

Sembène! dir. Samba Gadjigo & Jason Silverman. 2015. 90 min. Wolof, Peul, French & English with English subtitles. The Film Sales Company. Screening fee: £200

Sembène! is a documentary film about Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, director of one of the first African narrative film made in sub-Saharan Africa, *Borom Sarret* (1963), and the first feature-length sub-Saharan African film, *Black Girl* (1966). Usually referred to as the father of African cinema and as a modern “griot”, Sembène was born in 1923 in the Southern region of Casamance and passed away in Dakar in 2007. His social realist narrative films not only mirror Senegalese realities but aim to question, challenge, and respond to those realities from an African perspective and with a desire to speak to African audiences. *Sembène!* is a film about the filmmaker’s life and oeuvre, and has screened internationally in numerous film festivals (for example, the BFI London Film Festival, the UK-based African film festivals network, the New York Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival). It is a celebration of cinema and particularly of African cinema made in Africa for Africans, with the challenge of ensuring Sembène’s heritage is not disregarded but celebrated all over the world. However, it is also a re-writing of the history of cinema. Released just two years after Mati Diop had explored the legacy of the avant-garde Senegalese film *Touki Bouki* (1973) by her uncle Djibril Diop Mambety, *Sembène!* has the distinction of being the first biographical documentary of an African filmmaker.

Samba Gadjigo is the storyteller of the legacy of Ousmane Sembène in the film, and he is also the author of *Ousmane Sembène: Une Conscience Africaine* (2007) and *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist* (2010). The film starts with archival images of rural Senegal where Gadjigo grew up, with no television or radio, just his grandmother’s stories. By the age of fourteen, Gadjigo tells us that he dreamed of becoming French, like the characters he read in his high school books. When he was seventeen, he discovered the stories of Sembène, with characters that were ‘just like’ his friends, parents, and grandparents. This artistic encounter marked a transition for him – as he says: ‘Suddenly I did not want to be French. I wanted to be African.’ The documentary then shows a still image of Ousmane Sembène, characteristically smoking his pipe, and dissolves into a montage of sequences from his films, led by a group of powerful women as agents of struggle. It is then that we hear Sembène’s voice for the first time, claiming the need for African self-representation.

Different collage-style animated transitions divide the film into different life stages and film periods of Sembène – Galle Ceddo, the house of the rebel, where Sembène lived; Young Fisherman, on his upbringing and context; A Mirror for Africa, on the years of independence and his social realist film production as a reflection of Africa’s image, made by Africans; The Rebel, on his films critiquing colonial and imperial history; and finally postcolonialism and Finding Sembène, on Gadjigo’s experiences as a scholar in the USA teaching Sembène’s work, and the beginning of his personal relationship with the filmmaker. The first animation, showing Galle Ceddo, introduces Gadjigo’s journey to Sembène’s house, the first one since Sembène’s death in 2007. The documentary reviews his career, from Gadjigo’s perspective, while also recounting how self-revealing Gadjigo’s encounter with Sembène’s work was. In telling his story, Gadjigo shares his bittersweet encounters with Sembène, who ultimately became Gadjigo’s ‘tonton,’ the Wolof word for ‘uncle,’ and Gadjigo a keeper of Sembène’s legacy. This life journey is intertwined with exclusive archival images of historic and backstage moments, as well as film scenes, and a few selected testimonials, including those of Manthia Diawara, Malian writer, filmmaker, and scholar; Senegalese

author Boubacar Boris Diop; Sembène's son Alain Sembène and housekeeper, Nafi Ndoye.

The unity of this comprehensive biographical film portrayal is achieved through the use of a visual leitmotif and a carefully selected soundtrack. The leitmotif, appearing in various parts of the documentary, is arguably one of the most powerful or, at least, unforgettable, sequences of Sembène's filmography – the final scene of *Black Girl*, with the masked boy following the young French man who has travelled to report the suicide of Diouana to her family in Senegal. The music pays tribute to the importance of sound in African film. Gadjigo selects Senegalese musician Baaba Maal's singing for Sembène's film *Guelwaar* (1992), as well as the soundtrack of his latest title *Mooladé* (2004), and Youssou Ndour's track 'Tourista,' and a tribute to Sembène for the final credits.

We could argue that the intimidating feeling that marked Gadjigo's first encounter with Sembène, as we are told in this documentary, was also experienced audiovisually, that is, in the way in which Gadjigo approaches his filmic biography. Portraying important cultural figures is always a challenge – recent attempts, like *Finding Fela!* about legendary musician Fela Kuti, or *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*, about the Ghanaian writer, have had trouble reducing these complex figures to short film narratives – but Gadjigo and Silverman's film does something different. Gadjigo has employed an autobiographical approach that makes him a reflection of Sembène as storyteller and griot. This focus perhaps means that less emphasis is granted to themes such as the empowerment of women within his films or the impact of his films in the wider Senegalese community. Yet, Gadjigo adopts a first-person narrative film style, coherent with the importance that Sembène gave to orality. We witness a story and hence personal journey marked by the discovery of Ousmane Sembène, who would make 'the first film by an African in Africa for Africans,' according to Gadjigo. As Manthia Diawara says in the film: "against 100 years of stereotypes, Sembène's work constituted an incredible revolution, where he invented a new cinema language to represent black people."

The film is part of the daunting project of restoring Sembène's films and keeping his legacy alive. It is unclear, however, whether this documentary is suggesting that Sembène is part of the griot tradition and to what extent cinema itself is a continuation of this tradition. In other words, the film claims that Sembène saw a potential in cinema, with such a high rate of non-literacy in postcolonial Senegal. Yet, the film fails to critically and explicitly engage with the ways in which this was achieved. Similarly, the discussion on the impact that his films had on actual Senegalese audiences is missing. Instead, what is shown is the impact on the American community, and the international cinephile audiences of Cannes and the Venice film festival, and the political powers of France and Senegal that banned *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) and *Ceddo* (1977) respectively.

What is particularly significant about this first biographical documentary of an African filmmaker is that, through celebrating and reviewing the filmography of this renowned director, it initiates a call for a rewriting of the history of cinema, where filmmakers from Africa are not absent but occupy a central position. In the 1960s there was a flowering of European aesthetic forms contesting the hegemonic Hollywood style, such as Italian neo-realism, the French Nouvelle Vague, and British Free cinema. Yet there were also film productions where hegemonic representations within the Hollywood studio system were contested, and that have only later been studied and framed as 'world cinemas'. Looking at African cinemas in that period allows us to see not just other forms of resistance to the Hollywood studio-system, but also a broader

contestation of the representation of African people, for the first time seen through African eyes. However the global history of cinema can only truly be rewritten to include African filmmakers if audiences are exposed to their films, and to documentaries such as this one. Even more importantly perhaps, if Sembène's films were made primarily for African people, only distribution and exhibition of this documentary beyond the Euro-American circuit will guarantee a worldwide restoration of Sembène's legacy, inclusive of the Senegalese and African context.

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