

Toronto International Film Festival 2013

An interview with Dyana Gaye, director of *Under the Starry Sky*

David Walsh
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David Walsh spoke to Dyana Gaye, the Franco-Senegalese director of *Under the Starry Sky* during the recent Toronto film festival.

David Walsh: Why did you film this particular story?

Dyana Gaye: In my work, I'm very interested in multiple identities. This new film represents a thematic continuity with the short films I've made. In my first short, *Une femme pour Souleymane* [A Wife for Souleymane, 2001], I already worked along these lines.

I wanted to go deeper in a feature film in considering these problems, immigration, solitude, being enclosed ... or not, and also to make something that interests me very much, in French we call it "un film choral" [a mosaic or ensemble film], which involves multiple characters and situations.

Through those characters and their intersection, their movements, I wanted to get closer to their most intimate relations. It's a film that I might describe as a chronicle that takes place in one season.

DW: There's a double process, or a triple process, of emigration of Africans and others to Europe, and then an African in Europe to America, and a return by African-Americans to Africa. This is obviously a pattern that interests you.

DG: Yes, I'm interested in those crossed paths and the various trajectories. And I'm interested in the flows of the characters, their movements in relation to one another. People leaving, pursuing one another, replacing one another. And there is the geopolitical sense of it, that has almost a visual character: Africa, Europe, America.

The circuit in the movie is not the expected one. I was interested in reversing the normal direction. In other words, normally one expects to see people leaving the

southern zone, from Africa and so on, for the north. Here in counter-point is an African woman who has lived in the US for many years and returns to Senegal. She and her son both discover, through his eyes, who has never been to Africa, their origins.

I live in Paris, but I shoot films in Senegal, so I spend a lot of time there. They say it's a developing country, but it's a poor country. With few natural resources, except peanuts and fishing. It's the western tip of Africa, so there is a good deal of commerce between Africa and Europe, Africa and America. There was a political change two years ago, after a long period of protest and opposition. It's a country that is always changing. It's stable enough in comparison with other African countries; there is a quasi-democracy.

Senegal is a country with a rich history in regard to migration. It was an important point in the slave trade. Slaves were sold and left from Dakar. There is a small island where the slaves departed from. It's in the film. It was the door that opened on America. The people in the film are linked by the skies, but also by the sea, by the horizon.

DW: Was this older circuit of the 18th century, of the slave trade, also in your thinking when you made the film?

DG: Very much so. Yes, it was something very present when I worked on the script with my co-screenwriter. It was quite prominent in our choice of the US today, and a kind of means of reminding us, several centuries later, of that earlier circuit.

DW: What is the situation of undocumented Africans in Europe?

DG: That is complicated for me to reply to. I'm not a sociologist, a political scientist. I can give you my

impression. The situation, unhappily, is very tragic. In the course of working on this film in Italy and the US, one is made aware of the globalization of the problem of the undocumented worker, the immigrant.

From the point of view of Senegal, which I know best, there is the story of the boat people, the people who leave for Africa in pirogues. The people who try to reach Spain and never reach there. Many people have died. Every family in Senegal has someone who left, or who disappeared; it's a very drastic situation.

In my film, in an artistic manner, an informal manner, I wanted also to give voice to these people who make such a journey.

DW: There was one moment in the film that stood out in particular, or that made the film expand and reach a higher level. It's the moment in New York when one of the central characters, an African, meets the homeless man from Louisiana. When I saw that, I said, this is a filmmaker who understands something about the world. You understand that this is a universal problem, and that America is not a prosperous country, but one of social misery for millions.

DG: Absolutely. I am very glad you say that.

DW: I see many African films, and some I admire very much, but they tend to be somewhat insular. The problems perhaps are so pressing, so hellish there it makes it difficult to see other problems. This is the first time ...

DG: It is very significant you say this. It's not a film just about Senegal, or even about immigration. It's a history of movement, not just a confrontation of sufferings, but the correspondence between their situations, between the man from Senegal and the man from Louisiana.

DW: And there's also the fact that Sophie, from Senegal, goes off with the young guy from Ukraine ...

DG: Yes, I wanted to open this up. She meets someone, from a very different place, who is somewhat in the same situation. It is not simply about Sophie from Senegal; there's the confrontation between entirely different universes and cultures. There is a great emphasis on culture. There is the process of discovering a new territory, and the question of what one brings from the old to that new territory and what are we prepared to take from the new situation? It's this balance, this relationship that interests me.

There are the big questions of immigration,

prostitution, poverty, the undocumented. But I am not a sociologist, I'm not a documentary filmmaker, what interests me are the details, the intimate relations. What's going in inside these people...

I chose Turin for a couple of reasons. I know the city well. Over the last number of years I've noticed a new African population there, of women in particular, more independent, without husbands. A new form of immigration. Not that of my parents' generation, when the man went first, and brought his wife and family later.

Turin has this kind of immigration, not only from Africa, but also from Eastern Europe and South America.

The second reason that I chose Turin is its history of "interior immigration." For the Italians themselves, Turin was a city that for a long time was home to many immigrants from the south of the country. It was an industrial city, Fiat, auto production. This was the reason I chose New York too, where this was the case in regard to immigration on an even larger scale.

DW: What is the situation for cinema in Senegal?

DG: It barely exists. An average of one feature film a year is being made now. There are no government policies to finance films. The films shot in Senegal are financed in Europe, in the West. It's a very complicated situation.

For me, it's a little different. I'm French. For my colleagues in Dakar, it's very sad. There are no more cinemas open. When my father was a child there were 50 movie theaters; now there is not even one. People watch television. Senegal was once a leading center of African filmmaking, but now...



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