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CHALLENGING PERSPECTIVES: DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES  
IN FILMS BY WOMEN FROM FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Nottingham, 2011

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is located at the intersection of three dynamic fields: African screen media, documentary studies, and women's filmmaking. It analyses a corpus of fifteen films by Francophone sub-Saharan African women filmmakers, ranging from 1975 to 2009, within the framework of documentary theory. This study departs from the contextual approach to African women's documentary, which has been predominant among scholarship and criticism thus far, in favour of a focus on the films as texts. The popular models developed for the study of documentary film by Western scholars are applied to African women's documentaries in order to explore their innovative and stimulating practices; to determine the degree to which such models are fully adequate or, instead, are challenged, subverted, or exceeded by this new context of application; and to address the films' wider implications regarding the documentary medium.

Chapter One outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the thesis and engages with existing methodologies and conventions in documentary theory. Chapter Two considers women-centred committed documentary, analyses the ways in which these films uncover overlooked spaces and individuals, provide and promote new spaces for the enunciation of women's subjectivity and 'herstories', and counter hegemonic stereotypical perceptions of African women. Chapter Three addresses recent works of autobiography, considers the filmmaking impulses and practices involved in filming the self, and points to the emergence of a filmmaking form situated on the boundary between ethnography and autobiography. Chapter Four explores the filmmakers' ethnographic practices, considering their specificities in the light of pre-existing conventions within ethnographic filmmaking to emphasise the films' formal and political reflexivity. The fifth and final chapter analyses a selection of works of docufiction, demonstrating their striking singularities and arguing for the significance of films that blur the boundaries between fiction and fact and thus push the borders of the real. The overall aim of the thesis is, therefore, to show the overlooked diversity of documentary voices and to demonstrate that the practice of documentary by women from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa is both formally innovative and reflexive, and politically challenging.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My thanks extend to my family members, who encouraged and supported me throughout my studies, in particular my mother Caroline (to whom I should apologise for the title of Chapter One), my father Tony, and my grandparents John and Mary.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1963, the Cameroonian journalist and filmmaker Thérèse Sita-Bella released *Un Tam-tam à Paris*, a short documentary that chronicles Cameroon's National Dance Company's tour in Paris. This is widely recognised as the first film by a woman filmmaker from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa and it is particularly significant that it is a work of documentary. While male filmmakers from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa produce more fiction films than documentaries, their female counterparts have, from the very beginning, clearly favoured the latter medium. The website of the Centre for the Study and Research of African Women in Cinema, founded by Beti Ellerson, provides a timeline of African women's films during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This timeline reveals that between 2000 and 2010, African women filmmakers throughout Africa made over one hundred documentary films, against roughly eighty fiction films.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the pioneering Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye, who remains to this day the most celebrated Francophone sub-Saharan African woman film director, has made mostly documentaries and docufictions.<sup>2</sup> Her third film, *Kaddu Beykat* (1975) is her most successful and enduring work, having received positive appraisal from a selection of French viewers (Foster 1995: 130) and awards at the Berlin Film Festival and at the Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou

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<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.africanwomenincinema.org/AFWC/2000s.html>> [accessed 18 April 2011]. These figures are consistent with my own inventory of films released by Francophone sub-Saharan African women filmmakers.

<sup>2</sup> Faye has made four fiction films: *La Passante* (1972), *Revanche* (1973), *Man Sa Yay* (1980), and *Mossane* (1991); and ten documentaries and docufictions: *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad'jal* (1979), *Goob na ñu* (1979), *Les Âmes au soleil* (1981), *Selbé et tant d'autres* (1982), *3 ans et 5 mois* (1984), *Ambassades nourricières* (1984), *Elsie Haas, femme peintre et cinéaste d'Haiti* (1985), *Racines noires* (1985), and *Tesito* (1989).

(FESPACO) in 1976. Faye rapidly acquired relative fame in Africa and in the Western world but it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that other African women filmmakers emerged. In 1990, Angela Martin maintained that aside from Sita-Bella, who made only *Un Tam-tam à Paris*, Sarah Maldoror, a Guadeloupian living in France who made a few films on Africa, and ‘one or two newcomers’,<sup>3</sup> Faye was the main African woman film director (1990: 5). Seven years later, Denise Brahimi contended that there was still usually no more than one single woman filmmaker per country throughout the African continent (1997: 68–9). These included Kadiatou Konaté (Mali), Fanta Régina Nacro (Burkina Faso), Christiane Succab-Goldman (Mali), and Zara Mahamat Yacoub (Chad). A clear commonality between these women and those who undertook filmmaking later still, around the turn of the century, such as Victorine Bella-Meyo (Gabon), Fatou Kandé Senghor (Senegal), Rahmatou Keïta (Niger), and Appoline Traoré (Burkina Faso), is their frequent choice of documentary over fiction.

In building the corpus of films analysed in this thesis, around sixty active women documentarians from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa were identified, most of whom have made more than one film during the course of the last few years. The striking predominance of documentary as a means of cinematic expression for Francophone sub-Saharan African women is thus the founding observation of this thesis. Part of the aim of the present study is to account for this concentration on documentary, by exploring some of the contextual factors influencing their choice of cinematic medium, as well as the social, cultural,

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<sup>3</sup> Although Martin does not provide names, it is possible that she is referring, for example, to Zoulaha Abdou (Niger), Margaret Fobé Fombé (Cameroon), and Mariama Hima (Niger).

political, and personal functions of the films. These female-authored documentary productions open up a relatively new field of enquiry since the documentary practices in films by African women have yet to be addressed in detail by scholars or critics: ‘Scholarship, criticism and general commentaries on African cinema and video have focused disproportionately on the films made by men’ (Cham 2000: xi).<sup>4</sup> It is important to emphasise that if men’s films have consistently been the privileged focus of critical attention, this is not solely the result of a gender bias but is also due to the supremacy of the fiction feature film: ‘En raison de la prédominance de courts et de documentaires, l’œuvre des réalisatrices noires a l’apparence d’un cinéma mineur’ (Givanni and Reynaud 1993: 195). There is an enduring view concerning African filmmaking that ‘le film de fiction reste la voie du salut permettant d’accéder aux marchés de la gloire’, while documentary remains ‘un genre “alimentaire” qui répond plus à des films de commande qu’à des films de création’ (Tapsoba 1996a: 53–4).<sup>5</sup> Women filmmakers are therefore less visible precisely because of their widespread investment in the marginalised fields of television, public information filmmaking, and documentary, work which is much less widely advertised, distributed, and exhibited than the fiction films of their male

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<sup>4</sup> The tendency to favour films by men and fiction features, at the clear expense of the documentary work by women directors, is exemplified by David Murphy and Patrick Williams, whose criteria in their monograph on African filmmakers — namely a focus on the ‘*auteur* tradition of filmmaking’ and on directors having made fiction feature films — leads to the recognised exclusion of women’s work: ‘The most regrettable omission is that of women directors’ (2007: 2–5). There is also an accompanying readiness to view the cinematic production of male filmmakers as representative of general currents. For example, Rachel Gabara claims that Guinean David Achkar’s *Allah Tantou* (1990) and Haitian Raoul Peck’s *Lumumba, la mort d’un prophète* (1991) ‘mark a new turn to documentary in postcolonial West and Central Africa’ (2006: 131), an assertion that constitutes a clear disregard for the women who were also making documentaries around the time of the release of these two films, and long before.

<sup>5</sup> There is evidence that the situation is changing: the filmmaker Mousa Touré (Senegal) notes an increasing demand for documentaries by festival organisers and cinema theatres in Senegal (Bibas and Mélinand 2003).



counterparts.<sup>6</sup> This, in turn, hinders the accessibility of African women's screen work for viewers and researchers,<sup>7</sup> which reduces further the exposure of their work and fuels the misconception that it is less interesting than that of men. For example, Kathleen Sheldon claims that, 'although little known, there are African women making films, often dealing with issues central to women's lives. More often interesting films have been made by men and non-Africans' (2005: 84). Part of the aim of this thesis is to disprove such assumptions and to reclaim these disregarded films for academic interest.

Discussing 'the perennial lament about the general absence of women filmmakers and films by women in Africa', Mbye Cham rightly insists that few 'have actually made it a task and a priority to *look for* these female filmmakers' (2000: xi). It is essential to acknowledge that the widespread misconceptions regarding African women's screen media practices are a direct result of a lack of awareness of the films, rather than the considered outcome of thorough research. Contrary to preconceptions, the cinematic production of Francophone sub-Saharan African women is, as we will see, rich and heterogeneous. These filmmakers engage actively with a variety of media, having made an array of short and feature-length films of different genres, which testifies to diverse filmmaking agendas and practices.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the

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<sup>6</sup> This study responds to a concern raised by Nancy J. Schmidt, who calls for more work on these marginalised fields (1999: 292).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Schmidt includes several notes indicating that she was unable to locate a film or even identify the gender of a specific filmmaker. She writes that 'Jane Lusabe is mentioned as a Kenyan filmmaker [...] but I have not located the titles of any films she made' and concludes that 'there is the problem of identifying women filmmakers from names when very little has been written about them' (1999: 300).

<sup>8</sup> This includes popular television series, such as *Naître fille en Afrique* and *Ina* (Valérie Kaboré, 1996–2011), and *Monia et Rama* (Traoré, 2002), as well as animation films, such as *La Femme mariée à trois hommes* (Danièle Roy and Cilia Sawadogo, 1993), *L'Enfant terrible* (Konaté, 1994), and *Le Joueur de Kora* and *L'Arbre aux esprits* (Sawadogo 1996 and 2005).

films that will be examined in this thesis participate actively in the ‘vital process of self-definition and construction of identity’ for African women (Thackway 2003a: 147). The films are thus instrumental in questioning women’s place in society and in shaping the promotion of emancipation, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, which examines the relation of filmmaking to political struggles for female emancipation.

As examples of self-representation, documentaries in particular provide a privileged viewpoint from which to explore some of the many different perspectives of African women, which are all too rarely depicted in the mainstream media. Yet, among the researchers who have turned their attention to African women’s film, few have chosen to discuss their documentaries, a striking fact given the concentration of women filmmakers working in this field. The relative absence of African women documentarians in the media, in the international film circuit, and in academic publications, is currently at odds with the diversity and richness of their documentary production.<sup>9</sup> For example, Faye’s *Fad’jal* is the only documentary by a Francophone African woman to have been selected at Cannes, and then only in one of the sideline competitions of the festival, ‘Un certain regard’, in 1979. As Schmidt rightly asserts, ‘the participation of African women in international film festivals provides an incomplete and inaccurate perspective of filmmaking activities by African women’, since, by focusing mostly on fiction feature-length films, it does not

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<sup>9</sup> There has been notable progress in terms of the visibility of African women documentarians over the last few years. Colin Dupré reported from the Journées Cinématographiques de la Femme Africaine de L’Image, held in early March 2010 in Ouagadougou: ‘Côté programmation, furent projetées 38 œuvres tournées par des réalisatrices de 14 pays: 7 longs-métrages, 9 courts-métrages, 12 documentaires, 4 séries, 5 films indiens et un film japonais. Les documentaires occupaient ainsi une place prépondérante avec près du tiers des œuvres’ (2010).

suitably reflect their work in documentary and television films (1999: 278). The presence of African women filmmakers at the Cannes film festival, and other major events, is nonetheless significant because, as Elizabeth Lequeret suggests, ‘Cannes est le relevé cartographique [de la planète cinéma], sinon le plus fidèle, du moins le plus médiatique’ (2003: 63). As such, Cannes gives a clear indication of the status of filmmakers on an international level. Indeed, Faye notes that the Senegalese government invested in her films precisely because they were being screened at Cannes (ten Brink 2007: 160). Since the release of Faye’s pioneering *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad’jal*, no other documentary by an African woman has received this level of attention, in spite of the numerous recent releases.<sup>10</sup> So, while Janis Pallister and Ruth Hottell (2005) list over thirty-five women documentary filmmakers from sub-Saharan Africa, only Faye and Anne Laure Folly have benefited from extensive attention. This thesis examines a broader spectrum of documentary films than those previously analysed in order, in the first instance, to uncover and valorise the overlooked variety of documentary voices by Francophone sub-Saharan African women.

While few scholars have made it a priority to delve into the work of African women documentarians, fewer still have chosen to carry out close textual readings of their films, favouring instead historical overviews, examinations of the contexts of production, and considerations of the content of films.<sup>11</sup> For

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Derrière le silence* (Mariama Sylla, 2007), *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor* (Angèle Diabang Brener, 2008), *Dans le miroir du fleuve* (Pascale Kouassigan, 2008), *En attendant les hommes* (Katy Léna Ndiaye, 2008), *Diola Tigi* (Senghor, 2008), and *Le Monologue de la muette* (Khady Sylla, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> According to Murphy and Williams, scholarly work on African filmmaking generally ‘places particular emphasis on content over form’, partly because ‘criticism has been wary of concepts

example, in their articles on Faye, Ellerson (2004) and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (1995 and 1997) provide filmographies and most useful contextualisation of the filmmaker's work, situating Faye's films in relation to her ethnographic studies, highlighting her status as a pioneer, and briefly discussing the significance of her films in relation to cinema as a form of community expression. These scholars respond to the pressing need for more biographical and bibliographical work on the many African women working as film directors, actresses, camera operators, and sound engineers: 'If the African contexts of the creation and reception of women's films are the foci of future research, appropriate models for discussing and comparing their work will be developed' (Schmidt 1999: 292). The contextual work of Olivier Barlet, Ellerson, Foster, and Emilie Ngo-Nguidjol has been invaluable in compiling the corpus and informing and shaping this thesis.<sup>12</sup> Yet, although a necessary first stage in the examination of these films, the academic focus on contextual matters at the expense of textual readings wrongly suggests that these documentaries offer only limited formal appeal. Granted, certain features, such as Faye's search for a distinct cinematic language that reflects African culture and her practice of docufiction, have been explored, but such scholarly work

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such as style and aesthetics, which are often associated with Western notions of art and the artist' (2007: 19).

<sup>12</sup> Barlet is particularly active in the promotion of African screen media. The journalist has carried out numerous interviews with African women filmmakers and reviewed their work extensively. His commentaries can be found on the *Africultures* website: <<http://africultures.com/php/>>, and/or printed in the journal of the same name. Likewise, Ellerson's (2000) compendium of interviews with women filmmakers, actresses, and producers from Africa represents a valuable resource for acquiring information about the backgrounds of documentary filmmakers. Ellerson's online Centre for the Study and Research of African Women in Cinema (<<http://www.africanwomenincinema.org/AFWC/Home.html>>) provides filmographies, biographies, bibliographies, interviews, and an introduction to African women cinema studies. Finally, Ngo-Nguidjol's (1999) and Schmidt's (1998) extensive bibliographies outline the resources available to researchers interested in African women's filmmaking.

remains marginal.<sup>13</sup> Noteworthy examples are the work of Kenneth Harrow (1999b) and Melissa Thackway (2003a: 147–78) on the films of Faye and Folly. Thackway devotes a chapter in her monograph to African women actresses and filmmakers. Discussing both their contexts of production and the documentaries themselves, Thackway details the rhythm and cyclical structure of Faye's *Selbé et tant d'autres* and Folly's deconstruction of documentary's objectivity. Harrow's highly theoretical article situates the cinematic practices of Folly and Flora M'mbugu-Schelling (Tanzania) in relation to French feminism and details their individual filmmaking practices, opposing Folly's methodical documenting of women's issues in *Femmes aux yeux ouverts* (1993) to M'mbugu-Schelling's more personal and situated inquiry in *These Hands* (1993). While the work of Thackway and Harrow is useful in establishing a framework for feminist readings of Francophone sub-Saharan African documentary films, both also reveal an important oversight, since they fail to address the specificities of these films as works of documentary.

This study of African women's documentary aims specifically at countering this tendency: as its primary engagement is with form, it explores a corpus of fifteen films through the lens of the recent influential scholarly work on documentary.<sup>14</sup> This thesis will test some of the models developed for the study of Western documentary in a new context of application, that of Francophone sub-Saharan African filmmaking. Chapter One outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the thesis and engages with existing methodologies

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<sup>13</sup> See Foster (1997 and 2005a), Ukadike (1999), and Thackway (2003a).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the recent publications of Nichols (1991 and 2001), Waldman and Walker (1999), Bruzzi (2000), Beattie (2004), Renov (2004), Ellis and McLane (2005), Pallister and Hottell (2005), Rosenthal and Corner (2005), Cooper (2006), Hogarth (2006), and Rhodes and Springer (2006).

and conventions in documentary theory. Using these models developed for the study of Western documentary, the filmmakers' practices will be examined and theorised in the four subsequent chapters. Each of these addresses in detail one of the sub-genres of documentary to which the films in this corpus can be affiliated: woman-centred, ethnographic, and autobiographical documentary, as well as the marginal sub-genre of docufiction. The thesis will demonstrate the overlooked diversity and richness of themes, perspectives, and stylistic approaches in the corpus in order to illustrate that, contrary to common misconceptions, the films are indeed formally innovative and make for engaging viewing on both thematic and textual levels. Close readings of the films and cross-textual analyses will reveal whether and how African women question or reinvent the conventions of Western documentary. In so doing, the thesis will explore the degree to which the predominantly Western paradigms for approaching documentary are fully adequate or, instead, are challenged, subverted, or exceeded by these films. Finally, this study of African women's documentary practices will consider whether and how their work impacts on — and potentially redefines — our understanding of the nature of documentary itself.

This thesis will pay special attention to documentaries by Gentille Assih (Togo), Angèle Diabang Brener, (Senegal), Alice Diop (France, Senegal), Safi Faye (Senegal), Anne Laure Folly (Togo), Katy Léna Ndiaye (Senegal), Monique Phoba Mbeka (Belgium, DRC), Khady Sylla (Senegal), and Rama

Thiaw (Senegal).<sup>15</sup> These filmmakers' work has been selected in order to reflect the diversity of topics and approaches in documentary by African women, as well as their various cultural and professional backgrounds. However, it is important to highlight that the availability of films was unfortunately an equally determinant factor, as relatively few of their documentaries are released in cinemas, broadcast on television, or distributed commercially.<sup>16</sup> The work of the pioneer Safi Faye — who entered filmmaking in the early 1970s, having travelled to Paris to study ethnography at the Sorbonne and then filmmaking at the Louis Lumière school — epitomises the deficiencies of film distribution and exhibition, since *Selbé et tant d'autres* (1982) is the only one of her many films available for purchase.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, copies of some of her films are held at the Cinémathèque Afrique in Paris and so her work features prominently in this thesis. The corpus includes *Kaddu Beykat* (1975), *Fad'jal* (1979), and *Selbé et tant d'autres*, three feature-length films set in Faye's native Serer region in Senegal, which feature the filmmaker's own relatives and local community. All three films chronicle the daily lives of the village's inhabitants and freely combine documentary footage with fictional material, thereby initiating a novel ethnographic practice that remains influential to this day. Also relatively well known is the work of Anne Laure Folly, a lawyer, journalist, and filmmaker, prominent particularly during the 1990s and famous for her films dealing predominantly with the condition

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<sup>15</sup> The predominance of films by Senegalese filmmakers is purely coincidental and reflects the richness of the country's cinematic production.

<sup>16</sup> For example, I was unable to locate *Dona Ana Maria Cabral* (Senghor, 2002), *Un Amour pendant la guerre* (Oswalde Lewat-Hallade, 2005), and *Femmes en peine* (Aminata Diallo-Glez, 2007), among many others. Diabang Brener and Sylla were kind enough to provide me with copies of their films, *Mon Beau Sourire*, *Sénégalaises et Islam*, and *Le Monologue de la muette*, which are yet to be released on DVD.

<sup>17</sup> The film can be purchased from Women Make Movies but its institutional price of close to two hundred dollars is prohibitive to most individuals.

of women in contemporary Africa. *Les Oubliées* (1996) traces the filmmaker's journey to war-torn Angola, where she travelled to meet some of the victims of the thirty-year conflict and provide an alternative perspective on the war to that which is commonly represented in the Western media. The work of Faye and Folly has received considerable scholarly and critical attention, unlike the other eleven films in this corpus, which have yet to be examined in any depth.<sup>18</sup>

Films by less well-known and younger filmmakers also feature prominently in this thesis, including *Traces, empreintes de femmes* (2003) and *En Attendant les hommes* (2007) by the journalist and film director Katy Léna Ndiaye. These two documentaries are, in the filmmaker's own words, 'poème[s] imagé[s]' inspired by the tradition of wall painting by women in Burkina Faso and Mauritania respectively.<sup>19</sup> In her attempt to uncover these artistic practices, Ndiaye enters into conversation with some of the women actively involved in maintaining and perpetuating these women-specific art forms. Ndiaye's captivating films feature excerpts from their discussions on a variety of subjects, including femininity, relationships, and tradition. The films focus specifically on the experiences of women, as is the case with most of the documentaries in this corpus. Angèle Diabang Brener's biographical documentary *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor* (2008) delves into the life and work of Senegal's most famous griotte,<sup>20</sup> who not only performed publicly

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<sup>18</sup> For scholarly work on Faye's documentary films, see, for example, Foster (1995, 1997, and 2005a), Ukadike (1999), and Ellerson (2004). Regarding Faye's latest fiction film *Mossane* (1996), see Higuinen (1998) and Harrow (2002: 247–76). Scholarly works dealing with Folly's films include Tapsoba (1992), Barlet (1996), and Thackway (2003a).

<sup>19</sup> See Ndiaye's interview on *Cahiers nomades*, RFI, 4 May 2004.

<sup>20</sup> West African 'griots' and 'griottes' are the safe keepers of cultural knowledge and history. They act as storytellers and perform during ceremonies, often as orators and musicians, convey



in honour of the former President, Léopold Sédar Senghor, but also contributed to many musical and cinematic projects before her death in 2010.<sup>21</sup> Diabang Brener's earlier short experimental film, *Mon Beau Sourire* (2005), also deals exclusively with women since it uncovers the aesthetic practice of dyeing gums, which is popular amongst women throughout Western Africa. Conversely, Gentile Assih's *Itchombi* (2006) and Rama Thiaw's *Boul Fallé* (2009) both turn their attention to the realm of masculinity. In *Itchombi*, Assih travels to rural Northern Benin to attend the public circumcisions of young men, and uses this opportunity to reflect upon the significance of this tradition in contemporary Benin. *Boul Fallé* delves into the revival of traditional wrestling in Dakar's impoverished suburbs where the filmmaker grew up. Thiaw introduces some of the leading figures in the discipline and considers the sport's influence in terms of some of the recent social and political transformations in Senegal.

The corpus also features three autobiographical documentaries: Khady Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte* (2005), Monique Phoba Mbeka's *Sorcière, la vie!* (2006), and Alice Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* (2007). Diop made *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* following her parents' deaths in an attempt to repress her growing sense of isolation from her African roots. The film chronicles some of the filmmaker's conversations with her cousins and aunts, which took place during her stay with her mother's relatives in Dakar. *Sorcière, la vie!* also addresses the filmmaker's sense of self and experience as

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local tales and the history of individuals, families, and communities. Griots are often key characters in films set in rural Africa.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Yandé Codou sang for Faye's *Mossane* (1996) and Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Gei* (2001).

a member of the African Diaspora now living in Belgium. Mbeka travels to the DRC to investigate her African roots and, in so doing, uncovers some of the many facets of sorcery in colonial and contemporary DRC. In *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, Sylla focuses on the taboo issue of mental health and turns the camera on herself and her medical condition. Sylla is an innovative artist who has successfully experimented with a variety of media, both literary and cinematic.<sup>22</sup> The corpus features two of her other films, *Colobane express* (1999) and *Le Monologue de la muette* (2008). The former accompanies the driver and tout of a ‘car rapide’ through their working day, revealing some of the economic difficulties faced by those encountered on board the iconic express coach. Sylla’s latest film, *Le Monologue de la muette*, co-directed with Charlie Van Damme, also tackles the issue of employment and hardship, as she openly criticises the living and working conditions of Dakar’s ‘petites bonnes’.

In order to determine the factors that may account for African women’s preference for documentary over fiction it is crucial that these films should be examined within the specific historical and contextual framework that characterises African screen media. Of course, what constitutes ‘African cinema’ is the subject of some contention.<sup>23</sup> The term itself is considered a misnomer by the filmmakers Férid Boughedir (Tunisia) and Med Hondo (Mauritania). In their view, the term wrongly suggests the existence of structures of production and distribution when, in truth, although the films are

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<sup>22</sup> Her novel, *Le Jeu de la mer*, was lauded for its formal creativity and received critical acclaim when it was released in 1992. For criticism of *Le Jeu de la mer*, see Volet (1995).

<sup>23</sup> Although I am reluctant to use the expression ‘African cinema’ in the singular because of the diversity of trends it obliterates, it will be employed out of convenience at times when filmmakers or critics refer to it as such. Elsewhere the expression ‘African cinemas’ will be used: ‘En Afrique, comme ailleurs, *des personnes font des cinémas*’ (Sokhona 2001: 11).

shot in Africa, they are reliant predominantly on foreign funds, their postproduction frequently occurs in Europe, and they are all too rarely screened in Africa.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Keyan Tomaselli raises concerns about what constitutes Africa in this context:

Is Arab film and South African production part of African cinema? Is 'Black' cinema necessarily 'African' in origin? Is there such an identity as 'the African personality'? Should African cinema necessarily be linked to its Black diasporic equivalents in the United States, France and England? (1996: 165)

Subjects of contention pertain notably to the inclusion of North African films, works by filmmakers of the African Diaspora, and by filmmakers not originally from Africa but whose films reflect what Martin Mhando terms 'African conditions' (2000) and Lindiwe Dovey 'the "reality" of Africa' (2009: 191).<sup>25</sup> Francophone sub-Saharan Africa is a broad geographical space that is composed of countries with diverse national and ethnic cultural specificities, and varying economic and political climates.<sup>26</sup> Grouping these countries in the context of their cinematic production is nonetheless viable if we consider their commonalities: the origins and current conditions of filmmaking, which have

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<sup>24</sup> See *Caméra d'Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> Mhando uses the expression 'African conditions' in reference to the social, cultural, and political realities of contemporary Africa conveyed by film. Mhando notably asserts that studies of African films often prioritise such content over form: conveying a message is deemed 'the defining purpose of film production in the continent' (2000). Dovey similarly contends that 'the films funded by the EEC are interested in African images only at the level of anthropology'. This, she rightly contends, 'prevents African films from being seen *as* films' (2009: 191).

<sup>26</sup> It is commonly accepted that Francophone sub-Saharan Africa is composed of Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the DRC, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, and Togo.

been influential in shaping African cinematic practices;<sup>27</sup> and the recurring social, cultural, and political preoccupations expressed in the films.<sup>28</sup> Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia share more religious, linguistic, and cultural affinities with the Arab world than with most of sub-Saharan Africa, which has naturally led to a separation in much scholarly work between the cinematic productions of the Maghreb and of the countries south of the Sahara.<sup>29</sup> In accordance with this, the thesis will focus exclusively on films made in the Francophone countries of Western Africa.

This thesis also necessarily limits its scope by focusing specifically on films by women of African origin or descent. For that reason, the present corpus does not include films on Francophone Africa by non-African documentarians, such as Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982).<sup>30</sup> Although Trinh's experimental study of women living in rural Senegal is formally and politically challenging, including it in the corpus would signal a prioritisation of subject matter over African perspectives. Recent years have seen a proliferation of high-budget Western productions focusing on Africa, such as *Shooting Dogs* (Michael Caton-Jones, 2005), *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005), *Lord*

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<sup>27</sup> As Schmidt rightly contends, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, the DRC, and Senegal 'have faced similar problems in the development of filmmaking since independence including lack of capital to produce films, domination of film distribution by Europeans and Lebanese, lack of infrastructure to support a film industry, low priority of governments in supporting filmmaking, lack of facilities for training filmmakers and selecting the appropriate language in which to make films' (1985: 112). This Introduction will expound on each of these key factors to account for their continued significance.

<sup>28</sup> As will be detailed in this Introduction, some of the recurring themes in African films include colonialism and the fight for independence, pre-colonial African history, cultural identity, and gender issues.

<sup>29</sup> See Ukadike (1994: 34–5) and Gugler (2003: 3). For more information on films made in North Africa, see, for example, Armes (1987), Malkmus and Armes (1991), and Brahimi (1997).

<sup>30</sup> Influential non-African-made documentaries filmed in Anglophone and Lusophone Africa include *Un Carnaval dans le Sahel* and *Fogo, l'île de feu* (Maldoror, both from 1979), and *The Day I Will Never Forget* and *Sisters in Law* (Kim Longinotto, 2002 and 2005).

*of War* (Andrew Niccol, 2005), *The Last King of Scotland* (Kevin MacDonal, 2006), and *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006). This trend is problematic in some respects. First, African-American actors are often cast to play the African lead parts and many other speaking roles, at the expense of African actors: Morgan Freeman and Dennis Haysbert play the part of Nelson Mandela in *Invictus* (Clint Eastwood, 2009) and *Goodbye Bafana* (Bille August, 2007) respectively; Jennifer Hudson plays the part of Winnie Mandela in the forthcoming biopic *Winnie* (Darrell Roodt, 2011); and Jill Scott and Anika Noni Rose play Precious Ramotswe and Grace Makutsi in the television series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (2008–).

As the Creative Workers Union of South Africa objects in relation to Hudson's casting as Mandela, the tendency to employ 'foreign actors to tell the country's stories undermine[s] efforts to develop a national film industry' (Clayton 2009). In addition, casting non-African actors in films about Africa by non-African directors amounts to a total appropriation of African narratives. This is particularly problematic as these fiction features, along with the many foreign documentaries focusing on African landscapes, wildlife, or rural ethnic populations, tend to present a dual view of Africa as either a locus of violence, corruption, and famine, or as the mythical birthplace of humanity. As Josef Gugler comments, foreign television or cinema documentaries fall into two categories, those that operate as an 'extension of the news' and focus on human disasters,<sup>31</sup> and those that focus on the 'natural beauty of Africa' (2003: 1).

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<sup>31</sup> A report published by the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) in 2011 reveals that amongst the topics concerning Africa covered in French news programmes in 2010, 597 related to sport, 314 to armed conflicts, and only 31 to culture and education. See

African-made fiction and documentary films, on the other hand, offer more nuanced and diverse views of the continent, as this thesis will demonstrate. Considering films about Africa by non-African filmmakers would entail a departure from the view of cinema as a tool for expression and self-representation, a view that is crucial to an understanding of the importance of the documentaries discussed in this thesis.

On the other hand, I would argue strongly against the exclusion of works by African filmmakers no longer residing in Africa. Most African artists working in the field of cinema migrate regularly between Africa and Europe or the United States in search of funding opportunities, equipment, and contacts. As the Mauritanian film director Abderrahmane Sissako explains in *Caméra d'Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983), African filmmakers are by necessity what he terms 'des voyageurs incessants'.<sup>32</sup> Excluding filmmakers residing abroad, who, for this reason, may have been excluded from festivals in the past,<sup>33</sup> would amount to disregarding and denying the realities of the complex financial dynamics of contemporary African filmmaking, and would impose an impractical and unfair restriction. A constraint of this order would be difficult to implement, since biographical information on African women filmmakers is difficult to ascertain, and would invariably lead to the exclusion of a large number of viable films from a corpus that is already largely determined by availability. Besides, in a context of globalisation, the debate around the

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<[http://www.ina-sup.com/sites/default/files/MED\\_95-100\\_INASTAT.PDF](http://www.ina-sup.com/sites/default/files/MED_95-100_INASTAT.PDF)> [accessed 15 March 2011].

<sup>32</sup> Maldoror similarly states: 'I have to live where the money is to be raised' (in Foster 1997: 147).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Schmidt's discussion of the exclusion of African women Diaspora filmmakers from the meeting of women film professionals at the 1991 FESPACO (1999: 280).

‘purity’ of cinemas pertains to many national film industries and is not just restricted to African-made films, as demonstrated by the legal battle regarding the status of *Un Long Dimanche de fiançailles* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2004).<sup>34</sup> As will be discussed later in this Introduction, the extensive influence exercised by foreign sponsors over African screen media would make it untenable to seek such ‘purity’ in defining African cinemas.

Although Sita-Bella’s *Un Tam-tam à Paris* is widely considered as marking the start of filmmaking by women in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, Schmidt encourages caution, referring to the inaccurate statements that were made by historians attempting to locate the birth of literature in Africa: although it is generally acknowledged that male Francophone African authors started publishing actively during the 1950s, Schmidt remarks that this does not account for the writings published on African presses at earlier dates (1999: 279).<sup>35</sup> Filmmaking in Francophone Africa reputedly started with Senegalese Paulin Soumanou Vieyra’s *Afrique sur Seine* (1957), shot in France because Vieyra was denied permission to film in Africa (Diawara 1992: 23).<sup>36</sup> Mustapha Alassane (Niger) is widely acknowledged as the first film director to have released films shot in sub-Saharan Africa: *Aouré* (1962) and *La Bague du*

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<sup>34</sup> While the Centre National de Cinématographie (CNC) originally considered the film to be French and issued it with an ‘agrément’ (a status that qualifies French and European films for financial support from the Compte de Soutien), a group of French producers viewed it as a global or ‘transnational’ product because it was distributed by Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc. and went to court to block the ‘agrément’. The court ultimately ruled that the film was not French (Buchsbaum 2006: 16).

<sup>35</sup> Known pioneering African novels include *Ville cruelle* (Mongo Beti, 1954), *Le Pagne noir* (Bernard B. Dadié, 1955), and *Une Vie de boy* (Ferdinand Oyono, 1956).

<sup>36</sup> Significantly, Vieyra was also the first African filmmaker to graduate from the prestigious Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (Paris), renamed La Fémis in 1986, which trained many influential filmmakers, including Jean-Jacques Annaud, Claire Denis, Henri Duparc, Désiré Écaré, Louis Malle, Claude Miller, Idrissa Ouédraogo, Alain Resnais, and Jean-Louis Trintignant.

*roi Koda* (1962). However, the *Dictionnaire du cinéma africain* records the existence of several shorts, produced from as early as the late 1940s, such as *La Leçon de cinéma* (Albert Mongita, 1951) and *La Journée de l'arbre* (Bumba Mwaso, 1956), both from Zaire, now the DRC (Association des Trois Mondes 1991: 336).

The production of films from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa rapidly expanded with the pioneers Souleymane Cissé (Mali), Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal), Duparc (Côte d'Ivoire), Écaré (Côte d'Ivoire), Hondo, Oumarou Ganda (Niger), Ousmane Sembène (Senegal), and Cheick Oumar Sissoko (Mali). Their films came to represent a large proportion of those released each year throughout the continent: in 1992, Manthia Diawara asserted that eighty per cent of the films made by sub-Saharan African filmmakers originated from the Francophone countries (1992: 21), while the makers of the BBC documentary *Africa on Film*, broadcast in 1991, set the ratio at twenty films from Francophone Africa against every one from Anglophone Africa. The statistics have most certainly shifted, considering in particular the recent formidable expansion of 'Nollywood': the Nigerian home video market produced an astounding six hundred and fifty films in 2000 alone (Monfort 2003).<sup>37</sup> The most prolific countries in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa remain Senegal (as is represented in this corpus), Burkina Faso, Mali,

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<sup>37</sup> 'Nollywood' is an adaptation of Yoruba street theatre and is extremely popular among Nigerian audiences. In recent years it has gained worldwide attention and has become a field of academic research. For further information, see Barrot (2005).



Cameroon, and the Côte d'Ivoire, whose films continue to dominate the international market as well as academic publications.<sup>38</sup>

The imbalance in terms of the cinematic productions of Anglophone and Francophone countries derives, at least in part, from the policies of the former French and British colonial administrations as regards filmmaking, and to the subsidies provided following independence. During the first half of the twentieth century, the British set up the Colonial Film Unit, with subsidiaries throughout Africa. Above all, these promoted documentary productions destined for television.<sup>39</sup> However, although the Colonial Film Unit produced a variety of public information and propagandist films, it did not promote what Françoise Pfaff terms 'native "movie-thinking"' (1992: 31), by which she means the artistic quality of filmmaking, as opposed to the purely technical aspects of 'movie-making'. Rather, it demonstrated a paternalistic and racist attitude, considering 'the African mind too primitive to follow the sophisticated narrative techniques of mainstream cinema' (Diawara 1992: 4). Likewise, the situation in the French colonies was not initially favourable to the development of African filmmaking, notably since potential directors were submitted to the specifications of the 1934 'Décret Laval', which required that filmmakers seek authorisation before making a film and therefore amounted to a form of censorship, as Thackway argues (2003a: 7). Although Vieyra's *Afrique sur Seine* is allegedly the only African film to have directly suffered censorship as

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<sup>38</sup> See <<http://www.africine.org/>>, the website of the 'Fédération Africaine de la Critique Cinématographique' [accessed 13 November 2011].

<sup>39</sup> See *Africa on Film*, BBC 2, 16 March 1991. Murphy and Williams attribute the establishment of film schools in Ghana (then Gold Coast) to a report for the UNESCO by the famous documentarian John Grierson in favour of colonised people's right to filmmaking (2007: 12).

a result of the specifications of the Laval decree (Spaas 2000: 173), this regulation reflected France's policy on cinema during the colonial period, which undoubtedly impeded the emergence of filmmaking.

While most Anglophone countries stopped producing films when the British Colonial Film Unit closed in the late 1950s (Diawara 1992: 5), the founding of the French Bureau du Cinéma in 1963, following a wave of independence in Francophone Africa in the early 1960s, marked a fundamental shift in policy. Run by the influential Jean-René Débrix and under the authority of the Ministère de la Coopération (now the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes), the Bureau du Cinéma promoted independent filmmakers' access to creation by providing technical and financial assistance (Thackway 2003a: 7). Débrix is notorious for believing that cinema could help Africans regain a sense of cultural identity (Diawara 1992: 25) and, more problematically, for encouraging and favouring the making of films that portrayed an African past unaffected by colonisation, as well as films that would be likely to please French audiences (Barlet 2003c: 73). Although the Bureau du Cinéma claimed to select films on the basis of feasibility and not content, Débrix's own personal ideology and preferences were undeniably instrumental in shaping African cinematic practices at that time. For instance, the script of Sembène's *La Noire de...* (1966), a film that subsequently become a respected *chef d'œuvre* of Francophone African cinemas, was rejected by the Bureau (Armes 2006: 54), while Débrix expressed open admiration for Daniel Kamwa's *Pousse pousse* (1975), elsewhere widely criticised for being naïve and inartistic (Diawara 1992: 31). Débrix's preference for *Pousse pousse* over

*La Noire de...* led film directors to accuse Dèbrix of despising ‘African film and [opposing] the ideological and artistic maturity of its filmmakers’ (Diawara 1992: 32).

Reflecting on the emergence and subsequent development of African screen media, Boughedir summarises: ‘On peut dire, en gros, que le cinéma africain, en tous cas en Afrique Francophone, existe grâce à la France et aussi n’existe pas grâce à la France’ (in Maarek 1983: 31). Boughedir here condenses France’s apparently ambivalent attitude to African filmmaking and argues that the financial aid provided ultimately restricted the artistic independence of African filmmakers. The subsidies granted by the Bureau came in two forms. In some cases, it bought the advance rights to films, with the drawback that filmmakers lost control over their work, since France controlled the exposure of the films thus made, and also saw the films’ profit margins greatly reduced. Alternatively, the Bureau would provide grants to complete the editing of films in France, along the lines of a ‘logique d’aide basée sur le retour au donateur’ (Hoefert de Turégano 2003: 59). In addition, the Bureau would require that a French producer assist those filmmakers benefiting from such subsidies. These outsiders’ arguably excessive influence was greatly resented by filmmakers, such as Sembène, who accused the members of the Coopération of paternalism and imperialism (Diawara 1992: 26). The aid provided was clearly not conducive to the establishment of permanent infrastructures in Africa, contributing instead to perpetuating African filmmakers’ dependency on outside funding.

As can be observed in the closing credits of most sub-Saharan African films, many are made with foreign subsidies, notably from the CNC, the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, and the television channel ARTE. Filmmakers may also work for non-governmental agencies or for government officials making ‘films de commande’, such as *10 ans de pouvoir du Président Eyadema* (Abalo Blaise Kilizou, 1976), *Selbé et tant d’autres*, and *Le Truc de Konaté* (Nacro, 1998).<sup>40</sup> As an alternative to both these options, Sembène set up his own production company, *Filmi Domireew*, in order to circumvent outside influences.<sup>41</sup> Although others followed his example, including Ouédraogo (Burkina Faso), Pierre Yaméogo (Burkina Faso), and Diabang Brener, until the recent expansion of digital technologies, very few African filmmakers achieved financial independence and full artistic freedom.<sup>42</sup>

Most often, only very low budgets are available to directors, mainly because their films reach a limited market and do not gross sufficient profit for any of it to be reinvested in moviemaking: Gugler points out that the combined budgets of the fourteen films featuring in his study of African cinemas amount to less than half of the forty million dollar budget of *Out of Africa* (Sydney Pollack, 1985) (2003: 8). Ouédraogo warns that this funding situation impacts greatly on the quality and appeal of films released, citing examples of resources that remain out of reach for most directors, such as cranes and the equipment used

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<sup>40</sup> A ‘film de commande’ is a film commissioned by a government or charity and designed to respond to a set of requirements and to convey and promote a set of concepts, for example political doctrines or health issues.

<sup>41</sup> See *Caméra d’Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> Ouédraogo produced *Guimba – un tyran, une époque* (Sissako, 2004); Yaméogo produced *Keïta! L’héritage du griot* (Dani Kouyaté, 1997); and Diabang Brener’s company *Karonica* has produced films by Awa Thiam and Sylla.

for tracking shots.<sup>43</sup> In addition, because of the costs incurred, filmmakers usually shoot a scene only once and since the rushes are viewed for the first time in the editing studio (usually abroad), any flaw appearing at this stage would require deleting the entire scene from the film (Sokhona 2001: 16). Clearly then, although Brahim claims that ‘les cinémas d’Afrique et du Maghreb disposent depuis au moins deux décennies des moyens nécessaires à l’expression, matériellement et humainement’ (1997: 59), there is no evidence of a profit-making film industry in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. Pfaff rightly speaks instead of ‘low budget craftsmanship’ (1992: 31) and Sidney Sokhona describes African directors as ‘bricoleurs’: ‘Tous, par manque de structures cinématographiques et refusés par les institutions en place, sont à la fois réalisateurs, producteurs, distributeurs, quelques fois même acteurs, en un mot, *bricoleurs*’ (2001: 12). This notion of a makeshift film industry is expressed by many filmmakers, including Moustapha Diop (Benin),<sup>44</sup> who is dispirited by ‘les économies de bouts de chandelle’ prevalent in the field, and Faye, who refers to filmmaking in Africa as ‘mégotage’,<sup>45</sup> a term initially coined by Sembène (Diawara 1992: vii).

Likewise, Ouédraogo is despondent regarding the lack of cinema schools in Africa.<sup>46</sup> Since the closure, in 1987 for financial reasons, of the Institut Africain d’Éducation Cinématographique (INAFEC) in Ouagadougou,

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<sup>43</sup> See Ouédraogo’s interview in *Africa on Film*, BBC 2, 16 March 1991.

<sup>44</sup> See Diop’s interview in *Al’leessi* (Keïta, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> See Faye’s intervention on *Nulle part ailleurs*, Canal +, 8 April 1998. During the 32nd Festival International de Films de Femmes in Créteil (April 2010), Faye recalled: ‘Nous stockions des bouts de pellicule non-utilisée et nous sommes partis tournés avec ces petits bouts de pellicule trouvés à gauche et à droite et également à “Louis Lumière”’. See <<http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/05/safi-faye-role-model.html>> [accessed 30 July 2010].

<sup>46</sup> See Ouédraogo’s interview in *Africa on Film*, BBC 2, 16 March 1991.

opportunities for technical training in Africa have been severely limited. The permanent schools or temporary workshops that provide training in the various professions relating to the industry, such as image and sound, editing, directing, and producing, include the Atelier Fiwe (Benin), the Institut Régional de l'Image et du Son (IRIS, Burkina Faso), the Institut Supérieur des Métiers de l'Audiovisuel de Cotonou (ISIS, Bénin), the Média Centre (Senegal), and the Résidence d'Écriture organised yearly by Africadoc (Senegal).<sup>47</sup> Many of the well-known African filmmakers have gained training in institutions abroad: Sembène and Sissako in the former Soviet Union; Jean-Pierre Bekolo (Cameroon), Duparc, and Sissoko in France; and Idrissou Mora-Kpaï (Benin) in Germany. Alassane, Ganda, and Faye received guidance from Jean Rouch,<sup>48</sup> while others, such as Mambéty, never received any formal training.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, with the exception of a few professional actors, such as Cheick Doukouré, the late Isseu Niang, Hyppolite Ouangrawa, Rasmane Ouédraogo, and Naky Sy Savané, most African actors are amateur performers. Nacro and Mambéty have successfully employed amateur performers in their films,<sup>50</sup> yet the lack of professional actors, a direct result of the absence of acting schools, is one of the main factors hindering the appreciation of African films: in many cases, the actors do not possess the skills necessary to generate

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<sup>47</sup> Africadoc has been attended by some of the filmmakers whose work is discussed in this corpus, notably Assih and Thiaw. However, while it has permitted the making of several films, the training programme has been accused of exercising excessive control, or 'formatage', over filmmakers (Barlet 2010a).

<sup>48</sup> Rouch's many collaborations with Africans led some of the actors and technicians with whom he worked to become filmmakers themselves. This is termed the 'Rouchian' school by Faye (ten Brink 2007: 162). Rouch also encouraged African filmmaking with the creation, in 1981, of the Atelier Varan, which Mbeka attended (Rutazibwa 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Training received abroad should clearly be taken into account when considering potential national cinematic languages: 'We come from the same country but we were all educated differently' (Faye in ten Brink 2007: 162).

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, the performers in Mambéty's *Badou Boy* (1970) and *La Petite Vendeuse de soleil* (1998), and the part of Colonel Theo in Nacro's *La Nuit de la vérité* (2004), admirably played by Commandant Moussa Cissé.

the verisimilitude and seamlessness from which viewing pleasure arises, as can be observed, for example, in *Les Enfants de la guerre* (Yacoub, 1996).<sup>51</sup>

One should, however, be wary of attributing all the ills of African screen media solely to outside influences. In the post-independence period, fearing the controversial potential of cinema, many African governments imposed systems of censorship of their own. For example, Faye's *Kaddu Beykat* was initially banned in Senegal because the then Minister for Agriculture viewed it as too virulent an attack on Senegalese agricultural policies and on the treatment of rural populations (ten Brink 2007: 160).<sup>52</sup> In addition, most governments failed to ensure the protection and expansion of their national production. Rarely do filmmakers receive subsidies from their governments (aside from when making 'films de commande'), mainly because these are poor countries whose national budgets do not necessarily allow for extensive funding of the arts. Most governments have also failed to nationalise distribution circuits and film imports, making it impossible to derive a profit that could then be reinvested in local filmmaking. In the post-independence period, Guinea attempted to nationalise its cinema theatres, while Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) ventured to introduce a tax on film imports to finance its own industry. The aim was to sidestep the duopoly of the two French companies overseeing distribution in Francophone Africa — the *Compagnie Africaine*

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<sup>51</sup> The filmmaker's ambition to illustrate the terror of war and its devastating effects on civilians is thwarted by the flawed nature of the actors' performances. During what was presumably envisioned by Yacoub as a harrowing scene in which a father tries to save his children from a bombardment, the children are obviously laughing, amused by the commotion, which makes it impossible for Yacoub to secure the desired reaction from her audience.

<sup>52</sup> Ironically, the Minister for Agriculture responsible for this censorship was Adrien Senghor, nephew of the then president Senghor (Diao 2010), who had promised to ensure that promoting art and culture would be a national priority, as Sylla angrily recalls in *Les Fespakistes* (François Kotlarski and Erich Munch, 2001).

Cinématographique Industrielle et Commerciale (COMACICO) and the Société d'Exploitation Cinématographique Africaine (SECMA) — but these interrupted the supply of foreign films, which led to the collapse of the countries' exhibition circuits (Diawara 1992: 107). Cinema managers still have to contend with the 'système de la locomotive et des wagons', whereby film theatres acquiring the rights to a successful foreign film are obliged to simultaneously purchase the rights to exhibit other less popular foreign films (Boughedir in Maarek 1983: 74). Forced to show low-quality films that attract only a limited audience base, African film theatres make less profit and are often unable to offer screening spaces for African-made films. Consequently, local productions are sidelined and unable to keep pace with foreign films in their own market. The late Tunisian filmmaker Tahar Cheria equated this control exercised by foreign companies over filmmaking, even after independence, with an alternative form of colonialism (Diawara 1992: 36).<sup>53</sup> Such practices have considerably hampered the emancipation of African filmmaking, since directors are offered no guarantee that their films will ever reach African audiences or become financially viable.

That said, early African filmmaking was infused with ideological concerns relating to the art form's potential. Filmmakers had great hope in the representational power of film and believed that it could help uncover what Hondo terms the 'réalité invisible' that is Africa seen by Africans.<sup>54</sup> Up until the 1960s, African audiences were exclusively positioned as consumers of

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<sup>53</sup> Hondo likewise claims: 'Le cinéma sous sa forme actuelle est une forme de colonisation aussi dangereuse, sinon plus, et pernicieuse que la colonisation armée'. See *Caméra d'Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).

<sup>54</sup> See Hondo's interview in *Caméra d'Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).



outside images, notably those produced by the coloniser, who used cinema as a tool for oppression and domination (Dovey 2009: 192). Accordingly, the ‘cinéma colonial’ of the 1930s often served as propaganda, legitimising the ‘mission civilisatrice’ by portraying Africans as ‘what the French were not — savage, uncivilized, devoid of culture, highly sexual, closer to nature, irresponsible, and often violent’ (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 110).<sup>55</sup> The harmful potential of these outside images placed a social responsibility on African filmmakers to challenge existing filmic representations of Africa and Africans. Gaston Kaboré (Burkina Faso) summarises the dangers for societies that do not produce images of themselves:

Une société quotidiennement et quasi-exclusivement submergée par des images absolument étrangères à sa mémoire collective, à son imaginaire, à ses préférences et à ses valeurs sociales et culturelles, perd peu à peu ses repères spécifiques et son identité; du même fait, elle perd son aptitude fondamentale à imaginer, à désirer, à penser et à forger son propre destin. (in Brahim 1997: 15)

As a consequence, many early film directors engaged in what Issa Serge Coelo (Chad) terms ‘la guerre des images’,<sup>56</sup> imposing images of Africa and Africans that countered the negative stereotypes conveyed in colonial cinema and restored the ‘disfigured selves’ of African viewers (Haile Gerima in Thackway 2003a: 43).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> ‘Cinéma colonial’ refers to the films made during the 1930s and set in the French colonies in North and sub-Saharan Africa, which compare idealised visions of France with exotic and derogatory accounts of Africa and Africans.

<sup>56</sup> See Coelo’s interview in *Caméra d’Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).

<sup>57</sup> This echoes the 1975 Algiers Charter on African cinema and the 1982 Niamey Manifesto, both of which emphasised the need to convey the cultural identities of African people through film (Pfaff 1992: 31).

Cinema was positioned as a valuable tool for fighting what were then perceived as the relics of colonialism, in particular a fractured sense of cultural and individual identity. The hopes that were placed on the emerging screen media can be linked to their potential for reaching and making a strong impression on a wide audience. Sembène is famous for having turned to cinema at the expense of literature after he had published several successful novels, including *Le Docker noir* (1956) and *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960). He, along with many others, believed that cinema had greater potential for reaching the masses, as opposed to an educated elite: above all, Sembène wanted to film for the illiterate (Pfaff 1988: 36). Faye likewise justifies her investment in film by referring to her mother who was illiterate (Housni 2006): because she wanted to produce works that her mother — and the many others who were unable to access novels written in French — would be able to enjoy, cinema represented a suitable means of expression.<sup>58</sup> One of the rationales was of course that films, unlike literature, need not be made in French and, within the context of post-independence Africa, filming in indigenous languages, such as Wolof, Serer, or Diola, was a political act.

Early African directors challenged Western cinematic paradigms, in accordance with some of the principles of ‘Third Cinema’.<sup>59</sup> However, African

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<sup>58</sup> This is a foremost concern for many filmmakers. For example, Mahamet-Saleh Haroun (Chad) likewise states: ‘Je pense toujours à ma mère qui ne parle pas français, elle demeure mon premier spectateur’ (in Barlet 2002c: 22).

<sup>59</sup> The term Third Cinema was coined by the Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in the late 1960s, in reference to the rejection of dominant cinematic models, those of the Hollywood industry and European art cinema, by radical filmmakers, notably from the ‘Third World’ (Robin and Jaffe 1994: 1).

screen media do not completely adhere to these principles.<sup>60</sup> Most notably, while Latin American filmmakers express an ideological preference for documentary (Gabara 2006: 131), this is not uniformly the case in Africa: although African women filmmakers have indeed largely invested in documentary, their male counterparts have consistently produced more fiction films. Nevertheless, the majority of African films reveal a concern with seeking an alternative politics and aesthetics to those of mainstream Western films. This trend echoes the call for an ‘Imperfect Cinema’ made by the Cuban director Julio García Espinosa, who sought to counter the aesthetic perfection of mainstream cinema by privileging political radicalism over visual quality (Ukadike 1994: 99). The structural principles of many African films are based on cultural values. For example, Cheria asserts that ‘the individual is always pushed into the background’ and that ‘the principal character in African films is always the group, the collectivity’ (in Malkmus and Armes 1991: 210). In addition, a significant number of African films incorporate narrative techniques that are reminiscent of the principles of orality, as will be explored in detail in Chapter Five.

As Thackway notes, ‘the majority of filmmakers adhere to the vision of their works as a means of expressing an African voice rather than simply being a form of entertainment’ (2003a: 48). Accordingly, the late Burkinabé actor Sotigui Kouyaté claimed that African filmmakers act as itinerant cultural centres, promoting African cultures abroad.<sup>61</sup> This prioritisation of social,

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<sup>60</sup> For further information, see Chapman (2003: 305–21).

<sup>61</sup> Sotigui Kouyaté was cited by Gaël Brunet in his introduction to the screening of *Sia, le rêve du python* (Kouyaté, 2000). The event, held at the University Paris Diderot on 4 November

cultural, or political commitments over commercialism is strongly echoed in Sembène's work: embracing a Pan-African philosophy,<sup>62</sup> Sembène strongly believed that cinema could promote a sense of national (and continental) coherence by drawing on shared values.<sup>63</sup> Two main types of film prevailed in the early days of Francophone African filmmaking. The first emerged from what Brahimi describes as a 'règlement de compte' with France (1997: 25) and consisted of films that were strongly political and anti-colonialist, grouped by Thackway under the 'colonial confrontation' genre (2003a: 94).<sup>64</sup> The second consisted of films that perform an act of 'archivisme culturel' (Boughedir in Serceau 2003: 28).<sup>65</sup> Set in a distant past, prior to colonisation, these films seek what is 'authentically African' and uncover the rich historical heritage of Africa, which is often overlooked in the Western world.<sup>66</sup>

The desire to represent what is originally African is part of the incentive behind Faye's work, whose films deal predominantly with 'la paysannerie', for she considers small farming communities to be the foundation of contemporary Africa.<sup>67</sup> Although in Faye's case the focus on rural Senegal is ideological, a frequent criticism of African filmmakers is that they concentrate excessively on rural Africa: films taking place in such settings are widely and derogatorily termed 'cinéma calebasse' (Barlet 2006) or 'cinéma de brousse' (Lelièvre

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2010, was organised by the Bibliothèque Universitaire des Langues et Civilisations and the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales.

<sup>62</sup> Pan-Africanism can be defined broadly as an ideology whose main tenet is the need for a system of global solidarity, uniting Africans living in Africa and members of the African Diaspora in a fight against their common struggles.

<sup>63</sup> See *Caméra d'Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, *Emitai* (Sembène, 1971) and *Sarraounia* (Hondo, 1986).

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, *Yaaba* (Ouédraogo, 1988) and *Sia, le rêve du python* (Kouyaté, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> For an overview of pre-colonial African history, see Gugler (2003: 17–43).

<sup>67</sup> See Faye's interview on *Staccato. Vingtième festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France Culture, 9 April 1998.

2003c: 109) because of their inability to present a contemporary view of the continent, which results in a failure to draw in African audiences.<sup>68</sup> There are, of course, many counter examples to the ‘cinéma calabasse’ model, such as the work of Bouna Médoune Seye (Senegal) and Duparc, the short romantic comedy *Rencontre en ligne* (Adama Roamba, 2004), and some of the films in this corpus, most notably *Colobane Express* and *Boul Fallé*. The tremendous success of urban television shows and sitcoms, such as *Kadi Jolie* (Ouédraogo, 2002),<sup>69</sup> *Vis-à-vis* (Abdoulaye Dao 1995–2006), and *À nous la vie* (Kouyaté, 1998), demonstrates the desire of African audiences to see a broader variety of experiences mirrored on screen.

Interestingly, the African films that are successful in Western film festivals substantiate the view that the ‘cinéma calabasse’ model is relatively popular among selected Western audiences. For example, the fiction feature films *Moolaadé* (Sembène, 2004) and *Delwende* (Yaméogo, 2005), which are set in rural Africa and address the issue of women’s rights, were awarded the ‘Un Certain Regard’ prize at the Cannes film festival in 2004 and 2005 respectively.<sup>70</sup> Western audiences are familiar with the view of Africa that is presented and are attracted by the exotic ‘africanité’ of these films. In spite of

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, *Obali* (Pierre-Marie Dong and Charles Mensah, 1976), *Wend Kuuni* and *Buud Yam* (Kaboré, 1982 and 1997), *Sita* (Missa Hébié, 1995), and *Mossane* (Faye, 1996). The Burkinabé filmmaker Yaméogo alludes to the negative perception of such films in *Laafi* (1991), where a character disparages the African cinematic production thus: ‘Les films africains ce sont des navets, ils parlent toujours de misère. Je n’aime pas’.

<sup>69</sup> *Kadi Jolie* is one of the few African television series to have gained international reputation. It was broadcast on the French channel Comédie! in 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, Ouédraogo claims that the African films that win awards at film festivals in Europe are totally incomprehensible to African audiences, for, as Mhando explains, ‘the continued reliance of African film producers on the festival circuit, for example, essentially forces the filmmakers to accept and depend on the terms of their films’ canonisation to create other works thus holding them hostage to that label’ (2000).

the appeal of this ‘cinéma folklorique’,<sup>71</sup> it nonetheless fails to attract a large Western audience, partly because the films are under-advertised and their exhibition is limited, but also because they offer radically different viewing experiences to those of mainstream Western films. Reflecting on the manner in which African filmmaking practices differ from those of Western cinema, the Moroccan director Souhel Benbarka speaks of a ‘cinéma hermétique’.<sup>72</sup> Thackway similarly contends that ‘Western spectators accustomed to narrative causality may find the fragmentary layering, parallel developments, and shifts of point of view in time and space disconcerting’ (2003a: 78). As a result, art house cinemas and film festivals remain the main outlets for the exhibition of these films in the Western world.

There are many recurrent or isolated film festivals dedicated to African screen media, such as the core biennial FESPACO held in Ouagadougou in February and March,<sup>73</sup> yearly festivals,<sup>74</sup> and isolated events.<sup>75</sup> Enthusiasm for African films is sporadically reflected in the media, often in conjunction with festivals or when African filmmakers participate in major events. Recent examples of achievements that received extensive media coverage include Ouédraogo’s

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<sup>71</sup> See Ouédraogo’s interview in *Y’a pas de problème! Fragments de cinéma africain* (Laurence Gavron, 1995).

<sup>72</sup> See Benbarka’s interview in *Sarah Maldoror ou la nostalgie de l’utopie* (Folly, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> The FESPACO has long been a key event in the field of African screen media (Dovey 2009: 204). In spite of its popularity, however, the FESPACO is facing great financial difficulties, to the extent that it is threatened with closure, as its current managing director, Michel Ouédraogo (Burkina Faso), expresses in an interview with Barlet (2010b).

<sup>74</sup> Yearly festivals include Africa in the picture (Amsterdam, September), the Festival del cinema africano (Milan, March), Vues d’Afrique (Montréal, April), the Festival International du Cinéma et de l’Audiovisuel du Burundi, Bujumbura (FESTICAB, April), the African film festival (New York, July and September), and Africa at the Pictures (London, November and December).

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, ‘Africamania’, held at the Bibliothèque du Film in Paris (Bifi) in 2008 and the editions of the Festival International de Films de Femmes de Créteil devoted to African women filmmakers (1998 and 2010).

contribution to the *11'09'01: September 11* (2002) project;<sup>76</sup> Sembène's invitation to present the prestigious 'leçon de cinéma' during the 2004 Cannes film festival;<sup>77</sup> Sissako's short films *Le Rêve de Tiya*, made as part of *8* (2008),<sup>78</sup> and *Ni brune ni blonde* (2010), screened during the 'Brune Blonde' exhibition at the Cinémathèque Française (6 October 2010–16 January 2011); and Haroun's presence as a jury member during the 2011 Cannes film festival. However, most films remain in the margins of the international film circuit and fail to receive much or any public attention. In particular, documentaries and films by women directors are all too rarely released in theatres, made available on video or DVD, or broadcast on television channels. For instance, only two films by African women filmmakers were released in Parisian cinema theatres during the first decade of the twenty-first century: *La Nuit de la vérité* (Nacro, 2004), and *Al'leessi* (Keïta, 2003), which was screened in 2010, seven years after its release.<sup>79</sup>

The distribution and exhibition of films in Africa remains extremely limited. As Falaba Issa Traoré (Mali) explains: 'Cela étonne peut-être, mais le cinéma est encore au Mali un privilège de seigneurs' (in Jolin 2005). As a result of the relatively high price of tickets and the ever-increasing number of illegal cheap

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<sup>76</sup> This compendium of short films is a reflection on the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. Ouédraogo's film features alongside those of the internationally renowned Amos Gitai, Claude Lelouch, Ken Loach, and Sean Penn.

<sup>77</sup> The 'leçon de cinéma', launched in 1991, provides a platform for internationally renowned filmmakers to address a wide audience on the subject of their experiences of filmmaking and perceptions of the art form.

<sup>78</sup> *8* groups films by highly influential filmmakers, such as Jane Campion, Gael García Bernal, and Gus Van Sant. As with Ouédraogo's contribution to *11'09'01: September 11*, the inclusion of Sissako's *Le Rêve de Tiya* in this collection of shorts is a notable celebration of the filmmaker's work.

<sup>79</sup> *Le Nuit de la vérité* received positive reviews in the French press and was awarded prizes at the San Sebastian international film festival (2004), at the FESPACO (2004), and in Florence (2005).

copies of films, cinemas struggle to run at a profit.<sup>80</sup> For example, the culturally rich Dakar, now the poorer for the recent closure of its legendary cinema *Le Paris*, has seen the number of movie theatres decrease from eighty in 1973 to sixteen in 2000 (Barlet 2007). In rural parts of Africa, French settlers initially set up ‘cinémas ambulants’,<sup>81</sup> a practice that has now extended to cities with the launch of mobiCINE, an innovative system for exhibiting films where cinemas are sorely lacking.<sup>82</sup> Illustrating the extent of the shortcomings of distribution in Africa, Robin Buss (2003) reveals that, apart from Antarctica, the population of no other continent spends less time in cinemas. As a consequence, the African public remains ‘frustré de ses images’.<sup>83</sup>

African filmmakers are also disheartened that their work is all too rarely available in their home countries. Ouédraogo explains: ‘Ce qui pose problème avant tout, c’est la difficulté qu’il y a en Afrique à voir nos films. De plus en plus, il me semble que nous les faisons pour un public européen’ (in Brahim 2004: 143).<sup>84</sup> As Kouyaté rightly remarks, Paris remains ‘the capital of African cinema’ (in Dovey 2009: 178). The Parisian cinema La Clef regularly features African films and, along with the monthly Ciné-Club, organised by Catherine

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<sup>80</sup> See Jean Marie Teno’s (Cameroon) recent documentary *Lieux Saints* (2009), which chronicles the difficulties faced by the owners of a video-club in Burkina Faso.

<sup>81</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ recalls this in *L’Étrange Destin de Wangrin* (1992).

<sup>82</sup> Seven carrier tricycles equipped with a video projector, a laptop, and loud speakers travel around Dakar to screen films at a reduced price. See <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=murmure&no=7356>> [accessed 13 May 2011].

<sup>83</sup> See Hondo’s interview in *Y’a pas de problème! Fragments de cinéma africain* (Gavron, 1995).

<sup>84</sup> For example, while Faye’s *Kaddu Beykat* was meant for African audiences (Foster 1997: 149), it was released in France long before it was screened in Senegal. Indeed, in 1983, Faye reported that the film had yet to be released in Senegal. See her interview in *Caméra d’Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).



Ruelle at the Dapper museum, is essential for discovering new releases or attending retrospectives.<sup>85</sup> The Cinémathèque Afrique holds one of the largest and most diverse collections of African films to be found internationally, including films in Beta and U-Matic formats. As such, it is an invaluable resource for filmmakers, students, researchers, and journalists, as well as television, radio, and cinema programmers interested in African film. Regrettably, during my visits to the Cinémathèque, its recent directors, Jeanick Le Naour and Véronique Joo Aisenberg, both expressed concerns regarding the future autonomy and accessibility of the archive. Suffering from repeated budget cuts and several restructurings, it remains uncertain whether the Cinémathèque will be able to remain open to the public (Tiprez 2008).<sup>86</sup> A few of the most popular films are available to watch at the BIFI in Paris, and those that have been broadcast on television channels, most often on the Franco-German channel ARTE or Canal+, are available via the INA, whose archives can be accessed at the Tolbiac site of the Bibliothèque Nationale François Mitterrand (BNF). A selection of videos and DVDs are available to buy from L'Harmattan (Paris), the Médiathèque des Trois Mondes (Paris), or from Women Make Movies (New York). Only the most marketable films, such as the works of Sembène, Sissako, Yaméogo, and Ouédraogo, are available to the general public from non-specialist shops, such as FNAC.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> See <<http://www.cinematoclef.fr/>> and <<http://www.dapper.com.fr/cine-club.php>> [accessed 13 July 2011].

<sup>86</sup> Since 1999, the Cinémathèque Afrique has been under the successive authority of the Association Universitaire pour le Développement, l'Éducation et la Communication en Afrique et dans le Monde (AUDECAM), the Association pour la Diffusion de la Pensée Française (ADPF), Culturesfrance, and the Institut Français.

<sup>87</sup> Because few copies of these films are sold, they are often highly priced: African films can cost up to twice the average price of a DVD. Alternatively, the films are sold exclusively at institutional prices, as is the case with *Selbé et tant d'autres* from Women Make Movies, a major disincentive for potential enthusiasts.

There is clearly a demand for African films, both from Western ‘cinéphiles’ and African viewers eager for images of themselves, but African films are currently ‘morts-nés commercialement’ (Sokhona 2001: 16). As has been demonstrated here, the deficiencies of training, funding, promotion, distribution, and exhibition have, to date, locked filmmakers in a ‘carcan’ that prevents them from fulfilling their audiences’ desires.<sup>88</sup> As Touré commends, however, digital technologies are in the process of revolutionising filmmaking and offer considerable potential for the future of African screen media (Bibas and Mélinand 2003): by making filmmaking more affordable and technically less complex, and by offering alternative means of distribution and promotion, digital technologies offer filmmakers a new artistic freedom and enable them to experiment with styles and subject matters.<sup>89</sup> Accordingly, several video-on-demand websites specialising in African film have emerged over the last few years.<sup>90</sup> Users can sign up to YouTube feeds from producers and distributors, such as African Women in Cinema, Harmattan Productions, and Third World Newsreel. Finally, Facebook is coming to represent an important player in the field of communication, used notably by Africultures, Screening Africa, the African Women in Cinema Vlog, and the Centre for the Study and Research of Women in Cinema. In a report on the Sheffield Doc/Fest, journalist Sean

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<sup>88</sup> See Kaboré’s interview in *Y’a pas de problème! Fragments de cinéma africain* (Gavron, 1995).

<sup>89</sup> It is fitting here to recall that the prodigious Nigerian home video market emerged in the 1990s under General Sani Abacha’s military dictatorship, as a result of the insecurity that prevented viewers from going to cinemas and so boosted the sale of VHS players (Lequeret 2003: 77).

<sup>90</sup> These include the M-Net African Film Library, H7 Films, and AfricaFilms.tv. For more information see: <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=murmure&no=4951>> [accessed 13 November 2011], <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=murmure&no=5412>> [accessed 21 January 2010], and <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=murmure&no=7344>> [accessed 13 July 2011].

O'Hagan points out that, as will be explored in the following chapter, affordable digital technologies have also energised the field of documentary making (2010). O'Hagan refers here to *Life in a Day* (2011), a project curated by Scottish filmmaker Kevin MacDonald, who assembled footage filmed and uploaded to YouTube by thousands of contributors throughout the world. Likewise, Fatou Jupiter Touré's *Surtout, souriez!* (2006), a film that chronicles her friend Maïmouna's day in a Dakar bus station, was made using only a DV-Cam and so suggests new possibilities for the future of African women's filmmaking.

Interestingly, although Ouseynou Diop maintains that, in Africa, documentary has long been 'la porte d'entrée au cinéma de fiction' (1996: 86), there is no evidence that the women whose work will be explored in this thesis consider documentary as a stepping-stone towards fiction filmmaking, 'la voie du salut permettant d'accéder aux marchés de la gloire', according to Tapsoba (1996: 53). Contrary to Diop's assertion, many African women filmmakers appear to be dedicating their career in large part to documentary making.<sup>91</sup> This Introduction has outlined some of the contextual factors that may explain African women's concentration on documentary. Most of the women whose work features in this corpus are part-time filmmakers who engage in documentary making alongside other professional activities: Assih has set up

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<sup>91</sup> Many other African women filmmakers, such as Nacro, continue to employ both. As she explains, both documentary and fiction can be subversive and 'peuvent traiter de manières différentes le même sujet'. When preparing a film, she decides which to employ, based on her target audience and on how she wishes to engage with her viewers. Fiction filmmaking, she contends, offers more freedom with 'la réalité' and enables her to use humour to both entertain her audience and raise consciousness of important issues, as can most clearly be observed in *Le Truc de Konaté* (1998). See Nacro's interview on *Staccato. Vingtième festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France Culture, 9 April 1998.

her own advertising agency (Akakpo 2010), Folly is an international lawyer and in her own words ‘not really a filmmaker, in conventional terms’ (in Ellerson 2000: 95), Ndiaye is a journalist (Hurst et al. 2003), and Sylla a writer and teacher (Keïta 1999). Because of their marginal position within the film industry, these women are less likely to benefit from extensive funding, in particular in a context where, for men and women alike, making a film amounts to a ‘parcours du combattant’.<sup>92</sup> In this context, documentary offers a number of advantages. First, it undeniably represents a more approachable form of cinematic expression,<sup>93</sup> most notably because it is more affordable and therefore particularly adapted to the economies of African countries.<sup>94</sup> Secondly, because of its claim of privileged access to the real, documentary is also a very powerful medium that can have a strong impact on viewers and, in some cases, lead to concrete changes in policy, as will be discussed in Chapter One. Documentary therefore enables African women to produce films that reflect their radical personal, artistic, and political agendas.

African filmmakers, broadly speaking, remain committed to social, cultural, and political agendas and, although filmmaking is a prolific art form in Africa, it is not currently an economically viable industry, and investment is minimal. As such, it can be argued that African filmmaking has not yet reached its full potential, either artistically or commercially, that is rather a ‘cinéma à l’aube

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<sup>92</sup> See Nacro’s interview on *Espace francophone: Le Magazine télévisé de la francophonie. Écrans francophones: Festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France 3, 28 May 1998.

<sup>93</sup> As Mbeka explains, this is one of the main reasons that influenced her choice of documentary. See her interview on *Cahiers nomades*, RFI, 1 December 2004.

<sup>94</sup> See Assih’s interview on *Afrique, des cinéastes dans l’indépendance*, France Culture, 21 August 2010.

de son devenir'.<sup>95</sup> The late Jacques Binet, a former member of the *Africultures* editorial committee and professor at the International Centre for Francophone Studies of the Sorbonne, remarked: 'Quand j'étudie Bergman ou Eisenstein, je me moque pas mal des structures de la production [...] il me semble que si les films étaient "solides", il n'y aurait pas besoin de parler de tout cela' (in Maarek 1983: 48). In the light of what has been detailed above, this is clearly an egregious contention and contextual factors, due to their determining and often detrimental impact on the development of African cinemas, are essential to consider in any analysis of African screen media. However, there is an equally damaging tendency to lower critical standards when viewing African films, as Sokhona deplors: 'Dans les festivals, les Occidentaux excusent presque automatiquement la mauvaise qualité des films africains en disant simplement "C'est du cinéma africain"' (2001: 17). Such responses run counter to the interests of African filmmakers, as there are many who succeed in exceeding the limitations imposed by the context and make innovative and skilful films. It is worth recalling the work of the late Mambéty who, as mentioned earlier, was a self-taught film director who employed exclusively non-professional actors and made *Touki Bouki* (1973), widely acknowledged to be one of the most innovative fiction films from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. This thesis will demonstrate that the documentaries in this corpus merit similar attention, recognition, and acclaim.

The following chapters will explore the ideological reasons accounting for African women's preference for documentary and will test Michel Amarger

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<sup>95</sup> See *Caméra d'Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).

and Elizabeth Jenny's contention that African women filmmakers 'cultivent une démarche contemplative et analytique qui les oriente vers les documentaires' (1995: 89). As Chapter Two will demonstrate, committed documentaries that focus on the spaces inhabited by women and address gender issues relating to representation, the body, labour, war, and the family, account for a significant portion of non-fiction filmmaking by women from sub-Saharan Africa. This was already a tendency in the pioneering fictional work of the male filmmakers Dong and Mensah, Sembène, and Sissoko,<sup>96</sup> and one that can still be observed to this day.<sup>97</sup> According to Barlet, the recurrence of gender issues can be explained by practical rather than ideological considerations: 'Polygamie, circoncision, rituels secrets sont des sujets qui se vendent bien en Occident' (2002b: 45). Chapter Two will test this assertion and will analyse the women-centred committed films in this corpus, paying specific attention to the filmmakers' textual practices and to the ethics of encounter and representation. It will question whether and how their work initiates a womanist filmmaking practice, and, if so, how it may be compared and contrasted with Western feminist documentary traditions. Chapter Three will address the innovating autobiographical works on identity and memory in the corpus, considering claims that cinematic autobiography and African autobiography are both theoretical impossibilities.<sup>98</sup> It will consider the therapeutic potential of these works and examine how the filmmakers use form to represent the self. The personal but also cultural and social functions of

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<sup>96</sup> See *Borom Sarret* (Sembène, 1963), *Obali* (Dong and Mensah, 1976), and *Finzan* (Sissako, 1989).

<sup>97</sup> Films that maintain this focus on women include *Puk nini* and *Bintou* (Nacro, 1995 and 2001), *Mossane* (Faye, 1996), *Taafe Fanga* (Adama Drabo, 1997), *Madame Brouette* (Moussa Sène Absa, 2002), *Moolaadé* (Sembène, 2004), and *Delwende* (Yaméogo, 2005).

<sup>98</sup> See Bruss (1980) and Gabara (2006: 122).

these documentaries will be explored, since there is a tendency to combine autobiographical discourses with explorations of social and/or cultural phenomena. Leading on from this, Chapter Four will explore the ethnographic sub-genre and will detail how the films in this corpus extend or even reshape the conventions of traditional ethnography. It will outline how ethnographic knowledge is obtained and conveyed and explore the formal and political reflexivity of these filmmakers' representations of cultural phenomena. Chapter Five will consider the formal and aesthetic implications of films that combine both documentary and fictional material. It will explore how the filmmakers shape a docufictional practice that is singular and innovative, that enables them to make use of a variety of narrative techniques and to optimise the range of experiences depicted. This will lead to a consideration of how documentary and fiction are conceptualised in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa and what we may learn from these films regarding these cinematic genres. Before addressing each of these four sub-genres, the first chapter of this thesis will outline the framework within which the corpus will be approached. Chapter One will explore documentary's current status within the global cinematic industry and some of the recent evolutions in terms of the characterisation and definition of documentary. The chapter will explore and engage with the medium's defining features, such as style and form, audience expectations, the viewing experiences provided, and the ethics of documentary encounter and representation. Drawing on scholarly work on documentary theory, the chapter will outline the methodology used to analyse the films in this corpus and question whether it is unproblematic to apply these

predominantly Western models to films by women from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa.



## CHAPTER ONE – DOCUMENTARY

A significant number of documentaries released in the course of the previous decade — such as *Être et avoir* (Nicolas Philibert, 2002), *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Sicko* (Michael Moore, 2002, 2004, and 2007), *La Marche de l'empereur* (Luc Jacquet, 2005), and *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) — have achieved undisputed worldwide media and box office success.<sup>99</sup> Such a concentration of documentary films grossing sums exceeding ten million dollars in worldwide lifetime earnings is a recent and striking phenomenon. Although isolated films made during the twentieth century, including *The Living Desert* (James Algar, 1954) and *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (Alek Keshishian, 1991), ranked as highly in the box office, their undisputed success cannot be likened to the current concentration of high-earning documentaries in a period of just a few years.<sup>100</sup> The sheer number of documentaries released since 2000 exceeding profits of ten million dollars signals a renewal of their popularity among the wider public: Thomas Austin speaks of a ‘documentary boom’ (2007: 13) and David Hogarth of ‘Documania’ (2006: 1). The above filmmakers’ innovative, compelling, and at times controversial practices, which capitalise on sensationalism, provocative satire, impassioned rhetoric, or emotional narratives, have received the

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<sup>99</sup> According to <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>> the lifetime worldwide gross of each of these films is as follows: *Être et avoir*, \$16,063,920; *Bowling for Columbine*, \$58,008,423; *Fahrenheit 9/11*, \$222,446,882; *Sicko*, \$36,055,165; *La Marche de l'empereur*, \$127,392,693; and *An Inconvenient Truth*, \$49,756,507 [accessed 2 September 2009].

<sup>100</sup> In order to avoid the problems of accounting for inflation when assessing the popularity of films, the number of French cinema entries is used here as a point of comparison: *The Living Desert*, 3,633,584 entries; *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, 186,969; *Être et avoir*, 1,821,981; *Sicko*, 258,142; *An Inconvenient Truth*, 740,997. See <<http://www.cbo-boxoffice.com/>> [accessed 2 September 2009].

collective attention — be it appreciative or critical — of viewers, the international media, global corporations, and politicians.

Some of the recently released films in particular, such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Supersize Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2004), and *Home* (Yann Arthus-Bertrand, 2009), have generated considerable debate, have had a strong and lasting impact on matters relating to public consciousness and political life, and have drawn attention to the rhetorical power and relevance of documentary in contemporary society. This is reflected by the fact that the 2004 Palme d'Or was awarded to Moore for his highly politicised *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the first documentary to receive the award since *Le Monde du silence* (Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Louis Malle, 1956). While Quentin Tarantino, who presided over the jury during the festival, claimed that 'this prize was not for politics. It won because it was the best film' (in Ebert 2004: 812), there has been much controversy surrounding the event, which famously coincided with the run-up to the American Presidential elections, as the film was designed to impinge upon George W. Bush's campaign for re-election.<sup>101</sup> Moore's documentary practice, which has been accused of bias and manipulation,<sup>102</sup> has also raised questions regarding the nature and purpose of contemporary documentary

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<sup>101</sup> For information regarding the reaction to the Palme d'Or, see Lorrain (2004), Roy (2004a and 2004b), and Gianorio (2004).

<sup>102</sup> For example, objections have been raised regarding the sequence in *Bowling for Columbine* that shows a speech by the late Charlton Heston, then leader of the National Rifle Association. The sequence follows images of young survivors of the Columbine killings, crying shortly after the shooting. The speech opens with a highly disturbing declaration by Heston as he raises a rifle above his head: 'From my cold, dead hands'. In this shot, Heston sports a chequered blue tie, yet his tie is red in the remainder of the footage of his speech. This indicates that the sequence is composed of footage from two separate events, yet Moore misleads the viewer into believing in the integrity of the sequence: 'Just ten days after the Columbine killings [...] Charlton Heston came to Denver'. It appears that Moore covertly added the initial footage of Heston to further disgrace the NRA regarding its response to the Columbine shooting.

filmmaking, to the extent that some have excluded his films from the canon.<sup>103</sup> That same year, Spurlock's *Supersize Me* generated unfavourable publicity for the McDonald's International Corporation, causing a slump in profits (Tryhorn 2004) and forcing the multinational to modernise its service and image (Brook 2004).<sup>104</sup> More recently, the wide exposure of Arthus-Bertrand's environmental manifesto, *Home*, played a significant part in the success of the French Green party during the 2009 European elections (Szeradzki 2009). Simultaneously released in cinemas, made available to viewers on Youtube, broadcast on national television — and just as importantly, benefiting from the publicity that such a move generated — *Home* was able to reach a large number of viewers in time for the vote-casting.

Arthus-Bertrand's film is a potent example of how documentary can benefit from the growing variety of distribution and exhibition circuits and from the technological evolutions discussed in the Introduction. Cinema theatres and television have been prime sites of expansion for documentary, as demonstrated by the success of the films mentioned above and by the proliferation of popular factual television programming since the 1980s.<sup>105</sup> The Internet is also instrumental, with the many websites and blogs devoted to documentary promoting and critiquing releases or enabling viewers to stream

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<sup>103</sup> Moore himself is reluctant to qualify his films as documentary: 'Le mot documentaire est démodé, on dirait le nom d'un vieux médicament. Je préfère dire que c'est une "non-fiction"' (in Gianorio 2004).

<sup>104</sup> Six weeks after the screening of Spurlock's film at Sundance, McDonald's announced that supersizing meals would be abolished in its chain of fast-food restaurants (Bernard 2007: 109).

<sup>105</sup> For further reading regarding television documentary see Hill (2005).

films free of charge.<sup>106</sup> New forms of actuality filmmaking have emerged, and documentary, whether produced for television, cinema, or otherwise,<sup>107</sup> currently plays an undisputedly prominent role in the global entertainment industry. As documentary has gained in visibility and popularity, its public image and status have shifted. Documentary can by no means be equated solely with a didactic and sober genre of filmmaking, nor with a purely entertaining form of factual programming, and thus extends well beyond the tropes of *Panorama* and *Big Brother*. Documentary is neither the preserve of art house cinemas and fringe film festivals, nor exclusive to television. Rather, documentary is a multifarious and fluid form of filmmaking; it is the product of varied intents, exploits diverse and changing production techniques, makes use of a growing variety of distribution circuits, and provides all manner of viewing experiences.

The recent developments and transformations of documentary have generated a renewal of scholarly interest in the medium, although, as was discussed in the Introduction, this has not thus far been extended to the Francophone sub-Saharan African films with which we are concerned here.<sup>108</sup> Adding to the existing body of work on documentary,<sup>109</sup> scholars such as Bill Nichols (1991, 1994, and 2001), Stella Bruzzi (2000), Keith Beattie (2004), Michael Renov (2004), Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane (2005), Paul Ward (2005), and

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<sup>106</sup> See, for example, the websites <[www.freedocumentaries.org](http://www.freedocumentaries.org)> and <<http://www.moviesfoundonline.com>>, and the blogs <<http://www.thedocumentaryblog.com>> and <<http://www.der.org>>.

<sup>107</sup> Documentaries are produced for a myriad of other sites, including, and not restricted to, museums and public transport.

<sup>108</sup> Demonstrating its current prominence, documentary has recently entered the 'Very Short Introduction' collection published by Oxford University Press. See Aufderheide (2007).

<sup>109</sup> Seminal work on documentary includes Barsam (1976).

Sarah Cooper (2006) have addressed a wide range of issues particularly relevant to this thesis. The focus on non-fiction filmmaking in general and documentary in particular extends to questions of form, ethics, and politics, both at the level of production and reception. The newly emerged forms of documentary filmmaking, production techniques, distribution circuits, and so on, have generated much debate regarding documentary's defining characteristics. There is, for example, a clear interest in problematising documentary's truth claim, its ideological stances, and the viewing experiences it generates.<sup>110</sup> Taxonomic concerns are also foremost, as demonstrated by the extensive attention paid to modes of documentary representation and to the evolutions and key trends within sub-generic formations.<sup>111</sup> Finally questions regarding the ethics of encounter and representation have come to constitute a prominent and compelling field within documentary studies.<sup>112</sup>

This thesis advocates that the recent renewal of scholarly interest in documentary should extend to the work of African women filmmakers, not only because their work has thus far been largely overlooked, but also because its often novel forms and practices would prompt the questioning and redefining of models and conventions. As Gabara rightly points out, 'marginal works ultimately define a genre better than the normative ones', since they challenge accepted norms that become visible precisely as a result of the

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<sup>110</sup> For explorations of documentary's truth claim, see Beattie (2004: 10–25) and Bruzzi (2000: 1–8). For documentary's reception, the expectations of audiences, and the different subjectivities at play, see Renov (2004: 93–103), and Nichols (1991: 201–28).

<sup>111</sup> For detailed accounts of sub-genres, see Ellis and McLane's extensive historical overview of documentary (2005). See also Beattie (2004: 44–62 and 105–24) and Renov (2004: 216–29 and 104–19). The modes of representation are developed and detailed by Nichols (1991 and 2001) and critiqued by Bruzzi (2000).

<sup>112</sup> Regarding the ethics of documentary representation, see Nichols (1991: 76–103) and Cooper (2006).

transgression (2006: xii). The remainder of this chapter thus engages with the recent scholarly work on documentary, outlining and challenging the popular models and methodologies that will be used throughout the remainder of the thesis to analyse the films in this corpus. This chapter explores defining characteristics of the documentary medium; the ways in which it compares with and relates to other forms of cinematic expression; the types of viewing experience it provides; the important ethical questions it raises; and the categorisation of different types of documentary. This will provide a platform for the detailed analysis of documentary practices in films by African women, which will be carried out in the subsequent four chapters.

Benefiting from the attention of the public, the media, and scholars, global documentary has recaptured the enthusiasm it generated towards the end of the nineteenth century, when those present at the Grand Café in Paris on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1895 witnessed the initial showing of Auguste and Louis Lumière's motion picture, *L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat*. Richard Barsam recounts that members of the audience allegedly drew back, while others reportedly ran to the back of the room in fright (1992: 3), the photographic — and crucially moving — properties of the image duping them into believing that it was life itself.<sup>113</sup> Although the term was not in use then, this early motion picture — along with other shorts by the Lumière brothers, including *La Sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* and *La Pêche aux poissons rouges* (both from 1895) — is widely identified as a pioneering work of documentary. Since then, just as documentary filmmaking has evolved and expanded over the course of more

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<sup>113</sup> *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (Robert W. Paul, 1901) satirises the reaction of the viewers present at the early showings of *L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat*.

than a century, so too has its exposure and the expectations and insights of its viewers. The current level of audience awareness is such that most are capable, not only of identifying the onscreen image as precisely that, but also of differentiating between various media and genres with equal ease.

When watching a documentary, then, most of us are instinctively aware of the nature of the film, yet there appears to be an inverse relationship between the ease with which documentary is recognisable and that with which it is defined or even characterised. In spite of the substantial scholarly work devoted to documentary since 1926 when the term itself was coined, there remains considerable debate as to how documentary ought to be defined.<sup>114</sup> Many scholars have underlined the difficulties involved in delineating the ‘marvellously confused genre’ (Ruby 2005: 211) of documentary with accuracy.<sup>115</sup> Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight contend that there is still no consensus even as to whether documentary is a genre, style, or stance (2001: 7). The difficulty arises primarily because documentary is a wide field of filmmaking with fluctuating borders. The act of defining documentary is therefore generally predicated on refusals (Beattie 2004: 2), since documentary is seemingly easiest to characterise primarily in relation to what it is not: most notably as a form of non-fiction. This tendency can be traced to the very origins of film: Emilie de Brigard asserts that the advent of the cinématographe initiated two separate trends, ‘the documentary or *actualité* film, originated by the Lumières, and the fiction film, invented by [Georges] Méliès in 1897 to

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<sup>114</sup> The term documentary was first used in its current sense by Grierson in reference to Robert J. Flaherty’s 1926 film *Moana* (Ellis and McLane 2005: ix). For further information regarding the etymology of the term, see Winston (1995: 11–4).

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Bruzzi (2000: 7), Nichols (2001: 20), and Roscoe and Hight (2001: 7).

win back to the box office a public which had speedily become bored by motion pictures' (1995: 18).<sup>116</sup> Many attempts at determining the medium's defining features rely on the disparities between documentary and other forms of cinematic expression, in particular its perceived other: fictional narrative filmmaking.

For example, Ellis and McLane identify five characteristics which, in their view, are shared by all documentaries and distinguish them from the two other creative modes in film, namely narrative film and experimental avant-garde cinema: '(1) subjects; (2) purposes, viewpoints, or approaches; (3) forms; (4) production methods and techniques; and (5) the sorts of experience they offer audiences' (2005: 1).<sup>117</sup> Ellis and McLane's criteria are problematic, however, in terms of both the individual elements and the overall method. Their comprehensive account of documentary shapes a rather reductive definition of documentary as a medium that is primarily 'specific and factual' and concerned 'with public matters rather than private ones'; that encourages its audience to adopt a viewpoint or take action; that extracts its material entirely from the historical world; that is minimally edited and aesthetically plain; and that offers professional skill rather than style, as a result of which the audience 'responds not so much to the artist (who keeps undercover), as to the subject matter' (2005: 1–2). While some documentaries correspond broadly to Ellis and McLane's account, there are also many counter-examples: Ross McElwee and Chris Waitt are far from keeping 'undercover' in *Sherman's March* (1986)

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<sup>116</sup> Grierson later contributed to reinforcing the divide between documentary and fiction by arguing that, unlike the Hollywood motion picture industry, documentary 'should be regarded as an art form rather than a populist genre' (in Roscoe and Hight 2001: 25).

<sup>117</sup> Ellis and McLane use the term 'subject' to refer to the topic or subject matter of a film. In this thesis, as elsewhere, the 'subjects' of documentaries are the participants or contributors.



and *A Complete History of My Sexual Failures* (2008) respectively; the engagement of the viewer in Joris Ivens's *Rain* (1929) is predominantly artistic, just as Trinh's experimental *Reassemblage* (1982) is aesthetically very complex and challenging; and the box office hit fiction film *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) is far more politically reflexive than the documentary *Jackass: The Movie* (Jeff Tremaine, 2002), which by no means encourages its audience to 'live our lives a little more fully or intelligently' (Ellis and McLane 2005: 2). As we shall see, Sylla's autobiographical documentary, *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, and Diabang Brener's poetic documentary, *Mon Beau Sourire*, further counter Ellis and McLane's characterisation of documentary.

Ellis and McLane's methodology also advocates a polarisation of documentary and fiction that overlooks the many points of interaction and commonalities between the two media. Although seemingly straightforward, the tendency to define documentary relationally reinforces the lasting and problematic dichotomy established between documentary and fiction. For example, Véronique Rossignol establishes a dubious connection between the myth of David and Goliath and documentary and fiction filmmaking: Rossignol argues that documentary is the redemption of cinema, basing her argument on three qualities of the medium, namely its objectivity and reliability, its educational purpose, and its 'mission humanitaire', through which documentary breaks free of the rules and conventions of 'l'industrie' (2003: 3). Although she fails to detail whether her use of the term 'industry' refers to the economic and commercial activity of production and distribution, the artistic codes governing filmmaking itself, or both, Rossignol clearly places documentary on a higher

moral ground. The implication is that fiction filmmaking is in some way corrupt or lacking in substance, while documentary has a far greater radical potential, offering a canvas for disclosing and therefore combating immorality. For budgetary reasons, as well as by dint of the political power of its perceived access to the real, documentary is popular with independent filmmakers confronting social, cultural, political, or personal issues.<sup>118</sup> Nonetheless, the rationale behind Rossignol's analogy is a fallacious generalisation, which condemns works of fiction and documentary to a rigid and ultimately unrealistic dualism, ignoring variations in subject matter and intention and thus arguably devaluing both art forms.<sup>119</sup>

The main point of comparison between documentary and fiction is that of their respective claims on the real. This can be traced to the dichotomy established between the work of Méliès and the Lumière brothers: while the former reputedly explored *mise-en-scène*, theatricality, visual illusions, and special effects in order to initiate a new form of entertainment, the Lumière brothers were mainly concerned with the technical feat of reproducing reality (Fournier Lanzoni 2002: 32).<sup>120</sup> Ever since those early days, the relationship of documentary to the real has shaped our understanding and expectations of the medium. Laura Marks rightly asserts that:

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<sup>118</sup> See, for example, *La Hora de los Hornos* (Solanas and Guetino, 1970), *Afriques: Comment ça va avec la douleur?* (Raymond Depardon, 1996), *Rize* (David La Chapelle, 2005), *We Feed the World* (Erwin Wagenhofer, 2005), and *Jesus Camp* (Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2006).

<sup>119</sup> Civic-minded fiction films evading Rossignol's strict categorisation include *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995), *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2002), *Moolaadé* (Sembène, 2004), *Fast Food Nation* (Richard Linklater, 2006), and *Ezra* (Newton I. Aduaka, 2007). It is also worth noting that certain filmmakers, such as Moore or Spurlock, do not seek to break free of the rules of the industry but rather profit from them to impart a message.

<sup>120</sup> A similar contemporary effort is that of Rob Spence, a Canadian filmmaker who lost an eye following an accident in his childhood and had it replaced by a prosthetic enclosing a camera in order to make a film that would be a true reflection of his daily life (Icher 2009).

We can define documentary in the broadest sense as a cinema whose indexical relation to the Real is of central importance. Any kind of cinema has this relation to the pro-filmic event, but only documentary claims this relation to the Real as one of its defining qualities. (1999: 228)

Similarly, Nick James contends that ‘what distinguishes the documentary from other forms of cinema is its claim to be more reflective of the truth’ (2007: 22). An interesting feature of both these definitions is their authors’ insistence on the self-professed nature of documentary’s privileged access to the real, which rightly signals that the issue is of both prime importance and contention for filmmakers and scholars.

Following the Lumière brothers’ early work and throughout most of the twentieth century, documentary was aligned with the discourse of the Enlightenment and a faith in the facts (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 28). Because of the apparent incorruptibility of the image, documentary ‘demonstrated a potential for the observation and investigation of people and of social/historical phenomena’, and was considered a privileged instrument for use in empirical projects, such as fieldwork anthropology (Renov 1999: 84). It was not until the last quarter of the twentieth century that documentary’s claim on the real — as well as the binary view of documentary and fiction — started to be deconstructed (Rhodes and Springer 2006: 3). Exacerbated by the crisis of representation brought about by postmodernism (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 28), the connection between documentary and objectivity was increasingly devalued, to the extent that Rouch counterintuitively claimed that fiction was

‘the only way to penetrate reality’ (in Scheinman 1998: 193).<sup>121</sup> During the course of the 1960s and 1970s, Rouch and Edgar Morin coined the term ‘cinéma vérité’ to describe documentary as a genre that does not simply serve to reproduce the real but acts as a catalyst, generating its own reality.<sup>122</sup> Then, between the 1970s and 1990s, documentary came to reflect the rise of the personal in Western societies (Beattie 2004: 105) and documentary was increasingly used as a privileged site for the expression and exploration of identity. This led to the emergence of new filmmaking forms that were increasingly embedded in the personal, as will be explored in Chapter Three.<sup>123</sup> The filmmaker’s subjectivity, initially considered a weakness to be minimised, came to be seen as a ‘filter through which the Real enters discourse as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work toward its goal as embodied knowledge’ (Renov 1999: 88).

As Bruzzi rightly argues, any involvement of a filmmaker entails the loss of integrity of the real (2000: 6), notably since her creative vision and ideology preclude adhering to a view of documentary as a straightforwardly

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<sup>121</sup> Like Rouch, Gahité Fofana (Guinea) observed that documentary could not capture the truth when making *Un Matin bonne heure* (2006), a film based on a news item about two young boys who embarked illegally in the undercarriage of an airplane headed for Brussels where they were found dead on arrival. The story made headline news because the boys had previously addressed a letter to the ‘membres et responsables d’Europe’, calling attention to the ‘souffrance de nous, les enfants et jeunes d’Afrique’. When researching what he had originally intended to be a documentary retracing the events leading up to the tragedy, Fofana found it impossible to locate the truth within the testimonies he read or heard, and turned to fiction, which he saw as the only way to tell the story. See his interview on *Espace francophone: Le Magazine télévisé de la francophonie. Écrans francophones: Spéciale Cannes 2007*, France 3, 14 June 2007.

<sup>122</sup> Cinéma vérité refers not to the absolute unmediated truth of an impossibly utopian cinema but to the subjective truth of perception (Renov 1999: 87). As Diane Scheinman clarifies, cinéma vérité refers more to the truth of cinema than to a cinema of truth (1998: 194).

<sup>123</sup> See, for example, *Sherman’s March* (McElwee, 1986), *Roger and Me* (Moore, 1989), *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin, 1993), *Life Without Death* (Frank Cole, 2000), and *Les Plages d’Agnès* (Agnès Varda, 2008).

reproductive art.<sup>124</sup> Even ‘before filming starts, the profilmic event is heavily coded by the cultural assumptions people bring to the process of making a film’ (Kaplan 1988: 91). Nowadays, the concept of non-intervention and the view of documentary as an unmediated neutral record are widely considered as pure idealism: ‘To speak of the camera’s gaze is, in that one phrase, to mingle two distinct operations: the literal, mechanical operation of a device to reproduce images and the metaphorical, human process of gazing upon the world’ (Nichols 1991: 79). While some, such as the late Senegalese documentarian Samba Félix Ndiaye, consider that ‘une caméra qui n’est pas à sa place dérange mais si elle est à sa place, elle est invisible’ (in Barlet 2008c), others would contend that the mere presence of the camera and apparatus in fact permanently alters the dynamic. Rouch and Frederick Wiseman give different accounts of the uncertainty principle:<sup>125</sup> Wiseman suggests that the camera acts as an accelerator that gives a heightened sense of genuine behaviours (Grant 1998: 242), while Rouch rightly advocates a notion of the camera as an ‘agent provocateur’ (in Beattie 2004: 110), or a stimulant that encourages performance. Any discussion of the relationship between representation and referent in documentary should therefore acknowledge the three realities pertinent to documentary filmmaking: the putative reality that is the world as it exists without the intrusion of the camera; the profilmic, or the world in front of the camera; and finally the onscreen reality (John Corner in Beattie 2004: 14). Recognition of this issue is important since any attempt at associating documentary with objectivity and authenticity, defining it as a

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<sup>124</sup> In the interest of clarity and conciseness, and because this thesis deals with women’s filmmaking, ‘he/she’ and ‘his/her’ will be replaced by ‘she’ and ‘her’ respectively throughout this thesis.

<sup>125</sup> The uncertainty principle stipulates that the closer subjects are observed, the less certainty there can be that they are displaying habitual behaviour.

medium that aspires to offer an unmediated access to the real, is not only erroneous but also equally harmful, most importantly because documentary can only ever fail to live up to this expectation (Bruzzi 2000: 6). Recognising documentary as ‘a fiction (un)like any other’ (Nichols 1991: 125) and accepting its *unreliability*, its inherently interpretive nature, enables us to elude the limitations imposed on documentary in view of its so-called claim on the real.

Both documentary and fiction are the result of an elaborate combination of fictional and factual discourses. Characters, plots, and locations featuring in fiction films may be imagined, but narrative cinema nonetheless invariably capitalises on elements from the historical world: the cultural metonymies used to characterise protagonists — clothing, accents, and so on — modes of communication, feelings and emotions, and the historical, cultural, or social framework of the film. These enable viewers to make sense of the experience and connect to it to their understanding of the world. Documentary, on the other hand, may feature subjects, events, or circumstances that are factual, but it can only ever constitute a subjective and constructed representation of the historical world. Clearly then, both documentary and fiction derive from the real, while neither truly condenses it. It could therefore be argued that both are a ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson in Hardy 1966: 13).

Fiction films rely on specific cinematic codes to generate verisimilitude, an illusion of reality that is derived from a general sense of consistency, be it a likeness to the viewer’s experience of the everyday world or plausibility and

coherence with expectations. The illusion is achieved using various generic features that result from filming or the postproduction phase: lighting, camera movements and angles, point-of-view shots, and continuity editing. According to Annette Kuhn, the suspension of disbelief, or the reality effect, generated by the use of these cinematic conventions is precisely what enables the viewer to engage with the narrative and characters: the pleasure in viewing arises from the sense of passivity experienced while being drawn into a coherent world that renders a designated interpretation a straightforward, even unconscious, exercise (1994: 131–2). Likewise, conventions traditionally associated with documentary filmmaking include ‘profilmic practices’ — such as location shooting and the use of natural light — and ‘filmic techniques’ — such as interviews, explanatory voice-overs, and the use of portable cameras (Beattie 2004: 16). As will be explored in Chapter Five, these codes, although prevalent in documentaries, cannot and should not singlehandedly serve to define the medium, not least since its appearance is easily reproduced, as mockumentaries clearly show.<sup>126</sup>

The recent proliferation of hybrid forms of docufiction, such as the mockumentary and docudrama, which combine documentary and fictional form and content in various innovative ways, has contributed to challenging the dichotomy between documentary and fiction. Docufiction has been instrumental in addressing the relationship to the profilmic world of these

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<sup>126</sup> Mockumentaries, hybrid works that combine fictional material assembled and presented using codes that are widespread in documentary, are particularly useful in delineating the structural characteristics of documentary on which they base their parodic potential. See for example *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984), *C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (Remy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992), and *Best in Show* (Christopher Guest, 2000).

cinematic media, notably since their very existence draws attention to the elusiveness of the demarcation between fiction and fact. Docufictions notably raise the question of how best to qualify the contributions of non-professional actors performing events of their everyday life for the benefit of the camera, such as Faye commissioned in *Kaddu Beykat*, or Michel Montanary's enactment of letters written by Marof Achkar, the filmmaker's deceased father, in *Allah Tantou* (Achkar 1990). In spite of being largely performance-based, these films reveal a strong 'degree of proximity' to the factual (Lipkin et al. 2006: 22). Faye and Achkar adopt what Carl Plantinga terms an 'assertive stance', whereby filmmakers convey that 'the state of affairs making up that projected world holds or occurs in the actual world' (2005: 107). According to Plantinga, this is a characteristic exclusive to documentaries, one that is not shared by fiction films whose directors adopt a 'fictive stance'. While Plantinga's notions of assertive and fictive stances themselves hold sway, their staunch alignment with documentary and fiction is problematic and is clearly countered, notably by the docufictions of Faye and Achkar. This thesis argues against the rigid dichotomy established between documentary and narrative cinema, fact and fiction. In so doing it aligns itself with Roscoe and Hight's view of the 'fact-fictional continuum': 'We prefer to think about documentary as existing along a fact-fictional continuum, each text constructing relationships with both factual and fictional discourses' (2001: 7). It is argued here that all films, and not just documentaries, operate as Roscoe and Hight describe and that none can be designated as purely fictional or factual. This notion of a continuum allows for the many points of convergence between



documentary and fiction, not least the innovative and reflexive works of docufiction by Faye and Sylla that will be examined in Chapter Five.

It is important to recall that docufiction emerged in tandem with documentary filmmaking itself, since the pioneering feature-length film *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922) first raised the issues relating to factuality and hybridity that have permeated the making and reception of documentary ever since. While the film is frequently cited among the earliest and most influential feature-length ethnographic documentaries, it was famously scripted and staged: Flaherty used reenactments to portray Inuit life as he romantically imagined it, rather than based on its actual idiosyncrasies, and the actions portrayed onscreen therefore have little to do with Inuit life at the time.<sup>127</sup> Concerns regarding the degree of proximity of films to the factual have extended to the point where controversies regarding the realism of docufiction and distortion of documentary recur: Gary D. Rhodes and John Parris Springer identify the apt debates surrounding the realism of *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) and the explicit political bias of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2006: 9). To these two examples could be added the reception of *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001) and *Valkyrie* (Bryan Singer, 2008), criticised for featuring historical inaccuracies,<sup>128</sup> that of the dramatised biopic *The Social Network* (David

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<sup>127</sup> Jill Godmilow clarifies: ‘In 1922, they [the Inuit] were not living in igloos: they were living in wood houses, in villages, and they owned radios that they used to follow fur prices in San Francisco and London’ (2002: 7).

<sup>128</sup> The slight inaccuracies found in *Valkyrie* — such as the fact that Adolf Hitler allegedly did not escape onboard a Ju-52 aircraft — do not, however, prevent the historian Peter Hoffmann from qualifying the film as ‘parfaitement vrai sur l’essentiel’ (in Schirrmacher 2009). *Pearl Harbor*, on the other hand, is much more problematic and led Kevin Bachar to make a documentary, *Beyond the Movie: Pearl Harbor* (2001), in an attempt to counter the ‘Hollywoodisation’ of the Japanese attack.

Fincher, 2010),<sup>129</sup> and the highly contentious documentary *Darwin's Nightmare* (Hubert Sauper, 2004).<sup>130</sup> The strong reactions to perceived misrepresentations in the docufictions of Bay, Singer, and Fincher, and in Gibson's fiction film are of a similar nature to the criticism faced by the documentaries of Moore and Sauper.<sup>131</sup> This is indicative of the types of expectations and requirements placed on films explicitly delving into the factual or biblical and of the importance of the degree of proximity to the factual of docufictions.

An awareness of the nature of the material viewed is determinant in the reception of all films, regardless of where they stand on the fact–fiction continuum. For example, the notoriety and popularity of *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) was greatly influenced by the persistent rumour that it was not a fiction film, fuelled notably by the elaborate 'mythology' outlined on the film's official website.<sup>132</sup> Viewers who approached *The Blair Witch Project* as a film made from 'found footage' — similar to *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005), a documentary made from the

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<sup>129</sup> The writer of *The Social Network*'s screenplay, Aaron Sorkin, took deliberate liberties with the individuals and events that inspired the film: 'I don't want my fidelity to be to the truth; I want it to be to storytelling' (in Harris 2010).

<sup>130</sup> Sauper is accused of misleading viewers on the issue of arms dealing and prostitution in the vicinity of Lake Victoria in Tanzania. The historian François Garçon (2006) asserts that several of Sauper's findings are misconstrued or exaggerated and that the filmmaker is alleged to have paid his subjects to act out certain scenes. Importantly, Sauper does not acknowledge these subterfuges, and viewers who saw the film naturally took it as a valid reflection of the situation in Mwanza.

<sup>131</sup> *Valkyrie* is an unmistakable docufiction, as it is based on a historical event, the foiled plot to assassinate Hitler during World War II. *The Passion of the Christ* is more problematic, however, for it brings to the screen the final hours and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the truth status of which is debated. Gibson's film effectively demonstrates the complexity involved in defining fact and fiction and the resulting intricacies of the docufictional genre.

<sup>132</sup> This includes a timeline of the fake events and evidence, including photographs of the so-called victims' car and equipment, found following their disappearance. See <<http://www.blairwitch.com/main.html>> [accessed 13 May 2010].

activist Timothy Treadwell's video diary, recorded in the Alaskan wilderness up until 2003 when he was mauled to death by a bear — are likely to have experienced it very differently to those who understood it as a work of fiction. Similarly, there is relatively little in terms of topic and filmmaking practice to distinguish *Best In Show* (Guest, 2000) and *Spellbound* (Jeffrey Blitz, 2002). Both are observational and interactive films focusing on individuals competing in prestigious specialist events in the United States: a national dog show and the National Spelling Bee. Yet *Spellbound* is a serious piece examining the personalities and lifestyles of the teenagers engaged in the spelling tournament, while *Best In Show* is a bizarre comedy, a work of mockumentary featuring well-known actors. These examples demonstrate how the engagement of the viewer with the subjects and issues raised differs radically as a result of the films' respective degrees of proximity to the real and discernibility thereof.<sup>133</sup>

The producers of *The Blair Witch Project* and the makers of *Pumping Iron* (George Butler and Robert Fiore, 1977) play on the boundary between fiction and fact, faking indexicality or covertly dramatising the factual as a marketing strategy or for the purpose of making the film more appealing to audiences.<sup>134</sup>

While in these cases the practice is aimed at boosting box office entries, it raises a number of ethical questions, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

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<sup>133</sup> There are many amusing moments in *Spellbound*, such as the sequence where Harry 'speaks robot', but these are subservient to the film's socially-conscious agenda, as *Spellbound* encourages a reception governed by a social subjectivity. In comparison, *Best In Show*'s quality as a work of mockumentary, its explicitly fictional and satirical quality, encourages viewers to laugh at its caricaturisation of the dog show competitors, thus liberating them from their social subjectivity.

<sup>134</sup> In *Raw Iron: The Making of 'Pumping Iron'* (Dave McVeigh, Scott McVeigh, 2002), Arnold Schwarzenegger explains that in the 1970s bodybuilding was a highly unfashionable sub-culture and that *Pumping Iron* was dramatised in order to satisfy the investors, who felt that audiences would have been only moderately interested in watching body-builders preparing for the Mr Olympia contest.

As Jay Ruby details, the reception of images is determined by three factors: the label attached to them, the context within which the images are shown, and the socially acquired expectations of the audience (2005: 212). The manner in which a film is designated by its maker and subsequently marketed to the public is determinant in the viewing experience it provides and ultimately amounts to a ‘reworking’ of the film (Beattie 2004: 14). The director Michelle Citron describes the indignant response of viewers to *Daughter Rite* (1980), a docufiction that she had chosen to label as documentary. Citron carried out interviews with thirty-five women, material that was not itself shown in the film, but was recast, scripted, and acted, in a manner that was faithful — according to Citron — to the details of the women’s lives. The discovery that the material, which had been coded and labelled as factual, resulted from a process of transformation, provoked not only confusion amongst her viewers, but also a strong sense of having been manipulated and duped, a feeling of deceit that Citron relates to the specific investment of documentary audiences (1999: 283).<sup>135</sup>

As Plantinga rightly highlights, when a text is recognized as a documentary, this ‘mobilizes relevant expectations on the part of the audience’ (2005: 107). These expectations result from documentary’s claim on the real, which has shaped an assumption that the images produced by documentarians relate to

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<sup>135</sup> On this issue, see also Nichols’s comparison of the viewing experience provided by George Romero’s zombie film *Day of the Dead* (1985) and *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* (Stan Brakhage, 1971), a documentary set in a morgue that presents the viewer with a succession of autopsies: ‘In the one case, we know we confront a mimetic facsimile of a human brain (no human was actually sacrificed to achieve the effect); in the other we confront an indexical representation of the thing itself (human loss stands behind every frame)’ (1991: 81). The comparison is particularly potent because lifeless bodies, in spite of their sheer materiality, condense extreme emotions of sadness, fear, and disgust, and therefore trigger intense spectatorial responses.

people, places, and events that pre-exist and exceed the act and moment of filming, and have not occurred or been staged solely for the benefit of the camera. While viewing fiction generates a temporary willing suspension of disbelief, documentary need only sustain a pre-existing belief in the authenticity of the image. This does not mean that the viewer responds simplistically to the label: as Cooper rightly highlights, ‘the index of the film sets up an expectation on the part of the spectator without constraining him/her to agree uncritically with the label a film has been given’ (2006: 7). The viewing experience provided by documentary has led many scholars to identify the medium as a mode of response (Cooper 2006: 6–7) and to suggest that the essence of documentary is to be found in reception rather than production. For example, Dai Vaughan rightly considers that ‘what makes “documentary” is the way we look at it’ (in Bruzzi 2000: 7).

Aligning documentary filmmaking and its reception with rationality and science, Nichols argues that documentary viewing is governed by epistophilia, a desire to know. According to Nichols, a disciplined and civic form of viewing replaces scopophilia, as fantasy and the pleasures associated with looking are blocked by the discourse of sobriety (1991: 76). Nichols refers to the semi-naked bodies seen in certain ethnographic films to illustrate the theory that a disciplined form of viewing desexualises and de-eroticises the body (1991: 217). According to his account, a social subjectivity here replaces the libidinal gaze, as ethics supersede erotics. This is an interesting but partial and flawed account since, by resorting to ethnographic filmmaking to illustrate his view, Nichols is in effect discussing the question of desire, not in relation to

the gaze at play in all documentaries, but specifically in relation to the rationalising gaze of anthropology. Nichols's conception of the gaze fails to account for the forms of spectatorship that emerge in response to documentaries that feature more explicit sexual content or that do not focus on the 'Other', as is the case with his example.<sup>136</sup> The alignment of documentary and rationality is an over-simplification, since documentary spectatorship is in fact a site of multiple desires that traverses the barriers between consciousness and unconsciousness (Renov 2004: 97).

The specificities of documentary's reception bring to the fore the responsibility of the filmmaker to her audience: the ethics of representation. Documentary filmmaking is governed by a moral code of conduct, as outlined by Ruby:

The production and use of images involves three separable yet related moral issues [...]: (1) the image maker's personal moral contract to produce an image that is somehow a true reflection of the intention in making the image in the first place—to use the cliché, it is being true to one's self; (2) the moral obligation of the producer to his or her subjects; and (3) the moral obligation of the producer to the potential audience. (2005: 211)

Questions regarding the ethics of documentary reception emerged as a result of the 'demise of our naive trust that since the camera never lies, a photographer has no options but to tell the truth' and recognition that the image is inevitably embedded with a filmmaker's ideology and politics (Ruby 2005: 210). The

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<sup>136</sup> See, for example, *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* (Gough Lewis, 1999), *Inside Deep Throat* (Fenton Bailet and Randy Barbato, 2005), or Tony Comstock's 'Love, Uncensored.' series, including *Marie and Jack: A Hardcore Love Story* (2002) and *Damon and Hunter: Doing It Together* (2006).

ethical issues that underlie documentary making and reception are inherent in and specific to the medium. As a result, the field of ethics has come to represent a prominent area of scholarly interest, which distinguishes documentary from the fictional space, where narrative form and questions of style are at the fore of critical studies. Therefore, while documentary cannot be characterised solely on the basis of form or indexicality, the question of ethics is arguably what most effectively delineates the medium.

The primary question of documentary ethics relates to the filmmaker's responsibility to her subjects, whose contributions are governed by moral paradigms regarding informed consent, authority, and responsibility. The common criteria for informed consent are '(1) conditions free of coercion and deception; (2) full knowledge of procedures and anticipated effects; (3) individual competence to consent' (Anderson and Benson 1988: 59). This set of principles attempts to counteract the power imbalance inherent in documentary filmmaking: the status of documentary subjects is potentially problematic, since they are positioned as objects of the documentary gaze but are rarely associated with the process of fashioning that gaze. However, there remains considerable uncertainty over whether it is ever possible for contributors to possess an understanding of the processes of filmmaking and distribution, how to determine what qualifies as competency to consent, and what precisely constitutes coercion and deception. For example, should we consider that financial compensation constitutes coercion, in particular in a context of economic hardship? In *Selbé et tant d'autres*, Faye's subject refers to the payment that she received in exchange for featuring in the film:

‘Heureusement que cette année tu me fais travailler dans ton film’. Likewise, in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, one of Sylla’s subjects openly discusses the difficulties involved in providing for her family, while another alludes to the incentive of financial compensation: ‘Ma famille en profite [du fait qu’on me film]’. While supplying financial aid is not in itself unsettling, the apparent discomfort of some of Sylla’s subjects when faced with the presence of cameras in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, leads us to question whether their uneasy contributions are truly ethically unproblematic. On that same issue, it seems unrealistic to assume that the subjects of documentary would be sufficiently familiar with the practicalities of filmmaking to understand the many ways in which their contributions might be treated during the production and postproduction phases. This is all the more important in the case of some of the films in this corpus, which feature subjects who may not have been exposed to the range of media that are prevalent in the West. For example, discussing *Le Monologue de la muette*, the film’s co-director, Charlie Van Damme, explains: ‘Elle [Amy] savait le sujet du film, mais dans son village d’origine, il n’y a pas la télé. Ça fait partie du monde moderne qu’elle ne connaît pas’ (in Champion and Yariv 2008: 3). Diop’s approach to her subjects in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* also illustrates the difficulties involved in providing full disclosure:

Je leur [ma famille] ai expliqué un peu mon projet [...] et je crois qu’elles se sont pas vraiment rendu compte de ce que j’étais en train de faire [...]. Jusqu’au bout je crois que c’est resté un peu le film de famille où elles comprenaient pas trop ma présence: j’étais toute seule avec une petite caméra c’est moi qui ai



filmé j'avais pas d'ingé son [...] donc c'était vraiment très intime comme dispositif.<sup>137</sup>

It is equally problematic to expect filmmakers to accurately gauge the impact that their film might have on the personal or professional lives of their subjects. For example, as a woman of Senegalese descent born and raised in France, Diop may not have been sufficiently aware of social codes governing representation in Senegal. As will be explored in Chapter Two, Diop unwittingly caused outrage among some of her Senegalese viewers, who were critical of the intimate nature of her film. Finally, the code of conduct outlined by the former Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) exempted 'minors and the mentally incapacitated' from the informed consent clause (Winston 2005: 187). Films such as *Être et avoir* (Philibert, 2002) and *Titicut Follies* (Wiseman, 1967), along with the court cases surrounding these films, have nonetheless demonstrated the type of ethical pitfalls involved in turning the camera on children and the mentally ill.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, Sylla's film on 'la folie', *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, raises a number of highly contentious ethical questions in its treatment of Aminta, the filmmaker's mentally ill friend, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The moral guidelines of documentary filmmaking are often transgressed, sometimes unintentionally as a result of the grey areas described above, occasionally deliberately, particularly in documentaries of a journalistic nature

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<sup>137</sup> See Diop's intervention on *Cinéma d'aujourd'hui, cinéma sans frontières*, RFI, 23 August 2008.

<sup>138</sup> For detail of the *Titicut Follies* court case, see Anderson and Benson (1988). For *Être et avoir*, see Bruzzi (2000: 223–4).

or by filmmakers interviewing subjects perceived to engage in immoral behaviour. Two interesting examples to consider here are the Holocaust film *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) and the Channel 4 documentary *Young, Nazi and Proud* (David Modell, 2002). Both Lanzmann and Modell resort to hidden cameras, offer false assurances to their subjects, and conceal their Jewish identities in order to obtain unguarded incriminating disclosures of Nazi sympathies. Interestingly, both filmmakers make the subterfuge apparent, presumably in an attempt to mitigate the ethical problem it generates. Modell eventually divulges his practice to young BNP activist and covert Nazi sympathiser, Mark Collett, in their final encounter and justifies his actions by evoking his responsibility as a journalist. Likewise, Lanzmann's contentious broken promise made to former SS officer Franz Suchomel to keep his identity hidden is openly disclosed. In both cases, the subterfuge is tolerated, most likely because of Collett's and Suchomel's political extremism and — in the latter case — role in one of the most horrifying episodes of twentieth-century European history. These examples effectively demonstrate that ethical assessments are directly reliant upon subjective value-judgements and may vary according to multiple factors, such as time, generational differences, cultural, political, religious affinities, and so on.

Such insight into consent as that found in *Shoah* and *Young, Nazi and Proud* is uncommon, however, since agreement is obtained prior to filming and is therefore outside the knowledge of the viewer and critic. Questions are raised, for example, by films such as *Déposez les lames* (Folly, 1999) and *Une Affaire de nègres* (Lewat-Hallade, 2007), which feature contributions by subjects who

engage(d) in the behaviour or atrocities that the films set out to denounce. In *Déposez les lames*, Folly interviews Coumba Sy, a long time ‘exciseuse’ who extols the merits of clitoridectomy in a particularly chilling sequence. Similarly, in *Une Affaire de nègres*, Robert Kouyang, a former member of the Cameroonian Commandement Opérationnel, reenacts the night-time hunt and murder of civilians with disturbing enthusiasm and nostalgia. While, as in *Shoah* and *Young, Nazi and Proud*, the viewer is unlikely to sympathise with Coumba Sy and Kouyang, we may question whether Faye’s and Lewat-Hallade’s subjects were made aware of the directors’ stance on the issues at stake, and whether such a lapse is justifiable. *Shoah*, *Young, Nazi and Proud*, *Déposez les lames*, and *Une Affaire de nègres* all raise questions regarding the fragile balance between the material gathered and the human cost, and the extent to which filmmakers may justifiably intrude in seeking information and satisfying the demands of the public or of a particular viewpoint.

The filmmakers Folly and Longinotto were confronted with this very issue during the makings of *Déposez les lames* and *The Day I Will Never Forget* (2002), since both were invited to attend and film the circumcisions of young girls. Longinotto recalls how the offer forced her to confront what she perceived to be her role as a documentary filmmaker to investigate and present findings that will trigger social change, and that of an activist against female genital mutilation whose primary interest was to prevent the excision taking place (Fowler 2004: 104). Interestingly, while Folly politely declines Coumba Sy’s offer on camera, Longinotto decided to film the event in order to retain the trust of the community and employ this highly powerful footage for

consciousness-raising. Longinotto's use of these images is reminiscent of Kevin Carter's iconic photograph of a starving Sudanese child stalked by a vulture,<sup>139</sup> and Gilles Caron's photograph of Depardon taking a snapshot of a dying child lying on the bare ground at his feet.<sup>140</sup> As these photographs demonstrate, there is a fine and subjective line between reporting and exploiting. Conscious of this, Longinotto advocates that it is possible and in fact desirable for documentaries to act as what she terms a 'two-way-thing' (in Fowler 2004: 106), whereby emphasis is placed on the benefits enjoyed by the subjects of documentary as well on what the filmmaker gains. These questions will be addressed in further detail in Chapter Two, which will consider the moral judgements made by filmmakers when producing politically committed documentaries focusing on the victims of armed conflicts, poverty, and the exploitation of cheap labour.

Longinotto's concerns regarding the ethics of documentary representation extend to questions of authority. The filmmaker recognises that her status as a foreigner could lead to ethnocentrism and misrepresentation. As a result, Longinotto systematically employs a co-director, specifically a woman who knows the language and culture of the community, acts as a translator and cultural and artistic adviser (Malkowski 2007: 32–3). The question of authority encompasses different aspects of the relationship between the filmmaker and

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<sup>139</sup> While Carter won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for this shot, he was also violently criticised for the photograph. Carter allegedly waited close to twenty minutes for the vulture to move close enough to the child, during which time the child lay unassisted. Carter committed suicide a few months after winning the prize. For more information, see Kleinman and Kleinman (1996).

<sup>140</sup> The photograph features in Depardon's 1966 film, *Les Années déclin*. Depardon describes it thus: 'Un homme, avec une caméra, qui est penché sur un petit enfant visiblement moribond, complètement squelettique. Il est penché comme une espèce de vautour. L'homme à la caméra, c'est moi', and concludes: 'Il y a un aspect charognard, chez les photographes. Il y a l'aspect voleur, l'aspect voyeur: on prend' (in Borgeaud 1999).

participants in terms of meaning and discourse. On this issue, Scheinman distinguishes ‘open’ and ‘closed’ texts (1998: 188–9), concepts that will be central to the analyses of films in subsequent chapters. ‘Closed authority’ refers to a system in which the participants’ words are submitted to a dominant discourse fashioned by the filmmaker and subjected to orchestration, leading to potential displacements in meaning. The more amenable open forms of authority, on the other hand, subvert the ‘monologic authority’ of a text by allowing for the dominant discourse to be informed by the multiple voices that constitute a documentary. Achieving open forms of authority has been a concern for many filmmakers, including Rouch, who was eager to redefine the practicalities of anthropology: according to Scheinman, Rouch’s practice marked a turning point in ethnographic filmmaking, as he sought to allow his participants to express themselves freely through various idioms not restricted to the verbal (1998: 197). Scheinman describes Rouch’s Bakhtinian ‘dialogic’ approach to ethnography in *Les Maîtres fous* (1954), where music, dance, and singing are sites of significance in their own right, rather than subjected to the deconstructing commentary of the voice-over.<sup>141</sup> The issue of authority will be discussed in particular in Chapter Four, which explores how African women filmmakers redefine the sub-genre of ethnographic documentary, which has traditionally subjected its participants to the deconstructive gaze of anthropology and to a closed form of authority.

One of the most helpful tools for analysing documentary form and ethics, and notably the significance of the voice-over, is the taxonomy outlined by

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<sup>141</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin opposes the ‘monologic’ text, which reflects the singular voice of the author, to the ‘dialogic’ polyphonic text, which features multiple voices that subvert the singular voice of the author (Scheinman 1998: 189–90).

Nichols, who groups films according to modes of representation, namely the expository, observational, reflexive, poetic, interactive, and performative. Nichols places emphasis on the composition of documentary, on formal features that result from filming and the postproduction phase. Modes are articulated around patterns of recurring codes and conventions but function only as benchmarks. Films are not expected to comply fully or exclusively with one of the six modes; rather there will tend to be one dominant mode with multiple overlaps (Nichols 2001: 100). Modes in effect function along the lines of Jacques Derrida's counter law of genre: 'Un texte ne saurait *appartenir* à aucun genre. Tout texte *participe* d'un ou plusieurs genres, il n'y a pas de texte sans genre, il y a toujours du genre et des genres mais cette participation n'est jamais une appartenance' (1985: 264).

Nichols's account of the expository mode describes what is arguably the most prevalent, or at least the most visible practice of non-fiction filmmaking: the image coexists with an authoritative vocal and/or visual presence organising the discourse. The visual index of the historical world is here used as evidence for the unproblematic and consistent argument put forward by the spoken word (Nichols 2001: 107). In some cases, the image is even disposable, as is the case in Peter Joseph's *Zeitgeist* (2007), a controversial affirmation of the existence of a 'New World Order' in which the narrator's voice-over is sometimes accompanied only by a black screen or abstract computer generated images.<sup>142</sup>

According to Nichols, the expository is chiefly rhetorical, emphasises continuity and logic, and transgresses ambiguity. Owing to the ability of the

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<sup>142</sup> The term 'New World Order' refers to a conspiracy theory that advocates the existence of an elite that covertly governs the globe, supplanting sovereign nation-states in its pursuit of a totalitarian one-world government.

authoritative narration to draw out or create meaning from images that are not self-explanatory to a designated audience, the mode is largely used in ethnographic documentaries, such as *Les Maîtres fous*, educational productions, biographies, and wildlife or historical documentaries. Such films often tend to feature an omniscient and disembodied narrator or the confident onscreen presence of recognisable experts, such as David Attenborough in the case of UK natural history programs. The participation of identifiable individuals is also a feature of consciousness-raising films that use the notoriety of the speaker to substantiate the argument.<sup>143</sup> While expository documentaries are highly effective in presenting information in a clear and vivid manner, they may also be disempowering for the viewer, since the knowing voice of the narration, or the ‘talking heads’, may sometimes make interpretation an unnecessary exercise.<sup>144</sup> This feature is exploited, in extreme cases, by propagandist films, such as *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935), a documentary commissioned by Hitler to instil an acceptance of eugenics, which employs the expository in order to channel the viewer into adhering to the Nazi ideology.<sup>145</sup>

Interestingly, as the following chapters will reveal, the expository is not a dominant mode in any of the films in this corpus. There are elements of the expository, such as the authoritative voice-over, in Faye’s *Kaddu Beykat*,

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<sup>143</sup> Examples of this trend include the contributions of Al Gore to *An Inconvenient Truth*, Leonardo DiCaprio to *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour* (Leila Connors and Nadia Connors, 2007), and Martin Sheen to *Poet of Poverty* (Sean Dougherty et al., 2008).

<sup>144</sup> The term ‘talking heads’ refers to a format where subjects provide their accounts of the topic discussed, usually filmed in medium shots or medium close-ups. See, for example, the setup of *Derrière le silence* (Mariama Sylla, 2005).

<sup>145</sup> For more information on the films made as part of the Nazi propaganda machine, see Stastny (1998).

*Fad'jal*, and *Selbé et tant d'autres*, but this is generally combined with performance-based or observational footage. This may seem like an aberration, since the observational mode, otherwise known as 'direct cinema', precisely seeks to avoid the 'voice of truth' that is so central to the expository. Nichols describes the observational as a mode that tends towards non-intervention during filming, where the maker overtly adopts a 'fly on the wall' position. Observational films minimise editing because, according to Nichols, it negates the objective and untampered truth that observational films aim to reproduce (2001: 110). Direct cinema, he argues, mostly aspires to the invisibility of the medium and to enable the viewer to witness so-called unmediated events: 'We look on life as it is lived' (Nichols 2011: 111). This ambition was made imaginable, but of course unfeasible, as a result of technological evolutions, in particular the invention of the 16mm camera, followed by video and digital technologies: as filming equipment became less cumbersome and intrusive, it facilitated location filming and permitted synchronised sound and image. Although Nichols acknowledges that observational films occasionally reverse the basic premise of the mode — which is 'that what we see would have occurred were the camera not there to observe it' (2001: 113) — he does not sufficiently dissociate the observational's stylistic features from the pursuit of impartiality. As will be argued in Chapter Four, the observational is the dominant mode in Sylla's *Colobane Express*, a film that demonstrates that the mode is far more complex than Nichols suggests. Although the choice to minimise the intrusion of the apparatus and markings of the production process may signal a naïve negation of the mediated nature of documentary, it is also often evidence of much more complex and reflexive agendas. Observational



documentaries are capable of channelling viewers in a similar manner to expository films, while simultaneously — and dangerously — deemphasising the presence of the apparatus and imposition of a designated experience. Alternatively, the observational may counterintuitively emphasise the presence of the apparatus, as in *Titicut Follies*, in which Wiseman's unflinching presence as absence draws attention as much to the intrusion of the camera as to the crude living conditions in Massachusetts's Bridgewater mental institution.

Reflexive documentaries purposefully refine this exercise, since the mode places emphasis as much on what is represented as on how this is achieved (Nichols 2001: 125). The reflexive mode foregrounds the issue of representation and invites the viewer to contemplate the practical and ethical dimensions of filmmaking. Documentaries are formally reflexive when they accept that any attempt to mask the apparatus in order to convey objectivity is a 'masquerade [that] is impossibly utopian' (Bruzzi 2000: 155). Reflexive documentaries therefore highlight the constructed nature of documentary through the use of experimental and/or disconcerting filming and editing techniques. *Reassemblage*, for example, features unconventional angles, out of focus shots, unsynchronised sound, and extended periods of silence, which draw attention to the construction that is documentary (Penley and Ross 1985: 90–1). The aim of these features, which remove the regulations at play in documentary, is to encourage the viewer to reconsider her expectations of the medium and understanding of its inner-workings and ideological substrata. Politically reflexive films use disconcerting or discomfiting techniques in order

to call into question the viewer's understanding and assumptions of the very way in which society is organised and functions. For example, feminist documentaries, which flourished in the 1970s, use political reflexivity to reassess women's place in society and to draw attention to discrimination (Nichols 2001: 128). As will be explored in Chapters Three and Four, Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, Ndiaye's *En attendant les hommes*, and Diabang Brener's *Mon Beau Sourire* function as formally and/or politically reflexive documentaries that question our perceptions of mental illness, of African women, and of the nature of the ethnographic gaze.

The ambiguity underlying the reflexive mode is also a feature of the poetic, a mode of representation that emerged in tandem with modernism and the avant-garde in the period between the two World Wars (Nichols 2001: 103). Poetic documentaries include hypnotic films, such as *H2O* (Ralph Steiner, 1929) and the 'city symphonies'.<sup>146</sup> According to Nichols, poetic films do not serve an overtly didactic purpose but are highly aesthetic and lyrical and often characterised by fragmentation and ambiguity. Material from the pro-filmic world is rearranged according to abstract patterns of association and analogy, in a manner that sometimes lacks evident coherence, rather than chronologically or thematically (Nichols 2001: 103). Although discourses may not be immediately apparent, however, the poetic mode does not offer exclusively aesthetic experiences. Nichols maintains that 'the poetic mode is particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of

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<sup>146</sup> The 'city symphonies' is a genre that emerged in the 1920s, when filmmakers turned to film in order to capture the aesthetic quality and poetry of large cities. City symphonies include *Manhatta* (Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, 1921), *The Man with the Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *Rain* (Ivens, 1929), and *À Propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1930).

knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution' (2001: 103).<sup>147</sup> This will be explored in detail in Chapters Three and Four, as Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte* and Diabang Brener's *Mon Beau Sourire* use the poetic mode as a rhetorical tool in order to challenge perspectives.

Whereas the filmmaker is de facto defined by her presence as absence in observational documentaries, the interactive mode, also known as the participatory, acknowledges the existence of a mediating figure, while simultaneously moving away from the voice of truth audible in the expository. In the interactive mode, the filmmaker does not possess the pre-existing knowledge of the voice of truth, but is on a journey of discovery. Masked or unmasked interviews are a frequent form of interaction (Nichols 2001: 121) and give a sense of immediacy, as the film appears to be taking shape before our very eyes. The interactive mode calls attention to the unpredictable nature of the documentary, which seems to be shaped and determined in part by encounters with the subjects of documentary. Interactive films place emphasis on first-hand and direct testimonials: the view that is expressed is highly situated and subjective, as in Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*, Folly's *Les Oubliées*, and Mbeka's *Sorcière la vie!*. Interactive films commonly foreground the human experience of making a documentary. As is

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<sup>147</sup> For example, the assembled images in *Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982) — meaning life in turmoil or out of balance in Hopi language — serve as an illustration of the Hopi prophecy that is transcribed at the end of the film, which reads that abusing the Earth will lead to its destruction and that of humankind. The footage has been altered by Reggio, who increased or reduced the speed of passers-by and cars, in order to draw attention to the chaos of modern day city living and warn against the possibility of a collapse of the system.

the case in *Shoah* and *Young, Nazi and Proud*, interactive documentaries are revelatory of the nature of interactions between filmmaker and subject, and therefore of the ethics and politics of encounter and representation.

The final and most complex mode identified by Nichols is the performative, which engages the viewer in a reflection on the very nature of representation and empirical reality. The performative shares many features with the reflexive, poetic, and interactive modes. Both performative and poetic documentaries underscore the complexity of knowledge, since performative films draw attention to the subjective nature of meaning (Nichols 2001: 131). As with the interactive mode, emphasis is placed on the filmmaker's engagement with the subject matter: viewers are invited to experience a specific social position, as 'the referential quality of documentary that attests to its function as a window onto the world yields to an expressive quality that affirms the highly situated, embodied, and vividly personal perspectives of specific subjects, including the filmmaker' (Nichols 2001: 132). Finally, the performative, like the politically reflexive, 'seeks to move its audience into subjective alignment or affinity with its specific perspective on the world (Nichols 2001: 132). As will be explored in relation to Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte* in Chapter Three, Nichols's account of the performative appears somewhat reductive, as it does not fully exploit the work of post-structuralist philosophers on performativity, which Bruzzi successfully uses to distinguish the performative mode from the reflexive, poetic, and interactive.

Bruzzi is critical of Nichols's work on modes of documentary representation, most notably because of what she terms the chronological and 'Darwinian' nature of his 'crude' genealogy, as outlined in *Blurred Boundaries* (2000: 3).<sup>148</sup> While Nichols partly resolved this issue seven years later in his *Introduction to Documentary*, there nonetheless remain concerns regarding the validity of the taxonomy as a whole.<sup>149</sup> For example, Beattie, like many others, objects to the fact that Nichols's list of modes is not exhaustive, not least because it does not account for television documentaries (2004: 23), and Matthew Bernstein regrets Nichols's clear preference for the reflexive over the other modes (1998: 413).<sup>150</sup> Other scholars have formulated typologies of documentary filmmaking, but Nichols's remains the most widely cited and influential.<sup>151</sup> When considered as taxonomy rather than genealogy, and if we accept that Nichols's modes function as guidelines rather than absolutes, they represent a useful tool for analysing and anatomising documentary form. It is important, however, to minimise the strict correlation established by Nichols between style, purpose, and effect. Nichols himself acknowledges that multiple modes frequently coexist and overlap in any given film, which may seem contradictory, given the apparent incompatibilities between certain modes, in particular the observational and expository. Extricating modes from the literal interpretations offered by Nichols also acknowledges that filmmakers employ

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<sup>148</sup> Nichols attributes the expository mode to the 1930s, the observational to the 1960s, the interactive to the 1960s-1970s, the reflexive to the 1980s, and the performative to the 1980s-1990s (1994: 95). The poetic mode had not yet been formulated.

<sup>149</sup> In *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols emphasises that 'the modes do not represent an evolutionary chain in which later modes demonstrate superiority over earlier ones and vanquish them' (2001: 100).

<sup>150</sup> In order to bridge the gaps that emerge as a result of Nichols's omission of television documentary, Beattie complements his typology by adding two modes: 'reconstruction' and 'observational entertainment' (2004: 24).

<sup>151</sup> See, for example, Rotha (1936), Renov (1986), Barnouw (1993), and Corner (1996).

features of one or more modes for a variety of purposes, just as viewers will respond differently to a set of codes, and to the film as a whole, depending on a variety of attributes, including historical, geographical, generational, racial, and gender: documentary's 'meaning, its identity is not fixed but fluid and stems from a productive, dialectical relationship between the text, the reality it represents and the spectator' (Bruzzi 2000: 7).

Due to Nichols's insistence on the importance of style, which 'is not simply a systematic utilization of techniques devoid of meaning but is itself [a] bearer of meaning' (1991: 79–80), modes of representation are a particularly appropriate methodology for analysing the films in this corpus. This thesis places emphasis on questions of form, style, and aesthetics and aims to determine whether there are similarities between the documentary work of African women filmmakers and Western documentarians, or whether they question, push, and reinvent the conventions of documentary filmmaking. Nichols's modes of representation will here be used in conjunction with documentary sub-genres, as defined by Beattie. While Nichols claims that 'modes of representation [...] function something like sub-genres of the film genre itself' (2001: 99), it is important to distinguish between the two concepts. Unlike modes, sub-genres 'are not textual codifications, but general categories of works sharing orientations' (Beattie 2004: 1). Sub-genres itemise documentaries on the basis of content and emphasise subject matter and approach. Here again, documentaries rarely belong to a single sub-genre: for example, Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* is all at once an autobiographical, woman-centred, and ethnographic film, and Faye's *Kaddu Beykat* is an ethnographic docufiction.

This thesis will analyse African women's documentary practices to determine which modes are used in relation to specific sub-genres, how, and to what effect. Frequent combinations exist, such as the expository mode and ethnographic documentary, or the performative and autobiographical film, and this thesis will explore the question of whether African-made documentaries extend or reshape these existing conventions and associations. The subsequent four chapters will also examine what the form of these documentaries reveals in terms of the filmmakers' ideologies, values, and agendas. Nichols rightfully asserts that 'as an anthropomorphic extension of the human sensorium the camera reveals not only the world but its operator's preoccupations, subjectivity, and values' (Nichols 1991: 79). More specifically, 'ethical assumptions have aesthetic consequences, and aesthetic assumptions have ethical consequences' in documentary (Pryluck 2005: 195). Accordingly, one of the founding premises of this thesis is that documentary form and ethics are inherently interrelated. Nichols discusses this in relation to axiographics, which 'explores the implementation of values and the configuration of space, in the constitution of a gaze, and in the relation of observer to observed' (Nichols 1991: 78). Axiographics is primarily concerned with the values that are conveyed by the arrangement of space, the presence or absence of the filmmaker, the significance of camera angles, distance and length of shots, and so on. The succeeding chapters will therefore discuss the axiographics of documentary practices in films by African women in order to elicit the significance of modes of documentary in relation to the ethics of encounter and representation.

It is important at this stage to recall Ruby's aforementioned statement that reception is determined by 'the socially acquired expectations of the audience' and to acknowledge that ethical stances are largely culturally determined (Ruby 2005: 212). As with *Shoah* and *Young, Nazi and Proud*, ethical judgements made by filmmakers, subjects, and viewers are deeply subjective. As such, my own position as a Western viewer of African screen media must be acknowledged as determinant in shaping my observations and conclusions regarding the films in this corpus. First, unfamiliarity with highly specific cultural codes naturally results in gaps in understanding or misreadings. For example, in the documentary *Al'leessi* (Keïta, 2003), the Nigerien actress Zalika Souley demonstrates how African films offer scope for potential misunderstandings on behalf of foreign viewers. Citing excerpts from a film in which she stars, *Si les cavaliers* (Mahamane Bakabe, 1981), the actress provides an example of how specific cultural codes may resist interpretation: while the act of shattering a pot of water at the feet of a man, as is carried out by her character in the film, signals her affection for him, performing the same action with a pot containing food communicates jealousy. The possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpreting a scene is admittedly relevant to all films but must be acknowledged, in particular, by anyone addressing African screen media from a position such as mine, as it raises questions regarding the accountability of a viewer whose interpretations of films derive from culturally specific experiences and expectations of cinema, rather than an understanding



of local social and cultural codes.<sup>152</sup> As bell hooks remarks, however, ‘problems arise not when white women choose to write about the experience of non-white people, but when such material is presented as “authoritative”’ (1989: 47–8). It is important, therefore, to avoid the indiscriminate imposition of Western paradigms on non-Western films by considering their adequacy, a question central to this thesis. According to Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, the African film theory and criticism that emerged in the late 1990s has initiated a debate regarding the adequacy of critical methodologies, opposing those ‘advocating the adequacy of Western critical canons’, and those ‘arguing for a reassessment of the canon so that African cinema discourse should not merely be appended to dominant cinematic discourse’ (1998: 573). The issue of the suitability and relevance of the theoretical framework used to analyse the form and ethics of the films in this corpus will be considered throughout the thesis, since the methodology is primarily inspired by and focused on the work of Western filmmakers. To begin with, the issue will be considered in the following chapter on woman-centred committed documentary in relation to the feminist readings of African women’s films, which, importantly, the filmmakers themselves have resisted.

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<sup>152</sup> Such a misreading occurred, for instance, when I first viewed *Si Guèriki* (Mora-Kpaï, 2002). The first shot picturing the return of the filmmaker to his native village following the death of his father, is one of torrential rain that leaves the village looking desolate. While I instinctively assumed that this shot signalled the void left by the father upon his death and the filmmaker’s sense of alienation in a village he had left as a young man, Mora-Kpaï announces in the voice-over that, culturally, such a downpour is a good omen.

## CHAPTER TWO – WOMEN-CENTRED COMMITTED DOCUMENTARY

For the vast majority of the filmmakers whose work features in this thesis, documentary seems to serve predominantly as a tool for raising consciousness and encouraging social change.<sup>153</sup> This has been a tendency of the work of African women filmmakers since the 1990s, when an increasing number of them turned to documentary as a means of expression, a trend that sustains Jacqueline Bobo's contention that the exploration of social conditions is the first step for many Black women filmmakers (1995: 12). Their various cultural, social, or political agendas result in filmmaking practices that correspond to a sub-genre that Thomas Waugh terms 'committed documentary', which is 'a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation' (1984: xiv). Waugh emphasises the collaborative nature of committed documentary and the need to make films 'not only about people engaged in these struggles but also *with* and *by* them' (1984: xiv). In addition, as Julianne Burton argues, one of the goals of committed documentary is to 'us[e] the film medium to expose and combat the culture of invisibility' (in Waldman and Walker 1999: 18). This is an ambition shared by many African women documentarians, including Ndiaye, whose work on wall painting is 'une œuvre artistique qu'elle veut engagée [qui] nous restitue un univers que l'on a rarement l'occasion de voir sur les écrans africains "colonisés" par les super productions hollywoodiennes et les téléfilms sud-américains à l'eau de rose' (Faye 2007).<sup>154</sup> Speaking of her films, Ndiaye

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<sup>153</sup> Interestingly, this is identical to the account of 1970s American feminist documentarians provided by Patricia Erens (1988: 555).

<sup>154</sup> Assih also views documentary as 'une prise de position' (in Pochon 2009b).

emphasises the investigative nature of her work: ‘Je me vois encore comme une journaliste. Ma démarche consistait à découvrir si ces peintures murales existaient encore et ce qu’elles signifiaient’ (in Hurst et al. 2003). This journalistic approach is also shared by Lewat-Hallade, who has made several films focusing on the victims of war and violence:

J’ai commencé à travailler comme journaliste. Je prenais du temps pour faire des enquêtes, pour rédiger mes articles. Je ressentais énormément de frustrations de voir dès le lendemain que mes articles étaient déjà dépassés. Un article de presse a une vie extrêmement courte. J’avais envie d’inscrire mon travail un peu plus dans le temps, dans la durée. Je voulais élargir mon audience et mes perspectives narratives. (in Amekudji 2009a)

As she explains, Lewat-Hallade’s interest in cinema derived from a frustration with the limitations and ephemeral quality of journalistic work but represents, in her view, an extension of, rather than a break with, journalism.

Socially, culturally, or politically-conscious documentaries, such as those by Lewat-Hallade and Ndiaye, account for a significant portion of non-fiction films by women filmmakers from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>155</sup> Committed documentary is the dominant subgeneric formation, both within the films discussed in this thesis and beyond: all the documentaries in this corpus reveal a commitment to consciousness-raising, to providing positive role models, or valorising local cultural practices. The committed documentaries of

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<sup>155</sup> As Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (1999) assert, this is also a clear tendency within Western feminist documentary.

African women address a wide variety of issues and themes, including politics,<sup>156</sup> the economy,<sup>157</sup> arduous rural lifestyles,<sup>158</sup> physical and mental health,<sup>159</sup> clandestine and legal migration,<sup>160</sup> orphanhood and adoption,<sup>161</sup> sorcery,<sup>162</sup> environmental concerns,<sup>163</sup> and forgotten national heroes.<sup>164</sup> In particular, many of these documentaries reveal a clear interest in gender issues, a concern for the place allocated to women's subjectivity within the media, and their recognised position within history. African documentary filmmakers work towards providing coverage of women's experiences in contexts of economic poverty,<sup>165</sup> incarceration,<sup>166</sup> and war.<sup>167</sup> They address issues of exploitation,<sup>168</sup> sexuality,<sup>169</sup> mutilation,<sup>170</sup> and rape,<sup>171</sup> and reassess women's perceptions of the body and beauty,<sup>172</sup> relationships with men,<sup>173</sup> and experiences of religion.<sup>174</sup> Significantly, not all films are critical of the status quo: some

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<sup>156</sup> *Une Affaire de Nègres* (Lewat-Hallade, 2007).

<sup>157</sup> *La Crise économique au Sénégal* (Rokhaya Diop, 1993).

<sup>158</sup> *Kaddu Beykat and Fad'jal*.

<sup>159</sup> *Le Nerf de la douleur* (Keïta, 1999), *Vivre Positivement* (Nacro, 2002), *Derrière le silence* (Mariama Sylla, 2005), and *L'Homme est le remède de l'homme* (Diabang Brener, et al., 2006).

<sup>160</sup> *Le Cri de la mer* (Aïcha Thiam, 2008) and *Paris mon paradis* (Eléonore Yaméogo, 2011).

<sup>161</sup> *Les Orphelins du sida* (Jeanne d'Arc Kamugwera, 1992), and *Waliden, enfant d'autrui* (Awa Traoré, 2008).

<sup>162</sup> *Sorcière la vie!*.

<sup>163</sup> *Hann, baie poubelle* (Fabacary Assymby Coly and Marième Aimée Diouf, 1999).

<sup>164</sup> *Al'leessi* (Keïta, 2003) and *Entre la coupe et l'élection* (Guy Kabeya Muya and Mbeka, 2007).

<sup>165</sup> *Selbé et tant d'autres* and *Le Chemin de l'espoir* (Bella Meyo, 2005).

<sup>166</sup> *Femmes à l'ombre* (Odette Ibrango, 2007) and *Femmes en peine* (Diallo-Glez, 2007).

<sup>167</sup> *Les Oubliées*.

<sup>168</sup> *Le Monologue de la muette*.

<sup>169</sup> *Le Prix du sang* (Anne Elisabeth Ngominka, 2010)

<sup>170</sup> *Déposez les lames* (Folly, 1999).

<sup>171</sup> *Pourquoi?* (Sokhna Amar, 2004).

<sup>172</sup> *Mon Beau Sourire*.

<sup>173</sup> *En attendant les hommes*.

<sup>174</sup> *Sénégalaises et Islam* (Diabang Brener 2007).

celebrate women's achievements in a variety of fields, such as business,<sup>175</sup> sport,<sup>176</sup> and the arts.<sup>177</sup>

This chapter pays specific attention to these women-centred committed documentaries, starting with Safi Faye's pioneering *Selbé et tant d'autres* (1982), the earliest example of a woman-centred film in this corpus. The film shares the same concern with rural hardship as Faye's two other films discussed in this thesis — *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal* — but differs in an important respect: Faye here focuses specifically on the experiences of women living in the filmmaker's native Serer province. Like most of the films examined in this chapter, *Selbé et tant d'autres* is an interactive documentary, which is uncharacteristic of Faye's filmmaking practice. Anne Laure Folly's *Les Oubliées* (1996), Katy Léna Ndiaye's *Traces, empreintes de femmes* (2003) and *En attendant les hommes* (2007), and Alice Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* (2007) also originate from interviews between the filmmakers and their subjects. *Les Oubliées* features conversations between Folly and Angolan women with first-hand experiences of war and survival, and offers a radically different viewing experience from most of Folly's predominantly expository films, described by Harrow as 'straightforward presentations' (1999a: xix). Ndiaye's *Traces, empreintes de femmes* and *En attendant les hommes*, as well as Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* are also explicitly the product of encounters between women of different nationalities, cultures, and generations. Issues of representation are central to

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<sup>175</sup> Florence Barrigha (Nacro, 1999).

<sup>176</sup> *Itilga, les destinées* (Lewat-Hallade, 2001).

<sup>177</sup> *Anna l'enchantée* (Mbeka, 2001), *Al'leessi* (Keïta, 2003), *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, *Vedette de l'ombre* (Yacoub, 2005), and *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor*.

these three films, which work towards offering alternative images of African women to those that are provided by mainstream media. Ndiaye's and Diop's documentaries share a strong focus on the intimate: as Diop explains, making her film entailed entering 'le gynécée de mes cousines' (in Pochon 2008). In contrast with the films of Faye, Folly, Ndiaye, and Diop, Khady Sylla's *Le Monologue de la muette* (2008), co-directed with Charlie Van-Damme, demonstrably shies away from the interactive mode. The film addresses the exploitation of Senegalese 'petites bonnes' but in so doing raises many complex ethical issues.

In addition to analysing these six consciousness-raising documentaries, this chapter will explore Angèle Diabang Brener's *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor* (2008), one of the increasing number of biographical documentaries that pay tribute to the work of important African public figures.<sup>178</sup> Other films by women and about women include *Florence Barrigha* (Nacro, 1999), *Dona Ana Maria Cabral* (Senghor, 2002),<sup>179</sup> *Al'leessi* (Keïta, 2003), *Messagère d'espoir* (Florentine Noëlie Yaméogo, 2007), *Oumou Sangaré, un destin de femme* (Traoré, 2009), and *On n'oublie pas, on pardonne* (Annette Kouamba Matondo, 2010).<sup>180</sup> In relation to the subject matter of her film, Senghor expresses a concern for the lack of visible suitable role models for young women: 'How can I ignore the textbooks of my daughters where there are no

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<sup>178</sup> See, for example, *1000 soleils* (Mati Diop, 2008) *Manu Dibango. Tempo d'Afrique* (Pascal Vasselin and Calixthe Beyala, 2010), and *Valérie Kaboré* (Issaka Compaoré, 2010).

<sup>179</sup> Senghor's film is itself part of a series of six films entitled *Vies de femmes*, which the producer Hanny Tchelley describes as an 'hommage [...] à ces femmes d'exception qui marquent leur temps et dont la vie est source d'émulation pour les autres femmes du continent'. The six films in this collection focus on businesswomen, griottes, politicians, and legal practitioners. For further information on the films, see <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=film&no=5853>> [accessed 31 January 2011].

<sup>180</sup> Regrettably, I have been unable to access these films.

female role models to which we may refer' (in Ellerson 2011). This is reminiscent of Nacro's approach in *Florence Barrigha*, in the opening of which the filmmaker introduces the 'Nana Benz' as Togolese tycoons whose business acumen and sheer hard work made them paragons for her and other women of her generation throughout Western Africa.<sup>181</sup> Diabang Brener's film shares this concern for the promotion of female role models and pays tribute to the late Yandé Codou Sène, former president Senghor's griotte, an artist who, at the time the film was made, was neglected by the Senegalese public and living in poverty.<sup>182</sup> As films foregrounding women's accomplishments and promoting individual figureheads of the movement towards women's emancipation, biographical documentaries provide interesting models for discussing women-centred committed documentary.

Studies of Western women's feminist documentary, published mostly in the 1980s and 1990s, have demonstrated documentary's privileged position as a vehicle for womanist and feminist concerns, as well as women's now long lasting affinity with committed documentary.<sup>183</sup> This body of work, which has investigated innovative notions such as the documentary feminist aesthetic, has so far focused mainly on American and European documentary, at the clear expense of African women's films. The prominence of gender issues in films by women from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa explains the predominantly

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<sup>181</sup> The term 'Nana Benz' is reserved for a small number of women entrepreneurs who made their fortune trading in imported printed cloth on Lomé's markets. They are nicknamed 'Nanas Benz' because their wealth enables them to drive Mercedes Benz cars, a rare privilege, particularly when the term was popularised in the 1960s. For more information, see <<http://www.sudplanete.net/?menu=arti&no=5821>> [accessed 7 February 2011].

<sup>182</sup> This concern for forgotten artists is also at the core of Keïta's *Al'leessi*, which focuses on Souley, the pioneering Nigerien actress, who now works as a cleaner in Europe.

<sup>183</sup> See Erens (1988), Kaplan (1988), Lesage (1990), and Waldman and Walker (1999).

feminist and womanist approaches to their cinematic production,<sup>184</sup> work which has focused almost exclusively on the documentary and fictional work of Faye, Folly, and Nacro.<sup>185</sup> Thackway (2003a and 2009b) highlights their films' contribution to reconstructing and revaluing 'disfigured selves' (2003a: 43); Sheila Petty (1996) praises their films for articulating women's own concerns and providing positive directions for women's representation and identification; and Ukadike (1999) and Reid (1991) both emphasise their contribution to building a Black female subjectivity and constructing a black womanist gaze. Few have made it a priority to explore formal matters or carry out close readings of the films: Petty's interest in Faye's articulation of an African feminist film aesthetic is unique and noteworthy in this respect (1995b). This chapter will broaden the selection of films that have received critical appraisal, examining documentaries made by the latest generation of women filmmakers after the turn of the century. It will also shift the focus towards questions of documentary form and ethics, since published work on African women's film predominantly discusses documentary and fiction films indiscriminately.

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<sup>184</sup> Black womanism is defined by Mark A. Reid as 'a form of resistance to a raceless feminism and a phallogentric pan-Africanism' (1991: 377). Womanism recognises that African women experience 'racial discrimination, socio-economic oppression and cultural imperialism from Western societies and that the political cultural and socio-economic experiences of black/African women *as a social group* [...] differ from those of white women' (Arndt 2000b: 44). As a result, womanist readings must consider 'racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations' and divert from the Eurocentric approaches to African films of some Western feminists (Arndt 2000b: 43). See, for example, Reid's (1991) analysis of Faye's *La Passante*. See also Harrow (1999b), who questions the (in)compatibility of French and African feminisms.

<sup>185</sup> See, for example, Harrow (1999b, 2002: 1–21, 23–42, and 247–76) and Thackway (2003a). See also Petty (1995b: 21), who analyses Faye's work using a feminist theoretical framework informed by the work of Laura Mulvey and Kaplan.



This chapter will explore the political and formal radicalism of African women's documentary, by analysing seminal and more recent consciousness-raising and biographical documentaries. It will consider the acts of uncovering overlooked spaces and individuals, foregrounding experiences that currently have but a marginal place in the worldwide media, promoting and providing new spaces for women's subjectivity and herstories, and countering hegemonic stereotypical perceptions of African women. The films will be analysed in the light of the concept of 'rehumanisation' of African women, a term coined by Ukadike in reference to the tendency to 'de-womanise Black womanhood', which was initially identified by the Nigerian playwright Zulu Sofola (1999: 194). Patience Elabor-Idemudia traces the 'de-womanisation' of African women back to colonisation when 'the Europeans constructed an image of the black female as embodying the notion of uncontrolled sexuality' (2003: 104–5). This process later 'involved stripping the African woman bare of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain', leading to 'the demotion of the African women to the contemporary status, characterised by disorientation, weakness, ineffectiveness and irrelevance' (2003: 105). It will be argued that the women-centred committed documentaries in this corpus contribute to the rehumanisation of African woman, notably by bringing to the screen a variety of experiences.

In parallel, this chapter will discuss the filmmakers' textual practices in the light of Claire Johnston's assertion that feminist documentary needs to challenge audiences on a formal level. According to Johnston, 'it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film: the language of

the cinema/ depiction of reality must also be interrogated' (in Kaplan 1988: 80). This chapter will assess how the profilmic world is approached, represented, and codified, to determine whether and how the filmmakers whose work is discussed in this chapter attempt to challenge established textual practices. These questions of form will then be considered in relation to axiographics and the ethical implications of using individuals' lives to construct a discourse. In particular, the chapter will foreground the significance of the interactive mode, in view of Waugh's aforementioned call to make films *with* subjects. It will examine how filmmakers engage with their subjects and how they legitimise the documentary gaze, in particular in contexts of hardship and suffering.

First, however, the predominance of committed documentary among films by African women documentarians needs to be considered within the broader context. This prevalence tallies with Samuel Lelièvre's view that 'la majorité des réalisateurs d'Afrique restent motivés par un désir de communiquer au monde les réalités de ce continent' (2003b: 12). As outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, African filmmaking did not emerge in a neutral political or cultural context: 'Cinema came hand in hand with brutal colonization, and with patronizing and racist censorship and exhibition policies' (Dovey 2009: 28). There is, as a result, a recurring tendency towards what Thackway terms a 'cinéma de questionnement'.<sup>186</sup> Rather than turning en masse to commercially minded cinema, most African filmmakers have 'remained faithful to their

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<sup>186</sup> Thackway expressed this opinion during the 'table ronde' that followed the screening of *Sia, le rêve du python* (Kouyaté, 2000) at the University Paris Diderot on 4 November 2010. Thackway further explores this characterisation of African cinema as an art form used 'to explore fundamental social issues' in her monograph on African screen media (2003a: 147).

initial cultural and sociological commitment' (Pfaff 1992: 31). Therefore, when considered within the broader context of African screen media, the dominant tendency towards committed filmmaking in the body of work by sub-Saharan African women is not so surprising. Since there is a long-standing association between documentary and progressive social movements (Waldman and Walker 1999: 3), there is, at first sight, a natural correlation between African women's engagement and documentary's privileged status as their favoured medium of cinematic expression.

Discussing *Sahel - la faim, pourquoi?* (Théo Robichet, 1975),<sup>187</sup> Hondo expresses a radical view of documentary that sustains African women's widespread engagement with the medium: 'Il serait indécent et frivole, du moins inutilement bavard, de recourir à la fiction' (in Brahim 1997: 36). Interestingly, however, Hondo himself has made mostly fiction films, with the exception of *Nous aurons toute la mort pour dormir* (1976), a documentary about the Polisario Front in Western Sahara. This is the case with most African male filmmakers, aside from a few exceptions, such as Samba Félix Ndiaye, Sissako, Jean-Marie Teno, and Vieyra, who have dedicated part of their filmmaking career to documentary making.<sup>188</sup> Men arguably favour fiction over documentary for status reasons, because, as Clément Tapsoba explains, 'le film documentaire [...] ne constitue pas (aujourd'hui) un genre à l'honneur. On réalise un documentaire pour des raisons de contraintes budgétaires. Rares sont

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<sup>187</sup> Hondo is the film's producer.

<sup>188</sup> See, for example, *L'Envers du décor* (Vieyra, 1980); *Afrique, je te plumerai!* and *Vacances au pays* (Teno, 1991 and 2000); *Lettre à Senghor* and *Questions à la terre natale* (Ndiaye, 1997 and 2007); and *Rostov-Luanda* (Sissako, 1997).

ceux qui plaident pour un genre documentaire’ (1996a: 51).<sup>189</sup> However, whereas male filmmakers make more fiction films than documentaries, women express their cultural, social and political commitments predominantly through documentary. Women-centred committed documentary, the first sub-genre to be explored in this thesis is, therefore, not only the very one that women filmmakers themselves favour, but also the one which marks the greatest departure from the types of filmmaking practices with which their male counterparts generally engage.

The films in this corpus span close to three decades, a period during which there have been considerable changes in terms of filmmaking by women from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. In this respect it is significant that Farida Ayari’s investigation into images of women in African-made films focuses exclusively on the work of male filmmakers, such as Cissé, Ganda, and Sembène, who have explored the condition of women extensively in their films (1996: 181–4).<sup>190</sup> When Ayari’s article was first published in 1983, a year after the release of Faye’s *Selbé et tant d’autres*, examples of self-representation by African women filmmakers were still very scarce. The films discussed here, particularly those by the precursors Faye and Folly, therefore broke new ground by providing novel images of women mediated by women. Their films contributed to filling an important void, testifying to the diversity of women’s experiences throughout urban and rural Francophone Western Africa, offering

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<sup>189</sup> Since documentary has recently gained in visibility and popularity, as explored in Chapter One, it may be that the situation described by Tapsoba is changing.

<sup>190</sup> Likewise, in her examination of ‘films presenting certain positive directions for “feminist” expression’ (1996: 192), Petty devotes most of her article to fiction films by African men filmmakers — notably *Saaraounia* (Hondo, 1986) and *Zan Boko* (Kaboré, 1988) — rightly claiming that they offer a ‘positive direction for women’s representation and identification in film’ (1996: 188) but largely overlooking films by women.

images of African women that diverted from stereotypes, and positing their experiences as culturally significant. According to Thackway, ‘these women-centred films give their female characters a clear and central voice that contrasts radically with the silence and/or absence of African women characters in Western images of the continent’ (2003a: 147). In this respect, the act of documentary making is further significant, since, as Julia Lesage rightly remarks, there is a radical potential to ‘simply putting “real” women and their lives on the cinema screen without constructing the limited range of images of women prevalent in dominant cinema’ (in Kuhn 1994: 143).

In *Al’leessi*, the filmmaker Moustapha Diop admits and regrets that constructing complex female characters has never been a priority for him or his male colleagues: ‘Les réalisateurs ne pensent pas beaucoup aux personnages de femmes. On ne les travaille pas dans les détails, c’est presque des caricatures de femme’. In this context, bringing to the screen ‘real’ African women, documentary subjects with a variety of experiences rather than hastily constructed and stereotypical characters, is therefore significant. The issue of representation may seem outdated or redundant: according to Susan Hayward, it formed the basis of most of the critical work produced during the first half of the 1970s, the first stage in the evolution of feminist film theory (2000: 112).<sup>191</sup> The majority of the resulting work, however, focused exclusively on Western film, the hegemonic system of representation conveyed by Hollywood cinema and alternative portrayals provided by American and European counter-cinema. Comparatively, while the representation of women in African-made

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<sup>191</sup> Hayward identifies three stages in the evolution of feminist film theory: the early 1970s, the mid 1970s to the early 1980s, and the mid 1980s to the present day (2000: 112).

fiction and documentary films, both by men and women, has been the subject of some scholarly work,<sup>192</sup> it remains relatively overlooked. In addition, as Barlet illustrates when recounting the reaction of the audience to the screening of Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* at Lussas in 2008, the issue retains its importance for viewers: 'Vif débat ensuite dans la salle de Lussas sur la question, [...] sous-jacente en permanence, de la représentation de la femme au cinéma' (Barlet 2008b). More importantly, the issue of representation is also clearly a major concern for many of the filmmakers themselves, including Diabang Brener, Faye, and Ndiaye. Countering overly simplistic images is important to Faye, who aims to provide a more balanced view of life in rural Africa: 'Je veux qu'on change de mentalité à travers mes images, [...] l'Afrique est belle!'<sup>193</sup> Diabang Brener is critical of the public's hunger for images that focus on the human misery of Africa:

Une journaliste me reproche de n'avoir montré dans *Sénégalaises et Islam* que des femmes qui ont été à l'école, qui ont un certain niveau, et elle me demande où est la femme rurale, inculte... On ne veut voir que cette partie-là de l'Afrique! Il y a le Sénégal d'aujourd'hui, le Dakar qui bouge, les filles ont été à l'école, elles savent réfléchir et s'exprimer. Je veux montrer l'Afrique qui bouge! (in Cachat 2007)

In *Sénégalaises et Islam*, Diabang Brener addresses a controversial issue, showing some of the ways in which Senegalese women engage with the principles of Islam, with a view to 'faire voler en éclats les préjugés sur les

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<sup>192</sup> See, for example, Ayari (1996), Petty (1996), MacRae (1999), Garritano (2003), and Thackway (2003a and 2009b).

<sup>193</sup> See Faye's intervention on *Staccato. Vingtième festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France Culture, 9 April 1998.

femmes africaines musulmanes’ (Sow Guèye 2007). Cécile Sow Guèye’s assessment of *Sénégalaises et Islam* is reminiscent of Ndiaye’s approach in *Traces, empreintes de femmes*: ‘Je voulais casser des clichés sur l’Afrique en montrant la modernité que l’on peut trouver dans un village’ (Ndiaye in Hurst et al. 2003). In *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, Ndiaye focuses on Anétina, a young woman who studied in France and acts as a guide and interpreter during filming. Anétina and her four grandmothers counter many of the existing stereotypes about rural African women. A young single mother with boyish looks who wears trousers and t-shirts rather than ‘pagnes’, Anétina is filmed playing football and riding motorcycles rather than carrying out what could be described as archetypal women’s activities.<sup>194</sup> Discussing the representation of African women in film, Ellerson identifies three recurring stereotypes: ‘La mère avec son enfant, si dominante dans les expressions sculpturales africaines’, ‘la femme en tant que porteuse, surtout avec un fardeau sur la tête’, and ‘la femme qui pile [qui] est devenue de loin le symbole de l’Africaine au travail’ (1995: 28–30). As Anétina’s strong onscreen presence does not share any of the characteristics listed by Ellerson, Ndiaye’s subject counters the audience’s expectations, challenging hegemonic notions of African womanhood.

The three subjects of *En attendant les hommes*, Khady, Massouda, and Tycha, similarly challenge existing stereotypes of women living in rural Mauritania, which is reputed to be a highly oppressive patriarchal state: ‘Le spectateur est même quelquefois désarçonné par cette liberté de ton dans une société

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<sup>194</sup> A pagne is a traditional style skirt, similar to a sarong, which is worn by women throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa.

considérée (à tort?) comme misogyne’ (Faye 2007). As the women interact with Ndiaye, they discuss intimate details of their lives, notably marriage and divorce, their successive partners, and the nature of their relationships with men. Both the overall light-hearted manner with which they engage with Ndiaye and the details provided are surprising. Khady, Massouda, and Tycha express ideas that radically conflict with our expectations of rural Mauritanian women: ‘Je ne me complique pas la vie, quand je m’entends avec un homme, on reste ensemble... il part, je l’oublie’; ‘Je suis une femme forte, convaincue d’être plus forte que beaucoup d’hommes’; ‘Quand j’ai envie de mon mari... il s’exécute’; ‘Ce qui est important dans une relation, c’est de faire l’amour’, and so on. Regarded as sexually voracious and primeval creatures or the ‘passive victims of [...] patriarchal oppression’ (Thackway 2003a: 150),<sup>195</sup> the sexuality of African women has long been the subject of much deluded fantasy.<sup>196</sup> Few African filmmakers have attempted to convey women’s sexual pleasure, with a few exceptional examples, such as Mambéty in *Touki Bouki* (1973),<sup>197</sup> Écaré in *Visages de femmes* (1984),<sup>198</sup> and Faye, whose film *Mossane* (1996) features a

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<sup>195</sup> For example, in *Moolaadé* (2004) Sembène places emphasis on the pain resulting from female genital mutilation as Collé bites her finger during intercourse to detract from her agony.

<sup>196</sup> Gilles Boëtsch and Eric Savarese examine colonialist representations of women from black Africa and the Maghreb, both of which are constructed as ‘exotic’ sexual objects. In the ‘imaginaire occidental’, the orient is associated with the harem and ‘la mauresque’ is envisioned as subordinated to male pleasure, while ‘la femme noire’, who is in a permanent state of semi-nakedness, encapsulates bestiality and unbridled sexuality (1999: 127–9). The tragic destiny of Sara Baartman, otherwise known as the ‘Hottentot Venus’, who was taken from South Africa to Europe in the early 1810, where she was paraded in freak shows as a beast in a cage, reveals the extent to which African women have been the subject of extreme misconceptions and morbid curiosity.

<sup>197</sup> *Touki Bouki* features a suggestive scene to convey lovemaking between Anta and Mory. Anta removes her shirt and the couple slide down to the ground and off screen. All that remains for the viewer to see are the handlebars of Mory’s motorbike, adorned with a zebu’s skull and horns. A lengthy shot of Anta’s hand clutching the horns finally cuts to a shot of a wave violently crashing against rocks.

<sup>198</sup> Unlike Mambéty, Écaré contentiously decided to portray the sexual act explicitly in an unexpected and lengthy ten-minute sequence. The adulterous couple, Kouassi and Affoue, are filmed using lengthy medium long shots and close-ups, including of their genitalia. Deemed pornographic, the film was heavily censored upon its release and its filmmaker and actors were



lovmaking scene between Dibor and her husband, during which she is ‘literally and metaphorically “on top”’ (Thackway 2003a: 155). The private details disclosed by Ndiaye’s three subjects show women as sexually empowered without exposing them to the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer. In this way, her film counters the more extreme myths about the sexuality of African women, such as the idea that they embody animalistic uncontrolled and uncontrollable sexuality. Avoiding the traps of the asexual or the rampantly sexual, Ndiaye implicitly challenges these myths and engages in an emancipatory process, rehumanising or rehabilitating African women as rational sexual subjects.

In *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*, Diop secures similarly intimate confessions from her female relatives. The filmmaker’s relationship with her subjects, to whom she is paradoxically both a cultural outsider and a family member, enables her to enquire into intimate matters that are foreign to her, since she was raised exclusively in France. Diop interviews her relatives informally, broaching familial matters, such as the daily running of the household, her relatives’ relationships in a polygamous context, and their spiritual beliefs and observances. Her relationship with her cousins is of the greatest interest here. As will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three, the purpose of the film was to ‘interroger ce qui m’avait pas été transmis par la mort précoce de ma mère’.<sup>199</sup> Accordingly, Diop’s cousin, Mouille, assumes the late mother’s role, initiating the filmmaker into the Senegalese art of

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criticised for the erotic nature of the film. Many Africans saw it as flouting their values and surrendering to the pressures of the Western world (Amina 1991).

<sup>199</sup> See Diop’s intervention on *Cinéma d’aujourd’hui, cinéma sans frontières*, RFI, 23 August 2008.

seduction, the ‘Djagane-Djagari’.<sup>200</sup> Like Ndiaye’s subjects in *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, Diop’s relatives provide an account of their sexuality in which women at first sight appear empowered rather than submissive. Yet these outwardly light-hearted sessions ultimately reveal that the seductive strategies deployed by Diop’s relatives mainly serve the explicit purpose of ‘éviter les coépouses’.<sup>201</sup> Mouille and her friend Aissatou are adamant that Diop should learn these strategies in order to safeguard herself against polygamy, which they seem to view less as an oppressive religious or patriarchal institution than the result of an inadequacy or failure of womanhood: ‘C’est normal, ici on est au Sénégal, il y a la polygamie!’; ‘S’il prend une deuxième femme, j’ai échoué sur toute la ligne’.<sup>202</sup>

Diop’s focus on the intimate in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* proved controversial, as Diop herself reveals: ‘Les réactions au Sénégal ont été parfois violentes’ (in Ponchon 2008). When the film was screened in St Louis (Senegal) in 2008, it received what Barlet terms ‘des violentes attaques proférées par des spectateurs [...] qui lui reprochaient d’être impudique’ (2008b). At the États Généraux du Film Documentaire in Lussas that same year, an audience member also criticised the film for its inauthentic portrayal of women, which, by focusing on their seductive strategies, failed to capture

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<sup>200</sup> As part of this initiation, Mouille demonstrates the use of ‘Tchourai’ incense to perfume her skin and clothes, suggestive glass beads worn around the waist, and ‘Béthio’, a provocative fishnet *pagne* worn by women under their clothes. Mouille and Aissatou also demonstrate how to walk and lie on a bed seductively.

<sup>201</sup> Accordingly, Diop’s relatives describe the ‘Sabbars’ as social gatherings during which women ‘compete’ to show off their seductive dance moves and attributes, size up the competition, and ward off potential rivals.

<sup>202</sup> Mouille and Aissatou’s attitude towards seduction is reminiscent of that of Astou, the Senegalese prostitute in Nacro’s fiction film *Puk Nini* (1995), who explains to her Burkinabé rival, Isa, that the seductive strategies to which Senegalese women are exposed from as early as childhood are designed to ward off potential rivals and avoid their husbands considering marrying co-wives.

the modernity of Senegalese women. This criticism of the film is interesting on two levels. First it reflects the preoccupation with the notions of tradition and modernity, which have long informed the making and reception of African films. The many socially-conscious African-made documentary and fiction films addressing gender issues, such as arranged marriage, polygamy, and female genital mutilation,<sup>203</sup> are frequently read as addressing ‘the superficial tradition/modernity dichotomy that many Western viewers perceive in any portrayal of resistance to beliefs and customs’ (Ellerson 2004: 190).<sup>204</sup> Of course, as Jude Akudinobi remarks, modernity here is implicitly associated with Western civilisation (1995: 25). The frequent references to this dichotomy have resulted in a divide between the filmmakers who engage with filmmaking practices that sustain the notion of African daily life as being the locus of a ongoing struggle between two opposing forces, and those, such as Teno, who are frustrated with this representation of Africa: ‘Vous voulez encore parler du mariage forcé, et de ce pseudo conflit modernité/tradition, [...] ne nous ramenez pas trente ans en arrière!’ (in Barlet 2002d: 10). As will be explored in detail in Chapter Four, most of the women filmmakers who explore established cultural practices in their films do so without presenting them as rigid, preferring to emphasise instead the normal transitional nature of society. The films discussed in this chapter reveal a similar tendency towards minimising the conflict between established practices and change, thus deconstructing the binary and illustrating Ellerson’s claim that ‘tradition and modernity are

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<sup>203</sup> See, for example, *Mossane* and *Mariage précoce* (Amadou Thior, 1995); *Bal poussière* (Duparc, 1988), *Sita* (Hébié, 1995), and *Sondja* (Maurice Kaboré, 2000); and *Dilemme au féminin* (Yacoub, 1994) and *Finzan* (Sissoko, 1989), respectively.

<sup>204</sup> See, for example, Malkmus and Armes (1991), Diawara (1992), Akudinobi (1995), and Petty (1995a).

undifferentiated in the reality of today's Africa' (2004: 190).<sup>205</sup> Accordingly, Faye suggests that 'l'Africain s'en sortira quand dans sa tête il y aura la confusion entre la tradition et la modernité, quand il en fera un'.<sup>206</sup>

The mention of Senegalese women's modernity by the Lussas audience member has further significance, however, since it illustrates the unrealistic expectations that are placed on documentary to provide a comprehensive and faithful view of the world. As detailed in Chapter One, if documentary is deemed capable of and/or responsible for providing such a view, the medium has a built-in certainty of failure. In reaction to the viewer's criticism, Diop allegedly conceded that her film may 'véhiculer une réduction' (Barlet 2008b), yet, while Diop acknowledges that her film may only provide a simplified, incomplete, and fragmented vision of its subjects and the topic broached, I would argue that documentary is in fact inherently reductive. *Traces, empreintes de femmes, En attendant les hommes, and Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* undoubtedly portray models that are more varied and rounded than the three archetypes outlined by Ellerson ('la mère', 'la porteuse', 'la femme qui pile'). However, Ndiaye and Diop do not claim to offer a comprehensive view of African womanhood. Rather they merely present a few snapshots that complement the 'single story' of African women and demonstrate that they cannot and should not be reduced to only a few

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<sup>205</sup> Ellerson makes this claim in reference to Faye's *Mossane*, which she reads as a universal tale relating to adolescence, told within the specificities of African culture, rather than as addressing a specifically African tension between tradition and modernity (2004: 190–1).

<sup>206</sup> See Faye's intervention on *Staccato. Vingtième festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France Culture, 9 April 1998.

images.<sup>207</sup> The work on representation carried out by Ndiaye and Diop therefore further contributes to the rehumanisation of African women, since they reclaim representations and assert varied and multiple identities (Ukadike 1999: 194), introducing the viewer to individuals and lifestyles that are rarely shown elsewhere.

Interestingly, Ellerson's archetypal model of 'la femme qui pile' is ubiquitous in Faye's *Selbé et tant d'autres*, which exploits this 'symbole de la femme africaine au travail' for political purposes. *Selbé et tant d'autres* shares the central concerns of Faye's earlier films; monoculture, desertification, rural migration, unemployment, and poverty. For example, *Selbé et tant d'autres* features a seemingly fictional scene where the men in the village gather to discuss the forthcoming visit of the 'percepteur', who is due to collect a levy that the villagers cannot afford to pay following damage to their crops caused by the drought. *Selbé et tant d'autres* is infused with such community concerns, yet, whereas in Faye's other films threats to the village's integrity emanate primarily from outside the community (harsh climactic conditions, strict governmental measures, tax collectors, and remnants of colonial ideology), *Selbé et tant d'autres* focuses on the tensions festering within the community, those resulting from the men's reluctance or inability to engage in physical work and provide for their families.

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<sup>207</sup> The Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie highlights the 'danger of a single story' on Africa, which is when stereotypes emerge and remain unchallenged in the absence of a variety of literary (and cinematic) representations of Africa and Africans. See Adichie's Ted Talk: <[http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)> [accessed 2 August 2011].

These tensions are emphasised by the filmmaker's disembodied voice-over commentaries and by her onscreen and off-screen interactions with Selbé. In the opening of the film, Faye explains: 'Ici, le mariage n'a pas comme corollaire le divorce', hinting at the reasons for Selbé's misfortune and prefiguring the irrevocability of her circumstances. Faye insists on the inadequacies of men, asking Selbé: 'Depuis ton mariage, que t'a apporté ton mari?' The men's unwillingness to engage in physical work is only briefly touched upon in *Fad'jal*, when a group of women deplore their husbands' idleness in a scene lasting less than one minute. In *Fad'jal* and *Kaddu Beykat*, Faye devotes considerable screen time to footage of men at work in the fields, fishing, caring for cattle and so on. *Selbé et tant d'autres*, on the other hand, features very little footage of men engaging in physical work but focuses instead on the relentless daily chores accomplished by women. Men, who are comparatively absent from the film, are portrayed as drunken, idle, exploitative, and irresponsible.<sup>208</sup> In comparison, at no point in the film is Selbé inactive: rather she is always shown preparing food, making clay pots, felling trees, drawing water from the well, and fishing, occasionally combining these activities with breast-feeding. Selbé does not cease her chores during the interview sequences: Faye is seemingly careful to engage with Selbé at times that are convenient for her subject. These short onscreen conversations are nonetheless broken up as Selbé is interrupted by her children or by the task at hand. The longer conversations between them are shared with the viewer exclusively through the voice-over, so that they do not detract from the physical presence of Selbé hard at work. This image holds centre stage

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<sup>208</sup> The men in the village are briefly filmed making pots, engaging in the aforementioned 'palabres' session, spending money on alcohol (Soulard! Bois et tais-toi!), and sitting idle while their partners work ('Non je ne bouge pas [...] je t'ai aidé hier').

throughout the film and until the very end, as the credits roll over footage of her ploughing the family field, a particularly significant ending, since as Selbé herself explains, this is a responsibility customarily assumed by men.

Faye explicitly denounces the gender imbalance relating to physical work but stops short of outwardly criticising women's apparent lack of inclusion in the governance of the village.<sup>209</sup> Nor does Faye's discourse lead the viewer to consider Selbé and the 'autres' of the film's title as anything other than strong women who ensure the survival of their families through sheer hard work and resourcefulness. Selbé is even seen smiling and playing with her eight children, which prompts admiration for her rather than pity. In this context, the archetypal model of 'la femme qui pile' is a rhetorical device that contributes to highlighting women's efficiency and importance within the community, countering the weakness and ineffectiveness with which they have elsewhere been identified. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Faye is eager to provide a more positive view of rural Africa: 'Dans mes films, je ne veux montrer que ceux qui triomphent ou celles qui triomphent, [...] je ne veux pas filmer la misère africaine'.<sup>210</sup> Through her representation of Selbé as an energetic and dedicated woman, mother, and friend, again contributing to the rehumanisation of African women, Faye also counters the 'tradition of the victim in Griersonian documentary' (Winston 1988).<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Precisely because, unlike men, women feature prominently throughout the remainder of the film, their absence during the lengthy scene showing the men's discussion of the tax collector's impending visit is particularly striking.

<sup>210</sup> See Faye's intervention on *Staccato. Vingtième festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France Culture, 9 April 1998.

<sup>211</sup> According to Brian Winston, few of the subjects that feature in socially-conscious documentaries, most notably those of Grierson, are given a voice, and they therefore naturally come to be viewed as helpless victims.

*Selbé et tant d'autres* not only distinguishes itself from *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal* in terms of its foregrounding of gender issues, but also departs from Faye's two earlier films in terms of its dominant mode of expression. While *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal* are predominantly expository and observational, *Selbé et tant d'autres* is an interactive documentary in which Faye uncharacteristically enters the filmic space to have a dialogue with Selbé from behind the camera. This is also the case with Folly's *Les Oubliées*, where she appears on camera and structures the documentary with her personal voice-over commentary, notes, and impressions. Folly here addresses the rightful place of African women in history, departing from official accounts of the Angolan civil war, which would, in the filmmaker's view, focus on the root causes of the conflict, the number of casualties, and so on.<sup>212</sup> *Les Oubliées* opens with Folly's voice-over commentary explaining the rationale behind the film:

Généralement on énumère les différentes phases de cette trop longue guerre [...]. Pourtant une guerre ne se résume pas seulement à des idées. C'est aussi une lente destruction de la société, une population de civils qui est devenue, comme ailleurs, la cible privilégiée des guerres modernes de la fin du siècle. Et ce n'est pas pour comprendre cette guerre que je suis partie là bas, mais pour rencontrer ses victimes.

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<sup>212</sup> This effort to re-establish women's place in history can also be observed in Folly's *Femmes aux yeux ouverts* (1993), in particular in the section of the film that focuses on the Mali uprising in 1991.



This opening voice-over speech is delivered over footage of young children playing on an abandoned tank; the contrast between heavy artillery and children playing emphasises the gulf between the logistics of war and its human cost. As her opening quotation demonstrates, Folly explicitly wishes to depart from the material approach to which she alludes, offering the viewer an alternative perspective on the war.

In order to do so, Folly employs the interactive mode and supplies a platform for her subjects to provide embodied accounts of the conflict. The filmmaker focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of women, from Maldoror's daughter Henda who lives in Luanda to anonymous women in rural areas, since it was her intention to show 'the Angolan war interpreted from the perspective of a woman' (Folly in Ellerson 2000: 106).<sup>213</sup> Apart from her contact with a few men, including members of the UNAVEM III armed forces and Paul, a British mine-clearing expert working in the vicinity of Kuito, Folly interacts exclusively with women.<sup>214</sup> Her subjects relate horrific tales of rape, starvation, combat, and death, but, like Faye in *Selbé et tant d'autres*, Folly is careful not

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<sup>213</sup> Maldoror is most famous for *Sambizanga* (1972), a film about the Angolan war that greatly impacted on Folly's work. Folly acknowledges Maldoror's influence in *Les Oubliées* and in interviews: 'Sarah inspired me to do this film. She made a film called *Sambizanga*, which in my opinion is one of the masterpieces of African cinema. When I saw it, I had a desire to make a film about Angola'. See <<http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/01/profile-of-sarah-maldoror.html>> [accessed 8 February 2011]. *Sambizanga* tells 'the story of Maria Xavier's search for her husband, a worker, who has been imprisoned and tortured by the secret police. Focusing on her day-to-day existence during the struggle, Maria's physical journey gradually also marks the awakening of her political consciousness'. See <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=film&no=6781>> [accessed 8 February 2011]. Unfortunately, I have not been able to view the film and so cannot comment on any potential similarities between *Sambizanga* and *Les Oubliées*.

<sup>214</sup> The UNAVEM I (United Nations Angola Verification Mission), was established in 1988 in order to oversee the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. In 1991, it was replaced by the UNAVEM II, entrusted with monitoring the ceasefire and elections. The UNAVEM III was then created in 1995 to assist the Angolan government in restoring peace and national reconciliation. It was replaced in 1997 by the United Nations Observer Mission in Angola (MONUA). For more information, see the United Nations' website: <[http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unavem\\_p.htm](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unavem_p.htm)> [accessed 27 July 2011].

to posit her subjects solely as victims. Folly interviews women actively involved in the resistance movement, social workers bringing assistance to rape-victims and orphans, women organised in groups in rural areas, and concludes the film with footage of young theatre performers from the Elinga group rehearsing Euripides's *Trojan Women*. The film therefore gives a voice to those whose narratives have been largely obliterated by dominant accounts of the war, and posits women as active agents in the reconstruction of Angola.

Folly openly professes her ignorance about Angola and refuses to adopt a voice of authority on the issue. The opening sequence of *Les Oubliées*, is shot in a French airport where a voice can be heard announcing a flight to Luanda over the loud speaker, as Folly films feet walking through a revolving door, an airplane standing on the tarmac, and anonymous passengers waiting in a departure lounge. These details are significant, as Folly uses them to signal that her approach to Angola is that of an outsider. She confirms this when she announces that Maldoror's *Sambizanga* constituted the bulk of her knowledge about the country: 'Je ne connaissais rien, rien ou presque à l'Angola. J'avais juste vu un film que Sarah avait réalisé trente ans auparavant, *Sambizanga*'. Discussing the emphasis thus placed on her foreignness, Folly explains: 'L'important est de savoir qui regarde quoi' and highlights her desire to 'ne pas tromper et ne pas prétendre' (in Barlet 1997b), thereby demonstrating a keen awareness of the ethical issues inherent in the reception of documentary. Folly explicitly signals to her viewers that they are about to witness a subjective account of a specific social context. This perspective is that of an outside observer who naturally comes to embody an extension of and point of

reference for the non-Angolan viewer, yet this perspective differs significantly from the hegemonic view of the war conveyed in the Western media.

In most of the films discussed in this chapter, the interactive mode attests to collaborative ideals, to a desire to foreground the subjects' voices and promote an open form of authority. The subjects' resulting influence on a film's format can most clearly be observed in *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor*. Because of her subject's apparent dislike of appearing alone in the frame, Diabang Brener was driven to leave her chosen position behind the camera to feature prominently on screen: 'Elle [Codou] restait à distance si la cinéaste se mettait à côté de sa caméra et ne s'ouvrait que lorsqu'elle venait s'asseoir sur son lit à côté d'elle' (Barlet 2008b). This is clearly visible in the film, where Diabang Brener can be seen struggling for the singer to cooperate. The making of the film was a long and arduous process, something that the filmmaker openly recognises: 'Yandé Codou a testé ma ténacité au fil de toutes ces années où je l'ai côtoyée' (in Sizaïre 2009).<sup>215</sup> However, Codou's apparent hostility does not detract from the film's agenda. Diabang Brener's ambition was not to make a film about the singer's career or her relationship with President Senghor, but rather to uncover the personality and current lifestyle of a woman who had once played an important part in Senegalese political and cultural life.<sup>216</sup> During her lifetime, Codou was infamous for her 'caractère tranché' (Barlet 2008d), and Diabang Brener does not attempt to mask her stubborn refusals to

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<sup>215</sup> The film was made over a period of four years, between 2004 and 2008 (Sizaïre 2009).

<sup>216</sup> Foregrounding Codou's link to Senghor in the film's title emphasises the gap between her former status and her current living conditions. It may also help attract international attention, since non-Senegalese viewers would be unlikely to know Codou, while the former president is famous abroad for both his political career and literary work.

interact with the filmmaker, the awkward interactions (‘si tu dis encore un mot, je te casse la gueule’), interruptions, and negotiations.<sup>217</sup>

Unlike Diabang Brener, who was initially reluctant to be drawn into the onscreen reality of *Sénégalaises et Islam*,<sup>218</sup> Ndiaye was eager for *En attendant les hommes* to take the form of a discussion: ‘Je me sentais proche de ces femmes. Elles ont questionné la femme en moi, et donc j’ai questionné la femme en elles. Une sorte de dialogue entre femmes s’est installé’ (in Mansouri 2008). As will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Four, in *En attendant les hommes*, Ndiaye seeks to establish with her subjects a close contact based on gender and emphasises shared experiences of womanhood rather than cultural otherness. The collaborative ideals formulated by Ndiaye — ‘Je leur avait dit qu’on allait faire un film ensemble’ (in Mansouri 2008) — are interesting to consider in relation to the filmmaker’s textual practice. According to Kuhn, because the voice-over potentially represents an appropriation of the subjects’ narratives, it is not favoured by Western feminist documentary filmmakers: ‘The voice-over is invariably absent from feminist documentaries. When there is a voice-over, it does not come from outside the diegetic space set up by the film, but is spoken by the subject or subjects’ (1994: 144). Accordingly, Ndiaye does not resort to a voice-over commentary either, but favours instead a format relying extensively on her subjects’ own voices. For example, she encourages her subjects to express themselves in their

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<sup>217</sup> This is particularly visible in the scene where she scolds the researcher and singer Raphaël Ndiaye for attempting to sing alongside her.

<sup>218</sup> Diabang Brener had previously related her surprise at the involvement that her subjects expected of her in *Sénégalaises et Islam*, as they challenged and interrogated the filmmaker’s own religious beliefs and practices during the masked interviews that compose the documentary. See her interview on *Espace francophone: Le Magazine télévisé de la francophonie. Écrans francophones: Spéciale Cannes 2008*, France 3, 12 June 2008.

chosen manner, rather than responding to a format determined by the filmmaker: ‘Je souhaitais qu’Anétina et ses grand-mères se présentent à leur manière. Les vieilles dames se définissent par rapport à leur mari commun [...]. Anétina se présente comme étant la fille de son père’ (in Hurst et al. 2003).<sup>219</sup>

In *En Attendant les hommes*, the interactive mode is coupled with the poetic, as Ndiaye explores the narrative potential of wall painting in her search for ‘alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information’ (Nichols 2001: 103). The attention paid here to wall painting is clearly not motivated purely by aesthetic concerns. Each Tarkha, the form of mural painting practised in Oualata, a UNESCO world heritage site, is individual and reflects the personality and mood of its maker: ‘Les peintures murales sont la représentation de leur discours’ (Ndiaye in Faye 20007). The film does not seek to analyse or deconstruct this art form by exploring its origins, influences, the materials used, or recurring patterns and themes. The Tarkhas’ names are provided, as the extra-diegetic voices of Ndiaye’s subjects enumerate the motifs while shots of the murals appear onscreen: ‘Il y a la mariée; les épaules; le ventre; il y a Azeiba, la petite vierge; il y a l’oisillon; la petite oreille; le livre; le cinq’. While the Tarkhas are a strong visual presence in the film, their separate meanings remain elusive and Ndiaye therefore foregrounds her subjects’ artworks and voices without imposing on them her own

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<sup>219</sup> This is reminiscent of a scene from *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990), in which the filmmaker provides guidelines for her subject to introduce himself: ‘I’m Pepper Labelija’, a phrase that Pepper repeats sarcastically. Bruzzi sees this moment as expressing documentary’s performativity and self-reflexivity (2000: 154).

interpretations or knowledge. In so doing, she brings a lyrical and sometimes abstract quality to her film and provides space for the women's direct voices.

A similarly expressive use of local art can be observed in the soundtrack of *Selbé et tant d'autres*, which opens with the extra-diegetic sound of women singing a cappella: 'Il n'y a pas de repos pour les malheureux'. Faye later contextualises the opening song and explains that it had been composed for Selbé by her mother. The film's soundtrack is therefore built using elements originating from the subjects' lives and relates directly to their lived experiences: as Faye explains, 'cette chanson est semblable à leur vie'. Like the Tarkhas in *En attendant les hommes*, Selbé's song serves as more than an aesthetic feature, since it enhances the film's agenda and political discourse. Unlike Ndiaye, Faye occasionally addresses the viewer in the voice-over, both in Serer and in French. As in *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, her interjections serve to provide sparse factual clarifications and contextualisations, and do not seek to appropriate her subject's herstory:

I give people a voice, they are able to speak about their own problems, to show their reality, and I take a position within that. I situate myself on one side or another, my voice criticises what is open to criticism or I provide some small explanation. (Faye in Thackway 2003a: 100)

It is interesting to note that, according to Foster, in the English speaking version of *Selbé et tant d'autres*, a British female voice-over appropriates Selbé's actions and attempts to 'control viewer reception with "authoritative" commentary, threaten[ing] to disembody Selbé's knowledge and subjectivity'

(2005a: 186). A paradigmatic reading of Faye's *Selbé et tant d'autres*, where Faye's original filmmaking practice is compared with the amended English version of her film, reveals the extent to which Faye prioritises her subject's direct voice, as Selbé speaks directly to the camera in the original (Foster 2005a: 180). This is achieved, in part, through the use of Selbé's song, which returns intermittently throughout the film, either diegetically or extra-diegetically, to accompany footage of women at work. As the film comes to an end, the song continues to be heard, alongside the aforementioned footage of Selbé working, over which the credits roll. Composed by women, about women, and for women, Selbé's song first serves to enhance the focus on women's voices, which is central to an understanding of the film. It also subtly enhances the message conveyed by the images, in the interviews, and by Faye's voice-over commentary, since it emphasises the extent of the women's hardship and the strength and determination with which they confront their daily struggle for survival.

Faye therefore situates her subject as what Diana Robin and Ira Jaffe term a 'central narrative agent' (1994: 11), a characteristic shared by most of the films discussed in this chapter. This placement of the subject signals the filmmaker's desire to focus on individual voices, which is all the more significant in a context where, as Diabang Brener remarks, 'les femmes africaines sont trop peu entendues'.<sup>220</sup> This choice to focus on the individual rather than the nameless masses is shared by Folly and Ndiaye, whose shared agenda is conveyed notably through the arrangement of the onscreen space: 'On montre

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<sup>220</sup> See 'Le mot de la réalisatrice', <<http://www.africine.org/?menu=film&no=1866>> [accessed 25 February 2011].

beaucoup l’Afrique mais rarement les Africains [...]. Je voulais marquer un temps d’arrêt. Utiliser les plans rapprochés, m’attarder sur les visages, les yeux, les mains, les pieds, la peau. Mettre l’humain en [*sic*] cœur du film’ (Ndiaye in Hurst et al. 2003). Ndiaye’s approach, characterised by the combination of the interactive mode and close-up shots, is thus reminiscent of Folly’s formal practice in *Les Oubliées*:

La caméra maintient une proximité intime avec les femmes interviewées, en cadrant leurs visages en plans moyens ou en gros plans pendant qu’elles parlent directement à la caméra. Par ce choix esthétique, Folly souligne non seulement l’immédiateté de leurs voix, mais cherche aussi à réduire la distance entre le sujet filmé et la réalisatrice/le spectateur afin de ‘rendre “l’autre” proche’.

(Thackway 2009b)

The aforementioned biographical films by Diabang Brener, Keïta, Matondo, Nacro, Senghor, Traoré, and Yaméogo are of particular significance in this discussion of documentaries that focus on the individual. Their choice of subject matter testifies to the rise of the personal in African women’s documentary, a tendency that will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter on autobiographical documentary. The emphasis placed on individual subjects and their personal narratives has a strong symbolic relevance. Representations of Africa prevailing in the Western world rarely attempt to characterise individual protagonists or subjects in this manner, but focus instead on the group, community lifestyles, and so on. The filmmaking practices of African women documentarians counter this dehumanising tendency, providing names, focusing on faces, and conveying individual



experiences and feelings. This attention to particulars does not, however, preclude the filmmakers from assigning to these herstories a significance that extends beyond the individual. As Faye explains, for example: ‘I cannot eliminate the community. I cannot separate out an individual’, which is, she claims, ‘typical of African cultures’ (in Ukadike 2002: 34).<sup>221</sup> Accordingly, while Faye focuses chiefly on Selbé, the local community is omnipresent in her film. Selbé is rarely alone on screen but is mostly filmed with her children or working alongside the local women with whom she collaborates to provide for her family. In addition, the ‘et tant d’autres’ of the film’s title reveals a clear intention to generalise the representation and Selbé’s character acquires a synecdochical quality, as she comes to represent the community of women of which she is a part.<sup>222</sup>

Much like Faye, who exposes the concerns of the ‘tant d’autres’ using the sole voice of Selbé, Sylla’s *Le Monologue de la muette* focuses on the individual while seeking to generalise the experience depicted. Addressing the living and working conditions of the thousands of ‘petites bonnes’ in Dakar, Sylla concentrates on a young woman named Amy, one of the many who migrate each year from rural Senegal to the capital in search of work, only to fall victim to the exploitation of cheap domestic labour. *Le Monologue de la muette* is designed as a committed documentary denouncing the exploitation of young rural migrants by the capital’s middle class, yet it is distinct from the films

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<sup>221</sup> On a similar point, Madeleine Borgomano asserts: ‘L’art traditionnel africain est collectif aussi bien dans son origine que dans sa portée’ (1994: 12). While this would be an interesting issue to consider in greater detail, it is beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>222</sup> In Keïta’s *Al’leessi*, Souley’s life story similarly acquires an emblematic quality, as her career as an actress comes to echo the trajectory of Nigerien cinema: ‘Le film se passe sur une journée: dès le premier chant du coq, on voit son quotidien, et la nuit correspond à la mort de notre cinéma’ (Keïta in Barlet 2003a). *Al’leessi* thus both projects and exceeds the individual.

discussed thus far, in that its treatment of the issue presents a number of ethical problems.

For example, while the other filmmakers establish their subjects as central narrative agents, Sylla does not provide Amy with a voice. The collaborative ideals and interactive mode prevalent in the other films discussed here yield to an authoritative voice-over, combined with elements of the observational and performative modes. Amy is an outsider to the filmmaking apparatus and is fully submitted to the dominant discourse fashioned by the filmmaker, to a 'closed' form of authority. She is also the visual focus of the film, since she is present on screen more than any other subject, and yet, unlike the three other 'petites bonnes' who appear in the film, Amy is not interviewed by the filmmaker. Most of the footage of Amy shows her at work in her employers' household and later as a married woman and mother, carrying out daily domestic chores in her husband's home village in Casamance. Like *Selbé et tant d'autres*, *Le Monologue de la muette* focuses on Amy's workload so as to emphasise the stringency of her daily routine. In Dakar, most of the footage of Amy is shot indoors and predominantly in confined spaces. Sylla uses low- and high-angle medium shots, medium close-ups and close-ups to film Amy working: the presence of the camera at such close range and at angles that emphasise confinement appears highly obtrusive and intrusive. In this respect, Sylla's filmmaking practice can therefore be compared to that of Wiseman in *Titicut Follies* (1967), since his invasive camerawork draws attention both to the intrusion of the camera and to the living conditions of the interned mentally ill. As will be explored in Chapter Three, in her autobiographical film on

madness, *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, Sylla also uses medium close-ups and close-ups to film her friend Aminta as she sits alone in her courtyard and looks into the camera with a stern and wary expression. The camera repeatedly focuses on different parts of Aminta's face and hands. The extreme close-ups of her eyes are particularly expressive, since they convey her isolation and the poignancy of her situation, the effect being one of drawing the viewer closer to the lived experience of mental illness and seclusion. *Le Monologue de la muette* features two such sequences, each lasting roughly one minute and composed of two close-ups and an extreme close-up of Amy's face as she sits impassively with her eyes averted. As in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, the footage of Amy effectively conveys her hardship, in a manner that is comparable to the use of medium shots, medium close-ups, and close-ups by Folly and Ndiaye.

However, whereas Folly and Ndiaye accompany these powerful shots with interviews of their subjects, Sylla fails to empower Amy, since she is not invited to speak on camera during the filming that took place either in Dakar or in Casamance. As a rhetorical device, Amy's muteness in the film mirrors her daily conditions and effectively emphasises her quality as a 'muette' in society. Ethically, however, this practice is highly problematic, not least since, as Van Damme asserts: 'Il ne s'agissait pas de lui "donner la parole" mais de "parler pour elle"' (in Champion et Yariv 2008: 3). While this is not at odds with the film's title, it explicitly contradicts the film's professed agenda, which is to encourage the empowerment and subsequent emancipation of Dakar's 'petites bonnes'. The film opens with the extra-diegetic voice of Ndeye Fatou Diop, who whispers 'Spartacus est avec nous', a mention of the legendary defender

of slaves that makes clear the filmmakers' position on the issue at stake. Later, an anonymous woman speaks on camera and addresses Amy indirectly, imploring: 'Empare-toi des mots, joins ta parole à la nôtre!'<sup>223</sup> Paradoxically then, the film both implores Amy to speak while at the same time subjugating her voice to those of Sylla and Ndeye Fatou Diop.

In her concluding remarks, Sylla evokes some of the factors that contribute to the exploitation of the 'petites bonnes': 'La désertification [...] les lois d'une économie mondialisée'. Earlier in the film, speaking over footage of young girls in uniform leaving school for the day, Sylla also criticises the complicity of the Senegalese middle class — women in particular — in the status quo: 'Sans le travail des petites bonnes, plusieurs de ces jeunes filles seraient en train d'astiquer la maison, et leurs mamans seraient à la cuisine. Pourquoi faut-il que l'émancipation des unes se paye au prix de la servitude des autres?' The treatment of Amy in the film, however, does not truly break with the behaviour of the Senegalese middle class, since her hardship is exploited for the benefit of the film's agenda. Indeed, the validity of using individuals' lives to illustrate a thesis is itself debatable (Ruby 2005: 217). Ndiaye, Faye, and Folly partially circumvent this issue by associating their subjects to the film, in line with Waugh's call for a collaborative committed documentary tradition. By filming Amy extensively and at close range, however, Sylla arguably transgresses the ethics of representation, informed consent, authority, and responsibility. Amy is subjected to the documentary gaze and her general demeanour, her indifference and non-involvement in the filmmaking process, place the viewer

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<sup>223</sup> The end credits list Joséphine Diouf but it is unclear whether she is/was herself a 'petite bonne', an actress, or otherwise.

in a highly voyeuristic position. The effect is strikingly different from that of *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor*: although Diabang Brener's subject is occasionally reluctant to engage with the filmmaker on camera, Codou clearly controls her exposure — and the crew — and derives much satisfaction from the demands she imposes. On the other hand, while *Le Monologue de la muette* provides a very powerful insight into the exploitation of Senegalese rural migrants, it ultimately extends, rather than breaks with, Amy's exploitation by the middle-class.

Nichols rightly argues that the arrangement of sound and image conveys the filmmaker's ideological stance and testifies to 'the operation of an ethical code governing the conduct of the camera/filmmaker' (1991: 82). This code, he argues, 'is what legitimizes or licenses the continuing process of cinematography as a response to specific occurrences in the world' (1991: 82).<sup>224</sup> Most of the filmmakers whose documentaries are discussed in this chapter demonstrate a heightened awareness of the ethical issues inherent in filming individuals in contexts of poverty and hardship. In *Selbé et tant d'autres*, Faye ensures the integrity of her subject's voice and pays Selbé for her contribution to the film. Faye's filmmaking practice is therefore characterised by an interventional gaze and an ethic of responsibility. In *Les Oubliées*, Folly outwardly expresses her concern over the justification for her film, as can be observed in a poignant scene filmed in a village near Bayundo, a scene in which a group of women address the filmmaker as follows: 'Puisque

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<sup>224</sup> Nichols identifies six 'anthropomorphic categories' of the camera's gaze and attending ethic: the accidental gaze, justified by an ethic of curiosity; the helpless gaze and ethic of sympathy; the endangered gaze and ethic of courage; the interventional and human gazes, both justified by an ethic of responsibility; along with the clinical gaze and professional ethic (1991: 82–8).

vous êtes venues, vous allez transmettre le message que nous avons beaucoup de problèmes’, placing in front of the camera a malnourished underweight child. In reaction to this event, Folly reflects in the voice-over:

Elles n’ont pas de radio. Elles sont trop pauvres pour avoir jamais possédé une télévision, mais elles connaissent le pouvoir de l’image et c’est le seul qu’elles possédaient ce jour-là [...]. Elles ont utilisé l’objectif comme je le fais moi-même. La seule différence c’est qu’elles croient que leur souffrance peut encore émouvoir et changer le cours de leur destin.

*Les Oubliées* is therefore characterised by a helpless gaze and an ethic of sympathy. On the other hand, Sylla’s indignant voice-over commentary in *Le Monologue de la muette*, the short interviews carried out with other housemaids, and the reenactment of a confrontation between employer and employee all point to an interventional gaze and an ethic of responsibility, something with which Amy’s treatment seems somewhat incompatible. The ensuing ambiguities between the discourse introduced by the voice-over and aspects of the textual practice provide a disturbing viewing experience, which, as the following chapter will demonstrate, is also a key feature of *Une Fenêtre ouverte*.

Sylla’s film is therefore unlike the other documentaries discussed in this chapter, which share a number of defining features. It has been established that Ndiaye’s and Faye’s inventive use of elements of the image and soundtrack provide new cinematic spaces within which to inscribe African women’s voices: Faye’s use of Selbé’s song and Ndiaye’s focus on the Tarkhas recall

Scheinman's reading of *Les Maîtres fous* (1954), discussed in Chapter One, a film that lets the subjects' voices come through in the shape of song and dance. Ndiaye, Diabang Brener, Diop, Faye, and Folly's interactive and collaborative documentary practices comply with Waugh's emphasis on the collective nature of committed documentary, which sustains the view that for these filmmakers, documentary serves to formulate careful civic-minded representations and to assert their social, cultural, or political consciousness. Their engagement with the interactive mode of documentary and use of open forms of authority, also correlate with certain principles of feminist documentary, of which shared methods of filmmaking, relying on the collective and participatory, are a defining feature (Kuhn 1994: 178). Finally, in terms of representation, their varied and engaging portrayals of African women successfully divert from the 'single story' prevalent in mainstream media and counter the dehumanising effect of recurring stereotypes.

These features naturally invite feminist readings of African women-centred committed documentary. For instance, in view of the subject matter and form of Faye's *Selbé et tant d'autres*, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholars should have drawn on feminism to analyse her work. However, it is disconcerting that, speaking of *Kaddu Beykat*, Claire Diao should assert that 'ce tournage sur le vif [...] marque le point de départ du cinéma féministe africain' (2010). Diao's conflation of 'féminin' and 'féministe' is indicative of the expectations that are placed on African women filmmakers to produce feminist works. As Nacro recalls: 'Quand j'ai fait *Un Certain matin*, on m'a reproché, surtout des Noires américaines, de ne pas mettre mes moyens au service du combat féminin' (in

Barlet 2002a: 40). The enthusiasm of Western audiences for films and novels that ‘cast a critical light on existing gender relationships’ is further exemplified by the Nigerian author Flora Nwapa, who became indignant that on each of her American or European tours, her readers focused disproportionately on what they perceived to be the feminist undertones of her work (Arndt 2000b: 36–7).<sup>225</sup> This eagerness for radical representations of African women in turn impacts on the films that are made, since, as Nacro relates, ‘Il est vrai que quand on est femme, on répond à des commandes où la condition de la femme fait partie du cahier des charges’ (in Barlet 2002a: 40), citing her docufiction *Femmes capables* (1998) as an example of this. We know, for example, that Faye’s *Selbé et tant d’autres* was commissioned by UNICEF (Schmidt 1999: 288) and that Diabang Brener’s *Sénégalaises et Islam* was commissioned by the Goethe-Institut in Dakar (Barlet 2008a).<sup>226</sup> In the light of this, and in view of the practicalities of film funding in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa detailed in the Introduction, it is important to acknowledge that the predominance of gender-conscious African-made films, may result, at least in part, from the expectations of their paying public in Europe and the United States, and from selection operated at the level of production and distribution.

The enthusiasm of Western viewers for radical gender-based works has also led to a fear of being pigeonholed, as Diabang Brener and Nacro reveal: ‘Pour

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<sup>225</sup> Likewise, during each of their media appearances, questions regarding the ‘representivity’ (Murphy and Williams 2007: 26) of their work in terms of ‘la condition de la femme en Afrique’ are almost systematically directed at the women whose films feature in the corpus. See, for example, *Nulle part ailleurs*, Canal +, 8 April 1998; *Espace francophone: Le Magazine télévisé de la francophonie. Écrans francophones: Festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France 3, 28 May 1998; and *Staccato. Vingtième festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France Culture, 9 April 1998.

<sup>226</sup> The patrons of *Selbé et tant d’autres* specifically wanted a woman filmmaker to direct the documentary (Ukadike 2002: 40).



les deux premiers [*Mon Beau Sourire* and *Sénégalaises et Islam*], on me disait: “Tu fais des films sur les femmes!” Cela me gênait car j’étais persuadée de ne pas faire ça, de ne pas être féministe’ (Diabang Brener in Barlet 2008a) and ‘That may seem something of a paradox, but I refuse to be typecast as a director who makes films about women’ (Nacro in Verschueren 2002: 3). Few African women filmmakers have adopted the position of Ndiaye, who grew up in Europe in the 1970s and acknowledges that she — and her work — is ‘habitée par les revendications féminines et féministes’ of the time.<sup>227</sup> The same is not true, for example, of Faye, as Ellerson notes: ‘While Faye is a proponent of women’s rights, she does not use the term “feminist” to describe herself or her work’ (2004: 188). In fact, Faye considers feminism to be incompatible with her value system (Ukadike 2002: 34).<sup>228</sup> Such declarations suggest that antifeminist reactions by African women filmmakers perhaps stem from the reification of feminism as a discourse for and about white heterosexual Western women (Reid 1991: 375); from ‘Imperial Feminism’ (Amina Mama in Salo 2001: 59), the long-lasting insensitivity displayed by some Western feminists to race issues; and from a misunderstanding of the ideology.

As Irene Assiba d’Almeida rightly remarks, however, there is a crucial difference between behaving as a feminist and professing to be one (1994: 49). Reid similarly asserts that Faye’s response that ‘I never say that I am a woman filmmaker’ sustains the view that ‘the product should not be confused with its

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<sup>227</sup> See Ndiaye’s interview featuring on the commercialised DVD of *En attendant les hommes*.

<sup>228</sup> Faye’s staunch resistance to feminist readings of her work is particularly surprising considering that she has frequently argued that ‘everybody is free to make his own interpretation of the film’ (in Ukadike 2002: 35), explaining that it is not incumbent on her to decipher her work.

author any more than authorial intent should describe the final product' (1991: 385). Even if, as suggested above and as Barlet sustains, the subject matter of the films discussed in this chapter may have been influenced by commercial requirements ('polygamie, circoncision, rituels secrets sont des sujets qui se vendent bien en Occident'), their filmmakers' formal practices are revelatory of more than a superficial commitment to their topics. Close readings of the films by Diabang Brener, Diop, Faye, Folly, and Ndiaye have revealed that they adhere to humanistic principles that share some of the characteristics of feminism: they are committed to exploring spaces, to foregrounding narratives and addressing issues that are commonly overlooked in the mainstream media, and to providing positive female role models. In addition, the filmmakers initiate a film language that enables them to go beyond a simple discussion of gender issues.

However, a Western feminist reading alone fails to fully uncover the richness of these films. As Petty demonstrates in her discussion of the Cameroonian 'téléroman' *Miseria*, a strictly Western feminist approach to the series glosses over other aspects of the work, including its criticism of colonial oppression (1995a: 138). This is also clearly true of the films discussed in this chapter. For example, while some feminists might consider the use of a voice-over in *Selbé et tant d'autres* to represent an appropriation of the subjects' narratives, it has a different significance in an African context. Indeed, the filmmaker Bekolo claims that his extensive use of voice-overs is a reaction to the fact that 'no one ever hears what Africans say or what they think' (in Dovey 2009: 17). Furthermore, the films might not be as radical, in feminist terms, as some

might expect. For example, however much *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* reveals about Diop's Senegalese relatives, the filmmaker does not pronounce her conclusions or elicit judgement regarding the institution of polygamy, aside from a few brief comments made during conversations with her cousins and aunts, such as 'j'ai l'impression que les femmes elles font beaucoup [pour démontrer leur force de séduction] quand-même ici au Sénégal'. Similarly, Faye rationalises the men's idleness in *Selbé et tant d'autres*, which she attributes to harmful agriculture policies and widespread unemployment in the cities. As Reid rightly argues, Faye 'views the struggle in a larger frame—a sort of womanist struggle to counter dehumanizing relationships which oppress men and women' (1991: 385). As a result, applying a Western feminist approach to the films in this corpus provides a useful but incomplete perspective on the filmmakers' treatment of gender issues.

The films discussed in this chapter are evidence of a growing tradition of African womanist documentary filmmaking, which views 'gender relationships always in the context of other political, cultural, and social forms and mechanisms of oppression' (Arndt 2000a: 710–1). As the chapter has demonstrated, this tradition also seeks to redress representations of women and of the African continent. As the filmmakers' aforementioned comments demonstrate ('L'Afrique est belle!' 'Je veux montrer l'Afrique qui bouge!' and 'Je voulais casser des clichés sur l'Afrique'), they are as much concerned with gender issues as they are with valorising their 'africanité'. The resulting films are intensely personal: *Selbé et tant d'autres* is set in Faye's native community; Diop turns to her relatives in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*; *Les Oubliées*

chronicles a voyage of discovery for the filmmaker; Sylla's interest in the condition of the 'petites bonnes' emerged from an event in her childhood;<sup>229</sup> and Ndiaye asserts that her two films were motivated by 'une quête de moi-même'.<sup>230</sup> This investment is revelatory of a striking rise in emphasis on the personal in African women's committed filmmaking, a tendency that extends far beyond this single sub-genre and that will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter on autobiographical documentary.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> As a child, Sylla witnessed the ill treatment of her family's housemaid (Campion and Yariv 2008). This is an issue that the filmmaker has previously addressed in her first fiction film *Les Bijoux* (1997).

<sup>230</sup> See Ndiaye's interview on the commercialised DVD of *En attendant les hommes*.

<sup>231</sup> See also *Waliden* (Traoré, 2008), a documentary about traditional adoption in Mali, which was once used to strengthen family ties but which nowadays generates serious personal and social issues, as experienced by the filmmaker herself.

### CHAPTER THREE – AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTARY

As was explored in the previous chapter, many of the women filmmakers working in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s concentrated on producing socially-conscious documentaries. Using film predominantly to confront social and gender issues, they shaped the first major trend in African women's filmmaking. Indeed, committed documentary remains a prevalent and rich sub-genre amongst African women filmmakers, who show a long lasting commitment to consciousness-raising, providing positive role models, and valorising local cultural practices. However, as the number of African women filmmakers increased during the last decade of the twentieth century, new trends emerged, both in terms of documentary practices and subject matter. Pioneers such as Folly, Mbeka, and Keïta, began by filming predominantly in the relatively impersonal observational and expository modes.<sup>232</sup> The turn of the century then marked the start of a notable rise of the personal, which crystallised towards the mid 2000s, when some filmmakers opted for increasing directorial presence, produced biographical documentaries, and turned the camera inwards to focus on the self and make the autobiographical films that will be the subject of this chapter.<sup>233</sup>

This progressive move towards self-narratives in African women's documentary is consistent with global trends in documentary filmmaking, which, from the 1970s onwards, came to be used increasingly as a privileged

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<sup>232</sup> See *Femmes aux yeux ouverts* (Folly, 1993), *Rentrer?* (Mbeka, 1993), and *Le Nerf de la douleur* (Keïta, 1999).

<sup>233</sup> For biographical films, see, for example, *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor*, *Florence Barrigha* (Nacro 1999), *Al'leessi* (Keïta, 2003), and *Dona Ana Maria Cabral* (Senghor, 2002).

site for the expression and exploration of identity, and as a therapeutic tool.<sup>234</sup> On the other hand, this tendency contrasts strongly with the work of women writers from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, who began by publishing literary autobiographies in the 1970s and subsequently moved away from personal narratives to produce more outwardly focused literary works.<sup>235</sup> These opposing tendencies in African women's written and cinematic work can potentially be explained by the shift from the individual to the collective, which was promoted by African filmmakers as a way of opposing and rewriting Western cinematic paradigms (Gabara 2006: 154). As explored in the Introduction to this thesis, many early African filmmakers emphasised the collaborative nature of filmmaking and chose to foreground the community and collective issues. This is consistent with Faye's practice in *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, for example, since the filmmaker insists on the influential advisory role played by her subjects during the making of her films (Welsh 1983: 149–50), which focus on community issues and values.

This concept of the African collective has generated a lasting debate regarding the notion of African autobiography. Gabara recalls that 'many cultural and literary theorists, not only in the West but in Africa as well, have relied on the strict opposition of an African collectivity to a Western individuality in order to argue that African autobiography does not and cannot exist' (2006: 122). Although Teshome Gabriel does not deny the possibility of an African

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<sup>234</sup> For more information, see Beattie (2004: 105–24).

<sup>235</sup> These early autobiographical novels include *De Tilène au plateau, récit d'une enfance dakaraise* (Nafissatou Diallo, 1975), *Le Baobab fou* (Ken Bugul, 1983), *Étrange héritage* (Gad Ami, 1985), and *Kesso Princesse Peuhle* (Kesso Barry, 1988). For discussion of these novels, see Thioune (1988), Wright (1988), Anta Diouf Keïta (1991), Ngandu (1994), Almeida (1997), Geesey (1997), Hitchcott (1997), McNee (1997), and Watson (1997).

autobiography, he does, nonetheless, distinguish it from ‘autobiography in its usual Western sense of a narrative by and about a single subject’. Gabriel speaks instead of a ‘multigenerational and trans-individual autobiography’, one where ‘the collective subject is the focus’ (1994: 58).<sup>236</sup> Interestingly, similar concerns to those expressed on the subject of African autobiography have been raised regarding the notion of cinematic autobiography. Elizabeth Bruss warns of the inevitable ‘intranslatability’ of autobiography from written to filmic form (1980: 297), and of the threat to the autobiographical act posed by the newly emerging forms of personal cinema:

If film and video do come to replace writing as our chief means of recording, informing, and entertaining, and if (as I hope to show) there is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography, then the autobiographical act as we have known it for the past four hundred years could indeed become more and more recondite, and eventually extinct. (1980: 296–7)

Bruss and Philippe Lejeune share the belief that, unlike written self-narratives, cinema struggles to convey the unity of the speaking and written subjects (Bruss 1980: 301), which Bruss sees as essential to the viability of the autobiographical act. Lejeune, however, claims that ‘la “supériorité” du langage tient [...] à sa capacité de faire oublier sa part de fiction, plus qu’à une aptitude spéciale à dire la vérité’ (1987: 9). Lejeune also believes that cinematic autobiography is possible and in fact exists (1987: 10), and that film

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<sup>236</sup> Accordingly, Sonia Lee asserts: ‘Au contraire des occidentales qui ressentent souvent l’acte d’écrire comme une exploration du moi, les femmes de lettres africaines, francophones et anglophones vivent fréquemment l’écriture comme une maternité, c’est-à-dire comme une contribution à la communauté’ (1994: 8). This is corroborated by some African women’s texts. See, for example, Diallo (1975).

does not pose a threat to autobiography, on the contrary: ‘Et voilà le cinéma à son tour qui dit “je”. L’autobiographie ne peut s’en trouver qu’enrichie, c’est une aventure à suivre avec curiosité’ (1987: 12). Likewise, while Catherine Russell contends that ‘subjectivity cannot be denoted as simply in film as with the written “I” but finds itself split in time’ and ‘split again between the seeing and the filmed body’ (1999: 280) — alluding to the ‘temporal gap between the collection of images and the editing of them into film’ — she does not preclude the very existence of cinematic autobiography (1999: 282). The films discussed in this chapter are therefore located at the intersection of two debated — but nonetheless thriving — genres. By their very nature, they provide rich material with which to engage with the contentious notions of African and cinematic autobiography.

Exploring a selection of recent films by Alice Diop, Monique Phoba Mbeka, and Khady Sylla, this chapter will show that the films are successful in their approach to self-representation and therefore counter assertions regarding the impossibility, or inferiority, of African and/or cinematic autobiography. Seemingly confirming Gabriel’s assertion regarding a trans-individual autobiography, the present films are situated on the boundary between autobiography and ethnography. Friends, relatives, and occasionally the wider community feature prominently in each of the films discussed here. In this respect, they are comparable to films by the male filmmakers Achkar (*Allah Tantou*, 1990), Sissako (*Rostov-Luanda*, 1997), and Mora-Kpaï (*Si Guériki la reine mère*, 2002), whose relational autobiographical documentaries explore aspects of the filmmakers’ personal or family histories, while being firmly set



within specific social, cultural, or political contexts: Sékou Touré's brutal political regime, the Angolan war, and social hierarchy among the Wassangaris people in northern Benin, respectively. This chapter will first consider the outward looking stance of Diop's, Mbeka's, and Sylla's films, in order to demonstrate how it relates to questions of the self and complements the autobiographical. The focus will then shift towards what distinguishes these films from the rest of the corpus, namely the distinct filmmaking impulses and the purpose of the autobiographical act. Specific attention will be paid to the ways in which film is used as a therapeutic tool, as a way of expressing and possibly countering a personal and/or collective malaise. It will be argued that the present films can be related to the emergence of a first-person confessional filmmaking genre, in which film comes to represent a facilitator for self-examination, a powerful tool for self-understanding and emotional recovery (Renov 2004: 214–5). The chapter will then consider the manner in which Diop, Mbeka, and Sylla use form to convey their subjectivity and represent the self. Since in documentary as in fiction 'style is not simply a systematic utilization of techniques devoid of meaning but is itself the bearer of meaning' (Nichols 1991: 79–80), emphasis will be placed on the significance of specific formal traits and expressive techniques. This will help to determine whether the filmmakers attempt to convey a coherent identity, in accordance with Bruss and Lejeune's common premise, or whether they use film to represent identity as multiple and shifting.

The films discussed in this chapter, Alice Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* (2007), Monique Phoba Mbeka's *Sorcière la vie!* (2006), and

Khady Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte* (2005), vary greatly in terms of subject matter and filmmaking practice.<sup>237</sup> As detailed in the previous chapter, *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* documents the conversations that took place between the filmmaker and her cousins and aunts during her stay in Dakar with her mother's relatives in the mid 2000s. The film records her encounter with lifestyles that are foreign to her, since Diop's parents were economic migrants who left Senegal before her birth and lived in exile in France for over forty years until their respective deaths. In *Sorcière la vie!*, Mbeka travels from her native Belgium to the DRC, from where her parents emigrated when her father became one of the first Congolese ambassadors in Belgium (Rutazibwa 2011). Her film follows two parallel lines of investigation: Mbeka explores her personal cultural legacy, reflects upon her identity as a woman of African descent born and raised in Belgium, and portrays Congolese society through the prism of sorcery. Whereas in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* and *Sorcière la vie!* Diop and Mbeka are on voyages of personal, cultural, social, and historical discovery, *Une Fenêtre ouverte* reflects a radically different approach to its subject matter. Here, Sylla addresses the taboo issue of mental health by turning the camera inwards on her own medical condition and by documenting the conversations that took place in Dakar in the early 2000s between the filmmaker and her long-standing friend Aminta, both of whom share what Sylla loosely terms 'l'expérience de la folie'.<sup>238</sup> As such, the filmmaker does not approach Senegalese society or mental illness from an outsider's perspective but from a clear position of insider authority.

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<sup>237</sup> Part of the material on Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte* is to be published in my forthcoming article: 'Ethical Madness? Khady Sylla's Documentary Practice in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*' (*Nottingham French Studies*, expected publication date: summer 2012).

<sup>238</sup> Significantly, at no point in the film is Sylla's condition specifically identified. Rather, the filmmaker equivocally alludes to 'la folie' throughout.

The focus on mental illness in Sylla's film is itself unusual. While madness is 'a common theme chosen by female francophone authors when they invent protagonists who are marginalized by traditional hegemony, who live in an *entre-deux* between cultures, or who find themselves exiled from conventional support systems' (Harsh 2004: 175), this does not translate to African women's film.<sup>239</sup> Cinematic representations of madness are relatively uncommon, and *Une Fenêtre ouverte* is, to the best of my knowledge, the only Francophone sub-Saharan African documentary to address the issue in such detail and depth.<sup>240</sup> Although the choice of subject matter undeniably contributes to the originality of Sylla's film, it is her approach to this issue that is most striking. Sylla's intention in filming *Une Fenêtre ouverte* was clearly not simply to engage with the social aspect of mental illness or to show observable symptoms of a disorder, as Wiseman does, for example, in *Titicut Follies* (1967).<sup>241</sup> Although Sylla's film does reveal aspects of social perceptions of mental illness, this is not the focus of the film. Certain comments by Sylla and Aminta indicate that mental illness is considered shameful. For example, Aminta insists on the embarrassment brought on her family when she challenges her mother: 'Tu as honte, hein, tu as honte?' Later, it is alleged that stones have occasionally been hurled at Aminta in the street because of her

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<sup>239</sup> For a detailed analysis of madness in the work of women's writers from Africa and the Caribbean, see Orlando (2003).

<sup>240</sup> Francophone sub-Saharan African films addressing mental illness include the fiction films *Niaye* (Sembène, 1964), *Kodou* (Ababacar Samb Makharam, 1971), *Pressions* (Sanvi Panou 1999); and the documentaries *Qui est fou* (Agnès Ndibi, 2001), and *L'Homme est le remède de l'homme* (Diabang Brener et al., 2006). It is interesting to note that, in accordance with the trend identified in the Introduction, the fiction films are by male filmmakers, while both documentaries are directed or co-directed by women.

<sup>241</sup> It is interesting to note that Wiseman's depiction of mental health patients and their living conditions at the Bridgewater institution in Massachusetts was deemed to constitute a violation of their privacy and dignity by the government of Massachusetts and eventually led to a court case. A detailed account of this can be found in Anderson and Benson (1988).

condition. Since exploring madness involves uncovering and exploring what diverges from the norm, that which society fears and attempts to conceal and expunge, the filmmaker inevitably heightens the visibility of the unspeakable and transgresses the taboo.<sup>242</sup> Nonetheless, this is not a feature that the filmmaker has enhanced in order to build a social discourse, contrary to Mariama Sylla, for example, in her film on the taboo of AIDS, *Derrière le Silence* (2007).<sup>243</sup>

The focus of this film clearly lies beyond the purely clinical and social dimension of mental illness, as Sylla prioritises subjectivity and invites the viewer to encounter a personal experience of the disorder. Although clearly relational, this is nonetheless a highly personal documentary: of the fifty-two minutes of film in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, over twenty-five minutes are shot in the privacy of Aminta's courtyard and close to ten minutes in Sylla's own home. Only Aminta, her mother, and her daughter Tiané are questioned by the filmmaker, which provides a strong feeling of both intimacy and disconnection from the outside world. Aside from these three women, Sylla does not invite any other member of their respective families — although some are seen on tape — or community to intervene. As a result, it is immediately apparent that this is not a social realist documentary approaching madness from an objective or detached perspective, but rather a poignant account of a shared affliction.

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<sup>242</sup> Most academic research on mental illness in Black Africa focuses on trauma caused by disease, AIDS, displacement, conflicts, and mass human rights violations. See, for example, Bell (1991), Asuni et al. (1994), Summerfield (2000), and Porter and Haslam (2005). For broader accounts of mental illness in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, see Sow (1978), Bartoletti (2001: 40–9), and Tchetché (1998).

<sup>243</sup> In *Derrière le silence*, Mariama Sylla (Khady Sylla's younger sister) encourages her subjects to focus on the discrimination faced on a daily basis by AIDS sufferers. On the contrary, in *Une Fenêtre ouverte* Khady Sylla does not foreground the stigmatisation experienced by sufferers of mental disorders.

This representation of madness, a condition, which, by its very definition, exceeds reason, poses formal challenges that Sylla openly recognises in the film: ‘Je faisais l’expérience de l’intérieur, je faisais l’expérience de cette douleur indicible, puisque invisible, si difficile à localiser. Comment l’expliquer à quelqu’un qui ne l’a jamais ressenti?’ By using film to communicate her ‘expérience de l’intérieur’, Sylla attempts to represent the apparently unrepresentable: an inside view of a personal trauma that defies rationalisation, conveyed through a medium that relies heavily on the visible.

In *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*, Diop also focuses her attention on family members and selected friends at the expense of the broader community. Over three quarters of the film is shot in her relatives’ homes, in the house where her mother grew up and in her cousin Mouille’s bedroom. A few rare scenes are shot in the street or in public places: Diop interviews her cousin Mame Sarr outside the family home, where she meets with friends and relatives of her age, and includes in the film a selection of street views, snapshots of Senegalese daily life captured from a moving car or from a house window. These distant and detached long shots and high-angle shots serve to establish the setting for her film but also communicate the nature of her gaze as that of a tourist. Interestingly, while Sylla’s focus on Aminta and her family reveals a desire to set aside the social and cultural context and prioritise her and Aminta’s inner experience of illness, the close attention paid to Diop’s relatives in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* translates a radically different agenda. As the filmmaker explains: ‘Je voulais faire un portrait de la femme

sénégalaise mais toujours en partant du prisme très intime de ma famille'.<sup>244</sup>

The film translates a clear desire to document a way of life, as the journalist Bahia Allouache identifies when she labels the documentary an 'anthropologie familiale'.<sup>245</sup> Accordingly, Diop stages encounters with her cousins and aunts, interviews during which she questions them about work, money, relationships, sexuality, polygamy, and so on: her curiosity regarding their lifestyles leads the filmmaker to unveil and expose details of their private and intimate lives, in a manner that enables and encourages generalisation.

Likewise, Mbeka's interest in her family history led her to take an interest in the presence and impact of sorcery in modern-day DRC: 'Ma quête des origines a abouti à cette permanence de la croyance en la sorcellerie qui [...] donne une résonance différente aux bribes d'histoires qui me sont parvenues'. Her extensive research covers some of the many historical and contemporary facets of sorcery: the children accused of witchcraft for attending 'l'école des blancs' during colonial times; the powerlessness of the police forces faced with brutal attempts at exorcism; the proliferation of faith-based institutions in Kinshasa; and the accusations brought against Docteur Dieka, a friend of the filmmaker's late father, village leader, and 'juge coutumier',<sup>246</sup> accused of sacrificing his daughter in his search for personal power.<sup>247</sup> In *Sorcière la vie!*, Mbeka emphasises that hers is a personal rather than a scientific interest, as her

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<sup>244</sup> See Diop's interview on *Cinéma d'aujourd'hui, cinéma sans frontières*, RFI, 23 August 2008.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> 'Juge coutumier' is an honorary title that empowers its holder to preside over legal matters in the allocated jurisdiction, acting in accordance with local customs.

<sup>247</sup> For a detailed examination of the aspects of sorcery raised by Mbeka, see Ahounou (2008). For further reading on the subject of sorcery in contemporary DRC, see M'bemba-Ndoumba (2006).

approach to sorcery is explicitly contrasted with the official records gathered during colonial times by ‘une ribambelle d’informateurs séjournant au Congo qui ont envoyé des lettres, publié des mémoires, écrit des ouvrages scientifiques ou pris pour tel, et même filmé’. The film features some of this archival footage, photographs, and written documents dating from colonial times, which serve to emphasise the contrast with the nature of Mbeka’s material. Unlike this detached and often racist literature, the ethnographic material on sorcery featured in Mbeka’s film is approached from a subjective and embodied perspective: that of an individual who is both an insider and outsider to the world into which she travels, an approach that is shared by most of the filmmakers whose work is discussed in this thesis.

In the second sequence of the documentary, Mbeka is filmed reading from heavy volumes on African cultures in the Belgian Musée d’Afrique Centrale in Tervuren. However, Mbeka’s absorption of these official ethnographic documents is not sufficient for her personal search or cinematic project. As she leaves the museum four minutes into the film, Mbeka turns her attention to gathering her own fieldwork material. This departure from official records is apparent as two thirds (around thirty minutes) of the film was shot on location in the DRC, against fifteen minutes of footage shot in Belgium, the latter consisting primarily of interviews with members of the African diaspora. The filmmaker privileges direct encounters with subjects over the sterile and impersonal material held in Tervuren. Unlike Sylla and Diop, Mbeka invites more than ten subjects to contribute to her film: notably the caretaker of the family home in Boma, Congolese priests struggling with the treatment of those

accused of sorcery, and the intellectual Valérien Mudoy. While Mbeka concludes her film with a short sequence filmed in the museum in Tervuren, this only serves to emphasise the emptiness of the material on display: as the filmmaker pronounces her final words, she is seen reflected in the glass casing surrounding an African mask. The *mise-en-scène* in this final sequence highlights the inanimate and desolate nature of the artefact, now divorced from its context and separated from visitors by the casing, an image that is reminiscent of Alain Resnais and Chris Marker's criticism of cultural oppression in *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1953).

In her review of *Sorcière la vie!*, Anne Sophie Birot wrongly minimises the autobiographical aspect of the film by remarking that it is subsumed by the cultural: 'Son aventure intimiste n'aura été qu'un prétexte, de courte durée'.<sup>248</sup> Likewise, although Allouache's labelling of *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* as an 'anthropologie familiale' adequately valorises the film's ethnographic quality, this designation does not place sufficient emphasis on the autobiographical element of the work. While *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*, and *Sorcière la vie!* all strive to provide engaging personal, social, or cultural information about mental illness, Senegalese womanhood, and sorcery, the filmmakers' approaches to these issues vary significantly from those whose films are explored in Chapters Two and Four of this thesis. There is a strong personal dimension to Diop's, Mbeka's, and Sylla's work, an interplay between the ethnographic and autobiographical that is crucial to an understanding of their films. In particular,

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<sup>248</sup> See the film profile of *Sorcière la vie!* on Clap Noir: <<http://www.clapnoir.org/spip.php?article138>> [accessed 22 March 2011].



despite the variations in subject matter and approach, these documentaries share a fundamental trait in that all three convey a deep-seated need for reconstruction: Diop, Mbeka, and Sylla capitalise on the therapeutic potential of writing the self and use film both to express and to counter a specific malaise.

Sylla explicitly establishes artistic creation as salutary and therapeutic in her film when she writes ‘créer ou s’anéantir’ on a blackboard, thereby emphasising the didactic nature of her premise. Indeed, *Une Fenêtre ouverte* conforms to Sylla’s overall view of artistic creation as she recalls:

J’étais ainsi à Paris le jour où j’ai appris la mort de ma grand-mère bien aimée. Je me suis mise à table et j’ai commencé à écrire sur elle. J’ai pensé qu’en écrivant sur elle, je parviendrais à faire survivre quelque chose, que j’arriverais à la faire sortir de ce qui pour moi était un anéantissement. [...] C’est pratiquement l’écriture qui m’a sauvé la vie. (in Keïta 1999)

The urgency and therapeutic nature of Sylla’s early artistic endeavour (‘j’écris contre le désespoir’, Keïta 1999) can clearly be identified in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, since the film functions as a type of catharsis. Her question in the opening sequence of the film: ‘Tu te regardes dans un miroir brisé. [...] Ton visage est en miettes [...]. Lequel d’entre vous arrivera à reconstituer le puzzle?’ points to this notion of reconstruction, of film as a way to write/right the Self. *Une Fenêtre ouverte* is strongly centred on experiences of the inner-self and on the intimate, as Sylla’s presence, both in the soundtrack and visually, is strongly felt throughout: Sylla frequently addresses the viewer

directly in scenes where her face is filmed in close-ups while she exposes her insight into her own mental illness with striking openness and directness. Sylla also signals that the film is, at least in part, successful in its endeavour, since it marks a rebirth for the filmmaker: as the film ends, Sylla is filmed walking through a dark corridor and moving into the light and off screen, a final appearance that is immediately followed by an open view of the sea, a shot that fades out serenely as Sylla announces in the voice-over: ‘On peut guérir en marchant’.

However, as the distributors note on the back of the cover of the DVD, Sylla is not the sole subject of her autobiography: ‘Portrait, autoportrait: de qui? De la maladie, des errements urbains, de la folie, des deux femmes, Aminta Ngom et Khady Sylla, d’une Afrique fantôme?’ Sylla also made *Une Fenêtre ouverte* with a view to associating her friend, Aminta, with the creative process:

Pourquoi une fenêtre ouverte? Parce que c’est une fenêtre que j’essaie d’ouvrir pour Aminta, c’est une fenêtre que j’essaie d’ouvrir pour moi, mais c’est aussi une fenêtre que j’essaie d’ouvrir pour le public sur un monde très particulier qui est le monde de la maladie mentale.<sup>249</sup>

Aside from engaging in negotiations with Aminta’s family to improve her daily living conditions, Sylla instigates conversations to encourage her friend to share her thoughts on camera, in an attempt to overcome the isolation and marginalisation brought about by her illness: ‘Le film est un acte: une tentative

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<sup>249</sup> For footage of Sylla’s speech at the Festival International du Documentaire de Marseille, see <[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x407z9\\_5-13-khady-sylla-fid-2005\\_shortfilms](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x407z9_5-13-khady-sylla-fid-2005_shortfilms)> [accessed 13 November 2011].

de faire sortir Aminta, de la faire bouger' (Neyrat 2005: 1). In order to help her transcend her affliction, Sylla notably encourages Aminta in the re-appropriation of her body, since the stigmas of madness are precisely what distinguish 'les normaux' from 'les fous', as Sylla herself labels them: 'L'autre a peur de vous, vous avez enflé, vous avez des tics'. The body becomes foreign to oneself: 'Le corps est devenu encombrant. Cette matière qui est devenue notre ennemie'. For Sylla, reclaiming and taming the body, which here materialises with the purchase of a wig for Aminta, is a fundamental stage in the healing process, since it enables the individual to transcend otherness.

The filmmaker often addresses Aminta directly as 'tu' in the voice-over, and during close to three quarters of the film, exchanges between the two women are the focal point of the documentary. Many scenes are framed to show them sitting on an equal footing, face-to-face or side-by-side, as they attempt to come to terms with their illnesses. Sylla clearly wants to connect with Aminta, as can be most clearly observed in a sequence in which she is filmed performing the same motions as those carried out by Aminta, in an overtly mimetic enactment: first, both women are filmed looking at themselves, Aminta in a piece of mirror and Sylla in the rotating screen of a portable camera; the camera lens subsequently focuses on their eyes reflected in the respective instruments while they engage in contemplation. This footage, part of which results from instructions issued by the filmmaker, part of which is the

product of performance, is thus edited to create a correlation between Sylla and Aminta and to mingle their gazes.<sup>250</sup>

Sylla also refrains from providing any indication as to the specific nature of her and Aminta's pathologies, thereby preventing the viewer from attempting to distinguish the two women on the basis of their complaints. As she empties the contents of her handbag onto the ground at her feet, scattering boxes, bubble packs, and tubes of medicines, the filmmaker lists in the voice-over Effexor, Anafranil, Largactil, Tranxene, Stresam. These are prescription pills that are recommended in the treatment of acute depression; obsessive-compulsive disorders; psychiatric conditions, such as psychosis or schizophrenia; anxiety and related psychosomatic disorders; and aggression. These indications only provide the viewer with a sense of the symptoms experienced by Sylla, a lack of detail that reinforces the subjective nature of representation and enables the filmmaker to eclipse the particular in her pursuit of the essence of mental illness. Seemingly united by their common experience of madness, Aminta enables Sylla to engage in identity exploration, a fact that the filmmaker confirms by indicating in the voice-over: 'Ce chemin vers toi me ramène vers moi'.

Sylla's engagement with Aminta recalls 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

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<sup>250</sup> Sylla, now behind the camera, encourages Aminta to contemplate her reflection in a piece of mirror, which is clearly designed to echo Sylla's opening statement: 'Tu te regardes dans un miroir brisé'. The filmmaker solicits: 'Aminta regarde-toi [...] regarde-toi encore, je veux te filmer'.

others', where subjects serve 'less as a source of disinterested social scientific research than as a mirror or foil for the self' (2004: 216). Likewise, in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*, Diop turns to her relatives living in Dakar in order to engage in identity exploration. *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* reveals a singular interest in the hypothetical, in what Diop's life would have been had her parents not emigrated to Europe. The filmmaker's maternal relatives satisfy her curiosity regarding 'cette femme que j'aurais pu être, sans l'exil de ma mère' and 'une vie qui aurait pu être la mienne'. Diop positions her cousins as alter egos who help her to clarify her sense of self and, in Renov's terms, 'flesh out the very contours of the enunciating self' (2004: 228). In this sense, the film clearly operates as a domestic ethnography, 'a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other' (Renov 2004: 218). The largely interactive format of the documentary is designed to help Diop gain a better understanding of her relatives' daily lives, customs, beliefs and so on: 'Peut être avais-je besoin de venir voir mes tantes, pour essayer de comprendre ce que c'est qu'être une femme ici au Sénégal'. The staged masked interviews enable her to reflect upon her own circumstances, to determine what she shares with her relatives and the ways in which she is different.

The film undoubtedly investigates Senegalese womanhood, as the filmmaker announces early on in the film, but it also clearly exceeds ethnography. Diop demonstrates that her understanding of specific social or cultural phenomena is determinant in the act of uncovering and writing the self, in particular because of her mother's untimely death, which occurred when the filmmaker was a

young teenager.<sup>251</sup> It is immediately apparent that Diop turns to film in part as a response to a malaise, since she speaks of the ‘manque’ and of the breach in cultural transmission that resulted from her mother’s absence during her formative years. The filmmaker acknowledges that the film is oriented towards the self, that it is restorative and designed to address her incomplete sense of identity: ‘J’avais besoin de trouver des réponses à des questions que je n’avais pas eu le temps de poser. [...] J’avais besoin de faire le deuil de ce qui ne m’a pas été transmis par la mort précoce de ma mère’. The impulse to make *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* emerged following her trip to Dakar for her father’s burial in 2005, only two years prior to the making of the film, a trip during which Diop became intensely aware of her foreignness and detachment from her Senegalese origins. This sudden realisation triggered a desire to reconnect both with her Senegalese heritage and with those closest to her exiled mother, the women for whom she had felt a lifelong ‘nostalgie douloureuse’: ‘J’ai ressenti le besoin de me rapprocher d’elle [ma mère]. Il y a eu comme une urgence’. The filmmaker’s stay with her maternal relatives in Dakar — and the resulting film — are therefore predominantly intended to help her reassess her complex cultural legacy and come to terms with her orphanhood and sense of isolation, by situating her place within this extended family.

Diop’s and Mbeka’s autobiographical projects reveal a common urge to interrogate their postcolonial identities, to trace their lineage, and explore their cultural heritage. Mbeka admits in the film that her understanding of her

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<sup>251</sup> See Diop’s interview on *Cinéma d’aujourd’hui, cinéma sans frontières*, RFI, 23 August 2008.

parents' culture of origin is rudimentary: 'Mon père, très attaché à ses racines mais ne nous en ayant quasi rien transmis'. Much like Diop, she views cultural knowledge as essential to the autobiographical act. Uncovering her African roots is part of the incentive for Mbeka's entire cinematic work and is, likewise, an integral part of her autobiographical project. In *Fespakistes* (Kotlarski and Munch, 2001), Mbeka explains: 'Je fais des films pour retourner chez moi, pour me sentir bien chez moi, et chez moi c'est l'Afrique'.<sup>252</sup> With Mbeka, as with Diop, the autobiographical impulse originates in the disruption triggered by her parents' exile from Africa and is precipitated by bereavement, as the death of her parents severs the link with her African roots: 'Maintenant qu'il [mon père] est mort, j'ai décidé de faire ce film'. The documentary is rooted in her feeling of alienation from her origins and addresses the consequences of her parents' exile from the DRC in terms of her sense of self. When, in her concluding remarks, the filmmaker returns to this question of identity and heritage ('Nous nous éloignons sur les chemins du monde sans guides et sans repères'), she warns: 'Si tu ne connais aucun proverbe c'est que tu n'as pas écouté la parole d'un ancien'.<sup>253</sup> Both these assertions convey the importance of maintaining familial ties and existing structures of transmission, which are, according to Mbeka, essential not only for the collective, but also for the individual's sense of self.

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<sup>252</sup> Mbeka's other non-autobiographical documentaries on the DRC include *Revue en vrac* (co-directed with Fred Mongu, 1991), *Un Rêve d'indépendance* (1998), and *Entre la coupe et l'élection* (co-directed with Guy Kabeya Muya, 2007). One of these, *Un Rêve d'indépendance*, was broadcast on ARTE in 1998.

<sup>253</sup> This concern for the preservation of family history accounts for the centrality in the film of Dieka, a local figure particularly active in the conservation of collective history and practices.

Mbeka's 'quête des origines' is placed within a network of individuals, first since she claims to make *Sorcière la vie!* in part for the benefit of her siblings and offspring. Discussing her film with her brother Jean José, Mbeka suggests that her research may in time 'profiter à nous et à nos enfants', and Jean José announces: 'C'est un moyen, le film, pour moi, d'aller creuser un peu de ce côté là, comprendre ce que nos parents ont vécu quand ils étaient jeunes'. The interview with her brother establishes the film as a project that has a familial significance, similar to Diallo's autobiographical novel: 'Je sers aux miens de mémoire collective' (1975: 14). However, the film extends beyond the bounds of the familial, since Mbeka's personal search intersects with the trajectories of her subjects, most notably with the women of African descent taking part in an African dance class in Belgium, Sidonie Madoki and Joséphine Nzuzi, who, much like Mbeka, relate and regret their detachment from their origins. In the interview, they mention the necessities of integration, their parents' insistence that the French language, as well as Belgian history and culture, should prevail over their own in order for them to become fully integrated members of Belgian society. The presence of Jean José, Madoki, and Nzuzi in the film ultimately draws attention to the fact that Mbeka's experience is a collective one, one that is shared by many of the members of the African diaspora.

Both *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* and *Sorcière la vie!* convey the experience of women of African descent living in a cultural 'entre-deux' between Africa and Europe and struggling to come to terms with their complex cultural heritages. Diop deliberately foregrounds her complex status as a family member and cultural outsider to her relatives in Dakar, with whom she



ostensibly felt like ‘l’étrangère’ when she spent time in Dakar on the occasion of her father’s burial. Diop’s dual position as an insider and outsider was a determinant factor in the ensuing form of *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*. As a family member, she was granted privileged access into her relatives’ private lives, was able to film them as they carried out ritualised ablutions, and enquire into intimate details. However, as the filmmaker herself acknowledges, her gaze was clearly that of a foreigner: ‘J’ai vécu en France, je ne suis allée au Sénégal que trois fois, je ne parle pas wolof. J’ai donc regardé ces femmes avec la place qui était la mienne. Avec une distance, une extériorité, et j’espère, pas d’ethnocentrisme’ (in Pochon 2008). The role of Alioune Badara Thiam, aka Akon, the Senegalese-American R&B singer-songwriter, whose song ‘I Wanna Love You’ features diegetically in the film, is significant in this respect.<sup>254</sup> Akon is a popular figure in Senegal, where his wealth and global fame are a source of aspiration for the Senegalese youth.<sup>255</sup> Akon cultivates a strong interest in Senegalese affairs, maintains a noteworthy influence in local politics and a vested interest in the economy.<sup>256</sup> Nonetheless, Diop signals Akon’s inevitable partial detachment from Senegalese realities, notably by superimposing footage of the explicit dances performed by the ‘hip-hop

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<sup>254</sup> The song is played by Diop’s male cousins, who are filmed watching the music video, one of the few isolated instances in the film in which her male relatives appear on camera.

<sup>255</sup> Diop signals the appeal exercised by such wealth and lifestyle when she films the walls of the young men’s bedroom, which are lined with hundreds of images of cars cut out from magazines.

<sup>256</sup> Akon is a long-time supporter of president Abdoulaye Wade, has invested personal funds in ‘Sénégal Airlines’, and plans to provide funding for the construction of public buildings, including universities and a hospital. He was nominated ‘ambassadeur itinérant du Sénégal’ in January 2011. See <<http://www.senenews.com/2011/01/20/akon-kader-mbacke-cheikh-amar-et-les-autres/>>, <[http://www.seneweb.com/news/People/akon-construit-une-ecole-primaire-au-senegal-et-annonce-la-creation-d-une-universite-et-d-hopitaux-sur-financement-personnel\\_n\\_37331.html](http://www.seneweb.com/news/People/akon-construit-une-ecole-primaire-au-senegal-et-annonce-la-creation-d-une-universite-et-d-hopitaux-sur-financement-personnel_n_37331.html)>, and <<http://www.senenews.com/2011/01/07/akon-nomme-ambassadeur-itinerant/>> [accessed 16 August 2011].

honeys' in his video over footage of her own female relatives carrying out their daily chores in the courtyard where his music reverberates.

Akon therefore echoes the filmmaker's dual status as an insider/outsider. Diop's quality as a foreigner is apparent in the film, notably because of the language barrier that results from her lack of fluency in Wolof, and is emphasised by the division of the filmic space.<sup>257</sup> Unlike Sylla and Mbeka who frequently appear onscreen, alone or interacting with their subjects, and are thus inscribed physically in the profilmic cultural spaces through which they travel, Diop's exclusive presence behind the camera reinforces the divide between herself and her relatives. Simultaneously acting as filmmaker, camera operator, sound engineer, narrator, and off-screen subject, Diop is the only member of the filmmaking crew. As such, her sole presence behind the camera sets her apart from her female relatives, who exclusively inhabit the onscreen space.<sup>258</sup> This divide is particularly apparent in the last sequence of the documentary, during which the filmmaker accompanies her relatives to a family gathering to celebrate the baptism of a cousin's child. The interactive element of the film here recedes, as Diop does not enter into conversation with any of the women during the preparations or celebration. As they are filmed staring silently and somewhat uncomfortably towards the camera, Diop, now a total outsider, presents her concluding remarks in the extra-diegetic voice-over:

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<sup>257</sup> See, for example, her conversation with Mame Sarr — during which her cousin has to reiterate three times 'Je cherche du mari' — or her conversation with her aunt Diopi — during which she repeatedly asks her aunt: 'Tu t'arrêtes jamais de travailler toi?' The language barrier is further emphasised when Mouille complains: 'Mimi, il faut que tu te mettes au Wolof'.

<sup>258</sup> Diop reveals in an interview that she had trained one of her male cousins, Mohamed Thior, to act as a sound engineer. While he is credited at the end of the film as providing 'prises de son additionnelles', this is not apparent in the film. See Diop's intervention on *Cinéma d'aujourd'hui, cinéma sans frontières*, RFI, 23 August 2008.

‘J’ai pu mesurer ici tout ce que ne serions jamais mes sœurs et moi, tout ce que nous avons perdu par l’exil de ma mère, comme tout ce que nous y avons gagné’. These last words echo the film’s title, which suggests that while Diop may claim her Senegalese heritage, she does not align herself with her relatives: the filmmaker is clearly ‘Sénégalaise’, not Senegalese. Unlike the ending of *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, which marks a rebirth for Sylla, this last sequence of *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* confirms that while Diop made the film in order to explore ‘la femme que j’aurais pu être’, it does not in fact bring her closer to this hypothetical self.

Unlike Diop, Mbeka’s and Sylla’s respective presences in *Sorcière la vie!* and *Une Fenêtre ouverte* are not limited to the off-screen sphere. Both travel between the diegetic and extra-diegetic, onscreen and off-screen spaces. The division of the filmic space in *Une Fenêtre ouverte* and Sylla’s versatility and presence both in front of and behind the camera are particularly significant. Sylla shifts constantly between the various positions of filmmaker, narrator, camera operator, subject, and object: she is first heard as a disembodied narrating voice, situating her film and providing background information on her subject; she subsequently enters the filmic space, converses with Aminta from behind the camera that she is operating, and then appears on screen, alone and with Aminta. Sylla’s dual position in the film, which establishes her both as an object of the documentary gaze and member of the enunciating agency, echoes the filmmaker’s opening statement:

Tu te regardes dans un miroir brisé. [...] Ton visage est en miettes. Et celui qui te regarde dans le miroir brisé, il voit des morceaux d'images de ton visage. Lequel d'entre vous arrivera à reconstituer le puzzle? Peut-être n'êtes-vous pas du même côté du miroir.

The mirror is a prop that is often used in fiction films and writing as a metaphor for schizophrenia or madness.<sup>259</sup> Accordingly, the broken mirror here clearly communicates Sylla's fractured sense of identity: 'J'étais des fragments de Khady' and conveys the need for restoration and reconstitution. It is also employed here to set up an opposition between 'les malades', 'les fous' on the one hand and 'les normaux', 'les vivants' on the other (Sylla's own terms). Sylla's roles, both as subject of the film and member of the production team, echo her ambivalent position with respect to mental illness: the filmmaker is affected by madness, and yet — unlike Aminta — is also able to reflect upon her condition and communicate it efficiently to 'les autres', 'les normaux', her spectators.

Sylla's positioning as subject and observer disrupts the dualism at play in many documentaries, where the filmmaker and viewer are positioned as the standard against which the Other — the object of documentary investigation — is to be compared and judged.<sup>260</sup> Sylla identifies and names the Other, periodically

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<sup>259</sup> See, for example, *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), *À double tour* (Claude Chabrol, 1959), *Spider* (David Cronenberg, 2002), and *Secret Window* (David Koepp, 2004), as well as Calixthe Beyala's novel *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987). The mirror is also closely tied in with psychoanalysis, because of Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, which relates to the formation of selfhood and the recognition of the 'I'. Although the mirror stage has successfully been applied to fiction film studies, and while a psychoanalytic reading of *Une Fenêtre ouverte* may prove fruitful, this is beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>260</sup> As the following chapter will detail, this opposition between 'us' and 'them' is particularly strong in ethnographic documentaries.

alluding to ‘les autres’ in reference to those who have not experienced insanity: ‘Je voyais ce que les autres ne voient pas’, ‘l’autre a peur de vous’. Counter to potential expectations, the Other is not Aminta, the subject of the film and the person affected by mental illness, but the viewer, whose knowledge and understanding of the world is challenged. Rather than entertaining the notion of an inherent bond with the viewer — ‘celui qui te regarde’ — Sylla disengages with her audience: ‘Peut-être n’êtes vous pas du même côté du miroir’. This reversal of the dualism evokes the Brechtian ‘alienation effect’, discussed by Nichols in relation to the reflexive mode of documentary (2001: 128). This displacement of the Other is akin to the concept of making the familiar strange in order to heighten the viewer’s awareness of the constructed nature of documentary and problems of representation. This is the ‘fly-in-the-soup’ effect, thus named in opposition to the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ style of the observational documentary (Cooper 2006: 11). Although the film does not explicitly address common cultural or social perceptions of mental illness, since it prioritises a situated inside view of the disorder, *Une Fenêtre ouverte* is nonetheless politically reflexive. By identifying the viewer as the Other, Sylla encourages us to readjust our expectations of the historical world represented in the documentary, in particular our assumptions, understanding, or lack thereof, regarding the daily experience of being a sufferer of mental illness.

Sylla’s multiple and at times seemingly conflicting roles are of further significance, when confronted with Bruss and Lejeune’s claim that the narrating ‘I’ of written autobiography can find no equivalent in film. Bruss contends that ‘the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost

mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible; recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye)' (1980: 297). Lejeune similarly argues:

Le cinéma n'a en fait aucun moyen de fonder les deux aspects du sujet autobiographique, énonciateur et énoncé. Pas possible d'être à la fois des deux côtés de la caméra, devant et derrière, alors que la première personne parlée ou écrite arrive aisément à masquer que... je est un autre. (1987: 10)

In other words, Sylla exploits what Bruss sees as a 'failure' of film (1980: 297) to perform a self that is both multiple and unstable. In so doing, she promotes a contemporary view of identity as complex and shifting, while also evoking a fractured sense of self that is consistent with her projection of mental illness. Sylla ultimately counters Bruss's assertion that the validity of cinematic autobiography is threatened by the lack of unity, and demonstrates that film's propensity to convey an intricate view of identity can in fact enhance the autobiographical act: film is uniquely placed to explore the fluidity and complexity of identity.

*Sorcière la vie!* poses a similar challenge to Bruss's contention regarding the shortcomings of cinematic autobiography. Like Diop, Mbeka uses film to assert her identity as a woman living between two cultural spaces. Accordingly, Mbeka proclaims her dual origins early on in the film: 'Je suis née en Belgique. J'y ai grandi. Et, longtemps, cela n'a pas été évident pour moi de le dire. Si c'est une vérité, ce n'est qu'une partie de ma vérité, car je viens du Congo'. The filmmaker's sense of self — and ultimately the film — are

both the product of an interplay between the DRC and Belgium. This is more than just simply asserted by Mbeka in the voice-over, however: this notion of the interplay between the two countries is expressed formally in *Sorcière la vie!*, which is shot jointly in the DRC and Belgium and alternates repeatedly between the two countries. Mbeka makes use of expressive camera angles and movements as well as editing techniques to mix diegetic levels. For example, the first two minutes of the film take place in the DRC and introduce Docteur Dieka as a key figure in the documentary: ‘Mon histoire est comme celle du Docteur Dieka: arrimée au passé, mais ouverte au futur’. The image that follows is an unobtrusive high-angle shot of water, which the viewer naturally assumes has been shot on location in the DRC and is in some way connected to the preceding events. The shot is misleading, however, since as the camera tilts abruptly upwards it reveals an unexpected historical Western edifice beyond the stretch of water, the Musée d’Afrique Centrale on the outskirts of Brussels, which startles the viewer by its sheer contrast with the preceding images and expectations that they had generated. A similar deliberately misleading transition is observed fifteen minutes into the film, as close-ups of a black woman’s hands unfolding African wax print fabrics and tying her hair to the diegetic sound of percussions connect a sequence set in the village of Sethi-Vinda and the African dance class taking place in Belgium. In terms of the soundtrack, the diegetic voices, music, and other miscellaneous sounds from one sequence and location often overlap significantly with the following scene, and provide a sound bridge from one scene to the next.<sup>261</sup> For example, the sound of Mbeka’s car driving down a highway in the DRC travels from the

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<sup>261</sup> Gabara identifies the same mixing of diegetic levels in *Allah Tantou* (2006: 134).

penultimate scene in which it is captured over to the closing sequence of the documentary, shot in the Musée d’Afrique Centrale.

This latter sequence echoes the filmmaker’s geographical, temporal, and mental journey back and forth between Belgium and the DRC; through the DRC’s colonial past; her relatives’ personal histories; Docteur Dieka’s childhood, career, and troubled family life; and sorcery. Mbeka’s filmmaking practice in *Sorcière la vie!* effectively illustrates the notion that ‘autobiographical cinema constitutes a journey of the self’ (Russell 1999: 286), one that is not, however, solely geographic or temporal.<sup>262</sup> Like Sylla, Mbeka travels between the film’s diegetic and extra-diegetic spaces, appears on camera, alone or with her subjects, and addresses the viewer from the off-screen space. As Mbeka is established as a subject of documentary investigation, the film chronicles her journey of personal discovery. In addition, by creating such overlaps between the two countries, Mbeka emphasises the interplay between the DRC and Belgium in terms of her sense of self. As her textual practice mirrors her opening remarks regarding her complex origins, *Sorcière la vie!* reveals a clear concern for form and a search for a cinematic language that reflects the filmmaker’s identity. Like Sylla’s shifting cinematic presence, the effect of these production and post-production techniques sustains Bruss, Lejeune, and Russell’s assertion that the formal properties of autobiographical film make it likely to project its maker’s identity as intricate and convoluted, rather than as a homogenous and coherent entity. However, while Bruss finds fault with film for struggling to convey the unity

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<sup>262</sup> Mbeka herself remarks: ‘*Sorcière la vie!* c’est un trajet’. See her interview on *Cahiers nomades*, RFI, 1 December 2004.



of the subject, in *Sorcière la vie!*, Mbeka demonstrates that such a paradigm does not resonate with postcolonial identities such as her own, which are inherently multiple.

Mbeka uses film precisely to convey her dual identity as a woman of African descent born and raised in Belgium. The outward looking stance of *Sorcière la vie!* serves to interrogate how Mbeka's parents' experiences and distant cultures contributed to shaping her own identity, as she writes the self in relation to her complex cultural heritage. Her expressive editing foregrounds the experience of being the product of — and living between — two cultures, and sustains the notion of the self as culturally and historically constituted. Interestingly, unlike Diop, whose search is presented foremost as a familial one, Mbeka's film is inscribed in broader historical, cultural, and social phenomena. In particular, Mbeka considers the impact of colonisation in respect to the self: 'J'ai remarqué qu'au delà de tout ce que je pouvais faire ou dire, il y a une histoire préexistante qui connotait tous mes comportements et toutes mes actions', notably referring to 'le mur de malentendus qui à la fois sépare et unit Belges et Congolais'. Mbeka therefore positions herself as a subject embroiled in history, a notion central to Russell's concept of autoethnography (1999: 276). Unlike Mary Louise Pratt, who uses the term autoethnography to refer to indigenous ethnography, a filmmaking practice that will be the subject of the fourth chapter of this thesis, Russell focuses on issues of the self.<sup>263</sup> Russell's definition departs from the notion outlined by Pratt, as she places emphasis, not on the appropriation of the anthropological discourse

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<sup>263</sup> Pratt explains: 'If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations' (1992: 7).

by those who have traditionally been positioned as subjects of the ethnographic gaze, but on the autobiographical, the act of ‘placing oneself under scrutiny’ (1999: 312). Russell’s definition shifts from the notion of self-ethnography to that of ethnography of the self. As Russell notes, the maker of autoethnography is culturally, historically, and socially constituted: ‘Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes’ (1999: 276).

As Mbeka wishes to contrast her approach to sorcery with that of the men who compiled the official records gathered during colonial times, she foregrounds the fact that the ethnographic material featuring in her film has been gathered and interpreted precisely from this explicitly subjective viewpoint of an African woman born and raised in Europe. Mbeka therefore inscribes her subjectivity onto *Sorcière la vie!*, notably by exploiting the multiple levels and layers created by film. Not only does Mbeka travel between the different spaces of the film, acting as filmmaker, off-screen narrator, and onscreen subject; she also mixes and superimposes diegetic levels to draw attention to the mediated nature of the film. For example, the viewer witnesses shifts in time and location between a scene shot in the DRC showing a ceremonial event involving Dieka and Mbeka, and a study where the filmmaker is engaged in writing at a desk. The diegetic singing from the former scene travels seamlessly over into the latter, its sound properties changing as it does: the singing is still heard diegetically but is no longer in situ, since it is played back via a television monitor in the corner of the room. As Mbeka turns to face it, a

change in camera angle shows her intently studying the footage from the previous scene, before a subsequent shift in location and time takes the viewer back to the ceremony. In this particular sequence, Mbeka appears on screen in both diegetic levels, as she is seen on location gathering fieldwork material and later analysing this footage for the purpose of the film.

Mbeka's authorial subjectivity is also emphasised in the scenes that show her leaving the Musée d'Afrique Centrale, travelling by tram, and writing an email in an Internet café. During each of these three sequences, abrupt cuts punctuate the footage of Mbeka with shots of the written, photographic, and video documents gathered from Tervuren, and with excerpts of events and interviews featured earlier in the film. The interrupting shots are themselves highly edited and occasionally fundamentally altered. For example, some of the footage is accelerated and accompanied by a discordant musical score, and the subjects' voices resonate with an echo. Most interestingly, however, the historical documents appear on screen in a manner that reflects Mbeka's gaze. This can most clearly be observed in relation to a black and white photograph that portrays white men in suits standing facing black children in school uniforms. Rather than showing the photograph in full with a steady shot, the camera travels over it repeatedly, back and forth between the white men and the black children, movements of the camera that echo the movements of the filmmaker's own eyes as she examines the picture.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> A similar technique features in Peck's *Lumumba, la mort d'un prophète* (1991), where the camera circles around a photograph given to the filmmaker by his mother (Gabara 2006: 147).

Sylla also makes innovative use of form to convey her subjectivity. In the opening sequence of *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, the filmmaker situates her film vis-à-vis a project undertaken in 1994, over a decade before the release of *Une Fenêtre ouverte*. In the voice-over, Sylla explains that this early project, born of her fascination for ‘le nombre de fous errants dans les rues de Dakar’, was abandoned, as the existing footage was overexposed and therefore unusable at the time. Significantly, Sylla nonetheless recycles excerpts from this imperfect footage in her 2005 film, exploiting its flaws constructively to inscribe her subjectivity onto the film: ‘Malheureusement, ou fatalement, le film est surexposé, comme mon regard [...] sur le monde’. From the outset, using the striking quality of these images, the filmmaker places her subjectivity, both as author and as subject of the film, as key to *Une Fenêtre ouverte*. Although mental health is the central theme in both her 1994 endeavour and *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, there is a clear and significant shift in approach. While her early project appeared to be a socially-conscious documentary focusing on ‘eux’ (anonymous mentally ill homeless individuals), in her 2005 film, Sylla delves into the personal, addressing madness from within.<sup>265</sup>

The pursuit of aesthetic innovation is particularly salient in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, as Sylla uses form to represent a fractured sense of identity and seeks to achieve an aesthetic that complements her subjective personal rendition of mental illness. *Une Fenêtre ouverte* features multiple formal innovations and appears both simultaneously carefully prepared and yet essentially, and I would

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<sup>265</sup> This observation sheds new light on the distributors’ aforementioned reference to ‘une Afrique fantôme’. This is a possible reference to Michel Leiris’s novel *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934), which traces the author’s twenty-one month journey through Africa and in which the author’s personal impressions supersede the content of the logbook, just as Sylla’s subjective rendering of her illness prevails over the socially-conscious approach of her earlier film.

argue voluntarily, chaotic. It is immediately striking that Sylla does not seek to achieve stylistic seamlessness, nor does she attempt to mask instances of unsettling interactions with her subjects. The editing leaves apparent aesthetic imperfections as well as multiple interruptions and moments of tension that would normally be erased in order to provide a sense of integrity and achieve an impression of continuity. *Une Fenêtre ouverte* is an ambitious film that is formally innovative and engaging in its portrayal of madness, not least because of the unflinching and relentless quality of Sylla's practice in tackling an issue as personal as that of her own mental disorder. The film provides its audience with a complex experience and occasionally makes for uncomfortable viewing, in particular on account of the singular and sometimes disturbing onscreen relationship between Sylla and Aminta. While Sylla exhibits herself extensively in the film, both physically and emotionally, her onscreen presence is nonetheless self-instigated and controlled, unlike that of Aminta, who is at times (over)exposed to the viewer's gaze. Aminta shows confusion, hostility, and even anger in the film, in a manner that is reminiscent of Klaus Kinski's behavior in Herzog's *My Best Fiend* (1999): 'Ça suffit comme ça'; 'Pourquoi me posez-vous toutes ces questions, pourquoi me questionnez-vous?'; 'Le film, ça ne me dit rien. Je n'aime pas du tout qu'on me filme'; and 'Je n'ai pas envie d'être promenée. Je préfère rester à la maison. Quand je reste seule, tu [Sylla] ne me connais pas'.

In addition to the overexposure of Aminta, which is reminiscent of some of the issues raised in Chapter Two regarding Amy in *Le Monologue de la muette*, Sylla interrogates what qualify as cinematic imperfections. For example, rather

than masking evidence of the production process, Sylla unconventionally heightens its visibility, as is shown by the unconcealed presence of the apparatus and filming crew. During an interview between Sylla, Aminta, and her mother, an off-screen voice — presumably that of the sound engineer — is clearly heard interrupting filming to call for more silence off set, a disruption that not only remains post editing but is also translated from Wolof and subtitled for the viewer's benefit. Likewise, the movements of Sylla's own hand-held camera twice reveal the silhouettes of two members of the filming crew, a camera operator and a soundman. In view of the nature of the material used for filming and the position of these segments in the documentary, it seems unlikely that they would not have been deleted for cost or technical reasons. The provided translation of the sound engineer's request similarly tends to indicate that the exposure of these disruptions is not accidental or the result of carelessness: rather our attention is deliberately drawn to these interruptions. In addition, both Sylla and her camera operator use hand-held filming equipment, which results in frequent sudden camera movements as well as highly unsteady and slanted shots. Notable examples of this can be observed in the sequence that takes place in Sylla's bedroom, filmed simultaneously by Sylla and the filming crew. At this point in the film, Aminta is particularly restless, her behaviour becomes increasingly erratic as she paces the room hurriedly, mutters angry accusations regarding her mother, brother, and former husband, and repeatedly warns Sylla to stop filming. The visual quality of this sequence is particularly striking: Aminta's state of anxiety impedes the work of the camera operators, to the point where they struggle to

follow her movements and find their cameras obstructed by Aminta, who stands in the way of the lens.

Similar flaws can be observed in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*, since Diop simultaneously acts as the camera operator, sound engineer, and interviewer during filming, with occasional amateur help from one of her male cousins. As a result, the film periodically reveals Diop's difficulty with managing her multiple roles. An example of this can be observed in the sequence during which Diop's cousin Mouille and her friend Aissatou share intimate details regarding their sexual relationships. As Mouille and Aissatou playfully demonstrate their seduction strategies and explain how they use accessories and products to reinforce their sexual appeal, both women laugh and roll on the bed. At this point, Diop seems to struggle to manoeuvre both the camera and sound equipment, and experiences difficulty in maintaining her subjects in the frame and balancing the shots. This results in a number of imperfections: certain shots are poorly framed, the hand-held camera is shaky, and the overhead microphone is on one occasion inadvertently lowered, appearing in the frame.

The imperfect aesthetic of *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* offers an apparent guarantee of indexicality and heightens the credibility of documentary, since it presents the viewer with an image that appears authentic. Indeed, it is interesting to note that an unrefined aesthetic seems to guarantee the bond between representation and referent, according to what Bruzzi terms the 'inverse relationship between style and authenticity: the less polished the

film, the more credible it will be found' (2000: 9). This is most clearly exemplified by the 'grammar of the diaristic mode' (Jon Dovey in Beattie 2004: 124), as can be observed in *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* and *Une Fenêtre ouverte*.<sup>266</sup> Accordingly, the footage of Sylla, who is filmed in close-up as she recites excerpts from a text of her own composition, serves to provide a sense of immediacy. Filmed from her eyebrows to her chin, these shots emphasise the bodily manifestations of her illness, her facial muscle spasms, and her 'regard hagard'. Sylla also turns the camera from her face to her naked body and runs her own hand-held camera over her naked torso, lingering on the fatty tissue around her waist and the folds of skin under her chin.<sup>267</sup> These close-ups of Sylla's face and the quality of the image in the latter sequence, filmed using a Sony Handycam, are reminiscent of the visual style of video diaries, the effect of which is to generate an intimacy between the viewer and the filmmaker and give an impression of resolute disclosure and exposure.

However, Diop's and Sylla's films differ markedly, in that the production and postproduction of *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* reveal that the search for aesthetic innovation is subservient to Diop's subjects' revelations and to their interactions with the filmmaker. Diop places emphasis on the encounter and the accidental imperfections in her film serve mainly to provide the viewer with a sense of immediacy. Although the imperfect aesthetic in *Une Fenêtre ouverte* serves to testify to the unpredictability of documentary, as it results in part from the erratic behaviour of Aminta, it is also indicative of a highly

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<sup>266</sup> For a detailed examination of the video diary genre, see Beattie (2004: 105–24) and Renov (2004: 191–215).

<sup>267</sup> This is very similar to Varda's practice in her self-portrait, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000), where the filmmaker uses a hand-held camera to show the aging spots and wrinkles on her hands, and the white roots of her dyed hair.



complex performative form. Much like the silent black screen shots in Herzog's *Land of Darkness and Silence* (1971), which serve to convey the perceptions of the film's deaf and blind subjects, the unstable footage in *Une Fenêtre ouverte* can be interpreted as a material translation of Sylla's and Aminta's inner experiences of mental illness. The technique is consistent with Sylla's recycling of excerpts from the overexposed footage from her 1994 project, since in both cases the filmmaker uses visual imperfections to convey her subjectivity. The aesthetic chaos generated by her unconventional practice enables Sylla to inscribe madness formally, a feature that adds another dimension to the film, as Sylla's discourse thus permeates the image and exceeds the purely vocal. This is consistent with what Nichols would call a performative act, since he asserts that, in the performative mode, 'the referential quality of documentary that attests to its function as a window onto the world yields to an expressive quality that affirms the highly situated, embodied, and vividly personal perspectives of specific subjects, including the filmmaker' (2001: 132).

In her discussion of the performative documentary, Bruzzi criticises Nichols's definition of the mode on the grounds that he applies the term to films that simply emphasise the subjective nature of documentary (2000: 154).<sup>268</sup> Here, Bruzzi makes an important distinction between 'films that are performative in themselves and those that merely concern performative subject matter', and emphasises that films can 'straddle the two' (2000: 154). Films that are performative in themselves 'function as utterances that simultaneously both

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<sup>268</sup> For Nichols's definition see *Blurred Boundaries* (1994).

describe and perform an action’, a definition that Bruzzi shapes on the basis of works by John L. Austin and Judith Butler (2000: 154). In *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, Sylla describes madness to the viewer in the voice-over: ‘C’était le vide, je délirais, je monologuais à haute voix [...] je me sentais me dissoudre dans la lumière [...] je ne me sentais plus entière’. She also discusses its side effects on the body and the relational difficulties it entails, and emphasises her dependency on medication. In so doing, the filmmaker presents the viewer with a set of describable symptoms and effects. Simultaneously, however, Sylla fashions a documentary where madness penetrates the very structure of the film and composition of the image. Therefore, according to Bruzzi’s definition, as a film that both describes and performs madness, *Une Fenêtre ouverte* is performative in itself. While Sylla explicitly designed her film simply as a ‘une fenêtre que j’essaie d’ouvrir pour le public sur un monde très particulier qui est le monde de la maladie mentale’, she departs from a factual recounting, addresses the viewer emotionally and expressively rather than objectively, and ultimately challenges our expectation of how such a ‘fenêtre ouverte’ may operate.

The films discussed in this chapter are elaborate works of autobiography coupled with ethnography that address both personal and shared issues, are thought provoking and at times reflexive, and make for engaging viewing by challenging our perceptions of the self and questioning how documentary can operate. The filmmaking drive behind *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*, *Sorcière la vie!*, and *Une Fenêtre ouverte* distinguishes these three films from the rest of the corpus, since their makers share a common impulse to address

and redress an incomplete or threatened sense of self. The variations resulting from their respective cinematic approaches to this personal search show a complexity and depth in their choice and treatment of subject matter, ranging from Diop's and Mbeka's ethnographic interests in womanhood, lineage, and sorcery, to Sylla's inner ethnographic investigation into mental illness. As their filmmakers set out to gain and provide a better understanding of themselves, their origins, their environment, and their place within it, they position themselves as subjects and shapers of documentary representation. On account of their distinct cinematic presences, the viewer observes how Diop, Mbeka, and Sylla are personally affected by the making of their documentaries, and here, more than in any of the other films in this corpus, it is apparent that documentaries can transform their makers.

There is no doubt that these are successful autobiographical documentaries. Diop, Mbeka, and Sylla engage directly with questions of identity and selfhood, using both voice-over and form to convey their subjectivity. The aesthetic quality and composition of *Sorcière la vie!* and *Une Fenêtre ouverte* demonstrate a prominent and singular concern with form, something which is comparatively less central to *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*. Mbeka and Sylla use form to represent their split selves and sustain the notion that 'identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self [...] but a "staging of subjectivity" — a representation of the self as performance' (Russell 1999: 276). Contrary to Bruss's assertion that film, by its very nature, poses a threat to the autobiographical act, Mbeka and Sylla demonstrate that film may, in fact, represent a more effective means for representing complex identities and

subjectivities such as their own. In addition, Diop's, Mbeka's, and Sylla's films prove that African autobiography is possible, and that it tends to be more collective and outward-looking.

In all three films it is apparent that the filmmaker's approach 'entails but exceeds autobiography', a defining feature of Renov's domestic ethnography (2004: 228). As relational autobiographies that feature friends, relatives, or people and processes beyond the familial, the films call attention to dynamics between individuals and, beyond that, to cultural and social patterns. In so doing, the films offer models that exceed the bounds of individual portraiture. This outward looking stance does not impede reflection on the self but rather is posited as essential to introspection. For Diop and Mbeka, in particular, an understanding of the self can only be achieved if introspection is carried out within a specific cultural context. Although the parallels that have been established with the notions of domestic ethnography and autoethnography suggest that the films discussed in this chapter can be related to global trends in documentary, these singular autobiographies also point to the emergence of a specifically African autobiographical documentary practice. This is sustained by the relational autobiographies of Achkar, Sissako, and Mora-Kpaï, which are self-reflexive but also question what qualifies as ethnographic knowledge and how it is conveyed. This reflection on ethnography will be pursued in the following chapter, which focuses on some of the issues raised in relation to Mbeka's *Sorcière la vie!*, notably the cultural appropriation carried out by anthropology and the resulting politicisation of indigenous ethnography.

## CHAPTER FOUR – ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTARY

The physician Félix-Louis Regnault's untitled 1895 film showing a Wolof woman making pots at the Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale is widely held as marking the start of the use of film in the field of anthropology (de Brigard 1995: 15). Regnault's unnamed documentaries are labelled as ethnographic because, unlike some of his precursors and contemporaries, such as the Lumière brothers and George Méliès, his grounds for employing the cinematic apparatus were that it was a tool capable of recording human events for the purpose of future analysis (MacDougall 1998: 179).<sup>269</sup> The physician's interest in the properties of film was motivated by his new-found enthusiasm for anthropology and clearly derived chiefly from scientific pursuits: Regnault's specific interest pertained to the study of the physiology of ethnic groups (de Brigard 1995: 15).<sup>270</sup> As a result, the film is deemed to be a seminal work of visual ethnography, a field of cultural anthropology where (audio)visual media, namely photography, film, and information technologies, are considered as systems capable of inscribing cultural patterning, as (audio)visual accounts of cultural systems.<sup>271</sup> Regnault's pioneering film was seen as adding to, and in some respects improving upon,

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<sup>269</sup> As outlined in Chapter One, the Lumières were concerned with the technical feat of reproducing reality, while Méliès was interested in the artistic and entertaining potential of the moving image.

<sup>270</sup> For further information on Regnault's motivations, see Ukadike (1994: 46).

<sup>271</sup> Ethnography is distinct from ethnology, which is a parallel branch of cultural anthropology that deals with the study of cultures and ways of life through first or second-hand observation. While ethnography consists in a descriptive account of cultural patterning, ethnology is analytical.

existing discursive ethnographic practices such as writing.<sup>272</sup> Having built new bridges between the then separate disciplines of anthropology and filmmaking, the film stands as a landmark in both fields.

That the subject of Regnault's film is a Wolof woman is particularly significant when considered in the context of this thesis. The focus of this fourth chapter is the direct result of the evolution of African women in the field of ethnographic filmmaking, since they have shifted from being positioned exclusively as objects of the anthropological gaze to shapers of ethnographic knowledge. Women filmmakers from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa have, since the 1970s, produced a significant number of films that hold ethnographic value. This chapter will explore a selection of this body of work and will focus on the specificities of African women's practice of ethnography, considered in the light of conventions widespread in traditional ethnography. Close readings of eight films will reveal how ethnographic knowledge is gathered and presented, and explore whether the films in this corpus develop existing trends or rather break with conventions in a meaningful manner. We will also consider whether there are significant similarities and/or variations between the films, all made by directors who share both gender and a Francophone sub-Saharan African origin. Emphasis will be placed on the notions of formal and political reflexivity and on some of the ideological problems inherent in ethnography, namely 'the power relations inscribed in [the] construction of "self" and "Other", the representational frames and discourses utilized, and the locating of "authority"' (Scheinman 1998: 188).

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<sup>272</sup> As explored in Chapter One, documentary was long considered a particularly adequate and efficient tool for the observation of cultural, social, and historical phenomena. As a result, it seemed to offer a solution to the representational crisis of anthropology (Crawford 1992: 66).

The ethnographic gaze involves condensing a culture or elements of a culture: Timothy Asch suggests that the purpose of ethnographic documentary is to ‘capture the essence of the people, their passions, their fears, their motivations’ (1992: 196). Such an exposure of documentary subjects naturally raises ethical questions regarding consent, authority, the accountability of the filmmaker as an interpreter, and exploitation.<sup>273</sup> The potentially exploitative nature of ethnography recently came to the fore as a result of the controversies that surrounded two contentious television programmes: *Den Stora Resan* (The Great Journey), commissioned in 2009 by the Swedish channel SVT1 and labelled ‘ethno-pornography’ by the Swedish newspaper *Expressen*; and *Les Caméléons*, produced in 2006 by Endemol for France 2 but scrapped before it was broadcast due to pressure exercised by the Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l’Homme and the Ligue des droits de l’homme.<sup>274</sup> These recent controversies, which demonstrate the potentially exploitative nature of ethnography, resulted from the highly problematic conjunction of ethnography and reality television, which is frequently accused of flaunting ethical codes of conduct and moral standards in its pursuit of ever more novel and compelling

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<sup>273</sup> The parallel made here between ethnographer and interpreter is designed to emphasise the act of making cultural patterning available and intelligible to audiences.

<sup>274</sup> *Den Stora Resan* is an eight-episode series that documents the stay of three Swedish families in rural villages in Namibia, Indonesia, and Vanuatu respectively, and which uses the local communities as an exotic backdrop for reality television. The show rapidly became the source of a polemic regarding allegations of exploitation. Human rights groups accused the producers of underpaying the host participants and of failing to respect lawful conditions for signing contracts with the Namibian hosting community, as they presented the contract to the illiterate village elder rather than to a legal practitioner. See <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=murmure&no=5182>> [accessed 13 November 2011]. *Les Caméléons* was to chronicle the stay of six individuals among threatened rural communities, including the Hadzabe of Tanzania. For further information, see <<http://www.acrimed.org/article2394.html>> [accessed 13 November 2011].

forms of entertainment.<sup>275</sup> However, all ethnographic productions face similar ethical pitfalls, most notably exploitation and appropriation. In view of the power relations at play in ethnographic documentary, it is interesting to consider the level of awareness and caution exercised regarding questions of ethics by African women filmmakers.

This chapter will examine two of Safi Faye's early films, *Kaddu Beykat* (1975) and *Fad'jal* (1979), along with Khady Sylla's *Colobane Express* (1999), Katy Léna Ndiaye's *Traces, empreintes de femmes* (2003) and *En Attendant les hommes* (2007), Angèle Diabang Brener's *Mon Beau Sourire* (2005), Gentille Assih's *Itchombi* (2006), and Rama Thiaw's *Boul Fallé* (2009). It is immediately striking that among these films only those by Faye, who has been absent from filmmaking for over a decade, date back further than the turn of the twenty-first century. Women filmmakers from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa made few ethnographic films during the 1980s and early 1990s, aside from a few exceptions, such as *Falaw* (Hima, 1985). While there were still few active women filmmakers during the 1980s, the 1990s were dominated by civic-minded films that set out to raise consciousness about social issues and were dedicated to bringing about change, as detailed in Chapter Two. The last decade, on the other hand, has witnessed a proliferation of films focusing on cultural rather than social phenomena. As such, ethnographic documentary

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<sup>275</sup> Among the many ethically problematic reality television programmes, *De Grote Donorshow* (The Big Donor Show), broadcast in 2007 on the Dutch channel BNN, is amongst the most unsettling. With the proclaimed aim of promoting donor transplants to counter the Netherlands' lack of organ donors, the show breached rules of bioethics by making contestants compete for the kidneys of a terminally ill woman. For further information, see <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6699847.stm>> [accessed 13 November 2011].



filmmaking by women from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa is very much a contemporary and flourishing practice.<sup>276</sup>

Faye, a former schoolteacher who came to filmmaking following her meeting with Rouch at the 1966 Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in Dakar (Pfaff 1988: 115), was a pioneer in this respect, as in many others. After playing the part of Safi in *Petit à petit* (Rouch, 1971), Faye went on to launch her own filmmaking career with films that were strongly inflected with her interest in ethnology.<sup>277</sup> Having completed the shooting of *Petit à petit*, Faye enrolled at the Louis Lumière school and at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne), later obtaining a doctorate in ethnology from Paris VII in 1979 (Ukadike 2002: 29). Faye's early films were well received by French viewers and critics: in 1976 *Kaddu Beykat* was shown at Cannes and won the George Sadoul Prize, the International Critics Award at the Berlin Film Festival, and a special award at the FESPACO (Ukadike 2002: 29). As a pioneer who distanced herself from filmmaking in the late 1990s, Faye is remembered today for her innovations in ethnographic filmmaking, not least her works of ethnofiction and indigenous ethnography. It is interesting to note that Faye's films are widely received as ethnographic even though most of them openly blend fiction and documentary,

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<sup>276</sup> Other recent examples of ethnographic documentary by African women include *Gabil, le pagne magique* (Aïcha Thiam, 2005), *Dans le miroir du fleuve* (Kouassigan, 2008), *Le Culte des crânes* (Francine Kemegni, 2008), and *Ndoû, le culte des crânes* (Hortense Fanou Nyamen, 2009). Unfortunately, I have not been able to see any of these.

<sup>277</sup> Although Rouch introduced Faye to filmmaking, she is keen to minimise his influence on her work, objecting to 'l'impression que l'Africain il ne peut rien faire sans être chapeauté. Rouch n'a jamais dit que c'est à cause de lui que j'ai fait des films, je ne l'ai jamais dit, mais ici les gens racontent n'importe quoi'. See Faye's intervention at the 32nd Festival International de Films de Femmes in Créteil (April 2010), <<http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/05/safi-faye-role-model.html>> [accessed 30 July 2010] and her interview on *Staccato. Vingtième festival international de films de femmes de Créteil*, France Culture, 9 April 1998. Faye is also critical of Rouch's work, having openly proclaimed her dislike for *Petit à petit*: 'C'est finalement devenu un film qui ne me plaît pas. [...] Parce que je le trouve naïf, un peu bête!' (in Haffner 1982: 63–4).

as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five. Faye herself emphasises the anthropological stance of her early films: ‘D’abord, je fais de l’ethnologie. [...] C’est lors d’une enquête que j’en suis venue à faire un film’ (in Welsh 1983: 149). Her films condense the personal and historical, and convey both ethnographic knowledge and a subtle political commentary, primarily about Senegal’s agricultural policies and disregard for rural populations. The camera records the repetitions of mundane daily tasks as well as traditions surrounding birth, death, and the change of seasons in Faye’s own rural Serer community, located in the south-west of Senegal: ‘Je montre également la vie de mon village, sa quotidienneté, le rythme lent, typiquement africain’ (in Maupin 1976: 77).

Following Faye’s relatively high-profile entry into filmmaking, many less well-known women filmmakers from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa have produced documentary films that convey ethnographic knowledge, whether centrally or peripherally. Although Faye is the only filmmaker in this corpus to label her films as ethnographic, cultural patterning is equally central to Ndiaye’s *Traces, empreintes de femmes* and *En Attendant les hommes*, which, as detailed in Chapter Two, focus on the exclusively female art form of wall painting in Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Diabang Brener’s short film *Mon Beau Sourire* similarly concentrates on women, as it deals with an exclusively female aesthetic practice: an embellishment that consists in artificially darkening gums to emphasise the whiteness of teeth, achieved by altering the natural pigment, using metal needles or thorns and a black, grey, or blue dye. Assih’s *Itchombi*, on the other hand, follows the filmmaker to a village of the

Kéran region in northern Togo, where preparations are being carried out for the annual circumcision of adult men, an unusual topic for a Francophone sub-Saharan African woman filmmaker.<sup>278</sup> The film combines footage of the celebrations surrounding the circumcisions, footage of the procedure itself, and interviews with the villagers about health, particularly modern medicine and the prevention of disease and infection. Thiaw's *Boul Fallé* similarly focuses on the realm of male activity, as she explores the revival and transformations of traditional wrestling in suburban Dakar, in parallel with other forms of expression, in particular rap music. Thiaw here emphasises the cultural significance of wrestling for those of her generation who grew up during a period of political disillusionment following the initial optimism brought about by Senegalese independence. Thiaw innovates with what the sound engineer and producer of the film, Philippe Lacôte, terms 'une esthétique urbaine' (in Pochon 2009a), which relies on dynamic filming and editing. Significantly, *Boul Fallé* and Sylla's *Colobane express*, which chronicles a day in the life of the driver, 'apprenti', and 'coxers' of a Dakar express coach,<sup>279</sup> are the only two films discussed in this chapter that are set in an urban environment.<sup>280</sup>

Apart from Faye, whose films are motivated by anthropological concerns, the filmmakers whose work is discussed in this chapter do not adopt a scientific approach to their subjects. Unlike Regnault, they do not record individual or communal behaviour for the purpose of future analysis, which raises questions

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<sup>278</sup> Another notable example is *Diola Tigi* (Senghor, 2008) a documentary that delves into the 'bukut', a similar rite of passage into manhood practiced by the Diola people.

<sup>279</sup> Both 'apprenti' and 'coxer' are commonly used terms in Senegal. 'Apprenti' is defined as 'receveur dans les cars rapides et petits cars de transport interurbain' (N'diaye-Corréard 2006: 39), and 'coxer' as 'rabatteur chargé d'attirer les clients et d'organiser le départ des taxis et des cars dans les gares routières et aux arrêts' (N'diaye-Corréard 2006: 152).

<sup>280</sup> The location in *Mon Beau Sourire* is not specified and cannot be inferred.

regarding how we should characterise ethnographic documentary. The understanding that Regnault's film instigated cinematic ethnography derives from the dominant perception of the medium. Beattie provides such a seemingly elementary definition of ethnographic filmmaking, which he characterises as an anthropological cinematic endeavour, 'the practice of fieldwork in the study of cultures and the outcome of the fieldwork process, a report on the fieldwork experience' (2004: 44). Beattie's definition places the locus of inscription of ethnographic knowledge firmly in the realm of intention, which implies both that the film is invariably conditioned by a desire to convey cultural patterning, and that its reception is informed by an expectation that the film is primarily a vehicle for such material. The parameters contained in the definition provided by Beattie are therefore somewhat restrictive and do not acknowledge the active role played by the viewer. As detailed in Chapter One, viewers read and decode films on the basis of their 'socially acquired expectations' (Ruby 2005: 212) and cultural understanding of the medium and of the material encoded within. The outcome varies, depending on multiple factors, including race, gender, and geographical location. According to Stuart Hall's 'margin of understanding', the active process of reading cultural products by specific audiences results in a myriad of individual interpretations, each varying from the preferred meaning devised by its author (Lodge and Wood 2008: 581). Within the context of this chapter, Hall's margin of understanding allows for the likelihood that a designated viewer may encounter knowledge that she perceives as ethnographic, while the filmmaker may not have purposefully devised her film as a bearer of such information.

Marcus Banks introduces the possibility that the ethnographic label may not be solely attributed to films that are projected as such, but rather that two additional angles should be considered, namely the ethnographic 'event' and the ethnographic 'reaction' (1992: 117). Banks's analysis of the essence of ethnography is tripartite: it takes into account the three stages of film, namely its planning, production, and reception, and acknowledges that ethnography may derive from one or more of these stages. For instance, if the focus of the film or the methodologies used accord with an anthropological agenda, the event, in other words the film as text, can be qualified as ethnographic (1992: 123). If prizes are won at ethnographic festivals, if a film is included in ethnographic film libraries, if a critical response reveals expectations of ethnography, or if ethnographic insight is deemed to have been provided, the reception and viewing experience recognise ethnographic content (1992: 124–6). Although Banks acknowledges event and reaction as complements to intention, they are not, in his view, unproblematic. In particular, Banks is sceptical of the validity of the ethnographic reaction, which is based on factors other than 'pure ethnographic quality' (1992: 125), namely biased and partial human appreciation.

Contrary to Banks, who is sceptical of the validity of reaction, I advocate a definition of ethnographic film that shifts the moment of formation from intention to reception. This echoes the work of Wilton Martinez, who recommends that we 'move from the dominant author-text to a theoretical consideration of the viewer/reader as a powerful source of significance in the construction of anthropological knowledge' (1992: 132). Emphasising reaction

rather than intention or event recognises the complex relationship between ethnography and film. While Beattie's definition indicates that ethnographic content is inscribed centrally in film as a result of intention, this chapter will demonstrate that this is not always the case. Ethnographic content can be inscribed peripherally in film, and knowledge of this nature may emerge as a by-product of other filmmaking intentions, since not all films conveying ethnographic phenomena are made on the basis of a scientific rationale. For instance, although Regnault's film is widely identified as a ground-breaking cinematic ethnography, it could be argued, for example, that the Lumière brothers' *Sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon* and *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat* (both from 1895) also hold ethnographic value. A definition of ethnographic film that relies on reception — as this thesis argues — implies that all films, including fiction films, contain ethnographic knowledge, since, as argued in Chapter One, all cinematic works display elements of the culture of its maker and subjects.<sup>281</sup>

Whether or not the films examined in this chapter were intentionally produced as ethnographic or made following explicitly anthropological methods, they become vehicles for ethnographic knowledge upon reception.<sup>282</sup> As such, ethnography is inherently subjective and dependent, among other criteria, upon expectations and cultural knowledge, or lack thereof. The reception of *Mossane* (1996), Faye's fiction film that portrays the struggle of a young woman against arranged marriage, is clearly cautionary in this respect. As

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<sup>281</sup> Accordingly, de Brigard maintains that the hybrid 'documentaires romancés', which made their appearance in 1914, hold ethnographic value, since they are set against a backdrop of genuine village life (1995: 18).

<sup>282</sup> Popular methods for collecting ethnographic data include participant observation and interviews. For further information, see O'Reilly (2005).

Thackway rightly remarks, the film is both a continuation and departure from Faye's ethnographic work (2003a: 154). Much like *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, *Mossane* is structured around a narrative and portrays numerous, varied, and detailed ceremonies.<sup>283</sup> As a result of these similarities, as well as Faye's background in ethnology and her earlier films, *Mossane* was widely perceived as condensing ethnographic knowledge of cultural practices proper to the Serer region. This led Faye to staunchly 'defend' the film's fictional quality during the 1997 Cannes film festival and the FESPACO, a point which she further emphasises in a contemporaneous interview with Barlet: 'Dans *Mossane*, les cérémonies, je les ai inventées et elles n'ont rien à voir avec mes études d'ethno' (in 1997a).<sup>284</sup> The misconception arose in part as a result of expectations placed on Faye's filmmaking practice, as well as of a lack of knowledge of Serer cultural systems by the viewers present at the Cannes and FESPACO press conferences.

Significantly, as the reception of *Mossane* illustrates, such gaps in knowledge of cultural norms and attitudes pre-dispose a viewer to receive certain films as containing ethnographic knowledge. Unfamiliarity is by no means a prerequisite for ethnography but its influence on the nature of reception must not be overlooked. The distance between subject, maker, and viewer clearly impacts on the making and reception of films that portray foreign civilisations.

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<sup>283</sup> Is it interesting to note that Thackway stipulates that the film is more 'aesthetically "polished"' than Faye's other films, which is, in her view, an indication that the film is a "'traditional" fiction' (2003a: 154). Thackway's statement confirms Bruzzi's assertion regarding the inverse relationship between style and authenticity (2000: 9), explored in the previous chapter in relation to Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* and Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte*.

<sup>284</sup> See Ellerson (2004: 198–200) for a transcript of the press conference that followed the screening of *Mossane* at the FESPACO. It is important to emphasise that the film does include a number of references to genuine Serer beliefs and practices, most notably the 'Pangool' divinities.

Early ethnographic documentary was predicated upon this distance between the observer, shaper of the ethnographic discourse, and the studied culture, since both ethnology and ethnography were for a long time exclusively concerned with non-Western cultures. As a result, the observation and study of foreign phenomena were long considered to be the basic purpose of both disciplines. Regnault's 1895 film is therefore emblematic of early ethnographic documentary, since it exemplifies the dynamics of authority then widespread in ethnography, a medium predominantly employed by Western men for the portrayal and study of foreign cultures.

The field of visual anthropology has undergone significant changes since Regnault's 1895 film. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Africa became the focus of a well-documented fascination with the Other.<sup>285</sup> As filming equipment became more compact, facilitating travel and location filming, many documentary and fiction films were produced on the 'dark continent' after independence, notably as part of the 'cinéma colonial' discussed in the Introduction.<sup>286</sup> *La Croisière noire* (Léon Poirier, 1926), made during the expedition of the same name, led by Georges-Marie Haardt and Ariane Audouin-Dubreuil between 1924 and 1925, is one of the first and most influential films shot in Africa during the first quarter of the twentieth century. As the progress of Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil's journey across Africa was

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<sup>285</sup> Josephine Baker famously capitalised on this fascination, in particular in her dance routine 'la danse sauvage', also known as the 'banana dance', performed in *La Revue nègre* in 1925. Indeed, 'her popularity in the 1920s and 1930s undeniably depended on her exploitation of French exoticist impulses' (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 107). Another notable example of the manner in which Africa was built into the French 'imaginaire' is found in the Expositions Coloniales. For more information, see Ezra (2000) and de la Guérivière (2001).

<sup>286</sup> See in particular *L'Atlantide* (Jacques Feyder, 1921), the highest grossing French film of the 1920s (Ezra 2000: 3) and *Itto* (Jean Benoit-Levy and Marie Epstein, 1934).



extensively relayed by the media in mainland France, the film drew vast audiences upon its release in 1926 and rapidly became a cultural icon (Murray Levine 2005: 87). The film was re-edited in 1984 by the Citroën Company,<sup>287</sup> in order to attenuate the colonial discourse and propaganda with which the initial film was greatly imbued: ‘All colonial references [were] erased from the commentary, and many scenes simply excised altogether’ (Murray Levine 2005: 94).<sup>288</sup>

In addition to films that consciously or unconsciously served as vehicles for colonial propaganda, prevailing practices in early ethnographic documentary include ‘salvage’ or ‘redemptive documentary’ and ‘ethnographic taxidermy’, practices that derive from a sense of duty to record cultures perceived as vanishing under the influence of modernisation (Beattie 2004: 48).<sup>289</sup> Beattie rightly equates such practices with the confiscation of African artefacts (2004: 47–50),<sup>290</sup> now conserved and displayed in Western museums where they are divorced from their context, a practice famously challenged by Resnais and Marker in *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1953).<sup>291</sup> Beattie sustains the analogy

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<sup>287</sup> René Citroën famously financed the operation and provided the ‘autochenilles’ used during the expedition as part of the high-profile promotional campaign for the Citroën Company, which now holds the rights to the film.

<sup>288</sup> The references to ‘barbarous’ traditions and ‘strange little gnomes’ were removed, along with the many shots of the French flag that were designed to generate patriotic sympathies (Murray Levine 2005: 94). In addition to promoting the Citroën Company, the film was intended to demonstrate the technical and cultural superiority of the French, in particular over the ‘primitive’ inhabitants of the African continent.

<sup>289</sup> One of the most famous examples of salvage ethnography is Flaherty’s docufiction *Nanook of the North* (1922).

<sup>290</sup> The pillage of artefacts is not restricted to sub-Saharan Africa, as is demonstrated by the disputes over the five Egyptian frescoed fragments, formally held at the Louvre and returned to Cairo in December 2009, and over the Parthenon sculptures, otherwise known as the Elgin marbles, which were taken from the Acropolis in Athens and are kept, to this day, by the British Museum in London.

<sup>291</sup> The extent of the appropriation is particularly conspicuous when comparing the collections held at the slightly forlorn Musée Théodore Monod d’Art Africain in Dakar with those of the

between salvage ethnography and the appropriation of artefacts by suggesting that both derive from an inability to rely on the community that produces culture to preserve it or to safeguard its memory, and from an unwarranted sense of duty on the part of Western conservationists and ethnographers to assume this responsibility (2004: 48). A discourse that emphasises the divide between self and Other forms the basis of much early ethnographic filmmaking. As Beattie observes, ‘the tradition of ethnographic film, like ethnography itself, is deeply imbued with the “us” and “them” — self and Other — dichotomy and its attendant differential relations of power’ (2004: 45). Early ethnography is dominated by a rationalising and deconstructing gaze, which positions the filmmaker and viewer as observers, and members of the studied culture as a product to be consumed. Conventions in early ethnographic filmmaking tend towards the expository and a closed form of authority: the filmed communities are subjected to an omniscient voice and the distance maintained by ethnographers turns them into objects (Asch 1992: 197).

Some filmmakers intentionally subvert the excessive tendency in some ethnographic film to deconstruct cultural phenomena. For example, *To Live With Herds: A Dry Season Among the Jie* (David MacDougall and Judith MacDougall, 1974) seeks to disentangle anthropology from imperialism and alter dominant power relations (Beattie 2004: 50–60). *Cannibal Tours* (Dennis O’Rourke, 1987) and *And Still I Rise* (Ngozi Onwurah, 1993) are also arresting

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Quai Branly museum in Paris. This observation is based on my visit to the Dakar museum in September 2006. The Musée de l’IFAN, as it was then known, held only a very modest selection of simply displayed commonplace artefacts. The comparison with the imposing, diverse collection and elaborate presentation of pieces at the Quai Branly, which I visited around the same time, was particularly staggering.

and highly effective reverse ethnographies. The latter, inspired by Maya Angelou's poem of the same name, opens with a parody of the colonial ethnographic paradigm, an African woman contained by a disembodied authoritative voice-over, only to then reverse the ethnographic gaze of the white man (Foster 1997: 24–5). Likewise, in *Cannibal Tours*, O'Rourke turns the camera on unsuspecting European tourists visiting Africa, emphasises their grotesque behaviour and racist perceptions of Africans. The filmmaker's intention in so doing is clearly stated, since the opening sequence of the documentary is prefigured by the following quotation: 'There is nothing so strange, in a strange land, as the stranger who comes to visit it'.

Rouch is also famous for the changes that he sought to bring to visual anthropology.<sup>292</sup> His work has been much criticised, notably by Sembène who argued that, apart from in *Moi, un noir* (1958), Rouch treated Africans like insects in his films (Pearson 1973: 45). However, it was the reception of *Les Maîtres fous* (1954) that was most disparaging: Western audiences were shocked at the brutality of the ritual and criticism of colonial rule, and African audiences 'thought that Rouch's prolonged use of the camera for the psychological study of the Hauka members' gory ritual revealed an intractable racist perspective' (Ukadike 1994: 51). De Brigard adds that the film 'excited such strong reactions that both Europeans and Africans urged him to destroy it' (1995: 36). Although the film is, in parts, disturbing and problematic, it is also

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<sup>292</sup> Rouch is still much celebrated today: both a symposium and a retrospective were devoted to the filmmaker at the BNF in Paris in November 2009. See <[http://www.bnf.fr/pages/cultpubl/colloque\\_1191.htm](http://www.bnf.fr/pages/cultpubl/colloque_1191.htm)> and <[http://www.bnf.fr/PAGES/cultpubl/projections\\_audiovisuelles\\_1190.htm](http://www.bnf.fr/PAGES/cultpubl/projections_audiovisuelles_1190.htm)> [both accessed 6 November 2009]. In addition, in 2008, the name of the Bilan du Film Ethnographique was changed to Festival International Jean Rouch, in honour of its founder. See <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=murmure&no=5499>> [accessed 11 February 2010].

frequently misunderstood. It is important to acknowledge that the film was made ‘à la demande des prêtres, fiers de leur art’ and that Rouch sought to give a voice to the Haukas, so that they could communicate their perception of the colonial system.<sup>293</sup> Nonetheless, the scathing reception of *Les Maîtres fous* led Rouch to seek the collaboration of Africans in the making of subsequent films, a ‘cinema of collective improvisation’ that he tested with *Jaguar* (1967), an ‘ethnographic science fiction’ (de Brigard 1995: 36) made in collaboration with his friends Damouré Zika, Lam Ibrahim Dia, and Illo Gaouadel.

Rouch nonetheless remains a controversial figure. For example, in his documentary *Rouch in Reverse* (1995), Diawara wanted to do precisely the opposite of Rouch, reversing the observer and the observed:

I wanted to see if this idea of shared anthropology could give any insight into cross-cultural relations, relations between the powerful and the disempowered. I had to reverse my camera to film people like myself, metropolitan Africans, something Rouch rarely did.<sup>294</sup>

Diawara’s film epitomises the significant shift that has occurred within ethnography, which now functions irrespective of a distance between subject and maker. Ethnographic documentary no longer necessarily consists in an onscreen encounter with a foreign Other, rather filmmakers now also convey

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<sup>293</sup> As detailed in Chapter One, Scheinman argues that Rouch adopts a dialogic approach to his subjects in the film (1998: 197). Dovey even argues that the film is a covert reverse ethnography, since it portrays ‘un rituel [...] qui montre indirectement comment certains Africains se représentent notre civilisation occidentale’, as is explained in the prologue of the documentary (2009: 187–8).

<sup>294</sup> An extract of the film has been uploaded to YouTube by the film’s distributor, ThirdWorldNewsreel, and can be viewed at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQatAUm23Fo>> [accessed 13 May 2011].

ethnographic knowledge about the self, friends, family, or their own culture or sub-culture.<sup>295</sup> In the light of the conventions of traditional ethnography detailed above, the entrance of Francophone sub-Saharan African filmmakers into the field of indigenous ethnographic documentary emerges as a politically significant act.

Reflecting on the opening of the Quai Branly museum, Aminata Traoré, Mali's former minister for culture and tourism expressed the following: 'Je continue de me demander jusqu'où iront les puissants de ce monde dans l'arrogance et le viol de notre imaginaire' (2006). Traoré's quotation extends Beattie's aforementioned analogy in lending itself equally well to the appropriation of artefacts and cinematic misrepresentations. With this analogy in mind, indigenous ethnography stands as a re-appropriation of the African 'imaginaire'. Faye and Diabang Brener both started making films precisely because of the disequilibrium in representation: 'Jusqu'à présent, seuls les étrangers, qui ne parlent pas un mot de chez nous, ont écrit sur la culture africaine' (Faye in Maupin 1976: 80). Diabang Brener similarly claims: 'Depuis toujours, ce sont les autres qui viennent d'Europe ou d'Amérique pour filmer notre continent avec leur propre regard. Il est important que nous, Africains, nous prenions en main notre image et que nous montrions notre Afrique, une Afrique positive' (in Cachat 2007). The production of ethnographic films by African women is hence inherently political, since they write in response to, and often against, an outside gaze.

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<sup>295</sup> Ethnography is now interested in sub-cultures. See, for example, Rachela Colosi's (2010) ethnographic investigation into lap dancing.

Overall, the choice of phenomena represented in the films discussed in this chapter does not differ markedly from that of traditional ethnography, since these films focus on culturally specific ‘exotic’ practices: the impetus, protocol, and cultural significance of public male circumcision, gum dyeing, mural painting, or traditional wrestling in Senegal would be unknown or unfamiliar to the majority of those living in the Western countries where the films are most likely to be distributed. *Boul Fallé* and *Colobane Express* nonetheless stand out from this corpus in view of the urban environment in which the documentaries are set. Aside from the films of Thiaw and Sylla, which reflect the social change and urbanisation of Senegal, the documentaries discussed in this chapter all portray rural phenomena. This was for a long time the standard in ethnographic documentary, since cultural differences are arguably most apparent in rural communities. While there were few cities in Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, most countries have observed a massive rural exodus. According to Thiaw: ‘Sur 10 millions d’habitants, les  $\frac{3}{4}$  habitent Dakar et sa banlieue. Aujourd’hui, la société sénégalaise est une société urbaine’ (in Pochon 2009a). However, while the topics and settings themselves do not vary significantly from those of traditional Western ethnography, most of the films in this corpus are informed by an underlying or explicit form of political reflexivity. The scientific rationale of traditional ethnography here yields to a politically minded form of filmmaking that uses cultural phenomena to construct a discourse. Significantly, the films do not signal nostalgia for disappearing practices or call for the preservation and fixity of ways of life, as is the case with salvage ethnography. Although the films do in part address what Sharon A. Russell terms ‘themes that have generally

involved many African directors', which she identifies as 'the conflict between the past and present, between tradition and change' (1998: 58), these films celebrate change and generate reflection on the so-called conflict between tradition and modernity.

Accordingly, Assih's study of the practice of public male circumcision among the Solla people is clearly motivated by more than a purely anthropological agenda, since she generates an intentional reflection on the nature of tradition. The filmmaker's arrival in the village deliberately coincides with the spark of a vigorous debate regarding the potential implementation of new sanitary measures to protect the young men against infection: Assih introduced a disinfectant to the village leaders and suggested it be used to sterilise the implements and reduce the risk of complications (Amekudji 2010). Assih's concern is clearly to show that in rural villages, even those as remote as the one in which her film is set, practices are not static and tradition is not the polar opposite of modernity. On the contrary, Assih emphasises the flexibility and shifting nature of tradition in her concluding statement:

Tu vois quand j'étais petite fille, l'oncle de mon père me disait qu'un peuple qui oublie ses traditions est un peuple sans âme [...]. Mais les vieux ont fini par comprendre que pour résister au temps, le rituel du Itchombi doit s'adapter à l'évolution du monde. Et, depuis la fin de mon film en pays Solla, nettoyer les couteaux fait désormais aussi partie de la tradition.

Because of its graphic nature, the sequence showing the circumcisions themselves is naturally the pinnacle of the documentary. Assih noticeably

makes cautious and measured use of this powerful footage, which only amounts to just over seven of the total fifty-two minutes of film. In order to balance the potentially disturbing effects of this sequence, Assih emphasises the cultural significance of public circumcision: rather than simply focusing on the clinical procedure, *Itchombi* depicts each stage of the event, records the preparation of food and drink, the rituals surrounding the surgical instruments, musical and dance performances, processions, and so on. Assih thus situates the practice within a highly specific cultural environment and communicates that circumcision signals the entry of men into adulthood, is a source of pride for those undergoing the procedure, and a cause for celebration for the entire village. By documenting the preparations carried out before the circumcision, Assih is able to efficiently convey to the viewer the anticipation and tension experienced by the young men and their community, which in turn contextualises the joy and relief expressed by all after the event.

Diabang Brener and Ndiaye share with Assih this desire to convey a balanced view of practices that may appear brutal or simply outdated. Diabang Brener overtly expresses her frustration regarding the prevailing representation of African traditions in an interview with Céline Cachat: ‘Dans *Mon Beau Sourire*, je voulais parler d’une tradition africaine d’une façon moderne. En général, on classe les traditions comme archaïques’ (in 2007). This quotation is particularly interesting, for it can be read as signaling the filmmaker’s desire to alter the prevailing Western perceptions of a tradition, in this case the dyeing of gums, as well as the means by which such traditions are represented in the mainstream media. This is visible in the film in terms of both content and form.



*Mon Beau Sourire* is a short three-sequence documentary: the first and third are composed of portraits of women, while the longer middle sequence shows the dyeing of gums itself. Like *Itchombi*, which ends with a celebration where the circumcised are seen smiling and expressing their pride, *Mon Beau Sourire* opens and ends with shots of women smiling radiantly, including one of the filmmaker herself, who winks playfully at the camera. Like Assih, Diabang Brener does not attempt to mask the pain experienced by her subjects: the women utter groans of pain and frequently push away the beautician's hands.<sup>296</sup> Although clearly painful, however, the procedure itself is established as a mere parenthesis, since the filmmaker places her emphasis on its results. In so doing, Diabang Brener minimises what could otherwise be interpreted as the ritualistic or obsolete nature of the practice and implicitly equates the dyeing of gums with the painful aesthetic practices popular in the West, including body piercing, tattooing, and the many different forms of plastic surgery.

The film is more complex however, since *Mon Beau Sourire* is a poetic documentary that makes an expressive use of form. The film features very little dialogue and no vocal interventions from the filmmaker, but relies instead on dynamic editing, a forceful soundtrack, and a clever interplay between sound and image. Diabang Brener was trained as a film editor at the Dakar Média

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<sup>296</sup> Although this is not apparent in the film, since the women's eyes are covered with a cloth while their gums are tattooed, we learn from Barlet that the filmmaker is one of the two women who undergo gum dyeing in the film: 'La chose fait mal, à tel point que l'actrice qui s'était dévouée ne put supporter la douleur et se retira en cours de tournage malgré les enjeux. Angèle dut la remplacer au pied levé, belle métaphore pour cette cinématographie condamnée au courage pour exister'. See <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=3952>> [accessed 12 May 2011].

Centre,<sup>297</sup> and made the film as a personal experiment: ‘C’était d’abord pour moi: un test. En tant que monteuse, je me suis amusée’ (in Sizaire 2009). Diabang Brener’s many experimentations with form are manifest in the film: she alternates rapidly and frequently between medium shots, close-ups, and extreme close-ups, long and short takes. The footage is also accelerated in parts, for example when the beautician assembles and sterilises her needles and lays out her equipment in preparation for the tattooing. In terms of the soundtrack, the voice of the beautician is distorted and resonates with an echo, and there are stark switches between moments of marked silence, strong rhythmic percussions combined with groans of pain, and melodic tunes played on a stringed instrument. Different types of music correspond to different events: the portraits opening and closing the film are accompanied by gentle melodic Kora music by Yankoba, while the sequence where the gums are tattooed alternates between silence and forceful percussions by Abdoulaye Mbaye and Fatala, during which the rhythm of the percussions echoes the beat of the needles against the women’s gums. Diabang Brener’s aforementioned announcement (‘Dans *Mon Beau Sourire*, je voulais parler d’une tradition africaine d’une façon moderne’) is therefore clearly echoed in the film, since the filmmaker foregrounds the results of the procedure in order to compel her viewers to see gum dyeing in a new light, and simultaneously refashions ethnographic documentary by adopting the poetic mode and breaking with traditionally ethnographic codes. As a result, *Mon Beau Sourire* appears both politically and formally reflexive.

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<sup>297</sup> See, <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=5871>> [accessed 1 August 2011].

In *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, Ndiaye adopts a similar approach to Diabang Brener's blending of voices with musical instruments. Ndiaye called upon the Belgium jazz musician Erwin Vann, who used ambient sounds recorded during filming to create the soundtrack:

Le bruit des murs que l'on gratte, de la terre que l'on malaxe, des parois humides que l'on lisse, des pigments et des enduits que l'on applique sur les cases, les voix des femmes au travail... Le résultat est une musique forte, contemporaine qui forcément ne laisse pas le public indifférent. (Ndiaye in Hurst et al. 2003)

The complex and captivating soundtrack commissioned by Ndiaye is emblematic of the filmmaker's foremost concern with the aesthetics of her film, as is her use of warm natural light, her clever choice of backdrops for the interviews, and the many well-composed close-ups of the murals and materials used by the artists. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the paintings are a strong visual presence in both *Traces, empreintes de femmes* and *En attendant les hommes*: Ndiaye includes several shots of their paintings as they are being made and in their finished state, films them both in part and in full. These many varied shots effectively convey Ndiaye's appreciation of the paintings and admiration for the artists. However, her interest in this art form is by no means limited to its aesthetic quality. As the filmmaker explains:

L'idée de départ c'était: "Murs de femmes, paroles de femmes" à partir d'un livre de photographies qui s'intitulait *Africa paintings*. Margaret Costinlark, une femme du Zimbabwe qui avait fait le tour de l'Afrique des murs peints. Et

alors, il y avait pour moi cette frustration: c'était beau, c'était très esthétique. Mais il y a quoi de la parole et de la culture qu'il y a derrière. C'est ainsi que j'ai initié ce grand projet. (in Mansouri 2008)

Much like Assih and Diabang Brener, Ndiaye's intention in making a film about this traditionally female art form is to reflect upon tradition and modernity and counter reductive hegemonic perceptions about rural Africa and women: 'Je voulais casser des clichés sur l'Afrique en montrant la modernité que l'on peut trouver dans un village' (Ndiaye in Hurst et al. 2003). Ndiaye contravenes salvage ethnography by portraying the tradition of wall painting, not as threatened, as we might expect, by urbanisation and other major changes in lifestyles, but as a practice that is permanently renewed and continued with enthusiasm by women of different generations. By choosing to focus on Anétina, Khady, Massouda, and Tycha, women with strong personalities who are outspoken about details of their private lives, Ndiaye not only contributes to the rehumanisation of African women, as discussed in Chapter Two, but she also takes advantage of their strong personalities: by establishing a correlation between wall painting and these four admirable women, the viewer is likely to conflate the artists with their art. In so doing, Ndiaye also modernises our perception of the art form.

Ndiaye's focus on these four women is also interesting to consider in the light of conventions in traditional ethnography. The many interviews with Anétina, Khady, Massouda, and Tycha shift the viewer's attention away from the community as a whole and towards a few selected individuals, whose personal narratives are explored in greater detail. In so doing, the filmmaker counters

ethnography's traditional focus on the community at the expense of the individual. It is interesting to note that while this focus on the individual is a strong feature of the women-centred committed documentaries discussed in Chapter Two, it is comparatively less marked in the ethnographic films discussed in this chapter. Ndiaye's focus on these four women also occurs at the clear expense of their male relatives. *Traces, empreintes de femmes* and *En attendant les hommes* each feature a few isolated shots of men at work, walking through the streets, or occasionally in the home. Most of these are of silent and anonymous men, with the notable exception of Khady's husband, who is interviewed alongside his wife towards the end of *En attendant les hommes*. The noticeable imbalance that results from the omnipresence of women and the near total symbolic silencing of men could be read as a reaction against ethnography as a celebration of masculinity. According to Nichols: 'Ethnography's symbolic representation of power and authority centers on the male. The male as "man" — symbol of cultural achievement — is the star of ethnography, celebrated in close-ups as the talking informant [...]. The male stands in for culture and power' (1991: 217–8). Likewise, in his outline of the ethical guidelines for thorough and unbiased ethnographic filmmaking, Asch warns against the temptation to focus disproportionately on men and claims that 'having both men and women involved [...] will give you perspective on the activities of all members of the society you are studying' (1992: 198). It can therefore be argued that by focusing on 'herstories', Ndiaye transcends ethnography's celebration of culture as male.

Conversely, Thiaw focuses exclusively on masculinity, as she deals with the Senegalese national sport of wrestling, which is practiced exclusively by men. Of the seventy-one minutes of *Boul Fallé*, close to twenty-five are dedicated to footage of the wrestlers' training sessions and fights, where the men's impressive physique is emphasised by the use of lengthy low-angle shots and extreme close-ups.<sup>298</sup> This focus on the male body is not arbitrary or futile. Rather Thiaw designed these shots as a way of fighting hegemonic perceptions of male beauty — 'les modèles qui ne sont pas les nôtres' — and as an affirmation that: 'L'homme noir est beau' (in Cessou 2011). Thiaw does not only emphasise the men's impressive muscularity: her agenda also translates in terms of her unconventional treatment of light and colour. As the filmmaker explains:

On en a marre de voir toujours les mêmes coloris dans les films africains: du marron, des gens qui sont tous noirs de la même manière [...]. Nous avons travaillé autour des caméras pour changer la manière de filmer. On a désaturé certaines couleurs et saturé d'autres au tournage, sans faire l'étalonnage classique sur des feuilles blanches ou des peaux blanches, comme tout le monde fait dans la télé ou le cinéma. (in Cessou 2011)

The wrestlers featuring in the film, most notably Cheick Tidjane Nguer and Dam Sarr, are regarded as models and heroes in their impoverished Dakar suburbs, partly because they are successful sportsmen who have escaped from poverty, as did the Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho, for example, but also

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<sup>298</sup> The focus on the male body in the footage of the wrestlers' training sessions and tournaments is reminiscent of the wrestling sequence in Faye's *Fad'jal* and certain scenes in *Beau Travail* (Denis, 1999).

because they are important cultural and social agents. Wrestling has been practised for generations, in particular in the South West of Senegal, as Faye details in *Fad'jal*. However, wrestling was marginalised by the French under colonisation and, when it re-emerged following independence, it underwent radical transformations.<sup>299</sup> The sport's revival is attributed in large part to Mohamed Ndao, aka Tyson, a former wrestler whose emulation of American culture was the basis of his persona: Tyson frequently entered the ring wrapped in a flag of the United States — as can be observed in the archival footage that features in *Boul Fallé* — to signal France's loss of influence on the Senegalese youth. While it used to consist in yearly tournaments between villages, which were organised in the absence of physical work for the local young men during the dry season that follows the annual harvest, wrestling has metamorphosed into the Senegalese national sport. Matches are transmitted on television and eagerly followed by a large portion of the public, which has sizeable financial implications. The nature of the sport has also changed, since wrestlers now cultivate an element of showmanship and theatricality, not unlike professional wrestlers in North America. Wrestlers are therefore responsible for upholding and renewing a traditionally Senegalese practice, one that unites all members of Dakar's society: 'Toutes les classes sociales, tous les corps de métiers (et aussi du coup, ethnies) sont représentés dans l'arène. Dans le stade, il y a tout le monde' (Thiaw in Pochon 2009a). Thiaw emphasises the sport's significance when she makes an explicit comparison between wrestlers and warriors:

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<sup>299</sup> See <[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjfqol\\_rama-thiaw-a-propos-de-boul-falle\\_short\\_films](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjfqol_rama-thiaw-a-propos-de-boul-falle_short_films)> for footage of Thiaw's speech [accessed 9 September 2011].

Pourtant c'est d'ici, de nos quartiers misérables, que nous avons créé le mouvement Boul Fallé. C'est d'ici que nous les avons tous défié, des politiques aux marabouts. C'est d'ici de notre sable fertile, que la lutte s'est réincarnée pour redevenir ce que nous sommes: de nobles guerriers.

The association between wrestling and politics is furthered by the links between wrestling and the Boul Fallé movement, a term which means 'se foutre de tout et tracer sa route' in Wolof. The movement was born in 1988 when the Senegalese youth, 'la génération des vulgaires', took to the streets to protest against President Abdou Diouf's re-election in the parliamentary elections.<sup>300</sup> Alternative politics is central to the film, which opens with an impassioned speech by Didier Awadi, member of the Positive Black Souls and leader of the Boul Fallé movement, given to students at the Cheik Anta Diop University in Dakar. As Awadi is introduced to the audience in the lecture theatre, the speaker announces: 'Nous sommes sénégalais. Nous sommes les enfants de Thomas Sankara, [...] de Lumumba, et de Mandela'.<sup>301</sup> By citing these iconic political figures, who, through personal sacrifice, fought for democracy and against corruption and foreign interference, the film places the Boul Fallé movement and wrestling in alignment with their actions.

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<sup>300</sup> Hip-hop bands, including the Positive Black Souls, later worked towards mobilising the younger generation of voters in view of the 2000 Senegalese presidential elections, when Wade successfully became political leader of the country.

<sup>301</sup> Sankara, often nicknamed 'the African Che', was the much-revered president of Burkina Faso between 1983 and 1987, until he was overthrown and murdered upon the orders of the current president, Blaise Compaoré. Patrice Lumumba was the first Prime Minister of the DRC (then Zaire) following its Independence in 1960. He was, however, only in post for a matter of weeks, as he was arrested and murdered in a coup d'état in which were allegedly implicated Belgium, the United States, and Joseph Mobutu, the president of the DRC until 1997.



Evidence of this desire to valorise cultural practices is discernible in most of the films discussed in this chapter, including Faye's two early films. However, as is the case with *Boul Fallé*, the focus is as much on politics proper, domestic affairs and matters of state, as it is on representation. Faye clearly uses ethnographic documentary as a conduit for both subtle and explicit cultural and political commentary. *Kaddu Beykat* denounces Senegal's strict agricultural policies, which are impervious to the hardship of farmers, and *Fad'jal* focuses more closely on the nature of cultural memory and identity. This is a reflection that Faye initiates from the very beginning of *Fad'jal*, since the opening sequence of the film is set in a classroom, where schoolchildren are being asked to recite a history lesson while their parents attend mass at the neighbouring church. The lesson of the day is repeated six times by different children during a scene lasting close to two minutes: 'Louis XIV était le premier grand roi de France. On l'appelait le roi soleil. Sous son règne fleurirent les arts et les lettres'. The mention of Louis XIV and 'les arts et les lettres' is doubtless rooted in Faye's own experience as a pupil and later as a schoolteacher.<sup>302</sup> This is a clear reference to the requirement to teach French history in colonial schools throughout Africa, condensed in the infamous phrase 'Nos ancêtres les Gaulois'. As this first sequence ends, the children leave school and the adults exit the church. A long shot of the religious edifice

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<sup>302</sup> Faye recalls: 'En arrivant en France [...] pleins de gens me posaient des questions sur l'Afrique auxquelles je pouvais pas répondre parce que j'ai appris comme vous que Louis XIV était le plus grand roi de France' See <<http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/05/safi-faye-role-model.html>> [accessed 23 May 2010]. Faye also highlights the aberration that she had to travel to Europe to learn about her own African culture: 'J'ai eu l'occasion d'aller en Europe où j'ai été éduquée par les Africanistes car je ne connaissais pas l'histoire de mon continent. On m'enseignait en Afrique l'Histoire de France, celle des rois, pas celle de mon peuple. J'ai donc suivi des cours d'ethnologie à l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales de Paris puis j'ai suivi une formation en cinéma à l'École Louis Lumière. Mon premier film était tiré d'un poème de Baudelaire, *La Passant [sic]*, cela montre bien l'acculturation dans laquelle nous étions' (in Diao 2010).

then cuts to a long shot of a baobab tree, a popular symbol of ‘enracinement’, of cultural identity, in African literature and film.<sup>303</sup> Next to the baobab then appears the famous quotation by the Malian author Hampâté Bâ: ‘En Afrique, un vieillard qui meurt, c’est une bibliothèque qui brûle’. Following this first sequence, the film does not return either to the school or church, but focuses exclusively on the daily chores of the village’s inhabitants and the telling of an important local tale. This clear departure from imported French history and Christian religious service towards symbols of African roots and oral history signals Faye’s desire to bring into focus local history and cultural practices. Accordingly, Faye’s film resumes with a three-minute sequence that shows men carrying out agricultural labour in a field. This is followed by a fictional scene during which a group of children approach a village elder, ‘Grand-père’, seated at the foot of a baobab, to ask him to recount the story of the birth of their village, Fad’jal. This local tale noticeably generates much more enthusiasm than the earlier history lesson: the children initiate the story, frequently interrupt to ask for further details or clarifications, wait impatiently for the next instalment, and, at the end of the film, each child playfully repeats a short excerpt from the tale. This last detail, in particular, is designed to recall the earlier classroom sequence and is used to demonstrate that oral traditions are relevant and effective modes of transmission. Indeed, the children’s enthusiasm contrasts strongly with their mechanic reciting of the history lesson, and the elder’s narration, which Faye punctuates with reenactments illustrating his tale, is noticeably more lively and engaging than the didactic setup of the classroom.

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<sup>303</sup> Dudley Andrew rightly remarks: ‘De plus en plus de films africains sont construits de cette manière, autour du baobab’ (2003: 21).

Faye also sets the stage for the villagers to denounce the wrongdoings of the Senegalese administration and the isolation of rural populations in remote villages such as their own, which are cut off, both physically and metaphorically, from the decision makers in the cities. The villagers' discussions and debates regarding local and national politics take place under 'l'arbre à palabres', in accordance with local custom. As Faye explains regarding the issues raised by her subjects: 'Je n'imposais rien, je les laissais parler' (in Maupin 1976: 78). As in *Selbé et tant d'autres*, Faye intervenes sporadically in the voice-over to contextualise her subjects' remarks and clarify the legal framework. For example, she explains: 'Le 1er mai 1964 a été votée la loi sur le domaine national. Toutes les terres appartiennent désormais à l'état'.<sup>304</sup> Significantly, however, Faye leaves explicit criticism of the issues of land-ownership, taxes, monoculture, and so on, to her subjects: *Fad'jal* leaves the viewer in no doubt that the situation of economic hardship faced by the villagers, brought about by precarious living circumstances and extreme weather conditions, is worsened by the disregard of the governing class.

This is an issue that Faye returns to in more detail in *Kaddu Beykat*, where the deprivation of farmers is personified by Ngor and Coumba, a young couple waiting to be married but whose engagement is repeatedly delayed because of the drought. Ngor is forced to migrate to the city in search of work, which enables Faye to chronicle the humiliation and exploitation encountered in the

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<sup>304</sup> While she does provide essential contextual facts, Faye does not systematically explain the significance of the information. For example, as Petty relates, if Faye informs her audience that a farmer's annual income is twenty thousand francs CFA, only Senegalese viewers would be aware that 'in 1975 this income could not have lasted one person more than one month' (1995b: 26).

city and record daily life in the village he leaves behind. Discussing Faye's early films, Russell states that the filmmaker 'carefully documents the daily routines in her village as a means of preserving a passing lifestyle' (1998: 59). However, Russell is mistaken in identifying Faye's films as works of salvage ethnography, since the filmmaker in fact celebrates and promotes change, not least with regard to existing approaches to farming and microeconomics. For example, upon his return from the city at the close of *Kaddu Beykat*, Ngor comes to embody a voice of change, as he attempts to introduce radical innovative ideas regarding politics and crop farming, which he hopes will improve the villagers' quality of life. This function of Ngor's character as an agent of change in fact challenges the very basis of salvage ethnography.<sup>305</sup>

As discussed above, the subversive potential of ethnography, observed in Faye's *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, was famously explored by O'Rourke in his reflexive revisionist documentary *Cannibal Tours*, which satirises the tourist's gaze. Similar reflexivity can be observed in *Itchombi*, *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, and *En attendant les hommes*, interactive documentaries in which Assih and Ndiaye trace their encounters with settings and subjects that are foreign to them. Both filmmakers leave apparent the misunderstandings, moments of confusion, divergences of opinion, and faux pas that result from their foreignness.<sup>306</sup> Assih's status as an unfamiliar visitor is clearly signalled to the viewer during the opening sequence of *Itchombi*, filmed by Assih as she travels towards the village where the circumcisions are to be held: 'L'idée était

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<sup>305</sup> It is interesting to note that in Faye's *Mossane*, the young agronomy student, Fara, assumes an almost identical role to that of Ngor in *Kaddu Beykat*.

<sup>306</sup> As detailed in Chapter Three, this is also the case with Diop's *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise*.

de partir avec un personnage, voyager avec lui et faire tout le chemin avec lui’ (in Pochon 2009b). This is comparable to the opening sequence in Folly’s *Les Oubliées*, discussed in Chapter Two, since the filmmaker’s status as an unfamiliar visitor is clearly signalled to the viewer from the very start of the film. Folly’s foreignness remains apparent throughout. For example, when she arrives in Luanda, she is filmed struggling with the water pump system in her host’s home, which signals her unfamiliarity with this environment. Likewise, the viewer is repeatedly reminded of Assih’s status as an outsider in *Itchombi*, not least since her subjects frequently discuss the unusual presence of a woman with a camera: ‘Qui est-elle?’ and ‘Pourquoi elle nous filme, c’est bizarre’.<sup>307</sup>

Ndiaye’s position as a cultural outsider is also made apparent to the viewer in *Traces, empreintes de femmes* and *En attendant les hommes*, as the filmmaker must resort to interpreters to communicate with her subjects. In addition, the women who feature in the film provide details of their lifestyles, customs, beliefs, and observances in a manner that emphasises the filmmaker’s foreignness: ‘Chez nous, le premier mariage est décidé par les parents’; ‘Chez nous, c’est déplacé. Elle ne peut pas lui dire: je t’aime’; ‘C’est ça un bel homme chez nous’, and so on. Furthermore, Ndiaye emphasises that *Traces, empreintes de femmes* and *En attendant les hommes* are the product of an encounter between women of different cultures by incorporating into her films moments of discomfort as well as humour generated by her foreignness. Ndiaye’s questions occasionally provoke amusement: one of Anétina’s grandmothers laughs uncontrollably and inexplicably as her answer to

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<sup>307</sup> These comments are expressed in Solla and sub-titled in French.

Ndiaye's question, 'elle veut savoir si moi, Anétina, je suis une femme d'aujourd'hui ou d'hier', is translated to her. In *En attendant les hommes*, Khady similarly derives much amusement from her conversations with Ndiaye, but interviews with Tycha are occasionally strained. Tycha is considerably more reluctant to engage with Ndiaye: she refuses to answer certain questions ('Je ne comprends pas la question [...] non, je ne peux pas répondre à cette question') and challenges Ndiaye. For example, during a conversation regarding the ownership of her body, Tycha is indignant: 'Le corps de la femme appartient à l'homme... Avec quoi tu viens?' and retorts: 'Et toi? A qui appartient ton corps?' Interestingly, much like Diabang Brener, who embraced Codou's strong personality during the making of *Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor*, Tycha's occasional reluctance to engage with Ndiaye was not regarded as a failure by the filmmaker:

Ce n'est pas du tout une frustration, parce qu'en refusant de répondre on répond quelque part, de toute façon. Et puis c'était justement de quoi je me mêle et pourquoi je viens poser toutes ces questions. [...] Au contraire, je ne voulais pas de choses tout à fait lisses. J'ai autant aimé qu'on me dise non et que l'on m'envoie sur les roses que de me donner des réponses qui n'auraient pas été justes ou authentiques par rapport à mes questions. (in Mansouri 2008)

Nonetheless, although she is clearly a cultural outsider to the spaces into which she travels, Ndiaye is successful in shaping two films that are highly intimate. The filmmaker manages to establish with her subjects a close contact based on gender, which traverses cultural and linguistic barriers. As detailed in Chapter Two, the filmmaker discusses with her subjects issues regarding relationships,

sexuality, art, work, personal aspirations, and so on. In so doing, Ndiaye seeks experiences shared with her subjects because of their gender. This enables her to become an insider of a different type and to exceed the ‘us and them’ dichotomy of traditional ethnography.

Unlike Assih and Ndiaye, Faye and Thiaw present an insider’s view of their communities, which is of symbolic relevance if we accept that traditional ethnography can consist in an act of appropriation. Faye foregrounds her familiarity with the subjects of her documentaries. The title of *Fad’jal* refers to the village where the filmmaker’s parents were born and where the film takes place (Foster 1997: 148), and Faye announces in the opening sequence *Kaddu Beykat*: ‘Voici mon village, mes parents agriculteurs, éleveurs, ma grande famille. [...] Vous allez vivre un moment chez moi’. With this opening statement, Faye clarifies the purpose of her documentary, which she claims will enable the viewer to experience Serer daily life, and also foregrounds her familiarity with the settings and individuals on screen. This supports Petty’s view that in *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad’jal*, the voice-over is that of the community: ‘The filmmaker invites the viewer to associate her own voice with the “voice” of the village’ (1995b: 26). Likewise, in *Boul Fallé*, Thiaw highlights her familiarity with the topic of her documentary, since she speaks of her subjects using the first person plural ‘nous’ and relates a childhood memory that establishes her as a long-term inhabitant of the Pikine Dakar suburb where the film takes place. Faye’s and Thiaw’s practices of indigenous ethnographic documentary are particularly significant when considered in the context of traditional ethnography, which has frequently subjected participants

to a deconstructing gaze and appropriated their narratives, as is the case, for example, with the English speaking version of *Selbé et tant d'autres*, discussed in Chapter Two.

Faye's proximity to her subjects is crucial to the nature of her projects, of which she emphasises the collaborative nature: 'Nous avons élaboré le film ensemble' and 'ce film je ne l'ai pas fait toute seule' (in Welsh 1983: 149–50). During the shooting of *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, Faye worked closely with her subjects because she wanted to achieve a form of community expression: 'I give people a voice, they are able to speak about their own problems, to show their reality' (in Thackway 2003a: 100).<sup>308</sup> In *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, the filmmaker distances herself from the voice-over and image in order to give centre-stage to her participants: 'La voix "off" commentatrice, bien que présente, se fait discrète. Chargée de souffler à l'oreille du spectateur les renseignements indispensables, elle s'en fait d'une certaine façon complice' (Gardies 1987: 184). As will be explored in detail in the following chapter, Faye also makes use of a variety of strategies, such as storytelling, reconstructions, and children's play, which enable the villagers to tell their own stories in vivid and diverse ways. Faye therefore eludes the negative connotations of the expository mode, used among others by Rouch, who is accused of studying his subjects 'with an alienating objectivity, and above all, of tending to analyze them in voice-over narration rather than allowing them to speak for themselves' (Zacks 1999: 8).

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<sup>308</sup> As detailed in Chapter Two, the same collaborative ideals were important to Ndiaye, who was eager for her film to take the form of a discussion rather than an interview: 'Je leur avait dit qu'on allait faire un film ensemble', 'une sorte de dialogue entre femmes s'est installé' (in Mansouri 2008).



In *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, Faye therefore favours lengthy observational shots of her subjects, in a manner that can be compared to Sylla's documentary practice in *Colobane Express*. This documentary chronicles the daily events onboard a Dakar express coach. The film opens before dawn and ends after dusk: like Faye, who respects the unit of the day in *Kaddu Beykat*, Sylla emphasises her film's quality as a snapshot of an aspect of daily life in Dakar.<sup>309</sup> However, *Colobane Express* is also a striking example of ethnographic documentary, since the filmmaker positions the viewer as a fourth wall and does not employ voice-over commentaries, interviews, or talking heads. This observational film does not provide any indications regarding locations, events, subjects, the filmmaker, or her crew: what information the viewer is able to glean comes from the cover of the commercialised DVD or is inferred from the events and interactions that take place in the film. The filmmaker cultivates an element of mystery surrounding cultural patterning, similar to that which has been previously identified in *Mon Beau Sourire*, *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, and *En attendant les hommes*. Indeed, Sylla does not detail the practicalities of the Dakar coaches or explain the ambivalent social interactions, and, while there is clear evidence of staging, this is surreptitious and confusing. Sylla does not, therefore, provide the 'renseignements indispensables' (Gardies 1987: 184) that Faye supplies through her minimal commentary. The film stands in stark contrast to the models of ethnographic documentary to which we are accustomed, which

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<sup>309</sup> Faye marks the passing of days and nights with shots that fade through black to signal nighttime and the sound of a rooster crowing to signal morning. She also occasionally indicates in the voice-over: 'Ainsi se termine la journée' or 'Une journée se termine et une autre recommence'.

usually seek to interpret cultural phenomena for the benefit of the viewer. On a basic level, *Colobane Express* therefore makes for frustrating viewing, as, unlike the other films in this corpus, it does not transcend the ambiguity that accompanies foreign cultural patterning.

Upon further scrutiny, however, Sylla's use of the observational in conjunction with ethnography is effective on a different level, as it is revelatory of the very workings of ethnographic documentary. As detailed in Chapter One, Nichols's discussion of the observational mode does not sufficiently account for the mode's reflexive potential. While Nichols's definition of the mode would tend to establish *Colobane Express* as a film that attempts to provide an impartial coverage of daily life in Dakar, the documentary in fact foregrounds the near impossibility of deciphering ethnographic footage in the absence of a mediating authority. The nature of *Colobane Express* obliges the viewer to interpret the images in ways that are made unnecessary in expository or interactive films where, by definition, one or more designated interpretations are provided. The absence of a mediating presence in *Colobane Express* therefore accentuates the highly edited and (de)coded nature of more conventional ethnographic documentaries and encourages the viewer to consider how meaning is embedded in images and the voice over. Through its own lack of obvious didactic and rhetorical processes, *Colobane Express* draws attention to the highly mediated nature of much ethnographic documentary and demonstrates the near impossibility of fully understanding such material in the

absence of linguistic and cultural interpretation.<sup>310</sup> The intentional and conspicuous gaps in understanding that emerge upon viewing the film ultimately demonstrate how knowledge is shaped and what is required for ethnographic documentary to function as an efficient interface for a historic reality.

*Colobane Express* is therefore part of a growing trend for formally and politically reflexive ethnographic documentaries that seek to reinvent the boundaries and conventions of the sub-genre. The films discussed here are interesting to consider in relation to the complex historical and cinematic framework from which they emerge, since the filmmakers exploit the potential of indigenous ethnography to work against the grain of traditional ethnography. The filmmakers discussed in this chapter re-appropriate African narratives and experiment freely with form in order to divert from the problematic authoritative approaches to cultural phenomena that have frequently been adopted by Western filmmakers and ethnographers. There is a clear political dimension to African women's ethnography, as it initiates a form of committed ethnography that addresses issues of representation and stereotyping, reflects on notions of tradition, modernity, and exoticism, among others. The films discussed in this chapter reclaim the responsibility of representing African narratives and strive to challenge perspectives on Africa and Africans. They demonstrate the transitional nature of cultures and societies that mediate

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<sup>310</sup> Sylla's documentary practice in *Colobane Express* is reminiscent of the 'No Comment' slot, which features daily on Euronews and is available to view via the channel's website. 'No comment' is a one-minute programme that features footage relating to current affairs. The programme is composed of minimally edited long takes, which are not accompanied by a narrating voice, titles, or indications of any kind. Through its sheer contrast with other forms of news coverage, the programme highlights the highly mediated nature of news reports.

between established practices and the changes in lifestyle brought about by colonisation, independence, urbanisation, and so on.

Whether the ethnographic gaze is that of a cultural outsider, as is the case in *Itchombi*, *Traces*, *empreintes de femmes*, and *En attendant les hommes*, or that of an insider, as is the case with *Mon Beau Sourire*, *Boul Fallé*, *Kaddu Beykat*, and *Fad'jal*, most of the filmmakers position themselves explicitly in relation to their subjects, shape the onscreen reality around their individual perspectives, and act as mediators between the profilmic world and the viewer. When this situated quality yields to the observational, as in *Colobane Express*, this is not in an effort to provide an objective perspective on cultural phenomena, but rather to shape a documentary practice that is formally reflexive. The films discussed in this chapter redefine the ways in which ethnographic knowledge is gathered and conveyed. Textual authority is often shared, as the films tend towards the collaborative and dialogic in an attempt to call attention to the dynamics of authority and modes of representation to which we are accustomed, and counter the inherent power imbalance of ethnography. Ethnographic documentary here intersects with committed documentary, as there is a clear desire to make films with subjects. As Thiaw claims: 'Je voulais vraiment qu'on ait la sensation de lutter avec eux'.<sup>311</sup>

The films make innovative uses of the interactive and observational modes, and, in the rare cases when a voice-over is used, it emerges from within the filmic space or is spoken by a filmmaker who foregrounds her foreignness. The

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<sup>311</sup> See <[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjfqol\\_rama-thiaw-a-propos-de-boul-falle\\_short\\_films](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjfqol_rama-thiaw-a-propos-de-boul-falle_short_films)> for footage of Thiaw's speech [accessed 9 September 2011].

filmmakers also forsake the deconstructive tendency of ethnographic documentary and deliberately do not over-analyse cultural phenomena, preferring to leave final interpretations to their viewers. The works analysed here therefore contribute to reshaping ethnographic documentary, which can no longer be defined solely as a mode of observation that focuses on the Other, or that is made exclusively on the basis of a scientific rationale. In all the films discussed, there is evidence that the filmmakers seek to elude the limitations of the sub-genre, as outlined by Peter Fuschs, who rules out the use of ‘artificial manipulation in either shooting or cutting’ and ‘the use of staged material’ (Banks 1992: 119). As has been explored above, the films engage with the poetic mode, experiment freely with editing, and feature performance-based footage. In *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad’jal*, and *Colobane Express*, in particular, Faye and Sylla make extensive use of staged and unstaged enactments, and encourage a variety of performances. These fictionalisations shape a striking cinematic practice, in which the factual and fictional are juxtaposed and at times even conflated. These textual hybrids, located on the border between documentary and fiction, will be the focus of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE – DOCUFICTION

Interviewing Faye on the occasion of the French release of her feature film *Mossane* (1996), Barlet opened with an enquiry regarding this entry into the field of fiction filmmaking and attendant departure from what he terms her ‘démarche ethnographique’. In response, Faye declares: ‘Je n’arrive pas à établir une frontière claire entre la fiction et le documentaire’, and comments that both documentary and fiction stem from ‘la vie quotidienne’ as well as from ‘l’imaginaire’ (in 1997a). With this assertion of the unclear demarcation between documentary and fiction, Faye dismisses the notion of distinct strands of filmmaking with inflexible boundaries. Significantly, however, Faye does not refute the actual existence of documentary or fiction as genres, but rather interrogates how they should best be defined and suggests that there may be points of interaction between them.<sup>312</sup> The issues discussed in this chapter relate directly to Faye’s statement: the filmmaker’s exchange with Barlet is pertinent, for it raises the questions of how documentary and fiction are perceived and distinguished and, in turn, how they relate to the genre-challenging works of docufiction.

Much like reflexive documentaries, which are the most significant non-fiction texts challenging, articulating, or reinterpreting the central tensions within the documentary genre (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 1), docufictions engage in a reappraisal of many of the issues central to documentary and fiction. First, by

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<sup>312</sup> Accordingly, both in the interview with Barlet and during an earlier conversation with Heike Hurst, Faye posits *Mossane* as a work of fiction: ‘Tout est imagination, la mienne’ (in Barlet 1997a) and ‘J’ai tout inventé, rien ne vient de l’Afrique, mis à part mon imagination en tant qu’Africaine [...] c’est une fiction pure et simple’ (in Hurst 1996).

questioning the received boundaries between them and illustrating their multiple commonalities and points of convergence, docufiction sustains the notion of documentary and fiction as operating on a continuum rather than in opposition to each other. Secondly, as Steven N. Lipkin et al. contend, ‘documentary is the primary form’ from which all docufictions have developed and to which they continue to allude (2006: 12). Docufictions therefore offer a new and valuable vantage point from which to examine documentary critically, to reassess many of the formal and ethical concerns inherent in the genre, such as those pertaining to the real, distortion, legitimacy, and responsibility.

In spite of the many complex issues raised by docufiction, the practice seems unproblematic for the filmmakers whose work will be discussed in this chapter: Safi Faye and Khady Sylla. These filmmakers’ distinctive and complex approaches to documentary and fiction have defined the direction of their work: most of their films are docufictions that play explicitly and inventively on the perceived borders between fiction and fact. Interestingly, although Faye’s stated difficulty in delineating the boundary between truth and fiction is borne out by her practice of docufiction, this feature of many of her films is not explicitly addressed in the interview with Barlet.<sup>313</sup> This is surprising, for Faye’s works of docufiction — made mostly during the 1970s and 1980s — are formally distinctive and thought-provoking, and engage with the very issues central to Faye and Barlet’s opening observations. The same could be said today of Sylla, who, having made a fiction film, *Les Bijoux* in 1997, produced two compelling films that freely combine documentary and fictional

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<sup>313</sup> Faye has, however, acknowledged and discussed this aspect of her filmmaking practice elsewhere, for example: ‘I have made many short films and several feature-length films that juxtapose fiction with documentary’ (in Ukadike 2002: 30).

codes: *Colobane Express* (1999) and *Le Monologue de la muette* (2008). Sylla's films reveal a strong propensity for mixing factual and fictional codes of filmmaking in a manner that is highly singular. In particular, performance is central to her films where staged enactments feature prominently. Of course, Faye and Sylla are by no means alone in combining documentary and fiction; filmmakers have been doing this for many years in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.<sup>314</sup> Nevertheless, as this chapter will demonstrate, the singular composition of their films, and the nature, extent, and purpose of their use of generic hybridisation distinguish Faye and Sylla as two of the women filmmakers from Francophone Western Africa whose works of docufiction are the most extensive, original, and engaging.<sup>315</sup>

This chapter focuses on Faye's *Kaddu Beykat* (1975) and *Fad'jal* (1979), as well as Sylla's *Colobane express* and *Le Monologue de la muette*, the latter co-directed with Charlie Van Damme. In accordance with the overall direction of this thesis, the present chapter will demonstrate how the cinematic hybrids of these Francophone sub-Saharan African women extend and/or reshape conventions and interrogate the documentary genre. First, close textual readings of these four films will expose the distinctive manner in which Faye and Sylla exploit their artistic licence, freely juxtapose codes and conventions traditionally associated with documentary or fiction, create extensive overlaps

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<sup>314</sup> See, for example, *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922), *Jaguar* (Rouch, 1967), *Pumping Iron* (Butler and Fiore, 1977), *Daughter Rite* (Citron, 1980), *Kado ou la bonne à tout faire* (Kaboré, 1996), *Les Enfants de la guerre* (Mahamat Yacoub, 1996), and *La Vie sur terre* (Sissako, 1998).

<sup>315</sup> Kaboré's *Nâître fille en Afrique* (1996–2001), a series of docufictions that tackles a broad range of gender issues, including schooling, prostitution, forced marriage, exploitation and violence in the workplace, and female genital mutilation, would have been interesting to consider here. Unfortunately, I have not been able to view any of these films.



between the factual and fictional, both across and within sequences, and thereby achieve singular cinematic voices. It will be argued that *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad'jal*, *Colobane Express*, and *Le Monologue de la muette* depart from the docufictional practices that have been the focus of scholarly attention until now, in particular the increasingly popular forms of mockumentary and docudrama. Through discussion of this relatively underexplored strand of filmmaking, this chapter will highlight the originality of Faye's and Sylla's films and illustrate the benefits offered by their docufictional practices. There are certain limitations inherent in making documentary, notably social taboo, ethical restrictions, or simply availability, which (re)enactments can transcend so that docufictions thus extend the range of experiences depicted. In addition, docufictions can increase the available range of narrative strategies by exploring novel approaches for recounting past, present, or hypothetical events.

Secondly, this chapter will illustrate the challenges to documentary posed by such cinematic hybrids. As a composite form, Faye's and Sylla's docufictional work emphasises the porous nature of both documentary and fiction and questions their very tenability as separate genres, in particular in a context where the exact difference between them is an unresolved issue for many filmmakers and scholars. As discussed in Chapter One, documentary and fiction are frequently contrasted on the basis of practical filmmaking methods and techniques, the question of ethics, the viewing experience they offer, and the films' relationship to the real. Analysing the practice of docufiction by Faye and Sylla provides further rich material for exploring these perceived defining features and for reconsidering how documentary was characterised in

Chapter One. First, the synthesis of codes and conventions traditionally associated with documentary or fiction questions the importance of form, notably the inverse relationship between style and authenticity and the claim that documentary should not be reduced to a set of profilmic practices and filmic techniques, such as such location shooting, the use of natural light and portable cameras, interviews, and explanatory voice-overs. Secondly, the complex and diverse roles of the films' 'social actors', defined by Maria Loftus as subjects who 'play their real-life role' in docufictions (2010: 48), interrogate whether the ethical code of conduct regarding encounter should apply to, and is adequate for, these cinematic hybrids. On a similar note, we could also question whether the makers of these films should be bound by the same moral obligations to their audiences as documentarians, since docufictions, by definition, foreground the creative liberties taken with the real. Questions regarding the reception of docufiction arise, in particular, in the case of films that are received as ethnographic, as is the case in particular with *Fad'Jal*, *Kaddu Beykat*, and *Colobane Express*, since the definition of ethnography provided in Chapter Four relies on reception rather than intention and event. In the light of the observations regarding the benefits and challenges posed by docufiction, this chapter will consider whether this filmic practice offers broader avenues for cinematic expression than more conventional forms of documentary and fiction, and in particular whether it breaks with or works within the constraints of documentary filmmaking.

Docufiction remains a relatively marginal field of study within scholarship and there is only a small body of work analysing the intensely varied interplay of

documentary and fiction: the monographs addressing mockumentary and docudrama by Roscoe and Hight (2001) and Rhodes and Springer (2006) represent the bulk of scholarly work on the issue. Other articles published in isolation address individual examples of this hybridisation or its wider implications, but the attention paid to docufiction remains relatively limited and is still far from constituting a discipline in its own right.<sup>316</sup> This is surprising, since if we accept the basic premise that documentary and fiction operate on a continuum, docufiction represents the juncture between them and condenses both forms. Moreover, the field has expanded a great deal recently, largely thanks to the remarkable propagation and popular success of biopics, films that provide dramatised biographies, mostly of individuals in the public eye.<sup>317</sup> In the West, docufiction has long been a practice predominantly associated with television. As outlined in Chapter One, Beattie suggests adding ‘reconstruction’ to Nichols’s existing typology of documentary modes of representation in order to recognise the actorial element and technical reconstructions commonly found in television documentary (2004: 24). Contrary to Beattie’s assertion, the practice of docufiction is not here regarded as a mode of documentary representation, since modes are defined on the basis of a broader set of codes and conventions than the single presence of reenactments or other forms of fictionalisation. Rather docufiction is here conceived as a specific approach to the profilmic, and is therefore characterised as a sub-genre of documentary, albeit a marginal one. Corner refers to the

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<sup>316</sup> See, for example, Lipkin (1999), Schreir (2004), Garçon (2005), Taylor (2007), and Coleman (2009).

<sup>317</sup> Examples of recent biopics include *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002) *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003), *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004), *Walk The Line* (James Mangold, 2005), *Capote* (Bennett Miller, 2005), *Becoming Jane* (Julian Jarrold, 2007), *La Môme* (Olivier Dahan, 2007), *W.* (Oliver Stone, 2008), and *Coco avant Chanel* (Anne Fontaine, 2009).

textual hybrids broadcast on the small screen as ‘the “postdocumentary” culture of television’ (in Austin 2007: 4), a term which arguably places unnecessary emphasis on the notion of rupture and suggests a discontinuity between documentary and docufiction. While Corner points to the idea of docufiction as supplanting documentary, through an examination of the docufictional practices of Faye and Sylla, this chapter will demonstrate that both are elaborately interconnected.<sup>318</sup>

Interestingly, much like documentary, the term ‘docufiction’ is the subject of some controversy. It is sometimes used as a somewhat superfluous synonym for dramatised forms of documentary, most notably the docudrama, which is here considered as a sub-category of docufiction (Veyrat-Masson 2008: 94). The term yields greater benefit when given a broader meaning, in line with that coined by Rhodes and Springer, who employ the term docufiction in reference to films ‘in which documentary and fictional materials are intentionally combined, merged, and synthesised, leading to hybrid forms which [...] constitute a diverse but pervasive strand in film history and practice’ (2006: 7).<sup>319</sup> Within the context of this thesis, the term docufiction is therefore used as a necessary umbrella term to refer to the many products of ‘the cinematic flux between the imaginary and the real’ (Loftus 2010: 38). Docufiction thus encompasses a broad range of cinematic hybrids and is multifarious in terms of the nature, extent, and purpose of its generic blending.

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<sup>318</sup> Indeed, as detailed in Chapter One, Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) reveals the shared origins of documentary and docufiction.

<sup>319</sup> Rhodes and Springer then emphasise the relevance of the term: ‘We are proposing a new term, *docufictions*, as a way of naming an insufficiently analyzed tendency in film practice’ (2006: 7).

Rhodes and Springer provide a structural mapping of the field of docufiction that hinges on the notions of documentary and fictional form and content: the sub-genre of docufiction consists of docudramas, films that provide dramatised accounts of historical events, and mockumentaries, fictional imitations of documentary. For instance, staging a fictional narrative using filmmaking codes widely associated with documentary results in a work of mockumentary, while transposing events inspired from the historical world to the screen using fictional codes results in a work of docudrama (2006: 4). As with most types of generic blending, the ensuing terminology within docufiction is complex and overlapping.<sup>320</sup> Scholars use their own sets of terms, such as Lipkin et al. who distinguish ‘drama-documentary’ from ‘documentary drama’, ‘faction’, ‘dramadoc’, and ‘docudrama’, while rightly arguing that ‘it is more convenient to classify all documentary/drama mixes, those that cannot be categorised as “mock-documentary”, as docudrama’ (2006: 15–6).<sup>321</sup> Docufictions thus (mis)appropriate the codes and conventions of the media from which they derive for various purposes: parody and humour (*Dot*, Simeon Schnapper and Brett Singer, 2002), dramatic effect (*Schindler’s List*, Steven Spielberg, 1993), horror (*The Blair Witch Project*, Myrick and Sánchez, 1999), or formal or

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<sup>320</sup> The ‘mockumentary’ is also termed ‘mock-documentary’, ‘faux documentary’, ‘pseudo-documentary’, ‘cinéma vérité with a wink’, ‘cinéma un-vérité’, ‘spoof documentary’, and ‘quasi-documentary’ (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 1).

<sup>321</sup> The drama-documentary is a dramatised form of documentary that relies on historical events and protagonists to underpin a film script (see, for example, *Frost/Nixon*, Ron Howard, 2008). The documentary drama, on the other hand, inscribes fictional characters and events within a specific factual historical context (as in *The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006). Factions also refer back to such historical events, but this time through the scope of a fictional narrative and characters that recall, rather than replicate, the referent (as in *La Nuit de la vérité*, Nacro, 2004, which is set in an imaginary African country but references the genocide in Rwanda using the belligerent Nayak and Bonande ethnic groups). Finally, the dramadoc and docudrama are more or less interchangeable shortened terms for drama-documentary and documentary drama (Lipkin et al. 2006: 15–6). This thesis uses the term ‘docudrama’ as shorthand for all the film-types that fictionalise historical protagonists, events, or situations.

political reflexivity (*I'm Not There*, Todd Haynes, 2007; and *Death of a President*, Gabriel Range, 2006).

While Rhodes and Springer's outline adequately accounts for the works of docufiction that result from the fusion of documentary and fictional form and content, it does not sufficiently demarcate the films that juxtapose a factual discourse and narrative cinema, such as those discussed in the present chapter. Nor do Lipkin et al. explore the docufictional practices with which Faye and Sylla engage, as their films exploit documentary and fiction jointly and play on their points of departure and synergy. In terms of the aforementioned fact-fiction continuum, these works of docufiction extend directly from films such as *Allah Tantou* (Achkar, 1990) and *Touching the Void* (MacDonald, 2003). MacDonald's film features reenactments of Joe Simpson and Simon Yates's ordeal in the Peruvian Andes, recreations of the climbing accident described by the two mountaineers in a talking heads format. Likewise, *Allah Tantou* is composed of multiple layers and combines official archival film footage and photographs, family videos from the filmmaker's childhood, letters written by the filmmaker's father, Marof Achkar, during his stay in prison under Sékou Touré's regime in Guinea between 1968 and 1971, and reenactments of the prisoner being interrogated and alone in his cell. These layers constitute a film that offers its audience a rich experience, as it seamlessly combines open denunciation of a brutal political regime with the portrait of Marof Achkar as a public servant, and the voice of the filmmaker grieving for his deceased father. The films discussed in this chapter adopt a similar approach to that of Achkar and MacDonald, as Faye and Sylla alternate between footage that adheres to

so-called documentary codes, scenes that are clearly scripted and acted, and ‘neutral’ material that cannot be identified with certainty.<sup>322</sup> Similarly to *Allah Tantou* and *Touching the Void*, the docufictions of Faye and Sylla derive from historical events or situations. However, the fictional treatment that is applied differs markedly from that of Achkar and MacDonald, as their staged reenactments are subservient to the factual, whose primacy is not disputed. While Achkar and MacDonald maintain a close proximity to the real in *Allah Tantou* and *Touching the Void*, Faye and Sylla arguably exploit their creative licence to a greater extent, departing further from historical events. It is interesting to note that such docufictional practices are a common component of African screen media.<sup>323</sup> However, in spite of its relative predominance within Francophone sub-Saharan African cinemas, not only has the type of docufiction with which Faye and Sylla engage been widely overlooked by film scholars, but there is currently no appropriate label to designate it.

During the 2010 edition of the Festival International de Films de Femmes in Créteil, a special tribute was paid to Faye, who was invited to reflect upon her long experience of filmmaking. On this occasion, Faye recalled how *Kaddu Beykat* was filmed:

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<sup>322</sup> For example, in *Le Monologue de la muette*, Sylla films Amy with her sister and newborn baby. The footage is seemingly not performance-based, however, the interpretation offered by Sylla may be fictional, as it is at other points in the film.

<sup>323</sup> This is evidenced by the many African-made films that merge different genres, including *Ndakkaru, impressions matinales* (Moussa Yoro Bathily, 1975), *Hommage, Bikutsi Water Blues, Afrique, je te plumerai!*, and *La Tête dans les nuages* (Teno, 1985, 1988, 1991, and 1994), *Afrique, Mon Afrique...* (Ouédraogo, 1994), *Femmes capables* and *La Tortue du monde* (Nacro, both from 1998), *Nyani* (Amadou Khassé Théra, 2006), and *Un Matin bonne heure* (Fofana, 2006).

Nous avons tourné comme un documentaire: sur le vif [...] en 1973 [...]. Puis en 1974, nous nous sommes rendus compte qu'il fallait inventer une histoire autour de la condition de vie des paysans, ainsi nous avons imaginé l'histoire de Coumba et Ngor.<sup>324</sup>

Accordingly, throughout *Kaddu Beykat*, as well as *Fad'jal*, Faye intermingles ethnographic footage of rural Serer daily life and partially or fully scripted sequences performed by members of her community: 'Il n'y a pas d'acteurs, ce sont des paysans parce que je pense que ce sont les plus aptes à parler de leurs problèmes' (in Welsh 1983: 149).<sup>325</sup> *Fad'jal* is structured around two separate but related accounts of community life, since it documents local customs and daily routines, and relates the elder's recounting of the village's history. The film includes documentary and fictional footage of the yearly wrestling matches and the rituals surrounding birth and death. Considerable screen time is also dedicated to the villagers' daily agricultural work: they are filmed extensively as they harvest groundnut crops, tend to cattle, fish, and collect salt. Likewise, in *Kaddu Beykat*, Faye films her subjects at work in the fields, footage that she interprets with occasional ethnographic commentaries: 'Quand une femme est âgée... les fillettes du village viennent l'aider, c'est la coutume'; 'Avant les semailles on enterre certaines racines qui ont le pouvoir de fertiliser la terre ou bien on sacrifie des animaux aux divinités, les Pangools'; and 'La culture du riz est réservée aux femmes tandis que les hommes cultivent le mil et l'arachide'. As discussed in Chapters Two and

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<sup>324</sup> See <<http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/05/safi-faye-role-model.html>>, for footage of Faye's speech [accessed 30 July 2010].

<sup>325</sup> Some of the subjects and social actors featuring in her films subsequently became actors. For example, Abou Camara, who features in *Selbé et tant d'autres*, plays the part of the healer Onkel Baak in *Mossane*.



Four, although Faye does employ a voice-over in her films, she does so sparingly so as to privilege her subjects' voices. Faye's moderate use of the voice-over subverts the tradition of the expository mode, which often uses the visual index of the historical world as evidence for the unproblematic and consistent argument put forward by the spoken word (Nichols 2001: 107). Significantly, in *Kaddu Beykat*, it is not Faye's voice-over that organises the discourse, but the fictional storyline involving Ngor and Coumba, which serves to convey cultural patterning.

In both *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal*, the fictional and factual coexist and mirror each other. Documentary footage is combined indiscriminately with scenes that are identifiable as staged and/or scripted, such as those that include apparent acting, elaborate compositions of the frame, and planned placements and/or movements of the camera. This is the case, for example, with the breakfast scene, located three minutes into *Kaddu Beykat*. The scene opens with a long side shot of Ngor's father, positioned on the left of the frame, sitting on the ground opposite his house. The father calls out 'Ngor venez manger... avant d'aller au champs' and, shortly afterwards, his three sons emerge from the doorway to the house, located on the right hand side of the frame. As the boys cross the courtyard and the screen to join their father, they emphatically stretch and rub their eyes to signal to the viewer that they have just woken up. It is clear that the spatial arrangement in this sequence shot was carefully planned in order for Faye to film the entire scene without having to resort to more complex editing, such as a shot-counter-shot format. This orchestration not only tallies with her filmmaking practice, which favours long shots and long

takes over a more tightly directed and rapidly edited style, but can also be explained by two other essential factors. First, inexperienced actors would arguably find such a set-up easier to master, as they would not have to adapt to more complex directing imperatives. Secondly, Faye had very little film stock at her disposal when shooting *Kaddu Beykat* and making such use of the onscreen space would have enabled her to optimise the limited supply of raw film.<sup>326</sup> Many elements in this scene communicate to the viewer that a certain amount of preparation and planning were required prior to filming, in particular the manner in which this shot is framed and the acting style of the three sons, whose performance is rather overplayed and awkward.

In *Colobane Express*, Sylla also superimposes documentary footage and performance-based scenes. The film is composed mostly of sequences filmed onboard or in the immediate vicinity of the Dakar express coach driven by Pape Touré. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Colobane Express* broadly adheres to the codes of the observational mode, yet there is an unmistakable element of performance in the film. Many sequences are indicative of this: Pape Touré's bizarre fight with a passenger over non-payment of his fare, during which he threatens to strike him with an axe and faints; his scripted conversation with his 'uncle' over the transportation of hens; the staged police checks; and the scene that shows a passenger choking while eating onboard the bus. In the latter, a frontal medium close-up of the passenger sitting on the bus eating a snack is intercut by a short shot of the wheels of the bus rolling through large potholes, jerking the bus violently. The shot then cuts back to the

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<sup>326</sup> See <<http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/05/safi-faye-role-model.html>> [accessed 30 July 2010], for footage of Faye's speech, during which she recalls how she lacked even the most basic equipment when she travelled to Senegal to film *Kaddu Beykat*.

passenger who is first seen being jolted in her seat by the collision, then clutching at her throat as she gasps for air, and finally turning in her seat to attract the driver's attention. The next shot is that of the passengers disembarking from the bus, filmed, no longer from inside the vehicle but from the street, using a long shot. The sequence ends with the passenger continuing her journey on foot, having entered into an animated dispute with Pape Touré over his reckless driving. Here, as in the breakfast scene in *Kaddu Beykat*, the positioning of the cameras and editing of the piece are indicative of mise-en-scène, while the behaviour of the participants is over-played to an almost comical extent.

Elements of the birth scene in *Fad'Jal* are equally comical, although unintentionally so. There is no introductory commentary to this six-minute scene that takes place in a partially darkened room, but it becomes rapidly apparent that of the three women present, one of them, Coumba, is in labour. The filmmaking style in this scene is reminiscent of the fly-on-the-wall approach of the observational mode: it is filmed from a fixed position inside the ill-lit room and Faye does not intervene to provide information on the events unfolding. Unlike the breakfast scene, there are initially no visual elements to suggest that the birth may have been staged. However, by altering the settings on the television monitor, increasing the contrast and light levels, the outline of the 'unborn' child, a live infant, becomes visible, lying still under the mother until the moment she 'gives birth'. The obscurity in the room is arguably calculated, as it impedes the viewing process sufficiently to keep the

child partially out of sight and maintain the illusion of immediacy.<sup>327</sup> Given this detail, while the filmmaking style is neutral and indistinguishable from scenes filmed ‘sur le vif’ — to use Faye’s terminology — the viewer is ultimately left in no doubt that this scene is a reenactment of childbirth.<sup>328</sup>

The scene of the delivery opens a ten-minute sequence showing the practices that surround a birth in the Senegalese village of Fad’jal. The subsequent images of Coumba preparing for the newborn’s first outing are accompanied by a voice-over commentary by Faye, a feature widely associated with factual filmmaking: ‘Le port du nouveau né, la sortie du nouveau né, l’arbuste du nouveau né, la consommation du mil, base de la nourriture’. As in *Kaddu Beykat*, Faye provides a few other voice-over commentaries of an ethnographic nature during the film, such as: ‘La récolte est finie. C’est l’époque où les lutttes sont organisées. Séances qui rappellent aux vieux leur ardeur et leur habilité de jeunes’. In *Fad’jal*, Faye establishes a surprising and somewhat unusual connection between her ethnographic voice-over commentaries and scenes that are clearly staged. This seems unproblematic for the filmmaker, as she does not attempt to make distinctions based on the factual authority of different segments, but rather films and edits most of her material in a similar manner:<sup>329</sup> all the footage is shot on location, using natural light and mostly

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<sup>327</sup> This was observed while watching the film on a monitor at the Cinémathèque Afrique in Paris. It may be that other copies of the film or other monitors would produce a different quality of image. Unfortunately, this is currently impossible to verify since there are no other publicly available copies of the film.

<sup>328</sup> This is confirmed by the fact that when the newborn is wiped clean with a white cloth immediately after birth, the fabric remains free of any bloodstains.

<sup>329</sup> A notable exception is the reenactment of the village’s downfall, which Faye illustrates with atypical footage designed to convey the reckless waste of the villagers’ food supplies and their inebriated state. This sequence is highly edited, with rapid and repeated shifts between shots of cattle being slaughtered, percussion instruments, close-ups of men laughing hysterically, and of food being pounded. The sound track is similarly striking, as the sounds of

long takes, and alternates between complementary long shots and close-ups to provide overviews as well as detailed observations of specific activities.<sup>330</sup>

However, the superimposition of Faye's commentaries over scenes that result from an elaborate *mise-en-scène* raises the question of how such material should be labelled. The visual properties of the fictional birth scene suggest that it should not be categorised as documentary, yet its factual content is seemingly guaranteed by the filmmaker's authoritative voice-over commentary. This format is repeated throughout the film and can be observed subsequently, for example, in the reenactment of a villager's death, which enables Faye to illustrate the rites surrounding the passing of a patriarch: the customary slaughtering of a bull, the offerings of food made to relatives of the deceased, and the ritual observances, including singing and dancing, that take place during the wake. This format is a distinctive feature of Faye's practice of ethnofiction, defined by Rouch as a filmmaking genre in which '*la fiction s'appuie sur des recherches ethnographiques prolongées dans le temps*' (in Loftus 2010: 44–5). Faye's practice of ethnofiction is particularly efficient, since she positions herself as an insider in the village ('Voici mon village, mes parents agriculteurs, éleveurs, ma grande famille'). Her superimposition of the factual and fictional ultimately leads the viewer to comply with Faye's representation of daily life and traditions existing in her home village, and to accept an indexical bond between this counterintuitive visual representation of a lifestyle and its referent.

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laughter, singing, pounding, and percussions overlap to produce an increasingly cacophonous racket.

<sup>330</sup> For example, in one of the sequences focusing on agricultural work, Faye alternates extreme long shots of women ploughing a field with close-ups of their tools and hands sowing seeds.

In *Le Monologue de la muette*, Sylla also uses the voice-over and the visual to superimpose the factual and the fictional, a method comparable to that of Faye in *Fad'jal*, as two contrasting discourses are again made to overlap. However, the indexical bond is here shifted, since the images are factual and the voice-over scripted. Amy, 'la muette' of the film's title, is filmed extensively as she carries out her unremitting daily chores, yet is only seen speaking twice on camera: Amy's voice is first heard when she responds to her employer's criticism of her work in a few words, and later when she converses briefly with her sister. Footage of her working relentlessly is accompanied by the extradiegetic off-screen voice of a young woman soberly recalling her childhood and detailing the treatment she currently receives in her employer's household. The viewer would naturally assume that the monologue read by this disembodied narrator is drafted and/or spoken by Amy, an assumption that is encouraged by the use of the first person narrative, by close correlation between the topics covered by the voice-over and the images seen on screen, and by the properties of the voice, which is that of a young woman roughly Amy's age. However, certain details suggest that the voice is not Amy's own. For example, in the opening sequence of the film, the voice-over — which is at this stage a mere whisper — speaks over footage of women sweeping the pavement at dawn and addresses Amy in the second person: 'Notre étoile ne tardera pas à se lever. L'astre noir de notre printemps brillera de joie, pour toi Amy, pour nous'. There are also unmistakable similarities in terms of the style and phrasing between Amy's first person voice-over in *Le Monologue de la muette* and Sylla's own prose in *Une Fenêtre ouverte*, which suggests that

Sylla may be the author of the monologue.<sup>331</sup> The film's co-director, Van Damme, confirms the authorship of the voice-over when he explains: 'L'initiatrice du film c'est Khady. Au départ il y avait ses textes' (in Campion and Yariv 2008: 3). Van Damme also reveals that the film in fact superimposes words written by Sylla and spoken by an actress over the footage of the unsuspecting Amy: 'Il y a une dimension fictionnelle, transversale, et c'est la parole d'Amy qui est la plus fictionnelle' (in Campion and Yariv 2008: 3).<sup>332</sup> Sylla therefore speaks both for and over Amy, replacing the voice-over's factual input with her own presumptions regarding Amy's personal history, thoughts, and aspirations.

As detailed in Chapter Two, this has implications in terms of the ethics of encounter, since Sylla fails to provide Amy with a voice and subjects her to a closed form of authority, which makes for disturbing viewing. This feature of the film is of further interest, however, since Sylla's docufictional practice in *Le Monologue de la muette* engages with the gap between representation and referent. Although in many films, notably Western ethnographic documentaries, the voice-over consciously or un-consciously serves to convey the filmmaker's presumptions, in *Le Monologue de la muette*, Sylla's subversion of the 'voice of truth' is deliberate. The film ultimately raises similar questions to those of the mockumentary, since it demonstrates that the appearance of documentary is easily recreated and is therefore potentially deceptive. The films of Faye and Sylla discussed in this chapter all question the

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<sup>331</sup> For example, 'Là bas, c'est l'enfance, ici c'est l'adolescence douloureuse et angoissée' and 'L'obscurité y est dense et aveugle, lorsque j'allume le néon, la lumière est trop vive', both spoken by Amy's fictional voice-over in *Le Monologue de la muette*, are clearly recognisable as Sylla's prose.

<sup>332</sup> The end credits reveal that Amy's voice-over is provided by Ndeye Fatou Diop.

seemingly guaranteed indexicality of location filming and the factuality of the voice-over, while simultaneously suggesting that sequences presenting fictional characteristics may have a strong factual input, be it historical or ethnographic.<sup>333</sup> In so doing, Faye's and Sylla's docufictions question the widespread associations established between specific codes of production and postproduction and documentary and fictional filmmaking.

Discussing the textual specificities of the docudrama and mock-documentary, Lipkin et al. identify codes and conventions with 'documentary and [...] drama provenance', and indicate that 'factual input can be measured directly in terms of the screen time given to codes that are predominantly associated with the documentary: *captions, voiceover commentary, newsreel footage* [...], *direct address* of the camera and one-on-one *interviews* with actual historical protagonists' (2006: 17–8). On the other hand, codes with a drama provenance are identified as those that are performance-related, namely '*script, direction, acting style, set design, costume, lighting* [...], *continuity-editing, realist mise-en-scène*' (2006: 18). These codes are elements of the language of film, which is grounded in complex visual and auditory patterns and associations. It is therefore not surprising that Lipkin et al. identify them as devices of documentary and fictional filmmaking respectively. However, while such profilmic practices and filmic techniques can be indicative of the nature of the material found in films, measuring their screen time to determine factuality is nonetheless extremely problematic, not least since there are numerous variations within fictional and documentary filmmaking that render such

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<sup>333</sup> Incidentally, this correlates with the contention defended in the previous chapter that fiction films are not excluded from being read as ethnographic, since they enclose elements of the culture(s) or sub-culture(s) that form their context of production.



observations untenable.<sup>334</sup> In addition, because docufictions combine codes freely, these interconnections are eroded further, as details of the films of Faye and Sylla reveal. By using the voice-over to merge performance-related and factual conventions, both filmmakers conclusively illustrate how easily codes of filmmaking with specific connotations can be subverted and why it is necessary to disentangle documentary and fiction from a rigid association with these apparently drama- or documentary-related codes.

Faye's and Sylla's elaborate juxtapositions of the factual and fictional encourage a distinct form of engagement with the text. As detailed in Chapter One, the degree and discernibility of a film's proximity to the factual is determinant in its reception, in particular in the case of documentaries, which generate certain assumptions and expectations regarding indexicality. Considering the importance placed on labelling by Beattie (2004: 13–4), Ruby (2005: 212), and Cooper (2006: 7), it is interesting to consider how the docufictions discussed in this chapter are indexed and marketed by their filmmakers, producers, and by the Africultures website, and how this may, in turn, affect the viewing experience they provide.<sup>335</sup> While *Kaddu Beykat* and

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<sup>334</sup> The great diversity of documentary modes is indicative of the many variations within the medium, as are fiction films such as Lelouch's iconic *Un Homme et une femme* (1966), for which the actors were provided with the outline of the storyline but were encouraged to depart from the script, improvise with the dialogue, facial expressions, and gestures, to give the film a naturalistic overtone. The same is also true for Nacro's *Bintou* (2001): 'Le scénario était écrit et la mise en scène était réglée par moi. L'improvisation s'est faite dans l'expression et dans les dialogues. Le dialogue que j'avais écrit était un peu didactique. Je l'ai présenté aux acteurs comme une idée sur laquelle ils pouvaient s'inspirer dans leurs propres mots. J'ai obtenu des choses magnifiques' (in Barlet 2002a: 43).

<sup>335</sup> The database of films provided by Africultures is used as a yardstick because it is the only source to reference all four of the films discussed here.

*Fad'jal* are sometimes mistakenly described as fiction films,<sup>336</sup> which Faye herself has opposed,<sup>337</sup> they were both labelled as docudramas on release.<sup>338</sup> Interestingly, Africultures identifies *Kaddu Beykat* as a fiction film but *Fad'jal* as a documentary, a discrepancy that appears somewhat arbitrary. *Le Monologue de la muette* has yet to be released commercially but the film's official description, outlined on a leaflet provided by the film's producer Sophie Salbot, does not qualify the film either as a documentary or a docufiction, but rather refers to it neutrally as 'un film'. The descriptions of *Le Monologue de la muette* and *Colobane Express* published by Africultures, on the other hand, both identify the films as 'documentaire', as does the commercialised DVD cover of *Colobane Express*.

This lack of consistency in the categorisation of Faye's and Sylla's films demonstrates the complexities involved in identifying and labelling works of docufiction. That they are frequently reduced to their closest designation on the fact–fiction continuum suggests that there is currently no universally recognised framework for approaching these films. This, in turn, poses a challenge for the viewer who finds her expectations called into question by filmmaking practices that cannot be satisfactorily labelled either as documentary or fiction: as detailed in the previous chapter in relation to *Colobane Express*, the elements of staging and performance can prove

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<sup>336</sup> See, for example, their respective entries in the database of the Cinémathèque Afrique: <[http://www.institutfrancais.com/afrique-en-creation/cinematheque-afrique/po20\\_2.html](http://www.institutfrancais.com/afrique-en-creation/cinematheque-afrique/po20_2.html)> [accessed 19 October 2010].

<sup>337</sup> During the annual African Studies Association Conference, Faye affirmed: 'I have never made a fiction film. I am mainly interested in film as a research tool' (in Pfaff 1988: 33). It is important to recall that Faye made this statement long before the release of her fiction feature film *Mossane* in 1996.

<sup>338</sup> See Faye's interview on *Cinéma d'aujourd'hui, cinéma sans frontières*, RFI, 11 April 2010.

somewhat disorientating when they are unexpected and/or surreptitious, as is the case in Sylla's film. However, all the docufictions in this corpus, regardless of their generic designation, generate a highly singular form of spectatorial involvement. As Faye and Sylla indiscriminately layer factual and fictional scenes and create overlaps and interconnections between them, their films do not provide a consistent and coherent degree of proximity to the real. The viewer therefore strives to make sense of the discrepancies between the potentially conflicting discourses that are made to overlap. As such, the films involve us in a permanent process of differentiation, as we attempt to identify and distinguish factual and fictional segments and process this material accordingly. Therefore, much like the documentary, whose 'meaning [and] identity is not fixed but fluid and stems from a productive, dialectical relationship between the text, the reality it represents and the spectator' (Bruzzi 2000: 7), docufictions truly come into being at the moment of reception.

Faye's and Sylla's complex juxtapositions of documentary and fiction are interesting to consider in relation to their context of production, since, 'in the dominant tradition of African cinema, the fictional and the documentary coexist to illuminate and expand the borders of reality' (Ukadike 1995a: 91). This raises the question of how documentary and fiction are conceptualised and distinguished in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. On this issue, Jean-François Werner cites a study on the reception of Latin-American television series carried out in Senegal, which demonstrates that at the start of the twenty-first century, 'une partie du public ne fait pas la différence entre fiction et documentaire, entre les personnages et les acteurs qui les incarnent' (2002:

31).<sup>339</sup> The results of this study are echoed by the personal experience of the Nigerien actress Zalika Souley who, in an interview with Keïta in the biographical film *Al'leessi* (2003), recalls her rise to fame in the 1960s, when she starred in *Le Retour d'un aventurier* (Alassane, 1966). As one of the first professional actresses working in Africa, Souley featured in many productions and notably played the controversial parts of a prostitute and a murderess wife. In *Al'leessi*, Souley recalls the violent criticism she received at the time from Nigerien viewers who did not make a distinction between the women she played on screen and the actress herself.<sup>340</sup>

This tendency to confuse actors with the characters they play is by no means an exclusively African phenomenon, as is evidenced by the many instances when Western viewers make such erroneous connections.<sup>341</sup> However, Werner's study sustains Faye's contention that 'pour l'Africain, c'est très difficile de mettre une frontière entre la fiction et le documentaire'.<sup>342</sup> Interestingly, Faye's point about the elusiveness of the boundary between documentary and fiction seems to be widely countenanced, at least in Senegal. Many Senegalese

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<sup>339</sup> Unfortunately Werner does not provide any further details regarding the execution, date, and findings of this study.

<sup>340</sup> It is important to emphasise that the reaction of the Nigerien viewers to Souley was predicated on their lack of experience of cinema, which had only begun to be popularised in Niger at that time. It is fitting to recall the extreme reactions of members of the audience during the early showings of the Lumière brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat* (1895).

<sup>341</sup> A forum entry entitled 'Mistaken Identity: Confusing Actors With Their Characters', which totals two hundred and eighty five posts of confessed misjudgements by viewers, illustrates that the tendency is by no means restricted to Africa. See <<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3123915>> [accessed 11 October 2010]. For example, there have been reports that viewers of the Fox show *America's Most Wanted* have frequently confused the actors playing the parts of criminals in reconstitutions with the actual offenders, calling law enforcement agencies to report sightings. The same phenomenon famously led the actor Leonard Nimoy to publish a book entitled *I Am Not Spock* (1975), having been too often confused with the character he played in the *Star Trek* series.

<sup>342</sup> See <<http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/05/safi-faye-role-model.html>> for footage of Faye's speech [accessed 30 July 2010].

filmmakers engage with a filmmaking practice that is characterised by what Jean-Marie Barbe terms a form of ‘fiction totalement traversée par le documentaire’.<sup>343</sup> This includes Moussa Touré who claims: ‘Nos fictions sont souvent quasiment des documentaires. La frontière est très souple’, and importantly insists: ‘Ces définitions, ce n’est pas nous qui les avons inventées’ (in Thackway 2009a). Ukadike traces this striking phenomenon back to the pioneer Sembène’s first film, *Borom Sarret* (1963), which initiated a ‘model of African film in which the synthesis of fiction and documentary, meticulous attention to detail, and oral narrative techniques coalesce into an indigenous aesthetic’ (1998: 571).

On the subject of African docufictions, Tapsoba argues that such generic blending achieves a convenient compromise between what he perceives as the edifying yet somewhat tedious nature of documentary, ‘un didactisme ennuyeux pour le public’, and the entertaining nature of fictional narrative cinema (1996a: 51–2).<sup>344</sup> In Tapsoba’s view, docufictions are in theory highly efficient forms of filmmaking that achieve the ideal balance between informing and entertaining: ‘L’artifice d’une histoire mise en scène permettant de faire passer “le message” de manière plus attractive’ (1996a: 51–2). Like Rossignol, whose questionable parallel between the myth of David and Goliath and documentary and fiction filmmaking was cited in Chapter One (2003: 3), Tapsoba seems to regard documentary as incapable of providing viewing

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<sup>343</sup> See *Cinéma d’aujourd’hui, cinéma sans frontières*, RFI, 23 August 2008.

<sup>344</sup> Rouch similarly equated so-called pure documentary with tedium. Speaking of *Moi, un Noir* (1958), Rouch claimed: ‘J’aurais pu faire un documentaire nourri de chiffres et d’observations objectives. Cela aurait été mortellement ennuyeux. Et bien! j’ai raconté une histoire avec des personnages, leurs aventures, leurs rêves. Et je n’ai pas hésité à introduire la dimension de l’imaginaire, de l’irréel’ (in Cooper 2006: 37).

pleasure and implies that fictional narrative cinema lacks the substance necessary to conclusively explore radical material. Tapsoba's account of docufiction is problematic, for it would suggest that documentary and fiction are both inherently incomplete forms of filmmaking that are dependent upon one another to elicit emotional and social responses from viewers. On the other hand, based as it is on reductive assumptions regarding documentary and fictional filmmaking, Tapsoba's claim also presents a favourable view of docufiction that is important to articulate.

The creative synthesis of genres performed by Faye and Sylla produces cinematic hybrids that can, at their best, make for engaging viewing by depicting a vast range of experiences, featuring innovative voices and modes of narration, and exploiting the undeniable power of the factual. In this respect, Sylla's treatment of the exploitation of young rural workers by the urban middle-class in *Le Monologue de la muette* is interesting to compare with that of Faye in *Kaddu Beykat*, particularly in terms of the degree, nature, and effect of the fictionalisation. Ngor's experience as an economic migrant in *Kaddu Beykat* is very similar to that of Amy in *Le Monologue de la muette*, despite the three decades that separate the making of each film. When Ngor is driven to the city in search of work, he joins the many other young unskilled seasonal workers struggling to find paid labour in a context of mass unemployment. Among the many different precarious positions he occupies, Ngor is briefly employed as a housekeeper in a wealthy middle-class household but is falsely accused of carelessness and dismissed without pay having worked for a week. Here, the factual and fictional are again made to overlap, since this staged and

scripted sequence is derived from a lived experience, as Faye explains: ‘Le rôle de la patronne avec le boy, c’est la grande sœur de mon père! Elle m’a raconté qu’elle renvoyait chaque fois ses boys. Je lui ai demandé de jouer, elle a accepté’ (in Diao 2010).

In *Kaddu Beykat*, the film’s social actors therefore reenact a confrontation that Faye’s aunt experienced first hand. In *Le Monologue de la muette*, the fictionalisation is of a different nature, since Sylla supplies the young woman’s story by appending a fictional voice-over to factual footage: ‘L’ossature est absolument réelle: c’est la vie d’Amy’ (in Van Damme in Campion and Yariv 2008: 3). Here, Sylla successfully capitalises on what Folly termed ‘le pouvoir de l’image’ in relation to the women in *Les Oubliées* who begged her to film a malnourished child in the hope that the footage would, in Folly’s terms, ‘émouvoir et changer le cours de leur destin’. Sylla’s documentary footage of Amy effectively conveys the hardship of the ‘petites bonnes’, as she is filmed at length working relentlessly under near-constant pressure from her employers. The editing of the first sequence filmed in their home, for example, serves to condense in the space of under two minutes the plethora of orders issued by Amy’s employers:

Pose-le devant. Prends le pot de beurre. Prend le pot. Mets-le au réfrigérateur.  
Apporte le pain. Pose-le sur le plateau. Prends le thé et mets-le devant. Pousse  
le plateau. Amy, où est le sucre? Va en chercher. Amy, Amy, Amy! Donne-moi  
une bouteille d’eau. Amy, apporte une chaise.

The camera simultaneously focuses on Amy in order to reveal the distressing impassiveness with which she meets her employers' demands. At this point, the extra-diegetic silence of the observational is broken by Amy's fictional voice-over, which announces: 'Ici, c'est la prison' and proceeds to describe her current living conditions.

Sylla provides a very powerful insight into the oppression of Senegalese rural migrants: the long takes of Amy, who is submissive both to her employers and to the filming crew, are extremely effective in conveying her bleak living and working conditions, and generate considerable empathy. The sequence that documents Ngor's time in the city is also well designed, since it manages to convey the humiliation he faces in his desperate search, the toil of manual labour, along with the expectations and reliance of those in his home village. Nevertheless, this sequence is by no means as distressing as the factual footage of Amy in *Le Monologue de la muette*, or that of Selbé in *Selbé et tant d'autres*. Ngor's fictional experience of the city fails to generate verisimilitude, not least because the reenactment is provided by non-professional actors whose performances are sometimes awkward and lack credibility. In addition, because the viewer is not notified that the confrontation between the employer and Ngor is derived from a lived experience, it does not capitalise on its degree of proximity to the factual and fails to have the desired effect. This explains the reaction of Loftus to this scene: unaware of its factual basis, she describes it as 'exaggerated and Manichean' (2010: 49).



Although *Le Monologue de la muette* successfully employs factual footage to denounce the exploitation of economic migrants, the film is not unproblematic in terms of the ethics of encounter, as has been discussed in Chapter Two. Amy's central yet withdrawn onscreen presence and the insistence on her employers' abusive behaviour undeniably have a strong and lasting impact on the viewer. However, this footage is disturbing, not only in terms of what it reveals of Amy's working conditions, but also because of how it is obtained. In an interview with co-director Van Damme, Mariadèle Campion and Yanira Yariv voice their concerns over the ethical treatment of the film's subjects, since their behaviour tends to suggest that they may have been misled regarding the filmmakers' purpose in making the film: 'La mère et la fille, ne semblent pas du tout gênées de lui donner des ordres devant vous, elles semblent montrer comment elles éduquent leur bonne...' (2008: 3). Van Damme acknowledges this breach in the standards of informed consent, and much like Lanzmann and Modell, whose films were discussed in Chapter One, he attempts to justify the subterfuge by evoking the filmmakers' social responsibility and the validity of their commitment to bringing about change. Seeking to rationalise their decision to prioritise their political goal — a greater public awareness of the cause of the 'petites bonnes', at the expense of the film's subjects — Van Damme asserts that in the case of committed documentaries uncovering social injustices, 'c'est la guerre' (in 2008: 3). In addition, Van Damme claims that it is precisely this subterfuge that enabled them to persuasively convey the extent of Amy's exploitation and that interviewing her instead, as Campion and Yariv suggest, would have entailed a significant loss: 'À ce moment-là, il n'y a plus les patrons, et ce que vous

perdez c'est ce que disent les images, c'est-à-dire à quel point elle est soumise à sa patronne' (in Campion and Yariv: 3–4). Sylla and Van Damme's stance on the issue of informed consent demonstrates both the power of documentary footage and the ethical complexities of docufiction, which is ultimately bound by the same moral obligations to subjects as documentary, even if the filmmakers proclaim and foreground their fictionalisation of the real.

Faye's use of the reenactment, on the other hand, enables her to elude this ethical pitfall. This form of fictionalisation is a creative strategy that can, in the first instance, enable filmmakers to bypass some of the limitations of documentary and convey events or circumstances that can be difficult to film, either for ethical or practical reasons, or because of social taboo.<sup>345</sup> Accordingly, Kaboré regards docufiction as a valuable tool for representing the experiences of the victimised and powerless. As the filmmaker recalls in relation to her series *Naître fille en Afrique*:

Personne ne voulait témoigner à visage découvert, de peur d'être reconnu. D'où le choix du docu-fiction, qui fait rejouer à des acteurs professionnels des scènes réelles: viols des patrons, abus des maîtresses de maison, insécurité des villes, où les bonnes se font souvent agresser. (in Lequeret 2005b)

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<sup>345</sup> That is not to say that documentary filmmakers are limited to filming events as they unfold before the camera. For example, the debate surrounding the sterilisation of implements in *Itchombi* was triggered by the disinfectant introduced to the village leaders by Assih. Similarly, during the making of *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, Ndiaye paid local women to paint murals so that she could film the process from start to finish. This prompted Hurst et al. to question whether Ndiaye had created 'quelque chose d'artificiel pour faire exister le film', an accusation that she counters by affirming: 'Nous avons juste provoqué le moment' (in 2003).

Both Faye and Sylla use fictionalisation to increase the range of experiences depicted. It has been demonstrated that in *Fad'jal* and *Kaddu Beykat*, Faye stages reenactments in order to provide extensive footage of the customs that surround birth and death, as well as gender and generational conflicts. Likewise, in *Colobane Express*, Sylla features performance-based scenes that, when assembled, provide an extensive overview of the wide range of activities and events that take place daily onboard a 'car rapide': each sequence of the film serves to illustrate an aspect of this activity, notably the hierarchy onboard the bus, arguments over fares, repairs to the vehicle, police checks, and so on.

Although (re)enactments are undeniably very useful for illustrating events or situations that may otherwise be difficult or problematic for documentary to capture or convey, the practice of docufiction cannot be reduced to a mere artifice. Some of the reenactments in *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad'jal*, and *Le Monologue de la muette* serve to encourage different forms of engagement on behalf of the viewer, while others enable Faye and Sylla to feature open forms of authority. There are several such examples of narrative techniques that can usefully be considered in more detail, most notably the children's reenactment of a past event in the form of play and the love story in *Kaddu Beykat*; the recounting by 'Grand-père' of a popular local tale in *Fad'jal*; and the dispute staged by anonymous housemaids in *Le Monologue de la muette*. In the latter film, the observational footage of Amy at work in her employers' household stands in stark contrast with other sequences, since it is combined with performance-based footage that is designed to offer 'un certain regard sur le réel' (Van Damme in Campion and Yariv 2008: 3). Sylla and Van Damme had

envisioned a reflexive polyphonous film, made from a collage of voices and perspectives: Ndeye Fatou Diop's fictional voice-over, Fatima Poulou Sy's slam poetry, Joséphine Diouf's indirect address to Amy, masked interviews of washerwomen and other 'petites bonnes', and a short play illustrating a conflict between an employer and the relatives of an unfairly dismissed housemaid, performed by local women.

This four-minute sequence opens with a shot of a young woman crying over the treatment received from her employer: 'Elle m'a virée, m'a frappée. Elle ne m'a rien donné à manger'. These accusations spark a violent public confrontation between the young woman's relatives and her employer, which in turn leads to the intervention of a policewoman. Efforts have clearly been made, in particular in terms of clothing, in order for the enactment to appear viable. In contrast with the other women featuring in this sequence, all of whom wear African clothing, the employer sports a Western business outfit, a commonplace feature in African-made films, used to signal that a protagonist is a member of the educated middle class.<sup>346</sup> Likewise, the 'commissaire' wears a kaki vest and red cap, in order to be easily identifiable as a law enforcement officer. However, it is noticeable that the attention to detail is not designed to provide a factual indexical representation of these characters: the policewoman's outfit is not the regulation uniform and when the employer is summoned, her house is not that of middle-class women like Amy's employer, but rather a shack similar to that in which Amy herself lives. As the sequence ends with footage of the women laughing and discussing their performance, 'ce

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<sup>346</sup> See, for example, the importance placed on the protagonists' outfits in *Puk nini* (Nacro, 1995). Interestingly, Amy's actual employers are dressed in African clothing.

n'est pas si facile, le théâtre', it is clear that no effort has been made to disguise this enactment as an actual historical event. The apparent theatrical nature of the dispute is significant, for, unlike the confrontation between Ngor and his employer, which Faye does not prefigure with a warning regarding its factual basis, in this case the viewer is explicitly made aware that this is an improvisation performed by housemaids with first hand experience of such exploitation. This sequence therefore enables the women to tell their own story, an aspect that is strikingly absent from Amy's disturbing onscreen presence.

This theatrical performance, along with Fatima Poulo Sy's Slam poetry, which consists in a first person account of the sexual harassment, low wages, and shabby housing that are par for the course for 'petites bonnes' in Dakar, both depart from conventional documentary narrative methods and contribute to providing the viewer with the subjective and polyphonous view of exploitation that Sylla and Van Damme had intended. The staged children's play-acting in *Kaddu Beykat* similarly represents a departure from widespread documentary narrative techniques. Many scenes in *Kaddu Beykat* and *Fad'jal* are designed to give the impression that the films' social actors speak directly to the camera. An example of this is the sequence where men are gathered under 'l'arbre à palabres' to discuss local politics, an opportunity that they use to express their concerns regarding groundnut monoculture and the state ownership of the land. The scene of the children's play-acting serves a similar purpose, as it is designed as a testimony to the brutality of tax collectors. The scene begins with a shot of thirty or so children seated at the foot of a tree, as Faye explains in the voice-over: 'Les enfants sont sous l'arbre à palabres. Ils ont vu, ils miment'.

The filmmaker then becomes silent and the children take over the narration. One of them proposes, in a slightly slanted fashion indicative of staging: ‘Nous allons jouer aux percepteurs qui viennent réclamer leurs dettes quand la récolte est mauvaise’, a suggestion that is met with enthusiasm by the others. The group then proceeds to mimic a confrontation between three tax collectors and Khamad, a farmer with outstanding debts who is promptly beaten up, powdered with DDT, and left for dead, in spite of his plea regarding the low yield of his crops.

The choice to recount this event through the prism of the children’s play-acting contributes to diversifying the means through which information is conveyed to the viewer and provides an alternative to voice-over commentary, interviews, or talking heads. It also adds a subtly moving element to the scene, similar to Folly’s use of children’s play in *Les Oubliées*, which features footage of young children using an abandoned tank as a climbing frame, in order to emphasise the human cost of war. In both films, the contrast between the children’s light-hearted games and the devastating social and political climate encourages an emotional response from the viewer. The universal theme of the love story in *Kaddu Beykat* is similarly designed to encourage empathy from the viewer regarding the difficulties faced by Coumba and Ngor, who come to embody the experiences of the rural youth. Their relationship condenses the many social, cultural, and political issues that were raised informally by Faye’s subjects during the planning of the film (Welsh 1983: 149): their thwarted marriage serves as an illustration of how groundnut monoculture, desertification, rural migration, unemployment, and poverty can affect

individuals' lives in a significant manner.<sup>347</sup> The storyline also importantly functions as a unifying theme and provides a much-needed focal point and cohesion in an ambitious film that aims to supply a comprehensive account of village life.

Like *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad'jal* is a wide-ranging film that aims to bring into focus Serer history and cultural practices. The film is an elaborate combination of the elder's narrative, historical reenactments, and ethnographic footage focusing on daily manual labour, wrestling, and the rituals accompanying birth and death. The internal structure of *Fad'jal* is highly intricate, to the point of being occasionally confusing. The film relies on the layering of historical and ethnographic material and features multiple digressions, some of which are relatively ambiguous in their effect. For example, as the elder starts to recount the founding of the village by the matriarch Mbang Fad'jal, he is interrupted by the distant sound of percussions and singing. The elder halts his narration and the group turns to face the direction of the sound. There is then a brief shift in location, with a ten-second scene showing a group of women dancing. Another shift in place then takes us back to the 'arbre à palabres' and the elder resumes his story. The reasons for this interruption are uncertain, as is the exact nature of the scene. For instance, it remains unclear whether the dancing takes place on the same diegetic level as the elder's narration, or whether it is a glimpse into the celebrations that took place during the founding of the village. This uncertainty is heightened by the striking conflation of past and present in the film, which is best exemplified by the onscreen presence of the village griot,

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<sup>347</sup> In his documentary *Pour le meilleur et pour l'oignon!* (2008), the Nigerien filmmaker Sani Elhadj Magori likewise centres on the setbacks to Salamatou and Adamou's engagement in order to illustrate the impact of the harsh living conditions in his native village, Galmi.

Latyr, a character who appears alongside the elder and the children during the storytelling sessions, in the ethnographic sequence illustrating the customs surrounding birth, as well as in the historical reenactments. In each of these diegetic levels, Latyr appears under the same name and wearing the same clothes so that there is no doubt as to his identity. This merging of past and present and the mixing of diegetic levels is a particularly striking feature of *Fad'jal*, one which Thackway relates to African storytelling. As Thackway shows, the complex and non-linear structure of the film, the deliberate conflation of past and present, and the insistence on lineage, all echo the griot practice of storytelling (2003a: 118).

Drawing comparisons between African screen media practices and the narrative style of the griot has now become something of a cliché in discussions of African cinemas.<sup>348</sup> The analogy is twofold, as parallels are made both between the text and the tale, and between the social and cultural roles of the filmmaker and griot. Accordingly, Augustine-Ufua Enahoro asserts that, ‘the African cineaste is like a griot, he tells his audience the problems of the society. It is his responsibility to identify these problems. He is the spokesman of the community’ (1988: 137). Although some filmmakers, such as Faye, have admittedly aimed to become the voice of their community, there are also many counter examples to Enahoro’s characterisation of the African filmmaker, not least Diabang Brener and Ndiaye, who have frequently expressed their desire to move away from representations of Africa that focus on ‘the problems of society’. When it first emerged, the comparison was

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<sup>348</sup> Authors using the analogy of filmmaker and griot include Diawara (1988 and 1992), Enahoro (1988), Benali (2002), Martin (2002), Gabara (2003), Thackway (2003a), Murphy and Williams (2007), and Dovey (2009).



nonetheless useful in promoting the ‘aesthetics of decolonization’, which crystallised when African filmmakers ‘initiated interrogative narrative patterns by appropriating and subverting “dominant” conventions, blending them with their own cultural codes (oral narrative art) to create a novel aesthetic formula’ (Ukadike 1998: 571). As African filmmakers sought to reinvent Western filmmaking conventions by shaping a form of cinematic expression that relied on specifically African cultural values and narrative styles, the figure of the griot was politicised and came to stand as an emblem of this aesthetic search. It is interesting to note that griotism has often been wrongly used as a synonym for orality, in a manner that obliterates the other forms of storytelling that might have influenced filmmakers. For example, Nacro recalls that she came to filmmaking because she was inspired to tell stories by the tales that her seniors narrated during village gatherings when she was a child (Verschueren 2002: 2).

Mambéty, Kaboré, Kouyaté, and Sembène are among those who have frequently been termed griots. Even Rouch has been described as a ‘griot gaulois’ (Predal 1981) and a ‘cinematic griot’ (Stoller 1992) on account of his association with Africa. Mambéty and Kouyaté have embraced their heritage and the comparison, in particular Kouyaté, for whom it is of greater significance since he descends from a long line of illustrious griots.<sup>349</sup> Interestingly, although Sembène initially welcomed the comparison, he later came to view it as something of a racist caricature. During an interview in 1978, Sembène first presented a view of African filmmakers that echoes Enahoro’s aforementioned characterisation: ‘The African filmmaker is like the

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<sup>349</sup> See Wynchank (2003: 96) and Ouédraogo (2003) respectively.

griot [...], the living memory and conscience of his people, his society' (in Murphy and Williams 2007: 8). Twenty-seven years later, Sembène was comparatively far more critical of the comparison, as the journalist Alexander Carnwath recalls: 'Sembene [*sic*] meets the idea with exasperation. "Griotism was a historical era", he protests. "It's like the minstrels in England. The African mustn't feel himself enclosed by that"' (2005). Similar to the perceived dichotomy between tradition and modernity discussed in Chapter Two, the comparison between filmmaker and griot has become a point of contention among filmmakers and scholars: 'Among critics of African film practice, oral tradition as a creative matrix has generated controversies and disagreements regarding its application to African films' (Ukadike 1998: 571). Although initially relevant and effective, the comparison has been overused and has lost its early political significance, only to become a largely obsolete and reductive stereotype, as is evidenced by Sembène's radical reassessment of the issue. It is apparent that the parallel between filmmaker and griot is often drawn merely as a matter of convenience and is potentially damaging, since it offers only an oversimplified view of African filmmaking. In the case of *Fad'jal*, for example, while Faye, like Nacro, may have been inspired and influenced by orality and sought to incorporate some of its patterns into her docufiction, her filmmaking practice cannot and should not be considered as a mere transposition of these techniques to the screen.<sup>350</sup>

In *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad'Jal*, *Colobane Express*, and *Le Monologue de la muette*, Faye and Sylla initiate novel practices of docufiction that rely on the elaborate

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<sup>350</sup> Accordingly, features of *Fad'jal* are reminiscent of the structure of African oral tales, characterised, according to Hondo, by digression and repetition (Murphy and Williams 2007: 10).

blending and juxtaposition of documentary and fictional codes and conventions. This chapter has argued for the significance of these unconventional docufictional practices, which are far from simplistic or opportunistic but present interesting complexities in terms of their origins, formation, and implications. The films discussed in this chapter provide innovative forms of cinematic expression that are both strategic and political. *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad'Jal*, *Colobane Express*, and *Le Monologue de la muette* are revelatory of Faye's and Sylla's search for novel narrative methods that do not rely exclusively on the cinematic conventions prominent in documentary, namely the voice-over, interview, and talking head formats. These formal innovations enable Faye and Sylla to exceed the representational limitations of documentary, to engage their audiences in novel and unexpected ways, and to achieve open forms of authority that empower the films' subjects and social actors.

Faye's and Sylla's films share some of the characteristics and effects of the forms of docudrama and mockumentary that are prevalent in the West. Most notably, their practices of docufiction push the boundaries of the real, play with the appearances of documentary and fiction, and interrogate the perceived relationship between these two media. The manner in which documentary and fiction appear to be interconnected, and even at times conflated, in *Kaddu Beykat*, *Fad'jal*, *Colobane Express*, and *Le Monologue de la muette* suggests that the messages, aims, and formation of documentary and fiction are far from irreconcilable. This, in turn, contributes to refuting the existence of a potential dichotomy between documentary and fiction, and sustains instead the notion of

the fact–fiction continuum. On account of their textual specificities, the films discussed in this chapter provide distinct and engaging viewing experiences that challenge the audience’s expectations of the text and of the reality it represents. As films that both engage with and depart from documentary, the docufictional work of Faye and Sylla raises new issues regarding the ethics of representation and encounter, since they exceed the accepted bounds of documentary ethics.

Faye’s and Sylla’s docufictional work can be linked to that of Western counter-culture filmmakers, most notably the feminist filmmakers who came to experiment with docufiction as a way of challenging approaches to documentary and initiating a feminist filmmaking aesthetics (Erens 1988: 561). Indeed, Mulvey advocates that works that mix genres and blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction offer a valuable alternative to mainstream cinema (Waldman and Walker 1999: 10). Although Faye and Sylla’s rationale for engaging with filmmaking practices that juxtapose the factual and fictional is radically different from that of feminist filmmakers, their work nonetheless poses similar challenges to mainstream perceptions of cinematic media. Their filmmaking practices are grounded in specifically African approaches to documentary and narrative cinema, truth and fiction, and initiate a sub-genre that embraces these distinct concepts rather than complying with hegemonic Western practices. In accordance with Ukadike’s aforementioned assertion that ‘the synthesis of fiction and documentary, meticulous attention to detail, and oral narrative techniques coalesce into an indigenous aesthetic’, Faye’s and Sylla’s conflation of documentary and fiction therefore initiates a specifically

African cinematic language. This is where docufiction intersects with the other three sub-genres discussed in this thesis: a detailed analysis of woman-centred committed documentary, autobiography, and ethnography by Francophone sub-Saharan Africa women reveals that in spite of the great diversity and richness of themes, perspectives, and stylistic approaches, their work points to the crystallisation of a unique and challenging filmmaking tradition.

## CONCLUSION

The founding premise of this thesis is the discrepancy between the range of African women's documentaries and the limited critical attention they have received. The Introduction argued that many critics of African screen media privilege the fiction films of male directors because they wrongly surmise that the documentary work of their female counterparts is less interesting, less complex, and less radical. A review of existing approaches to African women's documentary revealed that few scholars opt to read these films specifically as documentary texts. This is regrettable, partly because this omission perpetuates misconceptions regarding African women's documentary work and, most importantly, because some of their films' most interesting features are therefore not researched. Their documentary work suffers from the widespread 'museumification of African cinema' (Frindéthié 2009: 3), a tendency to focus primarily on questions of content rather than form, to overlook the films' aesthetic properties in favour of privileging what they convey about African life. This is a problem that affects the films in this corpus more than other types of African screen media: as documentaries, they appear to offer their audiences a direct access to the profilmic, and because they are the work of African women, it is tempting to foreground these films' quality as symbols of their emancipation and empowerment.

This thesis set out to shed new light on African women's documentary work, to demonstrate that their films are worthy of acclaim not only because of what they symbolise or because of their content, but also because they are, above all,

challenging texts. This study has highlighted the overlooked diversity of subject matter, approaches to the profilmic world, and documentary practices in the films in this corpus, both across and within each subgeneric formation. It has established a timeline for African women's documentary and demonstrated a significant increase in reflexivity, showing how committed filmmaking became prominent in the 1990s and predominated until the turn of the century, when we witnessed a shift from social to cultural phenomena, along with a rise of the personal. The framework of documentary theory has served to shift the focus of study from questions of content to questions of form and to initiate a dialogue that would contribute to questioning the applicability of models developed for the study of Western documentary. These models have been used to highlight the significance of profilmic practices and filmic techniques, and to discuss axiographics, the ethics of encounter and representation. Analyses of the films in this corpus have demonstrated that a textual approach to the work of Francophone sub-Saharan African women filmmakers is both valid and productive, since this thesis has uncovered the existence of a documentary voice proper to African women, a practice of documentary that is socially, culturally, and/or politically committed, highly personal, and reflexive.<sup>351</sup> Nevertheless, close readings of their films have also revealed that they exceed the models of Western documentary theory, models which proved undeniably useful for engaging with the corpus, but which cannot, on their own, account fully for the specificities of African women's documentary practices.

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<sup>351</sup> It is also argued that the films offer scope for other approaches. The study of Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte* demonstrated that a psychoanalytic reading of the film may be productive. In addition, it would be interesting to consider all the films in the corpus within the framework of postcolonial theory.

This study has uncovered recurring features that testify to the fact that African women filmmakers consciously write against the grain of a Western gaze: their films serve to challenge viewers' potentially distorted understandings of Africa, and to divert from the reductive images that have shaped these expectations. On the whole, these women use film to show the 'réalité invisible' that is Africa seen by Africans,<sup>352</sup> and strive to offer engaging and novel analyses of complex personal and collective African issues: the construction of the self in relation to cultural and historical processes; cultural norms regarding women; the nature of and interactions between tradition and modernity; the status and relevance of specific cultural practices; and individual experiences of armed conflict, exploitation, poverty, and mental illness. The women whose work has been discussed in this thesis outwardly seek to counter stereotypes of Africa and Africans, both of which have long been represented with a limited range of images in the Western media, most notably in traditional ethnography. Their own practices of documentary are shaped by this rejection of specific cinematic codes and conventions, in particular the scientific, impersonal, and so called objective gaze of the ethnographer.

Many of the filmmakers discussed in this thesis have overtly expressed their desire to offer alternatives to prevailing accounts of Africa. These alternatives do not overlook the social, political, and economic difficulties faced by rural and urban populations in order to present an idealised view of the continent.

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<sup>352</sup> See Hondo's interview in *Caméra d'Afrique* (Boughedir, 1983).



However, their explorations of war, famine, mass unemployment, or exploitation ultimately differ from prevailing accounts, as they construct images of resourceful individuals actively working towards improving personal and collective living conditions, instead of focusing on anonymous and helpless victims of extreme hardship, as Western films often do. African women filmmakers innovate by bringing to the screen everyday African experiences and paying attention to the mundane, something that is often overlooked in Western accounts of African life. Although these filmmakers engage with broad, wide reaching issues, they prefer to focus on individuals rather than the group, whether these are social subjects, as in Folly's *Les Oubliées* and Ndiaye's *Traces, empreintes de femmes* and *En attendant les hommes*, or social actors, such as Ngor and Coumba in Faye's *Kaddu Beykat*. The aim here is to personify and personalise the experience, in order to 'mettre l'humain en cœur du film' (Ndiaye in Hurst et al. 2003), which, once again, can be explained by a desire to counter the hegemonic representations that all too rarely acknowledge individual human experiences.

A study of axiographics has revealed a desire to bring viewers closer to the lived experience, while also attempting to avoid intrusion. Shots are most often carefully constructed in a manner that reveals a clear concern for the ethics of documentary representation: the camera is not invasive, but nor do the filmmakers maintain a distance between the enunciative agency and subjects — a distance that was long almost standard in Western ethnography, as explored in Chapter Four. A large majority of the films in this corpus testify to a desire to make films with and sometimes for subjects, rather than simply

about them: Faye and Ndiaye emphasise the collaborative nature of filmmaking and seek methods that allow their subjects to speak directly to the camera; Mbeka and Sylla made *Sorcière la vie!* and *Une Fenêtre ouverte* in part for their relatives or a friend; and Thiaw wanted *Boul Fallé* to function as an extension of the political activism of the wrestlers and hip-hop artists who feature in the film. In accordance with Rouch's call to transform ethnography, most of the women whose work has been explored in this thesis seek to 'open up the "closed authority"' (Scheinman 1998: 188) of many ethnographic documentaries and minimise the power imbalance ingrained in documentary. When, as in Sylla's *Une Fenêtre ouverte* and *Le Monologue de la muette*, the films signal a transgression of widely-accepted forms of documentary ethics, they make for uncomfortable viewing and come to serve as a reminder of the tension, inherent in all documentaries, between the requirements of actuality filmmaking and the impetus of the creative drive.

Their rejection of impersonal accounts is a particularly striking feature of the films in this corpus, as they focus on individuals rather than faceless masses and shape representations that are embodied and subjective. In relation to African documentary practices, Barbe rightly claims: 'Plus souvent que dans les projets des jeunes Européens, me semble-t-il, il s'agit du récit direct d'éléments de leur propre expérience existentielle' (in Barlet 2011). Accordingly, the committed, autobiographical, and ethnographic documentaries and docufictions in this corpus are not necessarily made solely on the basis of professional or social responsibilities: these filmmakers also turn to documentary as a result of a personal interest and in the case of the

autobiographical films of Diop, Mbeka, and Sylla, out of necessity. The personal, situated, and subjective approaches to the profilmic world by African women differ markedly from the documentary films on Africa made by outsiders, who are most often motivated by anthropological and journalistic interests. In particular, the filmmakers divert from the many ethnographic accounts of Africa shaped by Westerners, who claimed to film with scientific impartiality and whose failure to acknowledge the inherently subjective and biased nature of representation was as damaging as their reductive representations of Africa and Africans.

Barlet rightly asserts that African documentary filmmakers do not shape ‘un regard authentique ou intérieur à prendre comme une vérité’, but rather ‘un regard critiquable et sujet à l’approximation voire à l’erreur’ (2011). This can clearly be observed in the films in this corpus, since their makers predominantly seek to assert their position with respect to the profilmic, as they highlight who is filming, why, and how. Aside from a few exceptions, the filmmakers acknowledge their quality as insiders, outsiders, or both: Faye and Thiaw express their familiarity with the individuals and settings on screen; Assih and Folly emphasise their foreignness; and Diop and Mbeka articulate the ambiguity of their position as European women of African descent. These filmmakers thereby emphasise that their documentaries are made from a specific perspective, draw attention to the subjective nature of representation, and use form to inscribe their authorial position onto the film. Although the growing tendency to view documentary as a vehicle for conveying subjective and embodied perspectives, and sometimes for self-examination, is a global

phenomenon, as explored in Chapter One, in this context it is all the more significant, since it is an explicit criticism of the outsider's gaze.

This emphasis on the personal in the films of African women and their rejection of the codes and conventions of Western ethnography translates directly in terms of their chosen modes of documentary representation. For the most part, the filmmakers privilege the interactive: whether the filmmakers are visible and/or audible during interviews, they place emphasis on the encounter between a filmmaker and her subjects and often show the director on a voyage of personal, social, and/or cultural discovery. As in Western feminist documentary, the expository is not the dominant mode in any of the films in this corpus. When there is an extra-diegetic voice-over, as in Faye's and Folly's films for example, it is not objective or anonymous, but is spoken from a situated perspective and includes personal observations and impressions. African women filmmakers clearly evade the expository because of its association with traditional ethnography and because of its disempowering tendencies. They prefer to explore instead what Martinez terms "'open" textual strategies', which 'carry an explicit "invitation" for the reader to do the interpretive work' (1992: 135): *Colobane Express* leaves interpretation of the interactions and events that take place onboard the Dakar express coach entirely to the viewer; Ndiaye does not over-analyse the art of wall painting in *En attendant les hommes*; and although Faye contextualises the events and situations portrayed in her films by providing relevant cultural, social, and political facts, she stops short of disempowering the viewer. There is therefore a clear effort to depart from the didactic tendencies of traditional ethnography

by privileging open and sometimes abstract textual strategies. The dialogic quality of African women's work serves also to challenge how meaning is conveyed in documentary. Their expressive use of music, diegetic sounds, and local artwork, as observed in *Selbé et tant d'autres*, *Traces, empreintes de femmes*, and *En attendant les hommes*, exposes the viewer to abstract elements that are not over-analysed by the enunciative agency but are there to be deciphered upon reception.

Therefore, as the title of this thesis suggests, the practice of documentary in films by women from Francophone sub-Saharan African is challenging on more than one level: their films encourage us to reflect upon the profilmic world as well as on the documentary medium itself, as they question how documentary operates and explore alternative methods for conveying meaning. Many of the formally and/or politically reflexive features identified in the films in this corpus echo the principles of Western feminist documentary: Waldman and Walker insist on the importance of redressing the power imbalance of documentary (1999: 14–5), of generating a 'solidarity' between maker and subject (1999: 15–7), of shaping 'counterhistories' (1999: 19), and of paying attention to 'the lives of everyday women' (1999: 22). The documentary practices in films by African women therefore intersect in many significant ways with Western feminist documentary, but it is essential to acknowledge that their work is shaped by feminist as well as 'Africanist' concerns. This thesis makes the case for the formulation of an African womanist documentary theory, an approach that takes into consideration the specific social, cultural, and economic realities of African women's lives, the representations of Africa

and Africans against which they write, as well as African cinematic traditions, all of which are undeniably influential in defining their filmmaking practices.

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Whenever possible, this filmography provides the release date, genre, country of production, and running time for each film. Unfortunately, in the case of many of the African-made films, this information was impossible to verify and so does not feature below.

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