

Lecture of Irene Jung:

“Women in film: searching for space” – a contribution to defending women’s rights

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I am not a filmmaker. I organize a thematic film festival in the university city of Tuebingen, Germany, called “Insights into Women’s Worlds”. The theme: human rights of women, how women in different cultures suffer violence, but also defend these women’s rights.

I am not a filmmaker, but I see myself as a promoter and a communicator, who seeks to enter into a dialogue with the film directors present at our festival; and also to connect them to other filmmakers, who could not be present. I try to foment an open conversation throughout the continents, and this moment is a contribution to it.

So I invite to join me, although they are not physically present, the filmmakers from three continents, who discussed at our round table just two weeks ago about the question that most urges us: how can we, through films, defend human rights of women?: the Argentinean-German director Jeanine Meerapfel, who has presented several of her films at this film festival of Havana, veteran of human rights in filmmaking; Ayse Polat, born in Turkey, whose film “En Garde” won this year the Silver and Golden Leopards at the filmfestival of Locarno; and Tunisian director Nawfel Saheb Etaba, who brought his awarded first feature film “El Kotbia” to our film fest.

We talked about the ethics that should prevail when we make films about women who have been victims of grave human rights violations. My organization, TERRE DES FEMMES, fights against forms of violence as women trafficking, forced marriage, honors killings, genital mutilation, domestic violence and the social rights of textile workers in the world factories called maquiladoras.

One year ago, in our previous round table it was already common ground, that it was very important to not present these women only as victims, as objects – for one side for a reason of justice, because many of these women are very capable of being subjects, of thinking, fighting and developing strength and solidarity, confronted with the most adverse situations.

One of our documentaries of South Africa, “Red ribbon around my house” shows this very clearly: Pinky, a South African woman who got the HIV virus through blood transfusion, is rejecting being a victim. She does not hide the fact that she has AIDS, as her daughter wants her to. She carries the mark of AIDS with pride, campaigns against the illness. And – she goes on living her life, sometimes partying, preferably among other beings marked with AIDS as she is.

For us within TERRE DES FEMMES it is also important for our goal of provoking solidarity with these women. When they are presented only as victims, the audience wants to turn away their eyes, because they feel helpless and traumatized by such a fate, that seems to be without any hope of a way out. But, when we show their strength and their will to change this destiny, the spectators feel motivated to participate in this fight.

In this respect our tour with the film “Senorita Extraviada” by Lourdes Portillo - who is actually present as jury member at this festival, and was awarded here two years ago - together with a very brave fighter against the femicides in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, named Judith Galarza, was a huge success. Impressing expressions of support was poured over her by the audiences of 12 cities, NGOs, and representatives of the Austrian and German governments and parliaments.

Jeanine Meerapfel scrutinizes further: “When the stories of these women are told from within their inner world, their reasons, then it is not any more an issue of their role as victims. Then we enter into the political and social surrounding we are living in, and how the surroundings condition these person. So, in a country like mine, Argentina, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo were really the only ones to raise their voices – because they did not know the ways of men. And these ways were: I know such and such, and through him I will find out where is my disappeared son. And the mothers said: like that we will not find out anything. And they joined and said, very naiv and directly: we want to know, where are our children. And they went to demonstrate into the streets, in a time, when NOBODY dared to take to the streets, because it was the reign of terror.

We all know, that history is being written by those who win the wars. Therefore it is important, that filmmakers transport the voices of those others, the voices of those who do not write the official history, but the unofficial history”. And we think, this is especially important for women.

We asked us also, what is the responsibility of the film directors with their figures. In the process of filmmaking: is it possible that we make them victims a second time, including them and using them for the story we want to tell?

Jeanine Meerapfel told us about moments in the production of her films that made her reflect about it: first, one of them in a documentary about the history of Melek, a Turkish women worker in Germany, who decides after many years to go back to Turkey, tired of the xenophobia and discrimination she experienced in Germany. Jeanine then wanted her to tell her all the things she had suffered in Germany. And Melek said to her: “You want me to be the poor little Turkish woman? I won’t give you this image, because I am more than that”. This conflict was solved by Jeanine, integrating this discussion between director and main figure into the film, making Melek subject again, and offering the spectator the possibility of reflecting also about the relation of power between director and figure of the film.

Jeanine says: “We always use to some extend the persons in order to be able to count the story. But we have to assume it consciously, responsibly, and make these persons participate in the decisions that have to do with their traumatic experience. We should not use the persons with preconceived ideas and try to prove with them a theory. We, the tellers of histories, should reflect about this problem permanently.”

Another point of discussion was the necessity of putting the spectators also to reflect, and not letting him just stay in a state of pure identification with the characters of the film. For that, it was important to show the figures in all their ambiguity and ambivalence which characterizes all human beings.

Jeanine went on: “It is not only the question of **what** we tell, but also **how** we tell it. When we talk about human rights, of human rights of men and women, it is also a human right to be able to understand, to be able to develop empathy. We are living in a world with a film industry that promotes fear, that does not leave it to the persons to make themselves their own idea about situations, to develop their own feelings and an opinion of their own.

It is very important, that we develop forms of telling our stories, that do not satisfy the pattern of good - bad, victimizer – victim. But that we describe precisely the ambiguity, the different political, social, cultural situations and their origins, and give the spectators the chance to develop their own opinion

Ayse Polat continues: “There are no correct answers – it is about finding out which are the correct questions. And I am not interested in this easy, superficial way of only provoking emotions. I want to make films that make people think. And I find it fascinating in filmmaking, that one can achieve, that a character like Alice, main figure from “En Garde”, who has many problems, with whom nobody wants to identify, because in reality she is a kind of anti-figure, that they start to understand this character, and through it also start to understand themselves.”

My theme today is: women in movies. And for this theme, the revelation for me as a film fest director was our only male filmmaker, Nawfel. He presented us with a provocative statement and thus gave us some new threads so we could continue weaving them: men who are victimizers are also victims.

He explained that it was logical and just, that women insist in their rights to be respected, and that they would address mainly women. But for him as male filmmaker it was important to address specially men. To tell them: “We should not violate these women’s rights, not only because they are human beings who should be respected. But moreover, we should gain conscience about the fact, that we cannot develop totally as whole human beings, if we insist in assuming only our traditional roles of macho men.

We lose much, if we do not allow the male **and** the female side intrinsic in any human being, to flourish. If we are not able to express those parts of ourselves that have to do with sensitivity, with empathy, with the willingness of assuming and accepting our weaknesses. We have much to gain, if we accept this part of ourselves and if we come to a relationship of dialogue, without impositions with our women – our mothers, wives, sisters and daughters.”

This may sound as something easy, a bit of willingness here and there. But we are also talking here about patriarchal cultures, where a young boy, instrumentalized by his surroundings, is obliged to kill his sister, perhaps the most cherished by him, because somebody saw her taking a look at an unknown man in the street. We do not need to be psychologists to imagine, that this boy has to become practically schizophrenic to survive this psychologically.

Definitely the issue of victim – victimizer is an issue to be discussed more profoundly. And – we **need** feature films about men, who, although pressured by their surroundings, resist and decide **not** to commit the crime. Because focusing the victimizer also may create a certain fascination for that figure, and apparently the film

industry also is more interested in that perspective. I found it revealing that a friend of mine, documentalist for several decades, never wanted to make a film about victimizers, for that reason. The **only** occasion, she made an exception, making a film about a victimizer, was also **the only** occasion she made money with a film. All the other documentaries merely were able to cover the expenses..

Nawfel's film "El Kotbia", which tells of two women and two men, was very well received by the women of Maghreb - Tunisians, Maroquees, Algerians. Not so by the men. And - it did not find any distributor, probably because it did not satisfy the clichés that the Western world wants to see confirmed in films about Maghreb, about the Arabian Islamic world. So, there is also a road to be traveled, and in another round table in the future perhaps we will evaluate, what is necessary for this message to be accepted also by the men.

And – Nawfel addressed also women, telling them: "As much as men suffer a big ignorance of the inner world of women, you also suffer of a big ignorance about the feelings of these men, who are victims of the mutilating role definition of the traditional male world. You have to investigate further into this interior world of men, to be able to influence it. Because you have more conscience about **what it means** to be victims".

For us within TERRE DES FEMMES this indicated a direction: that besides addressing women, we should, **more** that we have done up to now, address also men, and to integrate them more into our work in favor of women's rights – and the world of cinemas, distributors and producers is still a world, where men prevail – and to reinforce the rights of men also, to develop themselves as whole human beings. To work side by side against social structures that violate women, children, men, elderly and disabled people. Then, we will have to claim less and less violations of women's rights.