

# Sisters in Law

(2005, Florence Ayisi and Kim Longinotto, Cameroon)

## Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area: Critical Debates (AL) Filmmakers' Theories (AL)

### Rationale for study

- *Sisters in Law* offers opportunities to study a documentary film by female co-directors where the narrative style and documentary techniques empower the women and children it represents, in a developing West African community.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Grace 35:36 - 39:20
- Reverend Cole in court 56:42 - 1:01

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

- Side -shot of the man, Che Stephen and Grace Chi, with Stephen sitting behind her, as though he is protecting her. His hands are enveloping her.
- He is captured tilting his head to side to suggest his concern for Grace.
- Close-up of Grace shows her bewilderment-her eyes are looking down.
- The State Prosecutor, Vera Ngassa is sitting down behind her desk. She and Che Stephen are

framed so they are both at eye level, suggesting that he can be comfortable when talking to her, in spite of her position of authority.

- A steady long-take focused on Grace as the man explains how he found her.
- Camera zooms in to reveal Grace's wounds on her back.
- Close-up shots of Grace when the Prosecutor asks her questions.
- Steady camera movement from the Prosecutor to Grace and back again enables the dialogue between them to unfold.
- Whilst it is day, the lighting inside the office is dark, perhaps suggesting that electricity is being saved or scarce.
- Female judge, Beatrice Ntuba captured walking stridently towards the camera, as she enters court at the beginning of the sequence highlighting her forthrightness and authority.
- The judge is framed in the centre of the shot with the court attendees around her, standing to signify respect for her position.
- The accused man is framed behind his Defence lawyer at this point, whilst the latter's confidence in his abilities to acquit him are suggested by the way he stands and claps his hands.
- As the proceedings begin, the accused, Reverend Cole is captured in a medium-close-up as the camera gradually zooms in.
- The female Prosecutor is framed in a medium-shot, capturing her sense of measured judgement by locating her in the centre of the shot.
- The gradual alternating movement from the accused Reverend to the female Prosecutor reinforces the flow of the proceedings, as the dialogue moves the narrative towards its final outcome.
- Lighting around his face is low-key, not revealing his face fully, but suggesting that this detail is not significant. What is at play are his brutal actions (wife beating) and his allegations that she committed adultery.
- The lighting is enhanced to show the man crying,

when the judge is ready to give her judgement.

- Camera movement to the right of the screen frames his wife in a sitting position capturing her composure throughout the scene.
- Camera movement from the accused when he is found guilty to the wide frames a wide-shot, where she sits with a male companion. Her subtle smile is captured.
- Camera shots are overwhelmingly in medium or close-up throughout the scene, enhancing the tension of the court room and creating the uncomfortable atmosphere as it is warm and the small room is overcrowded.

### Mise-en-Scène

- When Stephen and Grace walk into the office, we see that it is cluttered, but functional with its computer, desk and fax machine. The air-conditioning machine on the desk highlights how hot and uncomfortable it is.
- Framing the Prosecutor's desk with her paperwork, an Oxford English Dictionary, a phone and a bell reinforces the idea that she is official and overwhelmed with her work.
- In spite of the limited space and make-shift look of the office, the State Prosecutor's approach remains authoritative, practical and constructive.
- The judge stands out when she arrives in court, she is wearing a white blouse.
- The male Defence lawyer is well dressed in a suit and tie, suggesting his social position and wealth, when compared with how the other men are dressed in court.
- The accused Reverend wears a pale blue short-sleeve shirt, suggesting attempts to look smart and formal, whilst taking the heat into account.
- The accused's wife is sitting folding her arms, suggesting her confidence in the proceedings, without being intimidated by her husband's accusations and the male lawyer's language which calls her 'loose'.
- The accused wife wears colourful traditional clothing and does not cover her head or face.

### Editing

- Long-takes when Che Stephen explains how he found Grace, enabling the man's account to be heard in good time.
- Slow pace of editing enables Grace to be at relative ease when she is questioned, allowing her response to unfold and contribute to the construction of the overall narrative.
- The steady pace of the shots suggests the

gravity of Grace's maltreatment and reinforces the idea that she is given space to speak, whilst she is listened to and taken seriously.

- The slow pace of the edits and the duration of the shots suggest that a procedure is in place to address Grace's situation.
- Slow pace of the editing permits the interaction between the Defence and Prosecutor to unfold.
- The long-takes enable the pauses to be meaningful so the spectator can form a response.
- The steady pace of the shots suggests that the court proceedings are in control, with the presiding female judge exercising her wisdom and authority.

### Sound

- We hear the State Prosecutor's voice before we see her. This is effective as she speaks with a clear and reassuring voice which suggests that she has the matter in hand.
- Diegetic sounds from outside the office indicating the limited quiet space of the office amongst this simple community.
- No non-diegetic music, sustaining authenticity of place and its simplicity.
- A diegetic voice begins the sequence, prompting the court to rise when the judge enters. This sound reinforces the sense of formality at play and works in tandem with the respect commanded by the court, for the judge.
- The effectiveness of the sequence and its overall impact draws on the diegetic sounds of the people attending the hearing. The unfolding narrative relies on the authenticity and realism of the people's voices and the diegetic sounds of the court.
- We hear the judge's clear and strong voice as she moves the proceedings along, even when the camera does not capture her.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- The representation of Stephen in this sequence is significant within the wider narrative. He is represented as compassionate and caring when other sequences represent men's brutality and violence towards their women.
- Madam Prosecutor is portrayed as authoritative but compassionate, commanding Stephen's respect. Unlike other sequences

where men are brought to account by women with legal authority, Stephen defers to her wisdom and experience.

- There is no conflict between Stephen and the Prosecutor (as is portrayed in other sequences) where patriarchal attitudes and male violence are in question. Stephen and the Prosecutor engage in a dialogue which puts Grace first, and does not involve any power politics between them.
- Grace's situation represents the vulnerability and danger to children in this society, when they are often subject to physical neglect and abuse.

### **Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)**

- The look of the film reinforces the underdevelopment of this society: people's simple but traditional clothing, the limited physical resources and the basic buildings and spaces.
- The inside of the state Prosecutor's office is not very modern, but the importance of addressing all forms of injustice, in this case against children is evident, even in a simple office set-up.
- The documentary looks and feels raw, with a visual style capturing realism and authenticity. The clothing and mise-en-scène, correlate with the lives of those whose stories are central to the narrative.
- The lack of glamour works with the documentary's movement towards revealing the truth and giving a narrative space to the stories of the vulnerable women and children in this village community.
- Realism in the court scene captures the practical set up, but formal proceedings.
- The dress code distinguishes between the legal representatives of the court and those attending from within the community.
- Realism captured through real lives unfolding in real locations, as the narrative is constructed. Real people, not actors, reinforcing truth and the authenticity of the story.
- Compare *Sisters in Law* with Kim Longinotto's documentary *Divorce*, Iranian Style in terms of subject – matter and documentary techniques.

### **CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts**

#### **Social**

- A rural community in Kumba Town, Cameroon with relative poverty and underdevelopment.

- The position of women is determined by patriarchal views of men who may regard women as their property. These views are often reinforced by family, friends and the village community.
- Whilst the law legislates for equality of gender, those who follow Islam, particularly Sharia Law still believe that women are not allowed their independence.
- Under Sharia Law, women's rights and freedoms are very limited and they must defer to a male guardian, a father or husband (for example, permission to leave the house).
- The rights and freedoms of children within this community can be precarious.
- Schools are set up and compulsory in Cameroon up to the age of 14, but books and uniforms must be paid for, so often sons rather than daughters are prioritised, thus perpetuating women's scope for opportunity and financial independence.
- Young children are often expected to help out with farming chores.
- Female judge in the court-room challenges the traditional views held by men, which work against women's rights and fundamental freedoms. Would a male judge reach different verdicts?

#### **Production**

- Florence Ayisi and Kim Longinotto were supported by the non-profit media organisation 'Women Make Movies' (set up in New York in 1972), running workshops teaching women how to make films. Women Make Movies distributes *Sisters in Law*, within the context of its wider aims to support filmmaking by female directors who embark on themes about women globally and it has supported the other documentary work by Kim Longinotto.
- The idea for the documentary grew from a visit to Kumba Town, West Cameroon, which is Florence Ayisi's home town, whilst she and Kim Longinotto were going to originally film a documentary about the police.

### **SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Critical Debates and Filmmakers' Theories**

#### **Starter Questions**

- *Sisters in Law* is regarded as Observational Cinema. What filmmaking techniques are associated with this style of documentary?
- Would *Sisters in Law* construct a different

narrative or give different perspectives of women's lives, if the directors were men? How significant to the documentary's pace, narrative and conclusions, is the fact that both directors are women?

- To what extent is the narrative space given to women and children determined by the female point of view of the directors?
- We might say that *Sisters in Law* belongs to the style of documentary filmmaking known as *Cinema Verité*. What are the distinctive features of this style of filmmaking and how effective are they in this documentary?
- How can Observational Cinema and *Cinema Verité* empower women?
- If truth is important to documentary filmmaking, what truths are revealed in *Sisters in Law*?