

Resistance in Ousmane Sembène's Cinema

"Colonialism took away our lands but not our heads"
(Ousmane Sembène, in Gadjigo, 1993: 91).

Ousmane Sembène (1923-2007) is a prolific Senegalese writer and filmmaker whose work is strongly linked to the decolonisation and liberation of African countries from the 1960s. He is the director of one of the first narrative films made in Africa, *Borom Sarret* (1963, French, 22 min.), and of the first postcolonial feature-length Black African film, *La Noire De.../Black Girl* (1966, Wolof and French, 65 min.), a milestone in his film career, whose release coincided with the celebration of the First World Festival of Negro Arts, following the independence of Senegal from France in 1960. Prior to the beginning of his film career at the age of forty, he had written ten books. He then directed and produced eleven films over four decades, being *Mooladé* (2004, Diola and French, 124 min.) the last of these, three years before Sembène passed away, in 2007, at the age of eighty-four. In 1967, he became an official jury member at Cannes Film Festival. In 2005, he was the first African director to ever deliver the director's lesson at Cannes. This has led scholars and critics refer to him as the "father of African Cinema" (Andrade-Watkins, 1993: 29), despite Sembène's reluctance to the term. Extensive literature has praised the impact of his work (Gadjigo, 1993, 2010; Dia & Barlet, 2009; Fofana, 2012; Pfaff, 1984; Murphy, 2000; Vetinde & Fofana, 2014; Vieyra, 1992, among others). Two leading Sembène scholars have further produced two documentary films on his work, *Sembène: the making of African cinema* (Manthia Diawara and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1994, French, 60 min.) and more recently, following his death, *Sembène!* (Samba Gadjigo and Jason Silverman, 2016, French and English, 89 min.). He is considered the pioneer of African film (Pfaff, 1984). His work is still largely absent from so-called 'world' film history, partly due to the challenging access to African cinema. In the twenty-first century, an increasing body of literature is contesting and re-writing such history, with emblematic contributions from Olivier Barlet (2000), Manthia Diawara (1992), Lizelle Bisschoff and David Murphy (2014), Lindiwe Dovey (2015), among others. Some of his films, including *Mooladé*, *Black Girl* and *Borom Sarret*, are now available for sale on DVD, but there is still a lack of visibility to films from African filmmakers beyond the international film festival circuit.

Sembène is son of a Lébou father, a fisherman from a community originally from the Cap Vert peninsula, and a Serer mother, an ethnic group among the last in Senegal to convert to Islam or Christianity. In 1942 he had to join the Senegalese tirailleurs. Following the Second World War, he returned to Senegal to participate in the railworkers' strike in Dakar (October 1947-March 1948), which would then lead to the writing of his novella *Bouts de bois de Dieu* (God's Bits of Wood) in 1960. In 1948, Sembène moved to Marseilles (France), where he worked as a docker and became a union worker. This would inspire the beginning of his writing career, with the novella *Le Docker Noir* (The Black Dockworker) in 1956. In 1960, when Senegal had gained independence from France, Sembène returned to Senegal. Aware of the limited scope of his written work (Mortimer, 1972), due to the oral history in West Africa and the high rate of illiteracy following centuries of colonisation, he decided to become a filmmaker, initiating his career through a funded training at Gorky Studios in Moscow, to return a year later with an old camera from the Soviet Union. He adapted five of

his novels to film, *Niaye* (1964), *Black Girl* (1965), *Manda bi/ Le Mandat* (1968), *Xala* (1974), and *Guelwaar* (1992) and kept telling stories through further films.

Over fifty years ever since the production of his first film, his work remains extremely relevant, particularly in the global concern about the need to decolonise a hegemonic educational and cultural system that has failed to sufficiently consider diversity of perspectives from what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam shrewdly refer to as a polycentric world (2014). Malian thinker and filmmaker, Manthia Diawara, speaks about a “‘Sembènian’ cinema”, characterised by sharing “a vision of the world struggling between tradition and modernity,” and suggests that this “has continued to dominate African cinema like the trees that hide the forest” (2000: 84). Building on the existing literature on Ousmane Sembène, this article analyses his cinema in relation to resistance. It particularly focuses on everyday forms of resistance, through a social realist cinema, language, religion and women.

Cinema Engagé and Sembène

Ousmane Sembène is considered a leading advocate of cinema engagé (Pfaff, 1984: 29), as a Marxist militant, whose films critique the colonial and imperial history, such as in *Emitaï* (1971, Wolof and French, 95 min.), *Ceddo* (1976, Wolof and French, 120 min.) and *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988, French and English, 153 min.); and the postcolony, for instance in *Borom Sarret*, *Niaye* (1964, French and Wolof, 35 min.) *Black Girl*, *Manda bi* (1968, Wolof, 105 min.), *Xala* (1974, Wolof and French, 116 min.) and *Guelwaar* (1992, Wolof and French, 115 min.). Sembène sees cinema as a “medium (...) to teach the masses”, as “the best evening school” (cited in Murphy, 2000). He further understood film as a means of political action, partisan and militant, that would invite audiences to reflection and generate questions (Tully-Stichet, 2009: 166).

If former films by colonisers had contributed to the establishment of the colonial rule and to the misrepresentation of Africa and African people as seen through an alienating gaze, Sembène saw film as a medium to restore African dignity (Diawara, 1992). This ultimate aim of his militant work has taken some scholars (Vetinde and Fofana, 2015) to compare the Senegalese filmmaker with first president of the independent republic of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, who was also one of the proponents of the Négritude philosophical movement. Senghor understood Négritude as a “weapon for decolonisation,” composed of “the ensemble of cultural values from the black world” (Senghor, 1964: 9 in Djigo, 2015: 218-220). This was an intellectual concept first developed by Aimé Césaire in the 1930s in Paris which sought to restore black African dignity through a return to local sources, thus placing black African cultural heritage at the very centre of the decolonisation. However, Négritude was often criticised for its emplacement in an idealised and romanticised African past, misrepresentative of the variety of cultural practices in postcolonial Senegal. Sékou Touré, first president of post-independent Guinea, even claimed that Négritude was “fatal to pan-Africanism and should therefore be destroyed (Touré, 1974:28 in Counsel, 2009: 150). Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka would also be among the critics, comparing the absurdity of Négritude to that of ‘tigritude’ – ‘must a tiger declare its tigritude?’ (in Apter, 2005: 65). As Elizabeth Harney shrewdly argues it was a philosophical movement which “developed as a result of a complex process of appropriation and rearticulation of earlier European ideas about Africa and its peoples” (2004: 20). Sembène found this movement

obfuscating and unable to respond to a continent where countries like Senegal were facing a liberation from over five centuries under the colonial rule.

Sembène's opposition to Négritude and consequently, to Senghor, both culturally and politically, also led to Senghor's criticism of what he considered Sembène over-politicised and critical cinema (Murphy, 2015: 2). However, as David Murphy (2015: 2) and Lifongo Vetinde note (2015: 21), despite their differences in the modes of expression and representation, they both shared the view of culture as central to the process of decolonising postcolonial Africa. When Dakar, capital of Senegal, celebrated the First World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966, under the patronage of Senghor and as an embodiment of Négritude, Ousmane Sembène received two awards, one for his novella, *Le Mandat* (The Money Order), very critical with the so-called independence in Senegal, questioned in the book, and for his first feature-length film, *Black Girl*. This also engaged in fierce criticism of the high consideration of France in postcolonial Senegal and of the transition from colonialism to neocolonialism. Sembène's success in the 1966 Festival, an emblematic multifaceted event in the pan-African debates in the period, is not but reflective of the contested dimension of culture and its role in the (re)building of a national and pan-African consciousness as a reaction against centuries of colonial destruction of African culture. As argued, a large number of intellectuals and artists had expressed their opposition to Négritude, and as a result, to the First World Festival of Negro Arts. Beyond its conceptualisation of African culture around a romanticized past and of –emotion and “rhythm as the architecture of being” (Harney, 2004: 19-48) the term seemed to exclude a large number of non-black Africans. In fact, in 1969, Algiers, capital of Algeria, hosted the second of four pan-African festivals celebrated in the 1960s and 1970s in Africa. This was not framed as a continuation of the First World Festival of Negro Arts, but rather, as a reaction to it, named the Premier Festival Cultural Panafricain (First Cultural Pan-African Festival), also known as PANAF. A year later, in Tunis (Tunisia), Sembène helped creating the Pan-African Federation of African Filmmakers (FEPACI), which in the Second FEPACI Congress of Algiers, in 1975, put together manifesto whose aim was to promote African national cinemas as “vehicles for education, information, and consciousness-raising, and not strictly a vehicle for entertainment” (Petty 1996: 6), thus opposing it to hegemonic cinema structures, notably, the Hollywood studio system. Sembène was one of the filmmakers, along with Mauritanian Meh Hondo (1936-), and Senegalese Mahama Johnson Traoré (1942-2010), emphasised to illustrate the educational value of film (Diawara, 1992: 42). These filmmakers shared a willingness to decolonise the gaze, through redirecting it to realities that talked to African audiences, engaging with local and contemporary realities, creative and critically using the past to reflect about the present, and challenging ethnographic (mis)representations around ideals of African purity. Malian thinker and filmmaker Manthia Diawara (2000: 81-89) has classified West African film into three categories: social realism, postmodernism and ‘return to the source.’ Social realist narratives are those focusing on sociocultural issues. They often adopt a critical perspective to modernity and neocolonialism, opposing it to tradition, which is represented through dance, music and ‘griots,’ that is, story-tellers and masters of the spoken word in charge of transmitting tradition to society through their voice and/or music (Diawara, 1992: 141). Postmodernism is instead, a more “poetic, indirect and highly experimental style” (Murphy & Williams, 2007: 91). The ‘return to the source’ narrative style is rather a kind of cinema with long takes and natural sounds that focus on precolonial African traditions and are less

politically connoted. To him, Sembène representative of the first of social realism, particularly through his first film, *Borom Sarret* (1963). In looking at his cinema in relation to resistance, I start by analysing the way in which becomes an everyday form of resistance, engaging precisely in the challenge of redirecting the gaze, opposing it to the colonial gaze which had essentialised Africa.

Social Realism as an Everyday Form of Resistance

Diawara suggests three categories in West African cinema, social realism, postmodernism and return to the source, illustrating the first of these three with Ousmane Sembène's first short film, *Borom Sarret*, which translates as "the owner of the cart." The film follows the day of an ordinary person in post-independence Senegal, the *Borom Sarret*, praying before leaving with his cart to work. It opens with the image of the sound of the prayer over a black background which fades in into the image of a mosque, reflecting the importance of Islam in Senegal, which constitutes over 90 per cent of the population. *Borom Sarret* faces the mosque while praying. His wife is in the background, cooking with a mortar. This is followed by the image of a regular road in Dakar, the capital, with cars, motorcycles, and human transit. It suggests a contrast and coexistence between the two urban spaces. These juxtaposed contrasting images continue throughout the film, for instance, when a shot of the cathedral in Dakar over orchestral music is followed by *Borom Sarret*'s voice-over, invoking protection by his dear marabout (spiritual guide).

Figures 1 & 2. Screenshots of opening sequence in *Borom Sarret* (1964).

After a short interaction with his wife, we are exposed to the everyday routine of *Borom Sarret*, picking up a series of customers, as we hear his reflections in voice-over. The use of the voice-over constitutes per se an aesthetic resource to express resistance. As Cameroonian filmmaker, Jean-Pierre Bekolo argues, "no one ever hears what Africans say or what they think," noting that, by extension, one could conclude that "Africans don't think at all" (2000: 25). The first-person voice-over places viewers in the main character's perspective, through an intradiegetic narrative, that of *Borom Sarret*. Similarly, in Sembène's first feature-length film, *Black Girl*, the voice character, in this case by a young woman, *Diouana*, features prominently in the film, offering a first-person reflection on *Diouana*'s interior crisis and insecurities throughout the film. *Diouana* is a young Senegalese woman who is recruited by a French family to work for them as a maid, first in Senegal, and then, in France. The film criticises the positive image that people in independent Senegal have of the former colony, France, idealising it. It opens with the image of a travelling boat, in the port, suggesting the widespread aspiration of mobility to the so-called El Dorado, and a smart and modern dressed young Senegalese woman, excited to board in the direction to La France.

Figures 3 & 4. Opening shot of *Black Girl*, and second shot where *Diouana* is introduced.

A hectic market, a physically impaired man begging for some money, a pregnant lady about to give birth who needs being taken to the hospital, traffic lights, the Sandaga market in the financial centre of Dakar... *Borom Sarret* offers a realist social account of life in Senegal for a person like *Borom Sarret*, who, while listening to a griot singing, says in voice-over: "It's this

modern life that has reduced me to a working slave.” Several obstacles on the road prevent him from arriving home with some money for his wife to be able to go to the market and cook for the two of them and their child. Such obstacles convey subtle forms of criticism to the social injustice of modern life. Diawara suggests it criticises postcolonial regimes of independent Africa, where regular people like the Borom Sarret (owner of the cart) had not been included in the picture (Diawara 2000: 83).

As Françoise Pfaff argues, in one of the earliest English-speaking literature on Sembène, Sembène’s cinema engages in a representation of “Africa through African lenses,” which contrasts with colonial films made in Africa, where this is essentialised and stereotyped through “alien lenses” (Pfaff, 1984: 1-10). Sembène saw his cinema as a reaction to films that were “based on European stories” (cited in Pfaff, 1984: 1). These often offered a paternalistic view of the country, justified the colonialism in the country and was aimed at non-African viewers. In contrast, films like *Borom Sarret* and *Black Girl* are the result “inward gaze,” essential to engage in the liberation struggle (Fofana, 2012: 2). His cinema is social realist in that it offers a mirror for Africa. It represents Africa from an African perspective, thus contrasting with the what Françoise Pfaff calls the “Tarzanistic,” picturesque, dark, exoticised and othered images of Africa (1984: 1-5) in the dominant media structures, from outside of the continent. It portrays a country where, in Sembène’s words, “[our] daily acts are regulated by our culture” (cited in Gadjiogo, 1993: 91).

Sembène considered himself as “a modern-day griot” (Fofana, 2012: 7), that is, a story-teller, concerned with the telling of African stories for African audiences, triggering thoughts and reflection in order to better understand the present and future through a critical look back. Sembène suggested that the filmmaker must live within his society and say what goes wrong within his society” (cited in Pfaff 1984: 15). Within his socialist realist approach, that critical gaze was reflected through different themes and aesthetic resources in his film. I look at this through a focus on three aspects, religion, language, and women, which are recurrent across his film career.

Resistance through challenging the role of religion in postcolonial Senegal
Senegal is, by Constitution, a secular country. However, today over 90 per cent of the population adhere to Islam, practiced mainly through Sufi brotherhoods, known as tariqas or turuq (Seck, 2010: 45). As Amadou Fofana notes, its long history and impact in Senegal and its culture, has meant that very few people see it as a foreign religion. While the exact date when Islam reached Senegal is difficult to be determined, Khadim Mbacké suggests it could have been at the end of the seventh or beginning of eight century, but achieved its greatest impact in the fifteenth century (2005: xii-xiv). With the arrival of European colonisers, Christianity would be implemented as a tool to reinforce the establishment of the colonial authority. Today, there is just a five per cent of the population that adheres to Christianity, while the other five per cent adheres to spiritual beliefs. Islam is very noticeable in the daily life in Senegal, through Arabic words, constant calls for prayers, and mosques. However, the country also celebrates Christian, as well as pre-Islamic and pre-Christian festivities (Fofana, 2012: 127). Sembène’s controversial views on religion have largely been discussed by academics and critics, as a filmmaker portraying both Islam and Christianity as foreign alienating forces (Fofana 2012: 128). While born a Muslim and educated in the Koran, Sembène became aware of the way in which religion was used instrumentally by both colonisers and corrupt politicians in post-independence Senegal. His

films address religious, social and political tensions, and call for a return to the fundamental social and spiritual values shared by Africans. Fofana (2012: 127-162) looks at the representation of Islam and Christianity as foreign and alienating forces through an analysis of *Ceddo* (1976), *Guelwaar* (1992), and *Faat Kiné* (2000). Both his writing and cinema shed light on the heterodoxy of Islam and the way in which it is evoked differently for diverse purposes depending on each of the realities and power relations of the film characters. Islam and religion, more broadly, appear as contradicting driving forces of a postcolonial and modern country, where people find themselves negotiating its meanings and values, and become aware of its variety of interpretations. The kind of conflicts that arise, as a result, invite viewers to challenge the power attributed to religion, as another form of resisting the colonisation of the minds.

Among his films, *Ceddo* tends to be discussed as “his harshest criticism of Islam” (Cham, Makward, Daney, cited in Correa, 2015: 33), yet, according to Chérif Correa, it is rather an “anti-clerical” film (2015: 33). In an interview with Samba Gadjigo, Sembène claimed that what he attempted to show in the film was “how Islam penetrated Senegal.” And added: “Despite the fact that we are Muslim or Christian, we remain deeply rooted in the universe of the *ceddo*. This is of paramount importance, for it means that our culture is very much alive, very strong. We can absorb other cultures, use them, adapt ourselves without any loss” (1993: 96). As Fofana claims, *ceddo* is a Wolofisation of a Pulaar word which refers to both a social subclass in Pulaar society and to Mandinko-speaking people. In the Pulaar society, the *Sebbe* were the king warriors who resisted Islamisation. However, in the film, the *ceddo* are those who resist such foreign forces. It refers rather to a state of mind resisting the status quo and any form of subjugation, claiming a return to tradition. *Ceddo* are those who refuse (Fofana 2012: 130-131).

Beyond *Ceddo*, further films address the religious tensions in the country, with the intention to portray the multi-layered dimension of religion in Senegal from a critical perspective. Fofana notes that in *Faat Kiné* this is reflected through an encounter between a customer and the pump attendant at the petrol station. When the customer asks for a mat to pray, he stares at the (Christian) cross the attendant is wearing, and yells “*Allahou Akbar*” (Allah is the greatest) before starting his prayers, in a provocative way. In so doing, Sembène draws attention to the false impression of tolerance that is often taken for granted in postcolonial Senegal. In *Mooladé*, a film resisting female genital mutilation (excision), there is also a subtle criticism of the way in which Islam is interpreted at the expenses of a few (in power). The resistance to excision, in this case, is a symbol to the agency individuals have to subvert, contest and challenge imposed external forces, even when such individuals are not decision-makers or people in power. The film ends with a still shot of the minaret, followed by that of a television antenna, suggesting the need to acknowledge the coexistence of both tradition and modernity. His films invite viewers to (re)value the immaterial cultural heritage that was in the continent before the arrival of both Islam and Christianity. Its critical approach to religion is thus, as Fofana also suggests (2012: 159) a form of resisting alienation, and a call to understand this within the cultural and postcolonial framework of a country whose geographical boundaries have been established by a colonial regime. This is represented, for instance, through inter-generational dialogues, where mothers and daughters held different views on religious traditions. Such is the case in *Xala*, where Rama confronts her mother, accusing her of passively accepting her husband’s third marriage:

“Never will I share my man with another woman.” Besides this future form of resistance, Rama expresses a form of resistance in the present: “I will not put a foot in the ceremony.” The scene hence challenges the widespread acceptance of polygamy by including younger characters who openly express their rejection to a practice reproduced from generation to generation based on biased and interested interpretations of religion.

Multilingualism as Resistance

Senegal is a very culturally diverse country with a wide repertoire of languages. Among the population, it is the norm to be multilingual and engage in multilingual conversations depending on the different contexts. Multilingualism is, as Sembène discussed in an interview with Gadjigo, taken for granted. He himself used up to four languages per day in the Casamance, where he was born and raised (Gadjigo, 1993: 89). He notes how even French is often a translation from Wolof, Bambara, or Pulaar, and how French is not but “a tool of communication with the dominator” (Gadjigo, 1993: 90-91). While the most widely spoken language by the Senegalese population is Wolof, French remains the official language. There is no institution support to the large repertoire of languages spoken in Senegal. Sembène’s film resist such hegemonic linguistic structure, through multilingual films, where characters speak in their own languages, mainly Wolof and Joola, particularly in his later productions. *Borom Sarret*, *Niaye* and *Black Girl* are all in French, featuring the voice-over of the main characters. However, in the later films, French is used strategically, as associated to specific contexts, often in relation to the political elite, education, snobbish interactions, or further forms of power. To Sembène soon realised that the redirecting of the gaze required also a claiming of the recognition of local languages. These constitute a form of resistance to French, the coloniser’s language. However, Sembène still acknowledge that sometimes French operates just as a unifying language among speakers of different languages, concluding that “linguistic liberation in Africa may not necessarily mean downright abandoning of the colonial language” (Fofana, 2012: 3). Instead, he advocated for the promotion of African languages.

Even in his earlier productions, *Borom Sarret*, narrated in French, the credits at the end choose the Wolof term for ‘The End,’ ‘Diekhna.’ *Xala* constitutes one of the most illustrative examples of the way in which African languages, Wolof, in the film, is used as a form of resistance to colonialism and the neocolonialism as implemented in postcolonial Senegal, with corrupt politicians and the elite as allies. This is the criticism that opens the film. It starts on 4 April, day of Senegal’s independence from France, when French politicians, dressed in suits are taken away from the Chamber of Commerce by a group of Senegalese men, dressed traditionally. These, however, are later seen in the same space, dressed in suits, and joined by two of the French men, who offer them a briefcase full of money. Among the Senegalese men, there is El Hadji, who announces he is getting married to his third wife and invites his colleagues to join the evening celebrations. El Hadji is confronted by Rama, his elder daughter from his first wife, well educated, and vocal about her opposition to polygamy. One of the main forms of confronting her father and expressing resistance to his assimilation of French culture is through language. While her father talks to her in French, she always responds in Wolof. It is not until quite late in the film, when she goes to his office to advise him to take better care of his first wife, that he raises his voice asking her: “why when I talk to you in French you reply in Wolof?” Rama stands up and says, in Wolof: “May you have a peaceful day.” The resistance reflected through language and her refusal to speak in French acquire a climax in a moment in the dialogue, on that same scene,

where El Hadji offers her some bottled (Evian) water, to which Rama replies: "I do not drink imported water."

Figure 5. Final Credits in *Borom Sarret*. Figure 6. Screenshot of a scene in *Xala*, Ej Hadji and his daughter. Rama.

Women as Everyday Heroines and Agents of Resistance

Sembène's positive representation of women as powerful, even when initially depicted as victims, has taken critiques and scholars view him as a feminist, despite his continuous efforts to avoid such term (Pfaff, 1983: 150). However, in his films, a large number of women are portrayed as agents of resistance in their expression of refusal. They are courageous, instigators of social change (Petty, 2010). As Fofana claims, each of his films challenges, to a certain extent, men's domination (2012: 166). Women are seen as everyday heroines, for instance, in films such as *Emitaï* (1971), *Faat Kiné*, *Mooladé* and the aforementioned films *Xala*, *Black Girl* and *Borom Sarret*. As Kenneth Harrow notes, Sembène's cinema features powerful women against a backdrop of men concerned about the thought of losing their privileged position (2009: 164). Sembène was a strong supporter of women's role in society. According to him, "the development of Africa will not happen without the effective participation of women" (Andrade, 1993: 100). As a Marxist activist, he placed women "at the epicentre of his revolutionary ideological dialectic" (Pfaff, 1983: 156).

His films feature the voice of leading female Senegalese griots, Fatou Kassé (1939-), Wolof, described as one of the most beautiful voices from Cercle de la Jeunesse, in *Louga* (Sutherland-Addy and Diaw: 2007: 227), famous for her lullabies, who we hear in *Niaye*; and Yandé Codou Sène (1932-2010), Serer, who was Senghor's official griot, and whose voice in *Faat Kiné*. They also lead the narrative visually. In *Emitaï*, women hide the rice so that white people, that is, the colonisers, do not see it, and still it from them. Rice is not but an excuse. It is a symbol of a struggle for dignity: "We will not give our rice to white people," they claim. In *Borom Sarret*, women's agency is only claimed at the end, when borom sarret arrives home with no money at all, due to the controversies of his day, and his wife leaves the child with him and says: "Take the baby. I promise you we will eat this evening." In *Xala*, it is through Rama's determination and resistance to his father's lifestyle, affecting her mother's inner peace. In *Niaye* and *Black Girl*, the refusal to injustice leads the main characters' suicide – Ngoné War Thiandoum, whose incestuous husband has impregnated their daughter, and Diouana, who feels like a slave working as a maid for a French family. Such resistance is further reinforced by another female character in the film, Diouana's mother, who refuses to accept the money offered by Diouana's patron when this goes to Senegal following Diouana's suicide. Kenneth Harrow's analysis of *Faat Kiné* also resonates with the portrayal of women as everyday heroines, resisting the patriarchal system, and standing up for everyday justice for ordinary people. She is the manager of a petrol station, thus controlling a large number of men employed by her. She is a single mother, whose two children pass the baccalaureate, which allows students to enter higher education. She represents, Harrow argues, "the new Africa," to which men in contemporary Africa seem to adapt well, as they do in the film with *Faat Kiné* and her friends (Harrow, 2009: 164). When she is bothered by men in her office, she is always in the powerful solution where men can

only surrender and leave, as she orders them to. Similarly, Fofana argues that she “epitomizes the independent and self-motivated modern woman who does not serve men and expects little from them in return” (Fofana, 2012: 168). With this depiction of women, refusing to different forms of injustice in personal and professional relations, Sembène adds complexity to the reality represented, acknowledges the important historic role of women, their current everyday struggle and invokes the need to consider women in thinking about Africa’s avenir.

Figure 7. Screenshot of Faat Kiné managing her petrol station. Figure 8. Screenshot of Collé. In Mooladé, protecting the young girls from excision.

Women’s power and heroism reaches a climax in Sembène’s last film, Mooladé, through the character of Collé Ardo Gallo Sy, much older than Faat Kiné, and set in a rural environment. Collé is Ciré’s second wife. She has one daughter, Amsatou, who Collé gives birth to through caesarean. She has also miscarried twice due to being excised. The scar left by Amsatou’s delivery features prominently in the film and her struggle, embodying her resistance through connecting a past experience with the present and the near-future to be achieved. She points at it to explain her daughter why she should not be afraid of being a “bilakoro,” the word to refer to those women who have not gone through excision, and who are consequently warned that no men will ever marry them. In the film, four little girls seek Collé’s protection in order not to be excised. This leads to a revolution against the practice, led by Collé and increasingly joined by Ciré’s first wife and the rest of women in the village. The culmination of Collé’s resistance also appears as an embodied form of resistance – resistance to pain, which will then be leading to further permanent scars in her body. Instigated by Amath, Ciré’s elder brother, Ciré flagellates Collé in public, ordering her to say the word that would give end to the mooladé, the protection she is giving to girls. Collé refuses to say the word. While men gathered around encourage Ciré to beat her even stronger, women support Collé asking her not to say it. It is, however, a young man, the shop-keeper, the one who stops Ciré from continuing with the violence over his own wife, for which the shop-keeper would then be killed. Later in the film, further men join the resistance against the practice, suggesting that men must join women in the fight for women’s respect and emancipation in society.

Conclusion: Call to Decolonisation Through Resisting Alienation

Ousmane Sembène is one of the pioneers of African cinema. His prolific film career remains of striking actuality, since it represents a diverse country dealing with a complexity and contradictory array of values shaped by the colonisation of the Senegalese land and minds. His work resists colonial representations of Africa through an alien gaze, contrasting with mainstream film productions set in Africa for non-African audiences. Instead, Sembène sought to make a cinema that would speak to African audiences, calling for a self-reflection and critical awareness of societal issues. This cinema, which Manthia Diawara calls a “Sembènian cinema,” has been discussed here in relation to resistance. Beyond the explicit references to the colonial regime, his films adopt a critical perspective towards a contemporary Senegal that is multi-layered, where the past, present and future aspirations meet, and result in conflicts that affect the everyday lives of ordinary people. His militant cinema reflects about the way in which the contemporary African still needs to manage the

contradicting tensions between modernity, tradition and the range of inequalities brought by centuries of colonisation. His controversial approach and fierce criticism to different forms of abuses of power, led to censorship and criticism by not only the French government, but also, the first president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Sembène's critical distance to Senegal was arguably due by his own exilic experience, as noted by Lindiwe Dovey (2009: 58-59). Like fellow Francophone West African filmmakers, such as Abderrahmane Sissako, Ousmane Sembène was trained in the film school in Moscow, and had also been in France working as a docker. This physical distance from his own country led also to a psychological distance, where he was also considered "something of an outsider," in that he refused to conform to socially accepted norms (Murphy, 2000: 1). His cinema is revolutionary in that, in Diawara's words, "it creates a new cinema language to represent black people" (Gadjigo and Silverman, 2016). In Samba Gadjigo and Jason Silverman's documentary, Gadjigo speaks about the personal effect that encountering Sembène's work had – "Suddenly, I did not want to be French. I wanted to be African." The analysis of his cinema in relation to resistance offered here has attempted to emphasise the global importance of his cinema as a tool to call to the decolonisation of the mind through a resistance to alienation. This is, as Fofana notes, "the ultimate message in his films" (2012: 159). In line with Gadjigo and Silverman's biographic documentary, this article seeks to play tribute to a filmmaker still to be considered beyond the label of African cinema, contributing, in that way, to the decolonisation of film studies, and of academia and culture, more widely.

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