did not work for film. I think the biggest difference for me was to understand the difference between who and why (prose) and what and why (film), i.e. character against action. It came to the point where I found that writing prose interfered with my learning the techniques of film narrative. But I was determined to conquer it. So I stopped writing prose. With practice and good teachers, slowly and agonisingly, I became proficient in creating for film. Now that I am able to write both fiction and screen, I am more aware of the similarities than the differences. The similarity is in what – character, plot, setting, and so forth – the traditional aspects of narrative. The difference is in how one manifests these to suit the medium.

Beti: Your role as film activist is apparent in your various initiatives in the area of cinema. In 1992 you created Nyerai Films, a film production company in Harare. What is its mission and what are some of the projects that it has undertaken?

Tsitsi: The mission of Nyerai Films is to produce and distribute compelling international-standard, moving images on issues that our societies have difficulty in engaging with. Zimbabwean society is a very secretive society. People seem to thrive on intrigue and subterfuge. This means the real problems are rarely discussed in the open with the idea of finding solutions. Our idea is to bring these issues to public attention through film. For example, one film that Nyerai Films co-produced concerns child sexual abuse. In the story in question was the abuse of a primary schoolchild by her headmaster, with the tacit consent of parents and other adults. This went on until one teacher started to question the situation. The woman who played the questioning teacher said she wanted the role because in our script we had showed that anything could be talked about, even if our societies thought the issues were ‘unspeakable’ as Toni Morrison so often describes in her writing.

So Nyerai Films’ mission is to make the unspeakable speakable. This is done by presenting difficult topics in the form of a compelling narrative,

with all the visual and narrative spectacle that makes film engaging. This is one of the key issues, I find: what is to be the source of spectacle? Because spectacle in film is what is engaging visually. No one will watch a film for long if it hasn't got any kind of visual spectacle. Sometimes the spectacle is only suggested, as in the short film about the abused girl, called *Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name)*. Of course, a child having intercourse with her headmaster is a spectacle. We don't show it. We only suggest it, but everyone fills in the act for themselves. It took me some time to distinguish between overt and covert spectacle.

Beti: You are a member of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ). What are its goals and how do your activities and interests as a film professional coalesce with the organization?

Tsitsi: When Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe was formed in 1996, its general objective was to increase the participation of women in the film industry in the country. I joined the organisation in 1998, at the personal request of the then Chair, the late Petronilla Munongoro, who was a Production Manager. That will always remain one of my highlights of my time with the organization—the fact that a competent woman called on another competent woman to work together in the medium. However, I quickly saw that the organisation's goal could not be fulfilled without some sort of training or capacity building element to the programme, and most of the women who wanted to depict the things important to them in motion picture had no or little training.

Realising this, I racked my brains for a platform from which to spring activities that gave women a chance in the industry, and sought to redress the kinds of images and messaging that women were not comfortable with. This idea took the form of a festival, which offers sponsors a platform, while at the same time enables them to contribute to worthwhile projects. The festival was the woman-centred International Images Film Festival for Women, whose first edition was in 2002. The festival features films with a female protagonist in line with a festival theme that is decided on each year. As I had hoped, we were able to stage other events in addition to the main festival. These other events include outreach programmes to communities that cannot reach the festival; training seminars, which produced the above-mentioned film on child sexual abuse *Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name)*. WFOZ membership is increasing, especially amongst young women, who realise that moving images in this day of the Internet offer a career path. The enthusiasm that has

stemmed from young women, and international filmmakers who have heard about the organisation as well as some who have attended the festival and met the women of WFOZ, has led to some remarkable developments.

One of these is the quarterly newsletter, *Wild Track*. We came up with the name to incorporate the idea that women are still not in the mainstream with respect to the medium, no matter how institutions speak about the woman question. The situation of women with respect to film sounds 19th century, and from the point of view of a woman filmmaker it is. Few countries have significant percentages of women in the industry. Fewer countries still have quotas of money spent in the industry going to women according to their equivalence in the population. *Wild Track* talks about all the activities of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe. It talks about the films members make, such as the recently released documentary by Porcia Mudavanhu, *Ungochani (Homosexuality)*. *Wild Track* presents the far-reaching successes of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe. There are so many of these successes, besides the festival and productions like *Ungochani (Homosexuality)* and *Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name)*.

We have interns from various institutions each year vying for places in the office. Sometimes the departments of these institutions ask us to contribute to their planning. Then WFOZ members interact with the communities through our outreach screenings and subsequent discussions. Our films are invited to festivals, or members are invited to conferences. The important feedback from these events is included in the newsletter. Finally, we strive to continue our training programmes. Any news on training, whether our own seminar, or seminars by other organisations that our members or interns attend, are also included in *Wild Track*. Naturally, we also feature our current productions. *Wild Track* is a kind of barometer on the local film industry, as few events of note take place without a WOFZ member, or a person who is connected to WOFZ, being involved in some way. I always say it is hard to find, at the present moment, a film in Zimbabwe that is being shot without someone who has learnt something from periods spent at either WFOZ, or its sister organisation, Nyerai films. I do not think this is an exaggeration. It would be great for us if someone could do the research and verify.

Beti: International Images Film Festival for Women in Harare (IIFF) created in 2002, of which you are founder and director, is significant in its scope and vision. One important interest of the Festival is to mine visual representation,

in particular, of African women. It is exciting to see this critical engagement with the critique of the image. How was IIFF conceptualized and what are some of its goals and objectives?

Tsitsi: IIFF was founded in 2002, a year which saw a proliferation of beauty contests in Zimbabwe and in the southern African region. We resolved to question society's reduction of women to the object of the gaze, where the gaze is male and leads to male gratification. This time-honoured theoretical maxim is a starting point, which needed to be taken further in the Zimbabwean context, where many other possibilities of oppression beyond the male gaze existed. These ideas of the male gaze and making a narrative in film that does not rely on the male gaze are very foreign to just about the whole world. This is why it was particularly exciting when I was invited to take part in a meeting of African Women Filmmakers last year (2010), organised by the Goethe Institute in Johannesburg. As I understood it, the purpose of the meeting was to come up with some concrete and specific programmes that would contribute to the voice of women filmmakers on the African continent. This has also been the aim of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe, although WFOZ confined itself initially to Zimbabwe and then to the region and only thereafter to the continent.

In any case, the meeting organised by the Goethe Institute was immensely stimulating to the continental and Diaspora filmmakers and film theorists who attended. The gathering formulated a manifesto that requested proper gender desks at all media outlets as well as 50% of funding for any media related exercise to be directed towards female players. This request was made to be in line with SADC quotas on women's representation in decision making, since the filmmakers were aware of how often the role of the media is ignored in decision making issues. The meeting to ratify the manifesto was duly held at IIFF 2010, with delegates from Africa and European countries. We have so far received a small grant from the Urgent Action Fund. We have put in proposals for more funds for our advocacy in this regard, amongst our other activities.

Beti: You did your doctoral studies in African Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin. I am intrigued by the proposed title of your thesis, "The exotic has always already been known: changing the content of the black signifier as a means of improving reception of African films." Please talk about the research, your findings and the contributions you would like it to make to African cinema studies.

Tsitsi: I have not completed my doctoral thesis, but I am hoping to find the means to do so. The idea for this research was inspired by the work on gender as a signifier in film, particularly the work of Laura Mulvey. My reading of Mulvey was that biological differences correspond to systematic differences with respect to how individuals are portrayed in film stories. According to Mulvey, the man is portrayed as the dominant character, while the female has no significance in herself in film narrative, but is only represented as an object of male gratification. This immediately said to me that the female is only represented as a figment of the male imagination. I thought one could expand the categories of difference beyond sexual difference, or even gender difference, to incorporate other aspects of difference. For me, these other categories of difference mean also race. However, I think Mulvey's analysis can be extended to any other category of social difference such as class, or sexual difference, or indeed religious faith. What strikes me about Mulvey's theory is that it gives us mechanisms for analysing outcomes of certain interactions based on the degree of difference or similarity of the players. If that is unintelligible, that is precisely what I want to articulate in my research.

Beti: Thirty-one years after independence, twenty-three years after your novel *Nervous Conditions*, a quintessential discourse on post-colonial identity, how would you assess Zimbabwean culture today and what are your hopes for its future, especially as it relates to cinema culture.

Tsitsi: In my opinion, the average Zimbabwean has become more desperate in the years since independence in 1980. Desperation is never a good state to be in because then one lets oneself open to all sorts of attacks which one would not otherwise give in to. Zimbabwe has indeed opened itself wide to attacks from the international community that would never have been launched against us thirty one years ago. Zimbabweans are accused of wholesale corruption from the bottom to the top. We are accused of poor fiscal management at government level. This poor fiscal management translates into either ignorance or wholesale corruption. Zimbabwe is accused of human rights abuse. We are accused of sabotaging our own economy and of defying international protocol. The list is endless. All the accusations can be traced to a single problem. This problem is called lack of morality in global parlance. It is a lack of 'unhu' in the languages understood in Zimbabwe, or a lack of 'ubuntu' in the wider languages of our region.

So I think, yes, we in Zimbabwe have lost the knowledge in the intervening thirty years of what it means to be human, to be ‘munhu’, and have humanity, ‘unhu’. We have listened too much to propaganda that tells us about our own inhuman destructiveness. We have read too many books and seen too many films that depict us as losers in the battle of knowledge. In my opinion, Zimbabwean culture today is a culture of intimidation, fear, malice and ill won gains. I do not know of a single sector, my sector included, where rewards are given in accordance to merits, whether these rewards are given by the government or international organisations. I can only hope that the people who control Zimbabwe’s narratives and artistic output understand soon the destruction they are doing to the nation by their current practices.

Tsitsi Dangaremba: Filmography

Passport to Kill, 1993

Neria, script for movie by Godwin Mawuru, 1992

Everyone’s Child, 1996

The Puppeteer, 1996

The Elephant People, 2000

On the border, 2000

High Hopes, 2004

Kare Kare Zvako, 2005

Growing Stronger, 2005

Pamvura (At the water), 2005

Peretera Maneta (Spell my name), 2006

Hard Earth – Land rights in Zimbabwe

Mother’s Day, 2006

Nyami-Nyami & the Evil Eggs, 2010

I Want a Wedding Dress

Prizes/Awards

Commonwealth Writers Prize, 1989, *Nervous Conditions*

Winner of UNESCO Children's and Human Rights Award, 2006, *Peretera Maneta*

Winner Zanzibar International Film Festival, 2006 for her film *Peretera Maneta*

Winner Gender, Equality & Media Award, South Africa, 2006

Winner of Golden Dhow Zanzibar, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*

Winner of Short Film Award Cinemaaficano Milano, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*

Short Film Award ZIFF, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*

Special Jury Mention Amakula International Film Festival Kampala, Uganda, 2005,
Kare Kare Zvako

Special Jury Mention, Corto in Bra Film Festival, Italy, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*