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- 1 Ousmane Sembene from Senegal is an acclaimed film maker of over ten films, including *Borom Sarret*, *La noire de...*, *Mandabi*, *Ceddo*, *Xala*, and the list goes on. He is also a confirmed author with ten books to his credit, among which the classic *God's Little Bits of Wood* (*Les bouts de bois de Dieu*). There are surprisingly few book-length studies¹ of Sembene's work, even fewer with in – depth critical analysis, and David Murphy seeks to fill the gap. His principal aim is to dislocate the easy label of social realism in which Sembene's work is most often categorised and as such the author emphasises elements of form and structure in his analysis. Sembene has consistently sought to counter the dominant social discourse in society and Murphy sees this attempt to imagine alternatives (hence the title) as the heart of his work. He shows how the desire to create counter-narratives is not only reflected in the choice of subject matter but also through the self-conscious reflection on the notions of silence and power.
- 2 The book consists of seven chapters with fairly equitable attention given to both his literary work and the films, although the overall direction of the book is more literary than cinematographic. The chapters are conceived around a wide spectrum of themes that provide a context for his analysis of both literature and film. These themes include, for example, resistance, alternative histories, urban discourse, consumerism, colonialism, neo-colonialism and the representation of women. There is an extensive bibliography as well as a short filmography.
- 3 Murphy begins by setting out the critical approach used in the study, which draws on theoretical work in the domain of postcolonial studies (Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri C. Spivak) in terms of discourse analysis, also engaging the contemporary economic and political context in Senegal and a cultural materialist perspective looking at the interplay between the texts and ideology. He is attentive to conceptual issues of analysing in unfamiliar cultural contexts. In chapter two Murphy analyses *Tribal Scars*

and *White Genesis*, moving beyond the standard arguments of social critique. The author is concerned with unveiling the “*architecture secrète*” of Sembene’s work, meaning for example, the way that Sembene frames his writing asking the readers to question the texts. Murphy points out the use of irony, the contradictory and contentious accounts of African history showing how Sembene’s aesthetic and political project go hand in hand. He argues for example that the forms of silence used are not of submission but of resistance. Murphy explores Sembene’s role as a griot as well as his use of the griot in his work and here he has usefully drawn on previous work by Mbye Boubacar Cham employing the content and form used in African oral traditions.

- 4 The following chapter examines the film *Mandabi/Le mandat* as a means of creating an urban and public discourse of resistance. This film holds a particular place in the history of African cinema as *Mandabi* is the first African film made in a local language, notably *Wolof*. As with his analysis of Sembene’s literary work, here again Murphy argues for the complexity of Sembene’s cinematic oeuvre. He emphasises Sembene’s attempts to find a cinematic form accessible to a popular African public but also one that contains a serious reflection on the cinematic means by which his social concerns can best be shown on screen (p. 73). Where Murphy proposes a preoccupation with silence and language in Sembene’s literature, on screen he replaces this preoccupation with questions of absence and presence, in the sense of who or what is excluded from, or included in, the images on screen. He again highlights Sembene’s work of making public that and those who are normally silent or invisible trying to map out the discourse and ideology of the urban poor “in order to begin the process of constructing a discourse of resistance” (p. 97). Murphy argues that *Mandabi* is visually structured around the rituals of the capitalist world and those of the “traditional” communal order and he notes that Sembene’s cinematic exploration of ritual has remained constant throughout his career but that it is usually superseded by the attention critics give to thematic and political issues (p. 87).
- 5 In the following chapter *Xala* is framed by a discussion of male sexuality and power as well as consumerism, fetishism and socialism in an African context. This politically engaged film was popularly acclaimed and its treatment of male impotency as a metaphor for the inability of “African men to deal with the realities of their society”, a subject on which Sembene has much to say, leads into the next chapter on the importance of the role of women. This theme is continually present in Sembene’s work and Murphy compares the way African women have been portrayed by other writers, for example Léopold Sédar Senghor. The artistic and political disputes between Senghor, former president of Senegal, poet, and Negritude leader and Sembene’s Marxist views and his vision of African women are clearly laid out. Moreover, this legendary antagonism between Sembene and Senghor surfaces at various points throughout the book. Murphy does point out that “Despite the fact that he works on somewhat essentialist notions of femininity, Sembene’s representation of African women manages at least to open up the terrain and to give voice to a wider range of concerns than was touched on by the preceding generation of African writers” (p. 141). Understanding that the time from writing to press can be very lengthy, it is still regrettable that there is no analysis of Sembene’s most recent film, *Faat Kine*, which is about an independent, urban, middle-aged Senegalese woman, in a cinematic form that draws more than usual from a commercial film language.

- 6 The final two chapters call attention to Sembene's criticism of West Africa's colonial and neo-colonial history. Murphy analyses *Emitai*, *Ceddo* and *Camp de Thiaroye* for the way they deconstruct colonial discourse and illuminate a discourse of resistance. The historical contextualisation of *Ceddo* is well done as Murphy places the emphasis on Sembene's reflexive, critical and provocative views of West African history. There is also a good discussion on *Camp de Thiaroye* in chapter six before turning to *The Last of the Empire* and *Guelwaar*, which form the substance of an analysis of neo-colonialism in the region.
- 7 Sembene is very kindly treated in this book, coming across as a noble rebel. Readers are likely to empathise with the author, who has dedicated so much work to the subject, when he comes face to face with Sembene in an interview included as an appendix. Murphy does not flinch in the face of Sembene's seeming arrogance and this perseverance is finally rewarded with some actual answers to the questions posed. Here the reader gets a real taste of the provocation inherent in Sembene's work but also an explicit sense of the limits of Sembene's critical discourse, which are unfortunately given little emphasis.
- 8 Finally, Murphy writes that his goal is to emphasise the form and structure of Sembene's work and he effectively shows how Sembene's search for alternatives to the dominant discourse in society is his driving creative force. The interweaving with historical narratives is a strength of the book, but there is a lot of content analysis and it would have been worthwhile to give more formal attention to the form and structure. The literary approach dominates this work, so in spite of its many merits, it does not really fill the void in terms of a thorough cinematographic analysis of Sembene's films. Nonetheless, Murphy's aim to provide a reading of Sembene's work which goes beyond the common approach of social realism, highlighting the aesthetic interest of his work is achieved and, as such, it does help fill the gap on the work of this important Senegalese artist.

NOTES

1. Murphy points out, for example, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, *Sembène Ousmane, cineaste*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1972 ; Françoise Pfaff, *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene: A Pioneer of African Film*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1984 ; Martin Bestman, *Sembène Ousmane et l'esthétique du roman négro-africain*, Sherbrook, Quebec, Éditions Naaman, 1981.