

Representation and Self-Representation: My Take

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Ousmane Sembene, the late Senegalese film director/novelist and the patriarch of African cinema, refers to film as a school of history, and confers on filmmakers the great responsibility of re-writing the history of our people. Films, Sembene said, should teach us to read and to know and to enhance our sentiments. For centuries, in Western literature and art, then in cinema beginning with the earliest films made at the turn of the century, our histories and our images have been the subject of manipulation and denigration. We have been relegated to the margins and used to reinforce, please and glorify Western desires. The earliest film practitioners, adventurers and explorers sought out to fix their gazes on the superficially observed differences of the “other” and typified exoticism as the true representation of our identities. D.W. Griffith revolutionized the cinematic art by culminating his experimentation in montage with “The Birth of a Nation” and achieved this feat by exploiting the fear of difference already present in the tainted relationships between the races.

The immense power of cinema in conferring identities emanates from the fact that it is so close to real life. Since the beginning, mainstream practices as represented by Hollywood have been striving to make this an indisputable fact by the seamless productions blurring the difference between the real and the imagined. Much has been written about how any form of visual production, and specially film, is a product of social, historical, cultural, political and economic forces; that there is no work of art, film, literature or other cultural product that can claim to be transparent of hidden meanings. The artists’ interventions, both conscious and unconscious, are selective and are mediated by their positioning within the context of these forces. But for the average

viewing public, separating fact from illusion is not a given. Critical viewing or close reading and interpreting the language and signs of cinema are often not part of general education.

Filmmaking in Africa by Africans is a fairly recent phenomenon in comparison to Western filmmaking history. This huge creative potential is hamstrung by the lack of infrastructure, resources and production experience inherent in the persistent state of underdevelopment. Carol Mundy Lawrence, a pioneer African American producer and director said that: "Whatever the reason for your decision to become an independent filmmaker, it must be strong enough to spur you to excellence and nourish you through many painful hours of disillusionment, not to mention high levels of frustration and budgets so tight they cut off your circulation."¹ Far more importantly it is compounded by the near total absence of education in film production or critical discourse about film in all its forms, followed by the lack of critical writing that could contextualize, guide and spur the growth of productions that are showing sporadic signs of life. The works of Ousmane Sembene and his contemporary pioneering cineastes remind us just how critical it is to understand that signification or representation cannot be separated from the myths and ideologies that provide context and meaning to them. At the same time we must remain vigilant to the fact that these same myths and ideologies can be used to oppress and deprive certain groups of their right to define their own identities. Moreover, it is important to develop the language of self-articulation by skillfully adapting and mastering the technologies of cinema. In this way we can advance practices that can truly capture and reflect the complexity of African realities.

Sembene and the other pioneers of African cinema explored various styles to identify what kind of practices would be appropriate to respond to the challenges inherent in such a project. The strategy that I find most appealing has been one in which master narratives become the object of analysis and critique, subverting the validity of such narratives, while at the same time appropriating and enlisting its tools of representation to serve these ends. Sembene and his contemporaries, and those that have followed in their footsteps provide us with ample evidence that African stories lend themselves to exquisitely accomplished cinematographic and montage. Take *Ceddo* (Sembene, 1976) and *Sarraounia* (Med Hondo, 1986) for example. In *Ceddo*, Sembene critiques the encroachment of Islam and

European colonialism by showing us how the oral customs of the local tradition get silenced when Islamic written law prohibited its practice. In *Sarraounia* Hondo tells the story of a West African queen who, despite the superior war machine behind it, devastates a French colonizing army in the late 19th Century. These two films are masterpieces of cinematic achievement. By appropriating the best style of classic story telling with pageantry and costumes, they present epic narratives of slavery, religious invasions, and colonial wars, featuring strong female characters. Sembene's *Faat Kine* (2001) features a successful modern businesswoman and single mother who rose from the ashes of shame, disowned by her father for her pregnancy out of wedlock, to raise two children and run her business. In a characterization unusual for many African films, a man also raises his three children alone. This film is exemplary both for its unflinching critique of women's marginalization in modern African societies, as well as its celebration of women who are successful, are conscious of their oppression but also of their power to pursue and achieve their goals. These films are visually sumptuous, beautifully shot and edited with complex characters and intellectually exciting narratives.

Studying these pioneers' work has been invaluable in developing my understanding of cinema's vast potential to transform the unbalanced relations between the dominant and the dominated. Their works demonstrate how social change has its deepest roots in self-realization and how the creative filmmaking process provides a quasi-ideal space in which to critique the status-quo and to experiment with the possibilities of creating films that foster and promote ideals of more just social relations.

I was lucky to have entered filmmaking at a time when theorization and re-assessment of issues of representation were taking place on many fronts. Being a product of the political and cultural awareness of the 60's and 70's it was natural for me to gravitate toward ideas and thoughts that challenged the dominant representational hegemony. Starting in the late fifties, Third Cinema theory had been making progress among filmmakers hailing from the so-called Third World. Its vision promised a genuine alternative to Eurocentric theories; a future in filmmaking in which we would develop a film language of our own; where Third World leaders would establish and nurture film industries in their countries encouraging experimentation and practices to advance its agenda. I was a student of this worldview.

The vision, short-lived as it was, tantalized us with the possibility that artistic and political liberation were at hand. It energized the production of some of the most exciting films, especially in West Africa, Latin America and South Asia; films that engaged with rigorous formal concerns, infused with deeply political content and commitment toward the fight for liberation.

On the heels of Third Cinema came feminist film theory and criticism led by Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Post-colonial and cultural studies further expanded the field, opening newer and more complex ways of conceptualizing and representing difference on film. The gaze of cinema was recognized not only as male but colonial as well. It was probably the most exciting period for a filmmaker to come of age.

I locate my work within this practice of critiquing / subverting / negating the dominant forms of representation. I am a filmmaker trained on the job and not academically trained in theory and analysis of cinematic forms. Nonetheless, I decided that if I was going to engage in the practice of filmmaking, it was important to understand these regimes of representation.

I started my work as an independent filmmaker in 1987. My initial focus in my first project was on African American history, *Our Place in the Sun (1988)*, a 30-minute documentary about the century-old presence of African Americans on Martha's Vineyard, an island associated with images of the white leisure class.

While I was making *Our Place in the Sun* I met the late Dorothy West, then an octogenarian whose family had been coming to the island since she was a baby. I discovered that Ms. West was a writer and one of the last remaining members of the great Harlem Renaissance. Her father who was born a slave and had been freed when he was 7 years old, had come north soon thereafter, and within a few years managed to become a successful businessman, setting up a middle class life for his family in Boston. West's only published novel at the time, "The Living is Easy", provides a scathing look at middle class Black Boston. A mixture of personal memory, archival footage and photographs, *As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West* (1991) narrates West's story, alongside that of other Black women artists of the period. In addition to my deep curiosity about African American history, I was interested in interrogating the erasure and/or deliberate neglect of women's participation in the artistic events of the Harlem Renaissance. West's story bridged Martha's Vineyard, Boston and New York. I was able to present an evocation of Boston's Black history, the first major

Black literary and artistic movement and, most importantly, glean the history of the women of the Harlem Renaissance about whom little had been known. Some of the most exciting parts of the film are the precious moments when Dorothy West's personal recollections take us into little explored areas of African American life at the turn of the 20th century.

While working on this film, I found myself constantly drawn into the news of the deteriorating political situation in Ethiopia. The repeated famines and the endless civil wars continued to dislocate and displace thousands of people, turning them into images of faceless masses, never-ending food lines and dusty processions into exile. Millions were stranded in neighboring countries that were not much better off than Ethiopia. Also, for the first time in the history of Ethiopia, women were fleeing from the country in large numbers. In between waiting for more funding to finish Dorothy West's portrait, I started researching what eventually turned into *Sidet: Forced Exile* (1991), a 60 minute documentary portrait of three Ethiopian women exiled in the Sudan.

In *Sidet* I wanted to personalize the stories, name the individuals and explore refugee women's narratives. The largest numbers of Ethiopian refugees were in the Sudan. I was interested in observing the conditions under which these exiles fared, having exchanged one chaotic situation for another. Sudan in 1990 was not a particularly welcoming place. It was a year after the current Islamic regime, led by colonel Omar al-Bashir, had overthrown President Sadiq el Mahdi. Instability reigned as Bashir and the National Salvation movement tried to consolidate their power. Everything was scarce. Moreover the refugee population was caught between the wrath of the people who blamed them for all the economic and political turmoil, and the government that found an easy scapegoat in their presence. At the same time, the war in the south was escalating and the government accused Ethiopia of supporting it. Filming refugees at this time was not the wisest move. According to a friend, who called me from Khartoum sometime after we returned to the US, we were the last film crew able to leave with our films intact!

Sidet represents my effort to express the stories of the Ethiopian women I met in Sudan, to pay homage to their resilience, their multi-faceted struggle, and their survival under the harsh circumstances they endured there. Despite their dire situation, they showed incredible courage and hope for the future. What I captured on film reflects some of these ideas. I completed *As I Remember It* and *Sidet* in 1991.

I started working on *Ye Wonz Maibel (Deluge)* (1997) immediately after I finished these films. The momentous events taking place all over Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, culminating with the fall of the Soviet Union and the ensuing tumult all across the Eastern block, spilled over to Ethiopia. In April, 1991 the military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam was driven out of power, weakened by the loss of Soviet support, drained by the double-pronged wars of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front and the Eritreans' struggle for independence from Ethiopia. In June 1991 I bought a hi-8 video camera and went to Ethiopia with the vague idea of recording the end or the beginning of something. I wasn't prepared for the horrors I found.

My intention was to try to capture narratives of what had happened during the military regime's elimination program known as the Red Terror, when, between 1976 and 1979, hundreds of thousands of people had been murdered. After spending a number of years sorting through hours of oral histories, visual documents and official narratives I had collected, I decided that the stories were too complex and too massive to contain within one hour using the what-happened-when style of documentary. As I was struggling to decide how best to tell this story, I came in contact with, and was greatly influenced by, documentaries from the London film workshops, a movement that was experimenting with and breaking new ground in hybridized story telling. Films such as Black Audio and Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1987) and Sankofa Film and Video Collective's *The Passion of Remembrance* (1988) presented visually exciting and poetic narratives of very complicated histories using personal reflections and reactions to events. Because of my training in public television, I initially resisted using the personal voice for such a public story as the Red Terror. But once I chose to locate the stories of my brother and my best friend in the big events that led to the Red Terror, I found that I had become part of the story.

What is the role of the individual in perpetuating such national tragedies, be it famine, war or political terror? What motivates us to love or to destroy? What turns good to evil, nobility to cowardice, vision to nightmare? All of us had started out with a vision for a better Ethiopia. Where and when had idealism metamorphosed into nightmare? Focusing my lens on searching through my own history, I wanted to look into my family's experiences in the hope of illuminating larger truths. What would I have done if I had been there?

It took 5 years of agonizing, deep emotional swings and mercurial changes to find the story that finally became *Deluge*. I was faced with images of death every day through those little TV screens in the editing room. My brother and my best friend had been murdered. Most of my compatriots from the student movement who had gone back home to join the revolution had also ended up dead. Hundreds of thousands of students and young intellectuals were randomly massacred. With emotional support from my daughter, my family and my friends, who regularly reminded me to stay steady and focused on the importance of the story that had to be told, I kept working until I found the direction the film needed to take. *Deluge* is by far the most challenging film I hope I will ever have to make. It stands tall as an intimately personal commentary, as a political and national history, as a eulogy not only to my brother and my best friend, but to lost innocence as well as to grand visions. In this regard, it is the most satisfying film I have made so far. Though many of the questions I started out with remain un-answered, the long and complex journey of its making has had a profound impact on me as an individual and as a filmmaker.

After *Deluge* I started experimenting with a fresh approach with which to articulate the post-mortem of the gaping mass graves dotting the landscape in Ethiopia. Returning to Ethiopia more frequently made me aware of the serious breakdowns, the seismic rifts that had sundered families and communities. I felt that the traditional documentary form was not adequate to capture this disconnection and fragmentation. As I mulled over which direction to take, I received an invitation to participate in the 2003 Venice Biennale with a new work. I seized this opportunity to experiment with fragmented structures, using a traditional art form of the triptych as the vessel. *Ruptures* (2003) became my first three channel video installation.

My choice of style was undoubtedly informed by the fact that painting in triptych is a traditional Ethiopian art form to which I have had much exposure. It is a widely used system of representation in Orthodox iconography, highly developed over centuries throughout the country. As the child of an Ethiopian Orthodox priest, I was always drawn to the iconic paintings and manuscript illustrations found in many Ethiopian Orthodox religious texts, church murals, as well as on wood panels illuminating religious narratives. Thus the triptych format refers not only visually to this traditional art form, but also to the core beliefs of the Trinity in Ethiopian Orthodox faith. Appropriating this formal

motif gave me a chance to propose a kind of hybridity that embodied existing traditions within modern technological and stylistic forms. I use this form to re-work the traditional content into images that refer to a variety of real and invented histories, including the myth of the Queen of Sheba, the Adwa victory and the piles of trash in Addis Ababa city dump.

For Ethiopia, the 20th century started out on a glorious note with Emperor Menelik's resounding victory over the Italians at Adwa in 1896. It was the first such defeat of a European power in the hands of an African nation. I was able to acknowledge the pervasive nature of the triptych art form in Ethiopian art and life, comment on the universalizing linearity of Ethiopian history, and critique the inadequacy of Western art forms to represent the complexities of the cultures and histories I was dealing with.

I also re-contextualize *Deluge in Ruptures*. In *Deluge* there are references to dirt, to trash and to sifting through debris at the mass grave sites. In addition to scenes of mass graves, there is a moment in *Deluge* when a mother appears standing at the edge of an empty mass gravesite to tell the story of how her son's body was tossed into a truck "as if he were dirt."

While attempting to film at the trash dump, *Deluge* was my passport for entry. When I arrived at the site, I was met by a group of young men who wanted to know what I was doing. I explained my intention to film there. They immediately surrounded me and my friend, started asking what I planned to do with the film, told me that many tourists often came to film promising they would come back with help and never do. In short, they would not allow me to shoot that day, because their group leader was not there anyway. As we engaged in a heated debate about the merits of an Ethiopian filmmaker doing it as opposed to foreigners, a man in his early 20's with sunglasses and a jogging suit strolled into the middle of the group demanding what was going on. I told him of my intention to film there. He asked if I was really a filmmaker, and enquired as to what films had I done that he would know about. I mentioned *Deluge*. Of course he hadn't seen it. I told him that it was about my brother and my best friend who was killed during the Red Terror. His face and posture changed, head hung down as if to hide his emotion and in a subdued voice said that his brother was also killed at that time. I promised to give him a copy of the film. After watching it a week later, he offered that he and his group would escort me to the dump anytime I needed to film there.

As a reflection on the transience of history, memory and identity *Ruptures* expresses the collective despair I felt about the state of the nation. But it also problematises the tendencies of representing as either/or the political or economic realities we face – for example, traditional/modern, developing/developed, under-developed/developing, etc. In the images of the installation the pre-historic, the pre-modern, the modern and the post-modern exist simultaneously side by side, more accurately representing the present-day realities of Ethiopia. With as few words as possible, relying on the power of the images, overlaying new and old sounds, juxtaposing and comparing them, I present new paths for interpreting this complex century in Ethiopian history, providing viewers with an acute sense, and feeling, of Ethiopia.

On another level, *Ruptures* marks a form of independence for me, a kind of self-reliance that by-passed the need for large fund-raising. I shot all of the new video footage for *Ruptures* with a small digital camera. I have continued to shoot entire projects including both versions of *Imagining Tobia I, II* (2006, 2007) and the most recent triptych, *Square Stories* (2010). I continue to explore different forms of visual story telling that make my filmmaking journey exciting and rewarding. I have grown in confidence as a filmmaker and will continue to grapple with the ever-increasing challenges of representing African stories.

Endnotes

1. Black Women Film & video Artists, Jacqueline Bobo, ed. p. 93

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Salem Mekuria: Filmography

Salem Mekuria is La Meur Professor of Art at Wellesley College and an independent writer, producer, director, videographer, and a video installation artist. Her film works include:

Square Stories (2010) Triptych Video documentary Installation

Writer, Director, Videographer, Producer

Imagining Tobia, I and II, (2006, 2007) Triptych Video documentary Installations

Writer, Director, Videographer, Producer

Ruptures, (2003), Triptych Video documentary Installation

Writer, Director, Producer and Videographer for most of the documentary

Ye Wonz Maibel - (Deluge), (1997) a 60 min. documentary

Writer, Director, Producer and Videographer for some of the documentary

Sidet: Forced Exile (1991) 60 min. film documentary

Writer, Director, Producer

As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West (1991) 56 min. documentary

Our Place in the Sun (1988) 30 min. video documentary