

The Silent Monologue by Khady Sylla and Charlie Van Damme: Some (not so New) Gendered Stories of Globalization

Diogenes
2018, Vol. 62(1) 48–56
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192117701386
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



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Abstract

This paper examines how, building on earlier filmic representations such as Ousmane Sembene's *La Noire de...* and Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako*, Khady Sylla's *Le Monologue de la muette* traces a continuum of women's exploitation, from slavery to colonization to globalization.

In his article, "Identité africaine et mondialisation," which he developed further in *L'Afrique au-delà du miroir* (2007), the Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop addresses the impact of globalization on artistic expressions, including films. In his later assessment of the status of film production on the African continent, he reminds us that:

Today African cinema is almost entirely controlled by foreign investors. [...] It changed radically the themes and aesthetic of some of the most mediatized African filmmakers at the time. Their films, which are imagined with the idea that they will be viewed in Western film festivals, are never shown in Yaoundé or Libreville. While made by Africans, their shaping is essentially Western. In some cases, one could say that the filmmakers' imagination has been confiscated, and that, for being dispossessed of her/his initial scenario, s/he ends up becoming a mere alibi. Even "her/his" crew is often essentially of European technicians that have been imposed by the producer.

For sure, this uncomfortable situation is not specific to African filmmakers, but in this case, the stakes are more cultural than financial. In controlling the images of a continent, one secures control over its political and social power as well. (Diop 2007: 204–205)

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While drawing similar conclusions about literature and music, Diop also acknowledges the possibilities and challenges produced by globalization, and how they are met by artists in terms of creativity:

Real culture is a human response to the blindness of dictatorships, whether they are based on politics or economics. It has nothing to do with tumult and ostentation. [...] it's not through denying oneself but rather in "keeping true to oneself", to use [Cheikh Hamidou] Kane's words, that artists can face the challenges of an increasingly complex and fierce world. Artists are nothing and have nothing to say if they don't accept first to be themselves. (Diop 2007: 208)

In *Les Cinémas d'Afrique des années 2000. Perspectives critiques* (2012), Olivier Barlet examines how films produced during the first ten years of the twenty-first century tried to respond to the challenges of globalization, the expectations of the economic market, the absence of an audience; he looks at how both women and men filmmakers have aimed at creating a new synergy, through new aesthetic forms, and a renewal of the objectives and concept of truth for the documentary.

Among films addressing issues of globalization, one film immediately comes to mind, Abderrahmane Sissoko's *Bamako* (2006), for his use of dramatization. In a review of the film, I remarked the following (Cazenave 2007):

In an initial long take reminiscent of Djibril Diop Mambety's *La Petite vendeuse de soleil*, between night and dawn, with a silhouette walking slowly through empty streets – here, with metallic scaffolding in the background – Sissoko takes us into a multifamily courtyard in a popular neighborhood of Bamako, Mali. As people wake up, ready to go about their daily tasks, the courtyard transforms into a courtroom for the trial of globalism.

The same description would essentially apply to *The Silent Monologue* (2008, 45'), directed by Khady Sylla and Charlie Van Damme. As the camera opts for an ambulatory exploration, going down the street and lingering on women's repetitive gestures, sweeping the floor in front of their doorway, we, in conjunction with the camera lens, come to stop and focus on Amy; she, too, is sweeping the front doorway before taking on other tasks, and in what promises to be a long day of unending chores, paced by the various abrupt commands: "Amy, bring this," "Amy, Do that."

If the two films aim at highlighting the negative aspects of globalization, each film/filmmaker proceeds from a different aesthetics. For instance, at the heart of Khady Sylla's work is the crafting of literary and filmic narratives together, an effect of echoing, some within her own *œuvre*, others based on filmic intertextuality, thus creating a series of conversations between films.

Before proceeding to highlight these different points, let us come back to *Bamako* for a moment, and see how this film offers a fresh perspective on globalization, which other filmmakers have been further expanding on.

Dramatizing globalization

At the heart of each film lies a practice of dramatization: in *Bamako*, the presence of Aminata Traoré, former Minister of Culture and Tourism in Mali (1997–2000), here playing the role of an impassioned writer called to the bar, signals a fusion of genres. This isn't a documentary discussing the responsibility of the IMF, the World Bank, and multinational companies in African societies' pauperization. Yet, as a former coordinator of the United Nations Development Program, with her book, *Le Viol de l'imaginaire* (2002) attacking the role of the West in Africa's increasing poverty, and today with her essay co-written with Boubacar Boris Diop, *La Gloire des Imposteurs* (2014),

Aminata Traoré remains a leading voice on the continent, in favor of another form of globalization to be based on cultural and political creativity. The many witnesses, through their eloquence, like Traoré's, their moving testimonies, even their silence, gradually engage us with the topic. The dramatizing effect does not end here.¹

Even though the focus is a courtyard transformed into a courtroom, the camera soon takes on a roving quality, wandering about, capturing the inhabitants of the courtyard and around – young and old – in their daily activities. Similarly to the poetic quality of his earlier film, *La Vie sur Terre*, Sissako gives us snapshot-like slices of life: a man enjoying his frugal breakfast in the morning, a toddler walking in his diapers and squeaking shoes, a bed-ridden sick person with little nursing other than water and an IV, a child's bicycle with Rambow written across, hard-working women tie-dyeing Malian cotton fabrics, the strikingly beautiful batiks drying in the wind, a young girl looking after a baby, the enchanting singing of Mélé at night, her husband Chaka learning Hebrew with audiotapes in the desperate hope of an Israeli embassy hypothetically coming to the city and giving him a guardian job. These fleeting moments when the camera leaves the courtroom while we still hear both legal parties debating in the background are most telling, as they subtly illustrate how the local and the global intersect.

In his comparative analysis of *Bamako* and *Cleveland contre Wall Street* (by the Swiss Jean-Stéphane Bron), Olivier Barlet highlights both the suffering of the poor communities, and the participatory experience of suffering as one of the principal vehicles for the emotion in the film:

In both cases they are fictitious scenes, with real witnesses, real judges and lawyers though. In both films, the dignity of the humble, more so than the facts themselves, highlights the cynicism of the powerful. (Barlet 2012: 62–63)

The insertion of a mock spaghetti-Western film, with one of the producers, Danny Glover, and Palestinian filmmaker Elisa Suleiman starring in it, and cowboys casually killing women and children passing by in the street, adds to that. The film-within-a-film can be understood in several ways. That the West is really wild, as claims Wesley Morris (2007); that it could be an allegory for the countless thoughtless deaths occurring in Africa because of Western policies, the difference being that it is probably more obvious in Western films than in the globalizing process; that the laughter and visible enjoyment of the courtyard people gathered around TV to watch it remind us of the importance of Western movies on the African continent, and its consequences: how these have fed the imaginary of the African continent with Western images of heroic figures and models of power and success; finally, the fact that this mock film is shown on TV may allude to how African theaters and national television networks find it cheaper to show these films on the continent rather than films by their own filmmakers; and how, in that context, making a film remains a challenge for African filmmakers because of very aggressive policies led by Western production and distribution companies.

While singing her last night at the club, Mélé's tears tell us movingly, better than any discourse, about the hardships of her situation – her marriage is over, her husband is unemployed and has lost his dignity, and she'll go back to Dakar, where she is from, without her daughter. But her tears also symbolize the untenable suffering of a continent, expressed otherwise through a woman voicing her explosive anger, disrupting the court, and saying "enough with all this suffering!"

The court's ruling, however, will not take place as it is interrupted by Chaka's suicide and death. With the same audience, and Maître Fall holding Mélé, the camera has displaced its focus, the photographer/cameraman who shoots weddings is now filming Chaka's funeral, with the courtyard silently emptying, vanishing in a last iris-out shot. If the emblems of Western power are not affected

or touched, *Bamako*'s audience are. Scenes of the film remain with us, the small details, pieced together, helping us see the larger picture, i.e., how people are locally affected by globalization.

Hence, as shown by Barlet (2012: 63), the tangents and digressions that occur in *Bamako* proceed from an idea of sharing:

The digressions taking us away from *Bamako* have no other goal, but to enable to experience how the witnesses feel. They are not illustrations; rather, they are applied case-scenarios, short and decentered enough (at times in a spoof-like manner as with the Western scene) to allow for any identification. These distantiations are such that their empathy does not prevent them from being critical. Their experiencing of reality and emotions through a poetic treatment enable a more direct understanding. The artist as a critic is no longer merely observing reality, but he proposes his audience the possibility of a direct experience of reality.

In *The Silent Monologue*, Khady Sylla further explores the effect of dramatization and individualization to tell us a story, that of the phenomenon of globalization as it translates in daily life, in the life of Amy, a young Senegalese woman originally from Casamance, who went to Dakar to find work.

The author of several short stories, two novels, including *Le Jeu de la mer* (1992), the late Khady Sylla (she passed away in October 2013), produced a number of films: a short, *Les bijoux* (1997) and three documentaries, *Colobane Express* (1999), *Une Fenêtre ouverte* (*Open Window*, 2005, 52') and *Le monologue de la muette* (*The Silent Monologue*, 2008, 45'). Together with Tsitsi Dangarembga, Isabelle Boni-Claverie, and Monique Agenor, she is one of a group of women filmmakers that have shifted from literary writing to filmic writing. In an interview with James Gaash in 2000, to the question as to how she combined these two creative activities, how she brought together imagination and reality, Khady Sylla had the following response:

Writing is a solitary activity whereas film is team work. There are many things that can be expressed through words, and do not translate well as images. The reverse is true as well. Writing is closer to Mankind, their inner being, and the apparent cinema of their lives. These are two different approaches to reality.

The way to apprehend reality – and in which the presence of the “I” behind/in front of the camera, plays a definite role – the question of authority, the importance of the subjective including through autobiography, these are questions each filmmaker must resolve. In Khady Sylla's case, whether in *Open Window* or *The Silent Monologue*, these also mean addressing the question of the “*irreprésentable*”, and “making the experience of it – including as part of the audience – from within.” Olivier Barlet's statement about Djibril Diop Mambety, his need to “understand/embrace the world” (1996: 142) remains just as pertinent when it comes to Khady Sylla.

With *The Silent Monologue*, Khady Sylla continues to pursue this approach, combining self-representation and a counter-narrative to address a collective social discomfort. And she does so by means of poetry. Whereas *Bamako* leaned on the emotions of Mélé's song, *The Silent Monologue* brings in improvised slam poetry. Through the Senegalese Slam singer, Fatim Poulo Sy's powerful voice, she lets us hear the glaring anger of the “little” maids.

Gilles Deleuze's words (as quoted in Barlet's analysis of new tensions and energies to seize and translate reality) are most pertinent:

What is important with images, it is not the mere content, but the extreme energy captured, ready to burst out, and that are such as they can never last too long. They can be fused into the explosion, the combustion, the diffusing of the condensed energy. (Deleuze 1992: 70–71, cited in Barlet 2012: 169)

A poetic creation, the film is first and foremost a way to interpellate the audience on a specific issue, that of women's exploitation, of the young maids working in Senegalese households – but, as the voice-over/Khady Sylla remarks, it could be anywhere in West Africa – and the slam multiplies and accentuates the energy of images, precisely in the tension between what is said/sung and what is shown.

In his analysis of *Open Window*, Bronwen Pugsley remarks that the interaction between Sylla and Aminta was not far from Renov's notion of domestic ethnography:

A mode of autobiographical practice that couples self-interrogation with ethnography's concern for the documentation of the lives of others', where subjects serve 'less as a source of disinterested social scientific research than as a mirror or foil for the self. (Pugsley 2004: 216)

The Silent Monologue shows a similar approach in the space given to the "I" and a certain choreography of the subject. Here, unlike the dubbing effect of voices that one can find for instance in Safi Faye's *Selbé et tant d'autres* (1982), unlike the ethnic observations as well, included what is constructed as a typical day in Selbé's life, the "voice-over," that of the filmmaker, is no longer individual, but plural:

We are a minority

We are marginal [...] But this spring will be our spring

A plural voice, first barely audible but that, gradually, surges like a waterfall, through Fatou Sy's text and voice, the rebellious words overflow. Built on a decentering of image and sound, her voice is also personal, intimate; it tells us about the memories of childhood, her mother's home, thus making a sharp contrast with the aridity of the land and other images shown on the screen. In so doing, Khady Sylla disrupts the norms and blurs the lines between literary and filmic writing in order to break away from silence, aiming at a poetic creation: beauty surges from confusion, pain, revolt, or silence. "The emotion produced by the image is not emotional, but poetic" (Barlet 1996: 158); the poetry emanates from this very decentering between image and narrative. Whereas Khady Sylla *tells* the translucent water and multifarious colors of her loincloth, the camera shows a desolate landscape, a dry, arid riverbed:

My body is here indeed, but my soul remains there.

Here, is like a prison. I am here only to run errands go to the market and shops, the market, shops, the market, shops.

In choosing to let us hear Amy's inner monologue, she becomes emblematic of a plural temporality and a genealogy that bring us back to Diouana, the young protagonist of *La Noire de...*, directed by Ousmane Sembene in 1966 (see Williams 1993). From then on, through the intertextuality of image and text, Amy's story unfolds on the screen; but it is also that of other young women, who have gone to the city to work as maids, generation after generation. The question of belonging, of uprooting as lived by Diouana in *La Noire de...*,² and that of a double migratory process, from village to town, from Dakar/Senegal to Antibes/France, can be read as an urbanization process, and that of exile within one's own country. As Mazrui (1999) argues, it shows that exploitation is simply reiterated, now within a global economy.

The reiteration of the same scenario, i.e., a young woman silenced for lack of schooling, from Diouana to Amy, points to forms of exploitation when it comes to women. Khannous (2013) explores the generational changes in African women artists' works, particularly with regards to feminism. In her introduction, she highlights a number of recurrent points as well, particularly, the silencing of women:

The history of women's silencing in Africa is intertwined with the history of colonization, as women were denied speech not only by the male patriarchy within their own cultures, but also by the European colonizer. ... That women were denied freedom of speech reveals how language had been used as a patriarchal weapon. (Khannous 2013: xviii–xix)

At the same time, Khady Sylla reaches out to the young generation, and the ways the African youth is affected by the notion of globalization. Khannous's statement about Leila Merrakshi's *Marock* (2005) remains valid for *The Silent Monologue*:

... reveal[ing] how globalization is changing the lives of youth in contemporary [Senegal]. ... Globalization has influenced people by transforming identities, something more evident among youth exposed to popular cultural trends and foreign media. ... The film's incorporation of gender allows exploration and understanding of the contested meanings of globalization that influence women's lives. (Khannous 2013: xx–xxi)

In that regard, the next shot of the slam singer ... who reveals her anger, is most telling: "What do you want us black, ugly, little? Why? Why?" she is asking angrily whereas her body is all beauty. The reiteration of the question, more than throbbing pain, becomes a pounding cry of revolt. It takes shape in the repetition, the rhythm created by the same words being repeated again and again; expressing revolt, the slam song draws its energy and strength from the singer's gaze staring at the camera, while walking directly to the camera. Both her gaze and her body express tension, anger, and a determination to refuse any form of submission or exploitation. The filmmaker has effaced herself from the image and disappeared behind the camera, recording the anger directed at the camera/audience, letting it amplify and spill over, outside the frame, coming right at us, to call on us.

Several of Olivier Barlet's points in his analysis of Aminta in *Une Fenêtre ouverte* could apply to Amy or this young slam artist:

Khady focuses on Aminta, on her malaise, her gazing away, her phobias, her confinement in the courtyard; the family is worried about letting her go out, and face her how difficulties to be in the world. A medium-shot captures them facing each other, equals, listening to each other, in their sharing, but also in their incommunicability when the smile closes in on the inner self. But if Aminta becomes a cinema screen, it is through utter tension. While she is fascinating for her projection of our own likely fears about the world, she is also the impersonation of the trauma that blocks all emotions. Aware that any attempt at explaining would cancel out the vision, Khady's gaze on Aminta does not proceed from that angle. (Barlet 2005)

Here, in her defiant gesture of seizing the image and taking over the power of the media, the young slam artist is emblematic of a new generation of African feminists, which Touria Khannous describes as follows:

Globalization has also shaped women's agency, as it has made public spaces equally accessible for women, and helped feminist activists to come together through global forums and transnational networks in their call for equal rights. Fourth generation feminist activists have embraced the community and instant

connectivity offered by social media, like blogs and Facebook, in an effort to better engage feminist goals with dynamic developments on the ground. As they voice their concerns they are making feminism relevant to the unique challenges their generation faces. They are using new forms of feminist discourse, and the technology to fuel such discourse, to promote change from within. (Khannous 2013: xxi)

While the slam artist tells us her anger, looking at us straight in the eyes, without blinking, the sequence of women's testimonies following her performance offers counter-examples in their inability to face the camera. With their eyes lowered, these young women and adolescents are first and foremost embodying submission and domination when telling their stories, recalling the road to their domestic employment, the fact that they have been maids for generations; that a mother will prevent her daughter from going to school.

Almost 25 years after *Selbé et tant d'autres* by Safi Faye, the same question has resurfaced: why wouldn't a little girl be able to go to school and have an education? Why is it that she will have to go into exile and move to the city, to *La Grande dévoreuse* to borrow a title from Isabelle Boni-Claverie's novel. This young Senegalese girl's question might just as well be asked in Abidjan, Lomé, or Porto-Novo; as for other alternatives, they are most likely to be prostitution or begging (Bali moune-Lutz 2005). Hence these young girls accepting to work as maids rather than prostituting themselves or begging: "Why should the emancipation of some be at the detriment of others and their slaving away?" asks another young woman.

To Amy's inner monologue, and someone, who has no voice, other women's voices are added: "it makes me angry to see a maid being mistreated. We are human beings just like others; but they show no respect for us." A new monologue appears, a contemporary version of Diouana's (in *La Noire de...*) that is representative of her own suffering but also of other young women and girls, who, like her, have been exploited. Such an approach reenacts the question of *agency*, of who can speak, as addressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 1988 article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

In expressing pain, in querying silence, and in confronting the dynamic tensions between silence and words, between resigned bodies and inner thoughts as a way out of confinement, Sylla proposes a new song and choreography: not of pleasure, but of pain and anger. Gradually, through the combination of slam poetry that takes over silence, and the body of the slam artist that occupies the space of the camera, the dramatizing of young women's work changes into a "performance," a moment when dance takes on its strength as an act of resistance; the gesture of social performance translates into that of political defiance, as "symptomatic of conflicts and of serious social disorder."³ Dance and movement find their true colors: no longer mere consumption and pleasure, they are a political act.

"I Enter my Father's Garden": is going back home ever possible?

A shot with Amy's profile, silent, her face against a white wall along which ants are running up and down, invites us to think further: can we read it as a *clin d'œil* to Sarah Maldoror's documentary, *Léon-Gontran Damas* (1995, 23'), a homage to the Guyanan poet, and in which ants are running in all directions?

Through the different testimonial voices, a contemporary version of Selbé in Safi Faye's film emerges; she is working to help out her family back in her village. They don't understand her, and she feels confined. Through Amy's voice and that of other young women in her situation, one can feel their longing to be taken care of. Unlike Diouana, Amy endures, says nothing, "doesn't care," and continues to make projects for the future: she'd like to become a maid with qualifications: a cook for instance, so that one day she can open a restaurant. These dreams are nonetheless associated with a terrible understanding: "I won't go back to the village, the garden of my father does

not exist” once again, the literary narrative is offset with the image on the screen, that of a scrawny ghostly horse, going through the village. That’s when the film, through these decenterings, is most powerful.

In so doing, Khady Sylla revisits the idea of the return to point out the contradictions: “It’s impossible not to go back to the village; they all go back.” This reminds us of *Selbé*; how these young maids are the link between the urban and rural worlds, how they are key in keeping the village alive; while these women have a certain aura that they could do without back there, the village seems too small to them; they feel constricted there as remarked by Khady Sylla’s voice: these are urban women now, which explains their malaise, for being in-between two spaces. As such, we are obliquely reminded of Diouana in *La Noire de...*: like her, Amy is from Casamance.

A young man, Omar, told her that he liked her, making her want to build something with him, but with the fear that he, too, would leave. In Khady Sylla’s final statement, today’s vision of Senegal emerges: an image where only children and old people are left; the live forces of the village have left for Dakar, even further, crossing the Atlantic. There, too, we are reminded of Diouana’s *La Noire de...*, but this is now in the context of a global economy. Similar scenes appear in Boubacar Boris Diop’s short story “Black and blues” (2011: 63): “Ngor has been emptied out of its human beings; it is cluttered with objects. [...] In Ngor, only old people and children are left. It looks like little sisters who have never had big brothers. They are no one’s little sisters.”

As in each of her films, Sylla has combined a literary poetic narrative with a filmic narrative, self-representation with a social analysis of contemporary Senegalese society; and she does so through filmic intertextuality and allusions to a number of African films. Behind Amy are superimposed other anonymous faces, going back several generations, the Diouanas, the Selbés, the forgotten ones, the ones that have not had a voice, for lack of education. Today they find themselves powerless, submitted to a scenario and life that are even more complex because of globalization, but that essentially equates with exploitation.

Through dramatization, through the fusing of text and image together, poetry and slam, Khady Sylla gives a face to the occurrences of globalization in daily life. Furthermore, thanks to Sylla’s own voice in the film – a murmur and a poetic vision that remain with us – the audience is fully aware of the interpretation the filmmaker puts forward: “When the author is fully present, the audience feels reassured about the origin of images” (Barlet 2012: 63). Beyond the issue of truth and authenticity, or of raising consciousness, such voice and vision become Kahdy Sylla’s aesthetic signature, that is, to *tell* suffering, have us experience the pain of these women, through the individual and personalization of the collective, in order to show how globalization translates in daily life for Amy – and, through her, for a multitude of women in the world.

Notes

1. *Bamako*’s analysis is based on Cazenave 2007.
2. On the issue of gender and migration, see Boyce Davies 1994.
3. On dance and its importance in the postcolonial contemporary landscape, see Tcheuyap (2011, chap. 2, Choreographing subjects: 71–93).

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