

# **Documentary Films as a Safe Space to Promote Gender Equity in Higher Education Settings in Mozambique**

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May 2020



Final assignment submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for post-graduate degree in International Gender Studies at the GRÓ Gender Equality Studies and Training Programme.

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Reykjavík, Iceland, 2020



Esther and Ivan fellows of GRÓ-GEST Programme 2020

## Acknowledgments

God for allowing me to be alive and experience wonderful and precious moments of learning and engaging in gender equity purpose.

GRÓ-GEST Programme for selecting me and giving this opportunity to be part of the worldwide GEST family that believes and works towards gender equity and social justice. Particularly, I would like to thank you Guðrún Eysteinsdóttir who patiently and lovely supported me during the difficulties that I faced to arrive in Iceland, Dr. Randi Whitney Stebbins, Dr. Giti Chandra, Dr. Thomas Brorsen Smidt, Védís Sigrúnar Ólafsdóttir, and Nikkita Hamar Patterson for all your dedication and patience with all 2020 GEST Fellows.

My supervisor Halla Kristín Einaradótti and Mr. Ármann Hákon Gunnarsson who supported me during the production of my documentary film project.

My mom, Zélia Matusse, and my daughter, Enzilin Olívia, for supporting me and all my dreams even when these dreams sound impossible and difficult to achieve. Thank you for loving and believing in me.

My dearest friend and teacher from USA Gabriela Maruri who patiently and lovely supported me during the whole criminal records process. Thank you for your love and friendship.

The School of Communication and Arts at University Eduardo Mondlane in Mozambique through its Dean, Dr. João Miguel, who supported my application to the GRÓ-GEST Programme and provided me the confidence that I needed to pursue my education at the University of Iceland.

My co-workers Paula Chissico, Loidi Pacho, and Júlia Mahomana who kindly replaced me in my work and supported me during my studies in Iceland.

## **Abstract**

This essay is inspired by my living experience as an African feminist woman and media practitioner who believes that media, especially documentary films are interesting and important safe spaces to promote marginalized and alternative agendas so that gender equity and social justice can be addressed, presented, and normalized in the public sphere. In this paper, I use the Feminist Film Theory to conceptualize the debate regarding the possibilities that documentary films represent to incorporate female media practitioners and their agendas into the media industry, the challenges that women face as professionals inserted in a male-dominant profession, as well as the role that academia has to play in order to promote and shape a generation of media professionals that values women's leadership and understands the power of media as a public pedagogy that should be committed to a democratic and inclusive society. Finally, I propose the development of a media criticism syllabus that relies on the feminist pedagogy to introduce, reflect, and prepare journalism students at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique to analyze and practice alternative agendas regarding gender equity and social justice.

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## Introduction

“Imagine that countless films show men as simple minded little sex objects, and you despair of finding a strong role-model for your little boy (for whom you see other futures than slut, bitch or house husband)” (Thornham, 1999, p.18)

My experience as a young African woman media spectator and practitioner informs me that my social value relies on what means to be a woman in the gaze, fantasy, perspective, sensitiveness, and necessity of men. The way popular culture and film industry reproduce the space, narrative, and image of women does not represent me and many courageous and hard work women who surround me. In my entire existence, I was told that my value as a woman relies on self-respect, respect for others, being strong, and fight for being a woman who can make a difference in this world. However, the media depicts and constructs a reality about womanhood that excludes my truth and many other women's truths, which do not fit into the generalized, legitimized, and the well-massified idea of women as servers of the male expectations.

Driven by the same perception and ambivalences feminist movements launched in the 70s academic discussions and research that led to the conceptualization of the Feminist Film Theory. Feminist Film Theory emerged as contestation and criticism to Hollywood film industry that essentially brought females in the media spotlight as sexual objects and in domestic settings, which roles were to delight and serve the main character which usually tended to be active, powerful, and protector males (Kotsopoulos, 1986; Mulvey, 2001; Patel, 1995; Smelik, 2016; Thornham, 1999; Warren, 2010). According to these authors, the Feminist Film Theory brought a pertinent debate regarding the feminist criticism against the hegemonic patriarchal representation of white women, describing the way language and image were used in media to maintain and reinforce the status quo embedded into the traditional power relationship between men and women. However, the Feminist Film Theory soon showed its limitations since it excluded the intersectionality of race, homosexuality, and women agency in the reception process of media contents (Kotsopoulos, 1989; Smelik, 2016; Warren, 2010).

On the other hand, the Feminist Film Theory was willing to construct and operationalize a counter-hegemonic cinematic narrative, image, and language, which was called counter-cinema through which feminist filmmakers would be able to use their expertise, perspectives, and experiences of the world to give a sense of realistic womanhood into media outlets. This ambition led to envision documentary film as a new, independent, and alternative media platform to expose, address and mobilize transformation regarding hegemonic patriarchal mainstream media ideology and structures of power (Gürkan & Ozan, 2015; Koch, 1985; Nordicom, 2014; Smith et al., 2013; Thornham, 1999; Warren, 2010).

Nevertheless, it soon became clear that mobilizing and involving women as filmmakers and decision-makers in the cinematic production would not automatically transform the culture and the meanings regarding power relationships that sustain patriarchy. These conclusions relied on the fact that cinema and its narratives are a mirror of what people already know and build sense about their lives, their options, and ideologies as members of a given society. Cinema is ultimately a space of culture and competing ideologies, which demands educational, institutional and social reforms, as well as social interventions to promote new values and social meanings that will lead to an alternative cinematic narrative and image regarding gender equity (Juel, 2006; Kabadayi, 2012; Nichols, 2001; Nordicom, 2014; Penley, 1989; Sapar et al., 2019; Thornham, 1999).

Taking into account the need to promote gender-balanced perspectives of men and women into media outlets, as well as to open spaces for other dynamics of sexuality, race, social minority groups, and cultural contexts, I claim that documentary films are important safe and alternative spaces through which gender equity agendas may be addressed and exposed. By safe space, I mean that marginalized agendas and marginalized social groups find a platform to express their voices and experiences in a democratic space, out of preconceptions and social judgments of their perspectives of the world. This safe place also



means a secure and democratic platform for women to direct their films out of stereotypes that tend to cast doubts on their skills and leadership.

Likewise, I argue that documentary films are open and democratic spaces to promote feminist pedagogy, media literacy as public pedagogy, alternative language, and alternative ideology into educational media settings to promote the values, knowledge, and meanings that are necessary to challenge and transform the hegemonic patriarchal status quo. As a media practitioner in the field of the documentary film, as well as media criticism lecturer in a university of a global south country, I propose the elaboration of a syllabus in the field of media criticism for communication and art students, through which feminist pedagogy and media literacy as public pedagogy are applied, as well as documentary films, are used to promote engagement and understanding of gender equity and its social and historical value.

The present essay is divided in (i) introduction, where I present the rationality of this essay; (ii) the literature review in which I dig into the theoretical foundations of documentary films as alternative and safe spaces for women's and marginalized agendas, narratives, and perspectives of social existence; (iii) the methodology through which I present the importance of feminist pedagogy and documentary film production as pedagogical practices that enable to create within the academic spaces transformative approaches regarding media management and contents; (iv) the overview of the media criticism syllabus where I present the context that drives my interest in developing critical reflections and practices, as well as the contents and audio-visual materials that I propose to be used in my classes and; (v) the conclusion in which I restate the main aim of this essay.

## Literature Review

### Feminist Film Theory and the Utopia of Positive Image of Women in the Media

“Imagine:

That everything you have ever read uses only female pronouns, she, her, meaning both men and women. Recall that most of the voices on radio and faces on TV are female, especially when important events are in the news” (Thornham, 1999, p.17).

The realm of media constitutes one more example and institution that proves, reinforces, and legitimates males' privilege, power, ideology, and control of the logic and norms of the world. In this context, claims Thornham (1999), involving women in the media industry is a simplistic fashion of looking for solutions regarding women's reputation and representation in the media. Likewise, Smelik (2016) explains that Feminist Film Theory proposes a counter-cinema ideology into the media industry that aims to introduce dignity into women's image and promote an active and more realistic representation of women in the media. Similarly, Cornwall (2016) asserts "And yet the popular media is a powerful vehicle for even more limiting representations of women, extending into hostile, misogynistic and derogatory portrayals shot through with sexist stereotyping. Changing these representations is a form of social action that can have a powerful impact on women's sense of their own power" (p. 354).

Nonetheless, Smelik (2016) indicates that this approach does not realize the power of meaning and social roles that are normalized and naturalized into the societies that ultimately influence filmmakers, either women or men, as well as audiences, either women or men to build sense on the narratives, logic, and symbolisms through which media industry, mainly cinema, builds its structure and creates its own modus operandi. "Hollywood's women's movies of the 1970s and 1980s allowed the female character to make the male character the object of her gaze, but her desire carried no power. Such films involved a mere reversal of roles in which the underlying structures of dominance and

submission are still intact" (Smelik, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, Mulvey (2001) argues that the male gaze that the Feminist Film Theory criticizes as the promoter of the objectification of women on the screen is, in fact, a product of a rooted and naturalized culture that although perceived as oppressing women, it also brings sense to women's existence and their social role. "However valuable, this approach leaves the cinema isolated and cut off from its surrounding society and culture. Ways of seeing do not exist in a vacuum. The 'gaze', as many critics and theorists have argued convincingly, is a key element in the construction of modern subjectivity, filtering ways of understanding and ordering the surrounding world" (Mulvey, 2011, p. 5).

In this context, Warren (2010) asserts that Feminist Film Theorists recognizing the potential that documentary films had and/or have to represent and construct more realistic representations of women, invested in this cinematographic genre mobilizing female producers and directors believing that it could be the path to bring a counter-hegemonic narrative regarding women's agenda and agency in the society. In fact, describes Warren (2010), the first attempt to use documentary films as a counter-cinema or women's cinema enable that, during the 70s and 80s, women were seen on the screen talking about women's issues, such as abortion, house issues, marriage, work, and so forth.

However, claims Warren (2010), these documentary films were not able to (de)construct the fundamental patriarchal meaning of womanhood and present a language that would represent women's power and agency in the society, since women per se mean powerless and their language is not valued as powerful. In general, Warren (2010) explains that the concept of women's issues in comparison to men's issues still less valued and what is meaningful and powerful to deserve attention and public interest is perceived as masculine. "since cinematic realism belied the workings of myth at the service of ideology, making the woman on screen seem like a fixed and natural signifier of a signified woman, when in truth, the woman on screen (denotation) represents only connotation, or what woman has come to mean in a world determined by patriarchy" (Warren, 2010, p.63).

Finally, argues Thornham (1999) "As a term of critical opprobrium, 'woman's film' carries the implication that women, and therefore women's emotional problems, are of minor significance" (p. 20). The intention to transform and demand a positive and realistic representation of women in media through documentary films leads this discussion to a level where it is important to understand the sense of realism and denotation that Feminist Film Theorists believe(d) could be a platform to construct and operationalize the concept of counter-cinema.

### **Why Documentary Films as Counter-Cinema?**

"I hope by now it is obvious that women must be shown in a much wider variety of roles. Their characterizations must have heroism and human dignity expressed in fields besides homemaking, loving a man, and bearing children. Women must be shown as active, not passive; strong women shouldn't constantly face ridicule and unhappy endings." (Thornham, 1999, p. 18)

According to Nichols (2001), the realm of cinema is divided by fiction and non-fiction cinema. Fiction cinema aims to depict the filmmaker aspirations, ideas, perspectives, and beliefs of the world creating and writing imaginary stories or stories based on true events according to what the filmmaker may find interesting and desirable and this process involves actors or characters that the filmmaker chooses and guides to perform their roles according to his/her guidance. Non-fiction cinema or documentary films, on the other hand, rely on true stories, true people, and real situations and places. The filmmaker is driven by the circumstances of the real events that take place during the production setting and people's lives.

documentaries may represent the world in the same way a lawyer may represent a client's interests: they put the case for a particular view or interpretation of evidence before us. In this sense documentaries do not simply stand for others, representing them in ways they could not do themselves, but rather they more actively make a case or argument; they assert what the nature of a matter is to win consent or influence opinion (Nichols, 2001, p. 4).

Considering this quote, it is clear why Feminist Film Theorists envision documentary films as a platform to promote women's interests in the media. Documentary films aim to present the reality of a given social group of people, which contrasts with the aim of fiction cinema that presents the imaginary world of the filmmaker. Considering that the media industry is male-dominated, one can understand that those who possess the means of production and the power to decide the agenda and the perspective of the world will use these means to depict their world beliefs, meanings, and stances to the society. As Thornham (1999) states,

Through history, males have done almost all the writing and filmmaking, naturally from a male point of view. Of course, that point of view has been molded or tempered by the culture each man lived in. However, in modern times, through the sudden (historically speaking) sophistication of the media and their uses, there exists a very large possibility that media now shape cultural attitudes, as well as reflect them. The attitudes of the (traditionally male) filmmakers towards women, and the roles they typically give them in films, must be evaluated in this light (p. 14).

Similarly, The Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research Report (Nordicom, 2014) explains that both women and men should be given equal opportunities to participate in the media industry and take decisions regarding media contents and agenda, so that gender equity in this field can be achieved. "Gender equality means that women and men have equal opportunities to shape society and their own lives" (Nordicom, 2014, p.3). In this context, the Feminist Film Movement mobilized and involved female filmmakers as an attempt to promote gender balance and representativeness of women in the media industry. "For a brief moment in feminist time, from approximately 1968 to 1974, women's documentaries were influential in the emerging field of feminist film studies and for feminist activism. [...] For the first time in history, numerous women were behind the cameras, rather than in front of or beside them" (Warren, 2010, pp.2-3). Since then, efforts from many media institutions around the world are being done to incorporate and give access to female filmmakers to the media means of production so that these women can bring their agendas and perspectives of the world to the screen.

There is a growing body of empirical research that documents how having a woman at the helm can affect the types of stories being told. First, female directors are more likely to feature girls and women on screen than male directors. [...] Examining more than 900 motion pictures, one study found that violence, guns/weapons, and blood/gore were less likely to be depicted when women were directing or producing, and thought-provoking topics were more likely to appear (Simith et al., 2013, p. 3).

Another important characteristic that emphasizes the concept of documentary film as a counter-cinema is because this genre of film relies on problem-solving structure, which means that documentary films aim to address a social problem, that may be experienced by a person or institution, or a specific social group. This social problem usually has public interest and the story is built upon the real situations and dialogues that the social characters are facing. Additionally, experts in the field, historical context, and other important social actors involved in the problem participate in the film in order to build a broader sense of the possible lens through which that problem can be evaluated and solved. "Audiences, then, encounter documentaries with an expectation that the desire to know more about the world we already occupy will find gratification during the course of the film. Documentaries invoke this desire-to-know when they invoke a historical subject and propose their individual variation on the history lesson" (Nichols, 2001, p. 40).

## Is Counter-Cinema a Reality or a Utopia?

“Simply having more females working in film will not change the films' content unless everyone working in films, male and female, starts rethinking the traditional sex role stereotypes”  
(Thornham, 1999, p. 19)

Although efforts are being conducted to promote gender equity in the media industry barriers persist so that women engage in this field and exert their right to express, expose, and propose alternative perspectives of femininity, their social roles, and experiences as human beings. For instance, Smith et al., (2013) demonstrate that one of the main constraints for women in the media film industry is the generalized stereotypes regarding women's abilities to navigate into a typical male profession, such as filmmaking. According to Smith et al., (2013) women tend to be objectified in the production stage, their voice is not validated, and their male counterparts tend to dismiss their contributions and leadership. Additionally, Thornham (1999, pp. 20-21) states "Correcting the stereotypes will open up a new world of film themes. And new images of women and men in film will provide more constructive models for film viewers. [...] As a term of critical opprobrium, 'woman's film' carries the implication that women, and therefore women's emotional problems, are of minor significance."

The Feminist Movement also proposes a Feminist Pedagogy in order to deconstruct gender stereotypes and promote gender equity in the academia. According to Penley (1989), Feminist Pedagogy has its own methodology that aims to raise self-consciousness, through permanent critique and observation of the world. Additionally, Penley (1989) also explains that the Feminist Pedagogy is a continuous practice that seeks to build equality and lessen the hierarchy that prevails into the educational system through which teachers are the authority and students merely receive the knowledge passively. For instance, in the Feminist Pedagogy practice, the classroom disposition should be a circle, students are stimulated to develop independent studies through practical activities such as observation, textual analysis, and theories that challenge gender inequalities and patriarchy.

Additionally, Nichols (2001) shows that documentary films have played an important role in creating a sense of national identity, through which subcultures and social minority groups gain space and historical context, enabling that all those who are members of a given society feel represented and their stories and values are presented and represented in the society in a democratic and inclusive fashion through sounds and images. Furthermore, Kabadayi (2012) argues that using audio-visual materials, such as short documentary films, enhances students' understanding and learning processes of the reality that surrounds them. "One of these perspectives is that short films provide students with storytelling skill, which enables them to have competency to perceive their surroundings and events" (Kabadayi, 2012, p. 317). Kabadayi (2012) also shows that students can use their own smartphones to produce and develop short documentary film stories, which contribute to increasing the levels of participation, group interaction, and connection with the different life experiences that exist in the real world. These video materials produced or not by students, claim Kabadayi (2012), constitute important texts to be discussed and analyzed in classrooms, which have to be sustained by the literature regarding gender inequalities and alternative practices that should be evaluated to promote transformation.



## Methodology

“Shooting film provides that students have an idea of being a part of the lecture to be brought by the active participation. The notions of group work, taking responsibility, fulfilling responsibilities, and experiencing group achievement develops for the student”  
Kabadayi (2012, p. 316)

In order to respond to the necessity of engaging feminist pedagogy practices to promote gender equity into media organizations and practitioners, as well as to increase the awareness of women's agenda and perspectives of the world in the media, and to promote respect and value for women as filmmakers, this essay proposes the elaboration of a Media Criticism syllabus to the 3rd-year journalism students at School of Communication and Arts at Eduardo Mondlane University, in Mozambique. This Media Criticism syllabus intends to present the following contents to the students, masculinities and femininities, agenda-setting and gatekeeping, male hegemonic gaze in the films, cultural studies, media representation, and construction of the reality.

The syllabus also aims to explore and use participatory pedagogical methodologies such as independent readings, short documentary film sessions and production, and group discussions of these materials in class. It also considers bringing to academia gender equity activists that work with feminist agendas and positive masculinities, in Mozambique. Through this, it will be possible to reinforce the platforms that unify the civil society and the academia bringing positive interaction and exchange of knowledge through seminars and workshops regarding possibilities that exist to media practitioners to promote gender mainstream agendas in the Mozambican society. One important goal of this syllabus and course is to create a space where students are able to produce and direct short documentary films and present it at the end of the semester to the academic community at the Eduardo Mondlane University.

Likewise, I explore the experiences of my students as well as the debates that we have in class regarding the real possibilities available to effectively achieve gender equity in

the Mozambican context, to bring an understanding of why it is necessary to invest in media criticism in the academic settings. I also share the challenges that I face to involve students in analyzing popular culture texts, to explain why media criticism theories and documentary film projects are important tools to promote a transformative pedagogy towards gender equity. In this context, I present an overview of the ways in which media criticism is done and I also provide some of the bibliography and audio-visual materials that I intend to use in this course.

At the same time, I produced a short documentary film narrating the experiences of the 2020 GRÓ-GEST fellows as a practical or tangible example that students can be both filmmakers and subjects of change by sharing their stories, perspectives, and work toward gender equity in their communities and countries. All the participants of this film accepted to participate voluntarily in this film project, in which they shared some ideas about how they intend to apply the knowledge that they gain in the GRÓ-GEST Program.

## **An Overview of the Contents of Media Criticism Syllabus**

### 1. Why do we do media criticism?

As a Media Criticism Lecturer at UEM, my experience informs me that students tend to resist and not understand why they need to be aware of how media organizations constitute a powerful means to disseminate different types of social inequalities. It is clear that these students, although being inserted in academia where supposedly they should be propelled to think critically their society and the world, do not have theoretical and practical foundations to engage in critical thinking, especially when it has to deal with social inequalities and gender equity. Usually, students tend to see and expect that Media Criticism Courses improve their technical skills on ethical and professional behaviors during their work, especially in dealing with vulnerable information sources, such as children and criminals.

These students tend to feel lost and unprepared to question systematic structures of oppression embedded in our society and how it affects marginalized groups, as well as how media organizations and practitioners contribute to this social normativity. Students from my Media Criticism Course tend to engage in resistance and questioning if, as a teacher, I am against journalism, movies, songs, videogames, and why should things be different from what they are and always were. They interrogate me about my position as a feminist and if I intend to make the world a feminist place not respecting those who choose not to be feminists. They also ask me, why do they have to analyze songs and movies in class because they do not feel that it should be done in a serious class. All these questions and resistance from my students made me realize that they are not prepared to value movies, songs, and videogames as part of what they consider a serious class or course. They see it, instead, as an entertainment material and therefore, they do not make any effort to engage in analyzing it in a critical sense.

Thus, I found it necessary to provide in the syllabus an introductory content and academic materials regarding the importance of media criticism, so that my students are engaged in constructing a basic or grounded understanding of the necessity of being vigilant regarding the contents that they consume from media as part of the society, as well as the contents, the ideologies, and the social, political, cultural, and economic structures of power that determine how contents are produced and delivered to the society. This contextual introduction of the importance of media criticism to journalism students at University Eduardo Mondlane (Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, UEM) is crucial to building their sensitiveness on the role of media to mold, influence, and maintain a social norm that privileges certain groups within the society, which at the same time perpetuates exclusion and stereotypes of other groups of the society.

In this context, these introductory classes regarding the importance of Media Criticism aim to create a space to prepare students in issues related to (1) Media Literacy as Public Pedagogy and (2) Alternative Media as Critical Media. In Media Literacy as Public Pedagogy classes, students debate matters regarding the role of media as a Public Pedagogy Space. In other words, they engage in digging the meaning of media in a broader sense; they understand that talking about media is not restricted to journalistic outlets, such as news, interviews, and newsrooms. Because, “The current technological revolution, however, brings to the fore, more than ever, the role of media like television, popular music, film, and advertising, as the Internet rapidly absorbs these cultural forms and creates ever-evolving cyberspaces and emergent forms of culture and pedagogy” (Douglas & Share, 2007, p. 4).

The media culture that involves the society in an alternative and symbolic form of knowing the reality generates public and democratic spaces of learning, discovering, naturalizing, and resisting the societal patterns that regulate the political, economic, and cultural aspects of life (Douglas & Share, 2007; Morrel & Andrade, 2005; and von Krogh & Holt, 2009). In this context, it is important to provide students with the fundamental notions of the impact, effects, and the power of media to promote both an inclusive and democratic

Public Pedagogy or an excluding and elitist Public Pedagogy in regards to gender, sexuality, classicism, power dynamics, and culture in our society.

In the Alternative Media as Critical Media classes, students are exposed to literature that explores the alternatives that are available or can be created to promote an inclusive and democratic Public Pedagogy through Media. “The contention is that alternative media should not only be understood as alternative media practices, but also as critical media that question dominative society” (Fuchs, 2010, p. 174). One of the interesting conversations that my journalism students and I have while attending Media Criticism Course is related to the real possibilities to promote transformative media contents and progressive organizational normativity in order to attend the narrative of social justice and inclusiveness of marginalized agendas in Mozambique.

My students defend that many Media Organizations depend on economic and political powers to operate, as well as their practitioners live in a capitalist and patriarchal society that demands them to attend to the institutionalized logic and behavior as professionals and members of a specific culture. How, then, it can be possible to change? How can Media Organizations operate in a context of dependency on political and economic pressures? How can it be possible to build an alternative model of doing business with media organizations that are inserted in a capitalist system? These questions made me realize the importance of providing my students with not only theoretical possibilities but also practical possibilities of alternative media content. “Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media” (Douglas & Share, 2007, p.4 ). In this class, students are exposed to documentary films as an alternative medium to promote alternative agendas, narratives, and multifunctional and diversified perspectives and experiences that people have in life.

Bringing the debate on the importance of investing in people’s voices and experiences of dealing with domestic violence, for instance; or even promoting social change through activism that works towards the inclusion of people with disabilities can help to create interest and awareness about these agendas in my students. In this sense, I use the news report “Disability and citizenship: struggles and achievements” available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqtndVzBakA>, so that my students get contact with true people, true stories, and true Alternative Media as Critical Media that enables media practitioners and managers to incorporate, on one side, alternative and progressive agendas in their business. And, on the other side, evaluate possibilities of making business based on progressive stories and narratives that can raise public interest and encompass allies from alternative financial sources such as human rights organizations and civil society. “One aim is to give voices to the voiceless, media power to the powerless as well as to transcend the filtering and censorship of information by corporate information monopolies, state monopolies, or cultural monopolies in public information and communication” (Fuchs, 2005, p. 179).

## 2. Critical Theories of Mass Media: How do we engage in Media Criticism?

In order to provide students with a theoretical background that enables them to engage in Media Criticism and Analysis, it is important to share with them the main critical theories, such as Marx Criticism on ideology, class, and media; Media Organizational Criticism; and Rhetorical & Cultural Analysis. These theoretical frames allow my students to build an understanding of the concept of ideologies and how it is embedded in our social structures of power, such as media so that we see the world in a perspective of those who occupy positions of power and those who have access to the means of the production of knowledge and language that make sense and legitimate the normativity in which we live, we think, and value ourselves.

In the Marxist Analysis of Media, it is possible to understand how capitalism influences the way media organizations operate, mainly by pushing media organizations to seek profits

through advertisements. It means that the main idea that drives media managers and practitioners to create their organizations and to create media products or contents, is to increase the financial sustainability of this kind of business. “Capitalism is driven by the continuous desire to increase capital, an ideology known as the profit-motive. Contemporary Marxist critics, many of whom identify as political economists, investigate both the prevailing patterns of media ownership and how the logic of the capital influences media business practices” (Ott & Mack, 2020, p.28).

At the same time, Marx conceptualizes ideologies as “definite forms of social consciousness” (Bennett, 1983-2, p. 49) which means that structures of power and those with access to the means of production impose their dominant perspective of the world, making it feel natural and rational. In this context, students are exposed to the effects of this dominant capitalist consciousness in the media organizations and contents, such as reduction of diversity and democracy, as well as the expansion of cultural imperialism, through the monopolies of media organizations and its contents, such as Hollywood, Disney company, CNN, BCC, MasterChef programs, House Rehab programs, and Got Talent shows that are spread worldwide. In this context, regardless of the country and culture, audiences tend to see the same programs and contents worldwide, which reduces creativity and diversity in media contents, as well as it lessens global democratic spaces for multicultural contents that represent subcultures that exist all over the world (Ott and Mack, 2020). In these classes, students are induced to empirical analysis of media contents and formats worldwide including in their own reality.

In the Media Organizational Criticism classes, students discuss how media organization norms and journalism rules are influenced by external pressures such as economy and politics. In these classes, students develop critical thinking on how and why social events are chosen to be given news value and others not; how public agendas are constructed and what are the social, political, and economic structures of power that dominate media agenda; how gatekeepers work towards decision-making process of what social agendas

media organizations will prioritize and marginalize, as well as the role of the gatekeepers on categorizing the priorities that are given in the presentation of the news (headlines, more and less important news). “Closely related to the criticism of ‘overpoliticisation’ of the news is the perception of elitism manifested in the coverage of the middle class and the marginalisation of the urban poor and rural majority populations” (Cheruiyot, 2019, p.128).

By comparing news outlets from different media such as TV, Radio, and Newspaper from Mozambique, students engage in practicing empirical methodologies and critical analyzing of the different forms through which news and social reality in Mozambique are presented in its aesthetical sense and agendas Through this exercise, it is possible to expose students to see and experience the way certain topics deserve attention and priority over others, and what are the topics that are prioritized, absent, and marginalized (meaning occupying, for example, the last pages of the newspaper). Moreover, documentaries about alternative agendas that focus on Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Mozambique and Brazil in domestic and private spaces are used to illustrate the fashion through which these issues can be addressed and brought to the public arena in a creative and meaningful way.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFO7\\_3YsJQg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFO7_3YsJQg)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3rSrv8dXrA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbYebsF2Esc>

The Rhetorical and Cultural Analysis aims to involve and propel students to think and be aware of the means through which visual, verbal, and written languages, as well as the social representation of the reality, are constructed by media organizations and media practitioners. By studying language, meaning, signs and cultural symbols embedded in our society, my students can be able to comprehend how meaning is framed though the systems of signification that exist in our society, which are created and recreated or adjusted to include different ideologies and cultural experiences that society defines, through its structures of power and institutional ownership (public, private, and civil society sectors), as



valid, meaningful, democratic, inclusive, elitist, important, and necessary in a given historical, political, and economic context (Ott & Mack, 2020).

In this sense, questions related to how media constructs, reinforces or resists ideas of femininity and masculinity and the way culture define social roles and positions of power that influence media practitioners and the audiences to build a collective sense of significations are addressed in these classes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gx-Ou03fj0c>); media representation of sexuality, heteronormativity and homosexuality are addressed; media representation of disability and ability are also addressed. Students are invited to research and bring examples in the media of alternative constructions of the reality of those groups of people who tend to be marginalized or given less attention in the media, as well as bring examples of stereotypes that prevail in the Mozambican and international media regarding their country (Mozambique) or continent (Africa), GBV, people with disability, womanhood, and manhood, and other issues that they consider as marginalized or stereotypical.

### 3. Documentary films as safe spaces to promote gender equity and women's agendas

One of the most important debates that I have with my students is related to the role of women in the workplace, mainly in male-dominated professions. Both my female and male students bring questions such as how can women deal with domestic responsibilities, husbands, and babies, and a journalistic newsroom that demands that women need to be available in schedules that do not fit their social roles? My students bring to the debate the fact that women tend to complain when dealing with hard work, cameras, long editing hours, and traveling for days to places that do not offer the comfort that they need. How do we deal with it? Women tend not to be available to do this kind of job, women tend to deny these opportunities, or their bosses tend to assume that they will refuse it and do not even offer the opportunity. How do we deal with it? My students also assume that it is more difficult to accept women's leadership in the workplace because even in group discussions in class my female students usually complain about the fact that they are not listened to and

valued by their male counterparts. On the other hand, my male students complain that their female counterparts do not talk and do not share their ideas in the group discussions.

All these experiences and debates make me understand that it is important to address issues related to safe spaces to include marginalized social groups, as well as to change stereotypes and values that both women and men have regarding their social roles and social positions that impact their careers and ability to give their potential and knowledge in the workplace, as media professionals. In this context, “Activists might engage in a number of endeavors to raise awareness about and/or change the working possibilities for female filmmakers” (Hankin, 2007, p.60). Hence, it is important to include women’s agency in media organizations and documentary film productions so that their agendas as women are valued and given the necessary resources to be implemented. “Documentary films aim not just to relay information/facts objectively to the audience but also to persuade them to think/act in a more humane or progressive manner” (Sinha, 2010, p. 367).

Therefore, in this class students are exposed to theoretical discussions regarding the challenges that women face as filmmakers and as film directors in which their leadership is not valued. Moreover, this class enables students to understand how social stereotypes create difficulties for both female and male media practitioners to deal with women’s rights in the workplace. At the same time, issues related to respect and ethics in the interaction with marginalized social groups, in order to create a safe space and democratic public space to include and validate their experiences and languages are addressed, because “documentaries could be an important part of the democratic process. By dramatizing the issues facing citizens, documentaries can give ordinary people the information they need to participate thoughtfully in government. Documentaries also inform viewers about individuals, groups, or issues that have been overlooked or ignored by mainstream media” (Young Minds Inspired Organization, 2005).

4. Engaging students to create alternative agendas and social representations of marginalized social groups through documentary films

At the end of the semester and after being exposed to debates regarding the role of media and specifically of the documentary films to promote alternative agendas and representation of marginalized social groups, my students have to develop short documentary film projects (10min to 15 min) through which they interview and interact with real voices and experiences of people who are discriminated or are oppressed in the Mozambican context. This exercise creates a space to students to use their journalist skills and ethics to build a sense of alternative media, alternative language, and voices as a way to promote real possibilities of democratic public pedagogy in Mozambique, as well as exploring alternative spaces to exhibit it such as using academic settings (website of the School of Communication and Arts and public exhibitions throughout the university) and promote academic debates in the UEM community about the themes that the students (re)presented in their films.

### **Media Criticism Syllabus**

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**Goal:**

This course aims to build awareness regarding gender equity in media outlets and media students. This course addresses discussions about media literacy as a public pedagogy that promotes democratic and alternative meanings and values towards social justice and inclusion of marginalized social agendas.

**Learning outcomes:**

Be able to understand the value of media to promote and resist dominant ideologies.

Have the capacity to analyze critically media contents both hard news and popular culture contents, using critical media theories, such as Marxist theory, Rhetorical & Cultural theory, and Media Organizational Criticism.

Understand the possibilities that documentary film projects can create to engage students in practical experiences that propel them to understand the importance of promoting democratic participation of the underrepresented and misrepresented social groups.

Acquire practical skills in exploring the diversity of marginalized agendas by promoting students' interactions with different experiences, language, and voices that tend to be excluded from mainstream media.

#### **Organization, assignments, and assessments**

This is a full semester course that takes place twice a week. Students are required to do the readings and watch documentary films and extract meaningful quotes and identify meanings. Each reading and film should be analyzed critically in groups of four and make a weekly presentation of the materials. Each week two groups of four present the readings or the film analysis. The groups should submit a two page of the critical and theoretical analysis of the readings and documentary film after the presentation and after receiving improvements from their classmates. Moreover, groups have to develop their final 10 to 15 min documentary film projects and provide a two pages monthly report of the progress, challenges, and techniques used to direct and produce their documentary films. All groups will have the whole semester to produce and edit their 10 min to 15 min documentary film projects.

#### **Grade Scale:**

Participation and conversations 10%

Monthly report of the final assignment (Group) 10%

Readings and film theoretical discussions (Group) 30%

Final documentary film project 50%

## Conclusion

This essay has presented the importance of integrating documentary films into higher education settings as a platform to engage journalism students in creating gender equity awareness in media organizations and contents. Through the literature review, it was possible to understand the role of documentary films as a safe space to involve marginalized and underrepresented agendas, narratives, and perspectives into the media and generate an alternative and more democratic public pedagogy. Additionally, this paper argued that it is important to create real possibilities for social transformation, through which theoretical discussions and practical experiences with alternative and inclusive social agendas can generate a space where students and future media practitioners are exposed to a feminist pedagogy that advocates for gender equity and social justice. Finally, this project also proposed exploring academic settings as alternative spaces to involve the interaction between civil society activists and students, as well as alternative spaces where the academic community can interact with the society by bringing the voices of the voiceless in order to validate alternative perspectives of social experiences and existence.

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