

AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IN THE COMBAT (*DITE DE COMBAT*) CINEMA: THE FILMS OF OUSMANE SEMBÈNE BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION IN THE FIGHT FOR MEMORY

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Abstract: Sembène's cinema is mostly studied from the perspective of his activism and his role as a pioneer of African cinemas. Given the importance and celebration of this filmmaker's centenary in 2023, seeking to work on the audiovisual production of this memorable Senegalese filmmaker, this article approaches the aesthetic aspects in his political way of filming, showing how his politics are structured aesthetically as to Frantz Fanon's *dite de combat*, or the awakening of the people through culture. Applying two methodological approaches, filmmakers and their works are taken as objects of study and possibility of theoretical elaboration, through the theory of filmmakers (Penafria, Santos & Piccini, 2015; Graça, Baggio & Penafria, 2020), and also in terms of a discursive analysis as a film study, keeping in mind the importance of going beyond films and artists, as proposed by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (2006). We explored several films by Sembène: *La Noire de...* (1966), *Emitai* (1971), *Xala* (1975) and *Ceddo* (1997), aiming to understand the aspects that permeate all the works, not only the regularities, but also the deviations and aesthetic-political specificities of each one.

Keywords: African Cinema; *Dite de Combat*; Aesthetics and Politics; Memory and History.

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ESTÉTICA E POLÍTICA NO CINEMA DE COMBATE (*DITE DE COMBAT*): OS FILMES DE OUSMANE SEMBÈNE ENTRE A REALIDADE E A FICÇÃO NA DISPUTA PELA MEMÓRIA

Resumo: O cinema de Sembène é estudado, com maior expressividade, na perspectiva do seu ativismo e de seu papel como pioneiro dos cinemas africanos. Dada a importância e comemoração do centenário deste cineasta em 2023, buscando trabalhar a produção audiovisual deste memorável cineasta senegalês, este artigo aborda os aspectos estéticos em seu modo político de filmar, mostrando como sua política se estrutura esteticamente como aquilo que Frantz Fanon chamou de *dite de combat*, ou o despertar do povo através da cultura. Aplicando duas abordagens metodológicas, por um lado o cineasta e suas obras são tomados como objetos de estudo e possibilidade de elaboração teórica, através da teoria dos cineastas (Penafria, Santos & Piccini, 2015; Graça, Baggio & Penafria, 2020), e também operamos de modo a realizar uma análise discursiva como estudo fílmico, tendo em mente a importância de ir além dos limites do quadro, explorando os enunciados que atravessam indiretamente as obras e os artistas, como propõem Robert Stam e Ella Shohat (2006). Exploramos vários filmes de Sembène: *La Noire de...* (1966), *Emitai* (1971), *Xala* (1975) e *Ceddo* (1997), visando compreender os aspectos que permeiam todas as obras, não apenas as regularidades, mas também os desvios e especificidades estético-políticas de cada um.

Palavras-chave: Cinemas Africanos; *Dite de combat*; Estética e Política; Memória e História.

Introduction

Most authors who study the works of the important Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène end up approaching him in terms of his activism and his role, viewing him as one of the pioneers of African cinema (Do Nascimento, 2015; Diawara, 2010; Gomes, 2020), leading us to forget the aesthetic aspect under which his works are extremely rich. I believe that Sembène himself, with his militancy expressed in his films and interviews, as well as his “combatant” mode, lead these same theorists to focus too much on political practice and forget about the filmmaker's poetics.

Thus, given the importance and celebration of this filmmaker's centenary in 2023, we seek to work on his audiovisual production by exploring the aesthetic aspects in his political way of filming. We want to demonstrate how his politics are also structured aesthetically similar to what Frantz Fanon (1961) called “dite de combat” (combat), or the awakening of the people through culture.

Bringing the ways in which the filmmaker constructs an aesthetic that breaks the boundaries between reality, we explore Ousmane Sembène's cinema proposal inserted in a context of alienation, in which, in the midst of colonization, many Africans had a positive notion of progress. In this sense, as a weapon, films were ways of reaching people, so that through their aesthetics they could promote decolonization, which goes beyond social structures, but also operates in their spirits.

We take filmic materialities into account, treating them as discourses, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, and closely to the perspective and approach of Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (2006). These consider the statements presented in the images and in the sounds, and also what goes beyond the limits of the frame, the contexts of production and circulation of films, cultural and historical, political and economic aspects, which also permeate the filmic discourse. We explored several films by Sembène: *La Noire de...* (1966), *Emitai* (1971), *Xala* (1975) and *Ceddo* (1997), aiming to understand the aspects that permeate all the works, but not only the regularities, but also the deviations and aesthetic-political specificities of each one.

In this article, we also propose an approach like did Manuela Penafria, Ana Santos and Thiago Piccinini (2015), thus also and mainly taking the

filmmakers' speeches about their own work or cinema itself. The proposal is not to limit the possibilities, but to expand them. Filmmaker theory comes as a complementary methodology for this research, given the balance between the three possible approaches in film study: origin of the film, about the work itself and spectatorship, as well as the encouragement of a direct relationship between the work, the filmmakers and the researcher himself (Graça; Baggio; Penafria, 2020).

We thus carry out an expanded approach, in which Sembène's thoughts and poetics regarding his filmmaking are taken into consideration (Graça; Baggio; Penafria, 2020), but which are also put in comparison with other discourses/theories.

Colonialism and the necessity of the people awakens

Ousmane Sembène was born during French colonialism, and lived for more than thirty years under that regime, with his country, Senegal, being a French colony until its independence in 1960. And, in this sense, we believe that the correlation between the way in which French colonialism operated is fundamental to understanding how this filmmaker constructs his aesthetics and political thought.

Figure 1: Frame from *Borom Sarret*, first Ousmane Sembène film



Source: Extracted directly from the film

French domination took place in order to acquire a vast possession of eight territories that became known as French West Africa (AOF²), consisting of the territories that are today Mauritania, Senegal, Mali (French Sudan), Guinea-Conakry (French Guinea), Ghana (Ivory Coast), Burkina Faso, Dahomey (Upper Volta) and Niger, with the capital in Dakar (Gomes, 2020). To organize these eight territories, the colony articulated a colonial bureaucracy in which regional governors were appointed who responded to a governor-general, and the latter to the metropolis through the Ministry of Colonies (M'bokolo, 2011).

By regulating territories, France not only established a form of control by instances, but also promoted the idea of modernization, or civilization brought by colonialism, which also contributes to the idea of a positive colonial domination in Africa (M'bokolo, 2011). Since this political practice emerged with a positive value within the academic field, being sustained through racial and cultural superiority, such expansion of territories by European countries was seen as beneficial, not only for the expansionist State, but also for the people dominated, since it “meant” the possibility of improvement. It was the so-called “white man's burden”, which guided the central argument for legitimizing imperialism.

In the context discussed, more precisely in the year 1899, a poem appears called “The White Man's Burden”, by Rudyard Kipling. This expression “the white man's burden” came to be

² The acronym comes from the French language, in the original: *Afrique-Occidentale Française*.

associated with the justification of imperialism at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The poem made an apology for American imperialism, leaving aside the idea of God's call and replacing it from now on with the notion of cultural duty: it was necessary to bring civilization and freedom to other peoples. It was about defining a cultural standard – and racial, as seen in the reference to “white” – as a model; the standard of the white man, the only one worthy of being considered civilized. (Teixeira Júnior, 2007, p. 96)

Such a notion that colonialism brought cultural improvement became so widespread by the introduction of Western institutions during modern colonialism that alienation over its value occurred on a large scale. An example of this is that, even after decades of domination, several individuals wanted to remain associated with France. Donn M. Kurtz (1970) states that in the 1958 referendum, when the populations of the territories that made up the AOF were asked if they would like to join the colony in a community, or if not, if they preferred immediate independence, the only one to say it wasn't Guinea.

This institutional articulation of colonialism, in which the practice of indirect administration occurred, made Ousmane Sembène realize the role of some of his countrymen in supporting colonialism. This also makes us think about the role of denunciation in his films, which, unlike being focused only on blaming colonialism, which authors such as Lúcia Nagib (1996; 2017) point out, also applies to all local problems. On the contrary, Sembène sought first and foremost what Frantz Fanon (1961) called *dite de combat*, which, in turn, promoted a decolonization of the mind through films that exposed the brutality of colonialism.

His opposition was not only direct to France, but to the spiritual aspects left by colonialism, as Vinicius Gomes (2020) attests when exploring how this filmmaker opposed the unification policy that African socialism brought, or even his clashes with political actors, important people who came to censor their films. Thus, we can attest that Ousmane Sembène and his cinema were combative in every way. His conflict was not only abroad, and with Cannes, but also internal, in the search for the decolonization of the minds of his compatriots.

***Dite de Combat* in Sembène's Cinema**

In his famous work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (1961) first explores the strategies and effects of power, so that he may subsequently be able to dismantle colonial logic, and thus propose ways to combat it. It is in this context that the concept of *Dite de Combat* (*combat*) emerges, defined by this important political philosopher, psychiatrist, anti-racist, and decolonization activist as a way of affecting his people intensely through culture, in order to create political awareness, to awaken them in relation to domination and, thus, to face the revolution.

Thus, according to Fanon (1961, p. 185): “the colonized after having tried to lose himself in the people, to lose himself with the people – will, on the contrary, shake the people. Instead of favoring the lethargy of the people, he becomes the one who awakens the people”, which is nothing more than a testimony of the nation based on culture, and which serves to “evidence it in the fight that the people lead against the occupation forces” (Fanon, 1961, p. 186).

It is in this sense that Ousmane Sembène's proposal fits in this perspective, given the context of alienation, as mentioned previously, in which many Africans still wanted to remain associated with France and/or saw colonization as a positive notion of progress and civilization. Thus, as a weapon, films were ways of reaching the people so that, through their aesthetics, they could promote decolonization, which goes beyond social structures, but also operates in their spirits.

For us, cinema is always a revolution; it has to be an object of Revolution... The revolution, before being carried out at the practical level, must go through our mentalities. “Urbanity” only allows for the social circulation of things, so it is necessary that it first happens in the head... (Haffner, 2008, p. 83)

Such articulation between Fanon's concept and Sembène's poetics that we propose here becomes more evident, and it makes even more sense when we take into consideration that the filmmaker admits to having learned a lot from the theorist. During an interview in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo and recorded by Pierre Haffner (2008), Ousmane Sembène, while discussing how his training as a filmmaker occurred, focus, in addition to his formal education in cinema carried out with a scholarship in Moscow, his style comes from contact with several important subjects, such as writers and

filmmakers. Thus, Sembène highlights Fanon as one of his important influences in the construction of his thought and aesthetics: “(...) I needed to know them, after I knew Senghor, Birago Diop, Césaire, Ousmane Socé Diop, Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright... I was new and I had to learn everything from each of them. It really does not bother me to learn from others” (Haffner, 2008, p. 90).

As proposed by Fanon, Sembène as a colonized intellectual and artist makes use of techniques and a language borrowed by the “occupier”, in order to promote the denunciation of what these same colonists try to hide: the true nature of colonialism: violence. In *La noire de...* (1966), he shows his compatriots that, however attractive civilization may be, it is based on the enslavement and control of black bodies. However, by bringing the analogy of the Sembène mask, it also demonstrates what is the necessary element to combat colonialism: the strengthening of its cultural roots.

Figure 2, 3, 4: Scene of the mask in *La noire de...* (1966)





Source: Extracted directly from the film

In parallel, in his second feature film, *Emitai* (1971), the filmmaker explores a real institution, in this case the Senegalese *tirailleurs* - the French colonial army made up of Senegalese people. Sembène works with the African enlistment forced by the metropolis, transforming the natives into enemies of their own people and making them repress any subject who comes to confront the colonial state. Here we see the complexity of the ramifications of colonial power, in which, even if induced, the colonized also act to sustain domination.

The Senegalese filmmaker also expresses an aesthetic imbued by his political vision in *Campo de Thiaroye* (1988). Even though he presents characters with expressed subjectivities / personalities, showing themselves to be little

individualized and acting collectively, Sembène places the army as the main character, and thus the collective, and not the individuals. In addition to breaking with the Hollywood logic in historical films of advocating a character as a great leader or inspiration, it demonstrates to the African people that the struggle is always collective.

Furthermore, *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), focuses on the portrait of a crime that France refused to recognize for decades, which touches on an open wound of the Senegalese people. Therefore, at the same time that it involves its people with awareness in relation to one of the main events that led to the independence of Senegal, it also targets the colonizer who tries to erase the perverse reality of his actions, even if this costs him censorship in Cannes and the rest of France.

Still in relation to borrowing language and techniques from the colonizer, spaces and institutions are also thought of and used in a strategic way by Ousmane Sembène. Among them, some of the most central and strategic are the European film festivals themselves. Bearing in mind his desire for there to be a feedback and self-sufficiency of African cinemas, this senegalese filmmaker sees Europe as a support, but not where his true audience is located.

For me, after all, it is about the development of African cinema and its embedding. African cinema is in a position to sustain itself on its own resources and public. More than what I do, it's about going to meet filmmakers, trying to raise their awareness. I did that in the Ivory Coast, Togo, Bénin, Mali, and Niger; I talked to the authorities, to create competitions: if one country can do it, others can too. Independently from that, I am trying to discuss with filmmakers about our limits and possibilities. The most important thing for me is to talk to them, because we have to make sure that our cinema can develop when it has its own circulation here — I see Europe as being a support, but that is not there where our public is. (Haffner, 2008, p. 82-83)

Between fiction and reality: Sembène and his films in the dispute for historical narratives

In an interview with Sada Niang (1993), Sembène discussed how he pursued cinema, after realizing that literature did not reach the most popular classes. Not wanting to limit himself to just an academically literate elite and few university students, as was the case, at the age of 38 he moved to the Soviet

Union, with a scholarship to study Cinema. From the desire to reach his people comes *La noire de...* (1966), an adaptation of his own book *Voltaïque* (Sembène, 1962), originally published in 1961.

Manthia Diawara (2007) states that Sembène's aesthetics sought to be the opposite of Hollywood, as it operated in a way that included mostly black bodies. With this, and with the denunciation of colonial violence as the main theme, Diawara believes that his aesthetic seeks to restore its dignity to Africa.

Although Diawara expresses some fundamental elements for thinking about Ousmane Sembène's aesthetic enjoyments, we believe that the author who comes closest to a pure synthesis of the Senegalese filmmaker's style is the historian Gustavo Durão. In an article about Ousmane Sembène's trajectory as a filmmaker, writer and Marxist activist, and about how his art explains some structures of African society in former French colonial territories, Durão (2013, p. 132) states that Sembène presents “the sensitivity of an artist and with the commitment of a writer’s engagement”³.

Figure 5: Scene from the Massacre in Camp of Thiaroye (1988)



Source: Extracted directly from the film

We certainly believe and defend that Sembène's cinema presents a sensitivity in a double sense, both in terms of provoking sensations and breaking the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, of a pure sensitivity. It is in this last point that a writer's engagement and commitment to reality, also imbued with aesthetics, come together.

The Senegalese filmmaker understands that his role as a filmmaker has a responsibility to show certain things that others want to hide (Sembène in an

³ Our translation, from the original: “a sensibilidade de um artista e com o compromisso do engajamento de um escritor” (*Ibidem*).

interview with Niag, 1993). Being aware of the dispute over discourse, he understands art, and cinema by extension, as inserted in the clashes over memory. He does so as his films address historical facts, as in the case of the Camp of Thiaroye massacre, which the French would like to keep hidden, bringing into play again.

Dealing with memory as a faculty that involves the different dimensions of time, Ousmane Sembène also articulated the conflicts of the present in his works. Some of Sembène's films were dedicated to collaborating with the confrontation between the filmmaker and the poet and the important politician Léopold Sédar Senghor. In *Xala* (1975), there is a mockery and an affront to this man who represented Senegal in the French parliament, as well as to the deputies voted for by the colonies and others who supported the colonial project of uniting African countries into a single territory with autonomy, without losing the connections with France.

In *Xala* (1975), the filmmaker begins the comedy about a businessman in Senegal who is cursed with erectile dysfunction with a not-so-subtle but very ingenious and ironic criticism of the supporters of the AOF unification. However, Senghor is the main target of this adaptation of Sembène's 1973 novel of the same name.

In this first scene of *Xala* (figure 6, 7), Sembène uses an actor very similar to Senghor to play the role of the country's president, who, in turn, appears with other politicians and businessmen receiving bribes from the French in a suitcase. Since these are the same characters that minutes before appeared supporting a speech of independence, here the Senegalese filmmaker not only exchanges barbs with his opponent, but also exposes the hypocrisy of subjects who claimed to value the best for their people, but who, on the contrary, saw themselves aligned with the interests of the metropolis.

Figure 6, 7: Opening scene of *Xala* (1975)



Source: Extracted directly from the film

Vinicius Gomes (2020) states that this scene, in addition to being direct and blunt, is also emblematic in relation to the many episodes of clashes between Ousmane Sèmbene and Léopold Senghor. As part of this conflictive relationship, being a long-time opponent of Senghor's African socialism and his blackness movement, it ends up reverberating in the circulation of his films, which came to be censored, as in the case of *Ceddo* (1977). According to Sembène in an interview with Josie Fanon (2008), carried out a year after Senghor's presidential

decree that banned the screening of *Ceddo* in Senegal, the filmmaker stated that the politician's argument came from the way the film's title was written.

Even in the midst of the conflict, the filmmaker does not allow himself to be intimidated and seeks alternative financing, even investing money from his own pocket, asking allies to obtain state support from not only Senegal, but also Burkina Faso, and as well mobilizing support from several areas, such as the shoe industry *etc.* (GOMES, 2020).

Figure 8: Frame of *Emitai* (1971)



Source: Extracted directly from the film

In *Emitai* (1971), the boundaries between past, present and future are also amid the intersection between fiction and reality. The first frame of the film (fig. 16) is an inter-title that assumes the enunciative function of Ousmane Sembène with the public, more specifically with the “militants of the African cause”.

Unlike Senegal and most of the colonized countries in the aforementioned French West Africa, countries like Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau still saw themselves under Portuguese domination and in an armed struggle for emancipation (Gomes, 2020). Thus, by breaking with the concealment of the artifice with this inter-title, that is, showing who is behind the cameras while also demarcating who is speaking to it, Sembène imbues the film with current events as a message of support for the wars for liberation in Africa.

By constructing fictions that discuss in a subtle or more open way the massacres, corruptions, injustices and symbolic and physical violence promoted by France in Senegal, it acts in a way to promote political awareness (*dite de combat*), as well as inserting itself in the dispute for discourse, by placing his films to compete with the narratives of the recent past, or even the present. And, no matter how much he dedicates himself to the Senegalese context and the more direct clash with French colonialism, Sembène's films also maintain a complex thought that understands transnational aspects and the need for union, but never unification. He makes this very clear in the case of *Emitai* (1971) and the support for militants from other countries.

Between fiction and reality: Sembène and his films in the dispute for historical narratives

Given his importance for African and world cinema as a whole, there is a large literature on Ousmane Sembène's cinema. However, most authors focus more on its social and political relevance, sometimes forgetting the fundamental aesthetic aspects. As we sought to demonstrate previously, and continue in this section, the Senegalese filmmaker's politics and aesthetics cannot be ignored.

We seek to demonstrate how this filmmaker built an aesthetic that breaks the boundaries between reality, bringing his films to compete in the field of memory. We explored how Ousmane Sembène's cinematographic proposal is inserted in the context of alienation in which, amid colonization, many Africans had a positive notion of progress. In this sense, like a weapon, Sembène's films were ways of reaching people, so that through his aesthetics he could promote decolonization, which goes beyond social structures, but also operates on their spirits (*dite de combat*).

Thus, his cinema as a combat cinema is articulated not only on the plane of fiction, being surrounded by reality, as fiction acts in reality. Ousmane Sembène and his films are like the characters he creates: they fight and directly face colonialism, never being romantic, they can be defeated and tragically lose their lives, but never their dignity and, much less, the sparks of the fight. Its decolonization, as it should be, is always permeated by hope, which seeks to

echo the continent's awareness of the enemy, thinking about how it articulates itself and how to defeat it, and thus keeps the flames of revolution burning.

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