

## Ousmane Sembène – aesthetics of resistance

by Mia Engberg

Ousmane Sembène's first film *Borom Sarret* takes place in Dakar in 1963. It was produced with almost no budget. It tells the story of a man who works as a cart driver. He drives through the city with his horse and cart, and in the film we are introduced to a number of the lives that cross his path during his working day. He takes a woman in labor to the hospital and a man with a dead baby to the cemetery. Everyone presented to us is as poor as the cart driver himself, and many of the clients cannot pay for their journeys. In the end the police confiscate his cart because a client convinced him to drive to the wealthy part of town, where horses and carts are forbidden. He returns to his family with no money and no means with which to continue his work.

The film shares many features with Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, which was filmed in Italy some 15 years earlier. Both take place among the poor people of a big city, and both were filmed in existing environments, using the authentic life of the streets as background to the narrative. Above all, both relay a common and universal message: poverty begets poverty, it is a prison from which one cannot easily escape.

It's this modern life that has reduced me to a working slave from a noble man like my ancestors (...). It's a prison. That's what it is this modern life.<sup>1</sup>

*Borom Sarret* was the first film made by an African director in Senegal after liberation from the French. All of the roles were played by black Africans. Under French colonial rule, the Senegalese were forbidden from making films, and only French films were shown in the cinemas of Dakar. Sembène wanted to show African life through the eyes of an African. Instead of the naturalistic narrative style of French films, where the people who were pictured spoke their lines, Sembène used an unseen narrator and incorporated traditional Senegalese music. There is no synch audio (audio recorded while shooting); all of the lines are read by Sembène himself. Much of the speech in the film is the protagonist's inner monologue wherein he reflects on his clients and the difficulties of their everyday lives, but the narrator also reads some of the dialogue himself.

While there was probably an economic explanation for choosing that technique – it was cheaper to record audio afterward than to have audio equipment on location – the resulting effect gave the film a unique character. By using a narrator, Sembène remediated African storytelling traditions and created an alternative film aesthetic that didn't recreate the cinematic language of the colonial power.

Sembène later did bigger productions with more resources using other narrative techniques, but I find his first short film to be his most inspiring. It demonstrates how singular films can be created within limited means, and that necessity can sometimes be the bedrock of innovation. *The conditions created the aesthetics*. Perhaps the work lives in its limitations. Perhaps it is in the gap that unique things can take shape.

1. From the film *Borom Sarret* by Ousmane Sembène (Dakar 1963)