



Alexander Fisher

Voice-Over, Narrative Agency, and Oral Culture Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret*

The voice-over—one of the most overtly “oral” aspects of cinematic enunciation—accrues a particular significance when considered within the context of films originating from historically oral cultures; the presence of voice-over in such films would appear to be the most obvious point of intersection between the modern cultural form of cinema and the ancient tradition of oral performance. Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (Senegal, 1969) presents a special case in this regard: widely regarded as the first sub-Saharan African film, the film's use of a first-person voice-over invites comparisons with the voice of the *griot*, the traditional oral performer in West African cultures.

However, *Borom Sarret's* voice-over is exposed as the voice of an unreliable narrator whose bias, shortcomings, and prejudices are emphasized via the unusual relationship of his vocal narration to the other sounds and images in the film. Through this relationship, *Borom Sarret* constructs and renders visible another narrator that has far more authority than the subject heard in the voice-over. Sarah Kozloff points out that “...behind the voice-over narrator there is another presence that supplements the nominal narrator's vision, knowledge, and storytelling powers. This presence is the narrating agent of all films (with or without voice-over)” (44). In *Borom Sarret*, the presence of this *cinematic narrator* is emphasized, while in classical (Hollywood) cinema it is rendered invisible. It is the god-like third-person *cinematic narrator* that recalls the autonomous narrator in some African oral performances, the *griot*. This *cinematic narrator*, operating behind the protagonist's voice-over, confides in us, and persuades us to appreciate the ironies and contradictions of the protagonist's social predicament. Within a highly economic running time of 19 minutes, *Borom Sarret* manages to articulate a complex critique of the urban poverty prevalent within postcolonial African countries, emphasizing its psychological effects. This is achieved

through the first-person, interior monologue of Modou (Ly Abdoulay), a cart driver or *borom Sarret*; a term which, according to Murphy, is a “Wolofisation” of the French term *bonhomme charette* (52), meaning the wagoner. Throughout the film, while undertaking his routine morning's work driving fellow citizens around Dakar in his horse-drawn cart, the protagonist expresses his thoughts and feelings in voice-over. As the morning unfolds, the protagonist Modou runs errands for a range of local characters, and meets a professional *griot* who persuades him to part with his earnings by singing his praises. Towards the end of the film, a well-dressed person convinces Modou to drive him to the “plateau”, the exclusive high town where the *sarrets* are not allowed. Once reaching the destination, Modou is accosted by a policeman who confiscates his cart, while his passenger flees without paying his fare. Returning to his family in the low town without his cart, and thus without his livelihood, the protagonist's monologue asks who is responsible for this misfortune.

As with many of Sembène's works, *Borom Sarret* is often didactic in tone, a characteristic which itself invokes questions about oral narrative techniques. Sembène famously saw himself as fulfilling a role akin to the *griot* (although he himself was not of *griot* lineage) and described himself as a “*griot* of modern times” (Pfaff 29). Moreover, *Borom Sarret* reflects Sembène's self-confessed commitment to the cinema as a tool for mass education, summarized in his statement, “cinema is an evening class for the people” (Sembène 184). Indeed, the director was known to tour his films around West African villages that lacked facilities for film exhibition, thus exposing his political ideals to as wide an audience as possible. Amadou T. Fofana, too, suggests that *Borom Sarret* is “a *griot's* narrative,” and emphasizes the didactic role Sembène occupies as director: “As a screen-*griot*, he overpowers the corrupted role of the sto-



ryteller, taking advantage of the power of the moving images that enables him to manipulate his audience visually as an outgrowth of what the traditional storyteller could only do verbally” (264). Fofana also emphasizes Sembène’s own distinction between the original *griot* of African tradition and the professional *griot* of postcolonial Africa, noting that “Ousmane Sembène proudly appropriates the title of *griot* but draws a clear line of demarcation between the kind he considers himself to be and the current, postcolonial, cash-driven kind as represented in his early film *Borom Sarret*” (256). The popular appeal of cinema makes it an ideal medium for Sembène to retrieve and reinterpret the traditional role of the *griot*, and the director’s commitment to this project extends to the formal components of his work.

The significance of the *griot* figure in relation to *Borom Sarret*’s use of voice-over comes into clearer focus against the context of the wider acknowledgement of African cinema’s relationship to oral tradition, represented by Cham, Diawara, Niang, Pfaff, Green, and Thackway, among others. As these critics have shown, oral performance informs a diverse range of African films, straddling the canon of Sembène, Souleymane Cissé (Mali), Gaston Kaboré (Burkina Faso), and Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal), as well as less well-known directors such as Dani Kouyaté (Burkina Faso) and David Achkar (*Guinea*). Yet, the precise ways in which oral performance may influence the films in terms of enunciation remain largely unrecognized, with Manthia Diawara’s work on Kaboré and Cissé being the most notable exception. This is particularly surprising in the case

It is the god-like third-person cinematic narrator that recalls the autonomous narrator in some African oral performances, the griot.

of a film like *Borom Sarret*, whose prominent use of voice-over brings the issue of oral performance to the fore. Undertaking a close analysis of the film reveals the norms of oral performance in the formal relationships between the voice-over and other forms of diegetic speech, music, and ambient sounds. Thus, the remainder of this essay attempts to delineate the ways in which the voice-over in *Borom Sarret* operates as part of a reconfiguration of the enunciative strategies of oral performance.

The starting point for this analysis is Manthia Diawara’s inspiring work on the relationship between filmic enunciation and African oral performances. In his examination of Idrissa Ouedraogo’s *Tilai* (*The Law*, Burkina Faso, 1990)—one of the films of a wave of African films that attempted to represent a “precolonial” Africa—Diawara argues how the visual characteristics of the film (the static camera, in this instance) may inscribe the oral performer at the level of cinematic enunciation. Elaborating an argument he first made in relation to Kaboré’s *Wend Kuuni* (Burkina Faso, 1983) in “Oral Literature and African Cinema” (1989), Diawara

discusses how the climactic scene in *Tilai* distances the spectator from the characters’ psychological predicament, referring the viewer, instead, to the narrator’s presence:

At the end of the film, the poetic way in which Kougri picks up the rifle and shoots Saga brings together film history and the African oral traditions. Because the camera is static and the acting looks clumsy, the shot reminds us of early cinema. But the distance between the characters and the spectator, the refusal to let the spectator into the characters’ minds, is also a trait of the oral traditions. We know that we are being told a story by a third-person (the *griot* or the filmmaker), and every shot must be negotiated through that narrator. (164)

Diawara demonstrates how the static camera calls attention to the film’s discourse and, in turn, the *cinematic narrator* recalls the *griot*’s narrative strategies. Clearly, for Diawara, an indicator of oral narration is the storyteller’s tendency to draw attention to the act of narration itself, and these characteristics may be refigured at the visual level. In *Borom Sarret*, however, this refiguring of the oral performer’s techniques occurs at the aural level. While the subject of the film’s voice-over, that is, the protagonist, cannot be likened to the African *griot* (since he does not possess the social status of a *griot*), the formal organization of the voice-over, and in particular, its interaction with other aspects of the soundtrack, recalls the *griot*’s emphasis on the act of storytelling itself. This strategy allows Sembène to articulate his didactic narrative for the rural audiences to whom he exhibited his films—audiences well-versed in African oral aesthetics. Indeed, when taken as a whole, the various “voices” in the film (spoken voice-over, dialogue, diegetic sound and music) coalesce to create a kind of tone poem whose rhythmic organization and internal logic signal the presence of the *cinematic narrator*.

Employing the dubbing technique pioneered in the ethnographic films of Jean Rouch (who himself was compared to *griots* by Paul Stoller), Sembène shot *Borom Sarret* without synchronous sound. This choice gave him the flexibility to take his camera on location, and add all the dialogue and other sounds at the post-production stage. As a result, all of the actors’ voices heard in the film are, in effect, forms of voice-over, and Sembène makes little attempt (for either artistic or technical reasons) to disguise this fact. Therefore, while Sembène’s camera is firmly located in the centre of a poor district of Dakar, the sense of documentary realism evident in the visuals is not actually reflected in the soundtrack. Having only a few scenes with the ambient hustle and bustle of the street, the soundtrack

is dominated by a set of fundamental sound types: diegetic and non-diegetic speech (Modou, the *griot*, the passengers, a *Muezzin*’s call to prayer); music (Senegalese folk music played on *xalam* which is a small lute often played by *griots*, European baroque/classical music); and sound effects (the horse’s hooves, the bells and squeaking wheel on Modou’s cart, the policeman’s whistle).

The close interaction of these various dimensions of the soundtrack roots the protagonist’s dialogue within the material reality of his social circumstances, and constantly reminds us how these very circumstances shape his verbal reflections on the urban surroundings. At the same time, there are barely any variations in the timbre of the different elements of speech; all the diegetic and non-diegetic voices heard are recorded in a similar fashion, whether they are part of the on-screen spoken dialogue, or the interior monologue that dominates much of the film. As a result, it can be difficult, upon first viewing, to distinguish between the dialogue spoken within the film’s diegesis and the *borom sarret*’s voice-over. This blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic voices undermines the illusion of dramatic realism sustained within the visual dimensions of the film, constantly calling attention to the discursive process of the cinematic medium, and in turn, the *cinematic narrator*.



The precise manner in which the film signals this narrator may be understood via Mary Ann Doane’s work on the use of the voice in relation to space in the cinema. Recalling the three “looks” of cinema determined by Laura Mulvey, Doane considers how the voice operates in relation to the three types of cinematic space: the diegetic space, the visible space of the screen as receptor of the image, and the acoustical space of the theater or auditorium (39). Doane continues by pointing out that “[d]ifferent cinematic modes—documentary, narrative, avant-garde—establish different relationships between the three spaces” (40). Just



as Mulvey demonstrates how classical cinema discourse attempts to disguise the “look” of the viewer and the “look” of the camera, leaving only the diegetic characters’ looks at each other (248), Doane points out that,

The classical narrative film ... works to deny the existence of the last two spaces in order to buttress the credibility (legitimacy) of the first space. If a character looks at and speaks to the spectator, this constitutes an acknowledgment that the character is seen and heard in a radically different space and is therefore generally read as transgressive. (40)

Borom Sarret achieves this transgression via its voice-over’s unstable situation within the heterogeneous soundtrack. Here, the voice-over undermines the illusion of the diegetic space by drawing attention to the second and third spaces, which, in turn, reveal the process of cinematic narration in a manner that recalls the self-conscious narrative strategies of the *griot*. Kozloff asserts that “films often create the

sense of character-narration so strongly that one accepts the voice-over narrator as if he or she were the mouthpiece of the image-maker either for the whole film or for the duration of his or her embedded story. We put our faith in the voice not as created but as creator” (45). In *Borom Sarret*, the unmasking of the cinematic process spotlights the *cinematic narrator*—not the first-person voice-over narrator—as the (*griot*-like) author-god of the film. In this sense, the film consciously undermines the spectator’s tendency to accept the voice-over as the voice of the film author, signaling the existence of the film’s authorship in a space beyond the voice-over.

Borom Sarret’s voice-over belongs to a protagonist who is clearly a social type as opposed to a complex character. This is established during the film’s opening sequences, in which Modou’s monologue determines an overt, heightened relationship between the protagonist and his social environment. Traversing what is clearly a familiar path, Modou offers a series of reflections on the individuals he meets on a daily basis. We learn that a regular punter never pays for his lifts, offering only a handshake. Later, Modou admits that he ignores beggars, demonstrating a necessary social indifference that, nevertheless, both accentuates and belies his own destitution. At points, Modou’s prediction of the events we are about to see demonstrates their routine nature (such as the recurring fare-dodging handshake), but it also allows the protagonist to “confide” in the audience, allowing him an apparently free route of expression and providing an uninhibited outlet for his own observations regarding the world around him. However, any confidences shared are in fact moderated by the interplay between the voice-over, the music, and ambient sounds, constantly reminding us that this protagonist is Sembène’s construction; a social type who enables the film’s critique of modern-day Africa. Early on in the film, Modou’s observations are accompanied by repetitive music, performed on the *xalam*, which forms an insistent presence on the soundtrack. Played to a beat of three, the music is sometimes accompanied by the squeak of the cart’s broken wheel, which creates a kind of cross-rhythm (a rhythmic construction idiomatic of numerous forms of traditional West African music). Modou’s voice-over sits at the top of these sonic layers; a position that seems to imbue it with the highest narrative authority, but whose agency is constantly undermined by its interaction with these layers. This reminds us that his voice functions, more than anything else, as a part of a constructed soundtrack that constantly reveals its own cinematic illusions, including the seemingly shared confidence between the protagonist and the viewer.

This relationship between the voice and the other sounds becomes even more complex during the scene where

Modou meets the actual *griot* in the film. Here, the *griot*’s vocal performance is synchronized with the musical track, which retains the *xalam* and remains in the same idiom. This creates the sense that the *griot*’s voice is principally an aesthetic component of the soundscape, carefully assembled by Sembène throughout the course of the film. The effect is heightened by the fact that the *griot* performs in Wolof (the principal native language in Senegal) and his words are mediated through the *borom sarret*, whose interior monologue provides a French translation of his own inference of the *griot*’s words. The *griot* tells the protagonist that he is of noble lineage, and that although he may be enslaved in his current life, he will always be safe in the knowledge that noble blood runs through his veins. Bowled over by this, Modou gives him all his money, and goes back to his cart empty-handed. The voice-over’s dual function, as an aesthetic aspect of the film’s soundscape and as an articulation of the protagonist’s inference of the *griot*’s persuasive performance, reifies the point that more than an individual character, Modou is a social type in the service of a didactic purpose. Because of Modou’s inference of the *griot*’s performance, he is exploited. The interaction of speaking positions presented here serves to explore the range of social forces exerted on the protagonist, and the social injustice he represents. Moreover, the distancing effect achieved by the voices’ emphatic incorporation within the overall sound mix continues to unmask the second and third spaces of the voice, ultimately calling attention to the presence of the didactic, *griot*-like narrator.

Having consistently undermined the conventional uses of the voice in the first three-quarters of the film, *Borom Sarret* then transgresses its own formal pattern via two further shifts in the use of sound. The first disruption occurs once the protagonist agrees to visit the plateau. Here, the eclectic soundtrack gives way to a rather pompous orchestral arrangement of the “Bourrée” from Handel’s Flute Concerto Op.5 No.1 (mistakenly attributed to Mozart in several analyses of this film). As Handel’s take on the seventeenth century French dance is heard over an aerial pan of the wealthy neighborhood, the voices of the film’s characters momentarily disappear, giving way entirely to the *cinematic narrator*, whose presence is now generated through the somewhat sardonic four-way comparison between the low town/*xalam* music and the high town/baroque music.

As the strains of Handel are faded low into the mix, Modou’s voice-over returns, praying to God and the saints for protection. The music then fades out completely and the familiar pattern of the cart’s squeaking wheel and bells returns; drumming is then heard briefly, until all these sounds are brought to a stop by the punctuation of the policeman’s whistle; a shrill, disconcerting and pragmatic sound which

marks the troubling reality of Modou’s predicament. Following the confiscation of his cart, the protagonist returns to the low town and reflects on the misfortune he has encountered during the morning. At this point, a further abrupt (and surprising) transition of narrative voice occurs. Having led us to believe that the European music represents the plateau, Sembène then introduces an emotive orchestral rendition of Mozart’s “Ave verum corpus” to accompany Modou’s monologue. By this point, the monologue has become emotional and highly personal, in contrast to the indifferent tone that marked Modou’s earlier observations. The music also encourages the spectator to empathize with the protagonist as an individual, and as a result, his typical aspects are undermined. This is achieved via a departure

Borom Sarret achieves this transgression via its voice-over’s unstable situation within the heterogeneous soundtrack.





from the transgression that called attention to the second and third spaces of the voice, and a return of sorts to the conventions of classical cinema. Disguising the marks of the *cinematic narrator*, Mozart's strains emphasize the dramatic impact of the protagonist's words. The order of the film's soundtrack is then partially restored upon Modou's return to his home in the low town, as the predominant sounds, marked by the *xalam*, return (without the squeaking cart wheel, of course) and the protagonist faces the practical reality of feeding his family.

Having called attention to the second and third spaces of the cinematic voice throughout the film, Sembène deploys the conventional disguise of these spaces in the end as a transgressive aesthetic strategy in itself. The effect is to promote a dual function for the character of Modou; as a social type standing for the millions of destitute individuals in postcolonial Africa, and as an individual experiencing intense emotion in the face of poverty and injustice. Modou, finally, finds his own personal voice.

Borom Sarret's transgressive and self-reflexive voice-over should be seen in the context of a cinema so closely associated with oral cultures. Through refiguring and appropriating the norms of both classical (Hollywood) cinema and African oral narration, the (third-person) *cinematic narrator* behind Modou's voice-over acts as a *griot*-like agency within a diverse range of sonic strategies throughout the film. In this context, our understanding of the voice-over and the issue of "who speaks for whom" must take account of African cinema's self-conscious location within the fissures between various oral traditions of the continent and a modernized, industrial culture.

Works Cited

- Cham, Mbye. "Ousmane Sembène and the Aesthetics of African Oral Tradition." *Africana Journal* 13.1-4 (1982): 24-40. Print.
- Diawara, Manthia. *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992. Print.
- . "Oral Literature and African Film, Narratology in *Wend Kuuni*." *Questions of Third Cinema*. Ed. Paul Willemsen and Jim Pines. London: BFI, 1989. 199-211. Print.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space." *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 33-50. Print.
- Fofana, Amadou T. "Sembène's *Borom Sarret*: A Griot's Narrative." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 39.4 (2011): 255-265. Print.
- Green, Mary Jean. "Reconstructing the Father's Voice: Oral Transmission in *Allah Tantou* and *Keïta*." *South Central Review* 17.3 (2000). 60-70. Print.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley: University of California, 1988. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18. Print.
- Murphy, David and Patrick Williams. *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007. Print.
- Niang, Sada. "Orality in the Films of Ousmane Sembène." *A Call to Action: The Films of Ousmane Sembène*. Ed. Sheila Petty. Trowbridge: Flicks, 1996. 56-66. Print.
- Pfaff, Françoise. *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène: A Pioneer of African Film*. London and Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984. Print.
- Sembène, Ousmane. "Commentary." *Symbolic Narratives: African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image*. Ed. June Givanni and Imruh Bakari. London: British Film Institute, 2000. 184-186. Print.
- Stoller, Paul. *The Cinematic Griot: the Ethnography of Jean Rouch*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992. Print.
- Thackway, Melissa. *Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives In Sub-Saharan Francophone African Film*. Oxford: James Currey, 2003. Print.

EXPERIENCE ESSENTIAL CINEMA

PACIFIC CINEMATHEQUE

1131 HOWE ST • VANCOUVER • CANADA // CINEMATHEQUE.BC.CA // TWITTER+FACEBOOK /theCinematheque