PROJECT MUSE®

The Language of Real Life: Interview with Ousmane Sembène

Kwate Nee Owoo

Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, Volume 49, Number 1,
Spring 2008, pp. 27-29 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frm.0.0011>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/252625>

TRIBUTES

The Language of Real Life Interview with Ousmane Sembène

Kwate Nee Owoo

This interview is reprinted from Framework 36, 1989

Kwate Nee Owoo: How are you able to reproduce the language of real life working with non-professional actors?

Ousmane Sembène: If you are working with actors who are not professionals, and you are trying to reproduce the language of real life you have to take special care with gestures and movement, to be careful not to destroy anything of the original atmosphere, nor destroying anything of their personality. Africans talk a lot. That doesn't mean that what they say doesn't make sense, but they do talk a lot. For instance I personally can speak/understand Wolof, Bambara, Malanke. Take for example the question of greeting. People will greet each other and go into some other matter and in the middle of the other matter they would suddenly start greeting each other out of the blue.

The cinema is rational, therefore, you have to suppress the repetition of greetings, but if you tell non-professional actors this, they can't grasp it. The roundabout way of thinking, the ins and outs of thought, it is very difficult to get people to change them. So when you are rehearsing the actors, you have to rehearse the language, gesture, and look, to make sure that there is no dead space. I am a product of the Soviet film school, and there we learnt about the Italian method, the French method, and the English method.

Framework 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 27–29.

Copyright © 2008 Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan 48201-1309.

For instance, if you take English theatre, there is English theatre and Irish theatre, but the English theatre was more or less nothing like Irish theatre, which keeps you awake.

The spoken language belongs to a particular ethnic group. For instance, in Senegal you will have people who can speak several languages, and in that case, you may have the gestures of one language going with another language, and you have to learn to deal with that.

Also you may have people moving within the same conversation from one language to another language quite unconsciously.

Now this question of redundancy or of people repeating themselves. You'll find that if you're working with peasants, for instance, they would tend to repeat themselves, and sometimes put in a lot of unnecessary words. So in the first rehearsal, I allow them the freedom to talk until they get this thing out of their system. Then during the second rehearsal you explain to them that some of this must be tightened up or cut out.

KO: But in *Camp De Thiaroye* [DZ/SN/TN, 1988], I found this repetition of lines sometimes quite refreshing actually, I mean the way in which sometimes, with a different flavor, or even with a touch of humor, a character repeats or reinforces what another character has just said.

OS: Also you must remember that first of all we are dealing with the army, and the army is an interesting phenomenon for most of us. Most of us don't know any more about the army than the uniform. So it's interesting to show how the army functions, and these guys in the army are ordinary human beings. One would repeat what the other fellow has said, naturally to show that one is actually participating fully in the conversation to show that you are agreeing with him. If I was making this film in a Western style, then I would cut out all of that.

KO: Well for me this is the most crucial and central and problematic area of our struggle as filmmakers or artists to develop an African film language: the language of real life. For instance in *Borom Sarret* [SN, 1966], one of your earlier films, the French language is superimposed or dubbed onto Wolof language, without synchronization between gesture and movement. So that one gets the impression that the French language has been deliberately superimposed on the film in the same manner as it has historically been imposed on the Senegalese people.

OS: Well I started out from the same thought. What I did was to take *Borom Sarret* and another of my films to the peasants at home in Burkina Faso and various places to show them. My attitude then was that there was nothing wrong with imposing the French language on the films, because the French language is a fact of life. But on the other hand the peasants were quick to

point out to me that I was the one who was alienated because they would have preferred the film in their own language without the French.

KO: For me the most fascinating of all the characters in *Camp De Thiaroye* was the deaf and dumb man called Pays. In him we experience an irony with that part of everyday life. Through his eyes, solitary feelings and mutterings we become sensitized to awakening to another impending tragedy. His Gestapo helmet symbolically reminds us of his traumatic experiences in a POW concentration camp in Fascist Germany which his colleagues thought had driven him nuts. His quick reflexive response to the barbed wire surrounding the transit camp (Thiaroye), was more reminiscent of his experience of the concentration camp in war-torn Germany. To be welcomed home by barbed wire was more like frying pan into the fire. What was there to celebrate? His response to the barbed wire was electrifying and ominous. Why did you choose a deaf and dumb character to convey this awakening?

OS: Yes, I agree with your observation. First of all, the dumb character's name is Pays, which means Africa. In him we see the concentrated experiences of all fellow soldiers of the war in which some of them fought and died, but would prefer to escape from and make merry. Do you remember the scene in which Pays first encounters the barbed wire in total disbelief and astonishment, is assured by one of his mates who scoops some soil from the ground and rubs it on Pays' head and hands and says, "Look Pays, look, we are home, back home to Africa, back on your own soil. Wake up man, this isn't Germany . . . this is Senegal." Pays of course remains unconvinced. Pays is Africa. He has been abused and traumatized. He can't talk. He is alive, he can look and see, he can touch, and he can see the future. He is the beholder of the drama of the past, of the concentration camps of colonization, very disciplined, very alone, very solitary, but he can't express it. And in these circumstances nobody believes him. Now do you remember in the final episode just before they were massacred by the French colonial soldiers, he instinctively and symbolically and tragically and furiously knocks his helmet against the wooden sheds to arouse them from their stupor, but alas it was too late. So as a result of this, everybody is killed. A tiny mistake in life and your whole life is ruined.