

Introduction

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RESEARCHERS IN QUEST OF IMAGES

The papers published in this special issue¹ have resulted from ethnographic studies carried out within the framework of a collective project entitled “Visual media and feminine identity dynamics in West Africa,”² which covered five West African countries (Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali).

The term “visual media” is defined here as the technological apparatus (tools, techniques, knowledge) used by private and public actors to make and disseminate visual information, and the images created by these technologies, whether they are still or moving, associated or not with oral or written narratives. The common characteristic of the technologies (photography, television, and video) these studies have been concerned with is that they have quickly disseminated all over the world, including through African societies, in the context of a globalization process, the cultural consequences of which are still a challenge to anthropologists [Appadurai 2001].

With this perspective, the main objective of our project was to test the hypothesis according to which visual media (especially photography and television) used in contemporary African societies have played, and are still playing, an important role in the emergence of alternative, hybrid, and individually-oriented identity constructions by women. This hypothesis stemmed from previous studies about the conditions of production and the social uses of photography in West Africa [Wendl and Behrend 1998; Wendl 1999; Nimis 1999; Werner 1999], which have evidenced the fact that the dissemination of this new visual technology had deeply modified the way African people were viewing other peoples, and themselves as well. Indeed, photography allowed people to construct photographic representations of themselves more in compliance with an identity no longer given once and for all, but constantly evolving in the frame of a modernization process dominated by colonial and post-colonial powers [Werner 2001]. In line with this result, we have supposed that visual technological innovations successively appropriated by these societies during the second half of the 20th century (chiefly cinema, video, and television) have inherited some of the power of truth photography has been entitled with [Tagg 1988], hence making them trustworthy representations of the world.

A review of the academic literature on the topic of visual media in Africa reveals that two approaches have been used to look at the appropriation of visual media by African societies. On the one hand, there are studies addressing this issue from a linear and mechanical “communication” perspective, as evidenced, for example, by the works of Bourgault [1995] and Auliff [1997] about the

production and dissemination of mass visual media in Nigeria. On the other hand, there are studies which, following in the footsteps of De Certeau's work [1980], have underlined the active character of media reception by subjects, who are able to use all sorts of tricks and tactics to circumvent and subvert the political and merchant-dominant order. This research perspective is illustrated, for instance, by ethnographic studies dealing with the relationships between electronic media and Islam in northern Côte d'Ivoire [Launay 1997], or the production and reception of video fiction movies in Ghana [Meyer 1999; Wendl 2005], and in Nigeria [Esan 1994; Haynes 1996; Oha 2000], where it is a large-scale social phenomenon.

Beyond the methodological problem raised by the use of small-scale ethnographic methods to study such a complex phenomenon, the comprehension of which requires being able to grasp the subject without excluding the structure, there lies a general theoretical issue on how to articulate the different hierarchical levels which can be distinguished within the so-called globalization process. For if there is a consensus on the necessity to understand the local while thinking the global, and reciprocally, the theoretical solution has not yet been found by those who try to stand back from the contemporary technological run-away, in order to better decipher its meaning.

The decision to focus on women, rather than men, to study the social use of visual media, resulted directly from our previous studies, which showed that African women had a particular relationship with visual media, and that they were playing a leading role in redefining gender relationships. In connection with these results, we should stress the importance attached to women in studies concerned with visual media in Africa. I shall mention Fuglesang's work [1994] about the domestic consumption of videotaped Indian movies by women in Kenya, and Schulz's study [2001] about the role locally produced musical video-clips produced in Mali have played in the emergence of a "modern" feminine identity in Mali. Last but not least, Abu-Lughod's studies [2002a, 2002b] should also be mentioned, as they seek to elucidate what might be the impact of locally made television series on Egyptian popular culture. But finally, one must note the scarcity of studies dealing with the way women are portrayed in local visual productions, despite the fact that some observations show that often they are negatively represented [Lyons 1990; Odejide 1996].

Generally speaking—and Africa is no exception—women develop a specific relationship to visual media, in the sense that their consumption is different from men's, from a qualitative as well as from a quantitative point of view. Thus, in West Africa, women do not consume the same visual products as men, as they would rather watch *soap operas* and *telenovelas* than sports programs or pornographic videos, while they are the biggest consumers of photographic portraiture. As a matter of fact, as keepers of the family group visual memory, they are the ones who order most of the photographic "reports" made on the occasion of family rituals such as baptisms, weddings and birthday parties. Moreover, they are sustaining a strong demand for individual photographic portraits, which reveals the attention they pay to their bodily appearance, and stresses its importance as a place of identity construction. Women also are making a massive use of visual media coming from non-African societies, whether in the form of still

images (printed love picture-stories imported from Europe) or moving images (Indian movies, or television series).

It should be stressed here that if women's consumption of visual media is not at the origin of the transformations of the feminine identity observed in Africa—they are related to structural causes, and long-lasting societal evolutions [Coquery-Vidrovitch 1994]—we did suppose that it could strengthen and channel them, by providing women with interpretative resources which might allow them to make comparisons with other cultures, to think over their own behavior, and to negotiate new relationships with men and/or the social group they belong to as a whole.

However, referring to this specific point, the different studies herein presented show the impossibility of assessing precisely the role of visual media in social change, given the number and the complexity of factors that come into play between visual media and users.

At the first level stands the social structure in which individuals find themselves tied up with statuses and roles according to their gender, age, and position in the social hierarchy. Whether these societies are more or less hierarchically organized, whether the economic and political modernization process is more or less advanced, does not change the fact that women are, always and again, caught into men's desire, and are socially dominated. It is evidenced by girls' generally lower educational level, limited access of women to the job market, and feminine individualization processes which fluctuate between the requirements of the group they belong to and a desire for a greater autonomy.

At the second level, Islam appears as an unavoidable factor in the use of visual media by women in the partially or predominantly Muslim societies we studied. The comparison between these different studies shows a wide range of situations, to such an extent that it would be better to talk about Islam in the plural than in the singular. Indeed, the specific relationship existing, in each country, between the religious sphere and the political power is a central issue to understand the social use of visual media. However, these differences should not obliterate the similarities, stemming from a common "Islamic habitus" that strictly regulates a feminine sexuality still largely devoted to reproduction within wedlock.

Finally, our studies reveal the multiplicity of individual factors which interfere in the reception process (age, educational level, marital status, and the length of time spent in an urban culture) and stress the complexity of feminine identity constructions torn between compliance to the prevailing social order and the necessity to adapt themselves to an economic and social environment characterized by a high level of instability and uncertainty. This is particularly true in urban areas, due to the current multifaceted crisis (not only economic, but also social and political), which favors the emergence of the individual as an actor relatively detached from his/her communal ties [Marie 1997], but henceforth facing such obligations as making the appropriate decisions without being given a *mode d'emploi* [Ehrenberg 1995: 304].

In other words, willingness and constraint characterize these individualization processes, as they are altogether promises for freedom and obligation for individuals to be more efficient, inasmuch as uncertainty about the future is henceforth the rule. For women know pretty well that marriage is not an everlasting protection, as marital instability is very high (through divorce, repudiation, or

widowhood), and one day or another they might be obliged to provide for their own needs. Moreover, even if marriage is successful, the prevailing economic crisis is so deep that nobody is protected from losing a job. In such an uncertain context, personal autonomy, which is a prerequisite for the elaboration and the success of a professional project, is not just a luxury but a vital necessity.

Lastly, we should stress here the difficulty to grasp this individualization phenomenon, the ambivalence and complexity of which go beyond the angelic way anthropologists often indulge themselves in representing it. For instance, by looking at television reception through a magnifying glass, they neglect the fact that these active and smart subjects who are consuming such pleasant entertainment are at the same time the target of a cultural industry, which makes a lot of money "selling receptive human brain time" to advertisers.³ In this case, economic interests interfere at every level of the production and marketing of television programs, such as *soaps* and *telenovelas*, which are designed as commodities, sold as commodities, and are ultimately used to sell all kinds of goods. Thus through multiple channels African women receive advertising messages extolling the virtues of products meant to make them more efficient in the accomplishment of their domestic chores, or to help them modify their physical appearance. As a matter of fact, as evidenced by the studies presented here, the body appears to be the key point where one may observe the interaction between globally oriented merchant logics and locally based individualization processes. This interaction becomes effective through the invitation repeatedly extended to women, not only to change their physical appearance (through a permanent renewal of clothes, accessories, hairstyle, and make-up), but also to modify their body itself through various techniques (diet, body-building, fitness activities, skin bleaching, or plastic surgery).

OUTLINE OF THE ISSUE

It is not usual in the field of social science to have an artistic glance be associated with a scientific one, as is the case in this issue. This innovative alliance between art and science would not have been possible without the help of the Nigerian artist Fatimah Tuggar, who gave us the right to use one of her computer montage works in this issue, for which I am very grateful.

This piece of art is analyzed by Yates McKee in a paper entitled "The Politics of the Plane: On Fatimah Tuggar's *Working Woman*" which comes in the first place of this issue. We learn that Tuggar's work pertains to an aesthetic trend called "Afro-futurism," which in common with social science interrogates from a critical stance the rhetorics of historical and technological innovation. From this point of view, what he writes about the way Tuggar is suggesting that technologies are never simply informational or technological, but are inseparably marked by narratives and iconic projections which surround them, is a perfect introduction to the central issue of this collective work.

Entitled "The Rise of Nigerian Women in the Visual Media," Erika Nimis' paper comes as the continuation of the work this historian has been carrying out for many years about the history of photography in West Africa [Nimis

1999] and, more specifically, about the role played by Yoruba photographers in the dissemination of this technique throughout West Africa [Nimis 2005]. Within the framework of this project, she has concentrated on the feminization of the profession of photographer and, to a larger extent, of visual media in Nigeria, since women are more and more involved in the production of fiction video movies, which is a fast-growing phenomenon in that country.

Applying an ethnographical method to his object of study, Jean-François Werner has chosen to study the reception of *telenovelas* by women in Dakar, a phenomenon that he describes thoroughly in a paper entitled "How Women Are Using Television to Domesticate Globalization." In the first part of his paper, he shows how the only national public television network functions as a filter between the external world and Senegalese society, by selecting programs intended, at the same time, to entertain people, to educate them, and to generate money. In the second part, this author shows how women, confronted with the social fragmentation caused by the reception of *telenovelas* within the domestic sphere, are displaying astonishing abilities to appropriate this media through intensive oral exchanges. This "TV talk" has been a most valuable analysis material to understand how women are taking advantage of *telenovelas* to make the boundaries that separate genders and generations move discreetly but surely.

The three other papers concerned with the relationships between visual media consumption and social change will be published in *Visual Anthropology*, Issue 20(1).

NOTES

1. With the exception of D. Schulz's one, for this author joined us later on.
2. This project was funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Fieldwork studies were carried out between 2002 and 2003.
3. This was said by Patrick Le Lay, chairman and managing director of the French private TV network TF1, and reported in a book entitled *Les dirigeants français face au changement* [Paris: Éditions du Huitième Jour, 2004].

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