

## Decolonizing National Consciousness Redux: Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* as Transhistorical Critique

Vartan Messier  
City University of New York

Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.

—Walter Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

The *Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou* (FESPACO) celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the winter of 2009.<sup>1</sup> After the opening ceremonies, the festival paid homage to the late Ousmane Sembène, who was hailed internationally as the father of African cinema.<sup>2</sup> The press release for the festival outlines that in addition to his pioneering work in African cinema, Sembène, commonly referred to as "*l'Aîné des anciens*" ["the Elder of Elders"] among his peers, had participated actively in FESPACO since it began in 1969. To pay tribute to Sembène, his works were screened each day of the festival, and a life-size effigy was erected in a city square bearing his name. This is no small homage for an artist whose socially conscious films assisted in positioning Africa as a noteworthy player in the field of World Cinema.

This celebration of the life and work of Sembène coincides with the fact that 2010 marks the fiftieth anniversary of independence for Senegal and seventeen other African nations. In Dakar, president Abdoulaye Wade commenced the ceremonies on February 13 by similarly inaugurating a gigantic statue, the world's tallest, which depicts a couple and a child rising from a pile of rock and magma to represent the African Renaissance. Yet, the building of this monument—which, according to one observer, allegorizes a vision of the continent emerging from "the bowels of the earth" as if it were liberated from darkness<sup>3</sup>—has spurred considerable controversy amongst the Senegalese because of its overbearing imagery and its vertiginous cost: 20 million Euros. Consequently, attendance at the inauguration was very poor. Wade has been in power for ten years, but the polemics surrounding the statue are a sign of a growing dissatisfaction amongst the Senegalese with his presidency. Although Senegal has been an example of stability in the region ever since Léopold Sédar Senghor became the nation's first

president, many critics lament the fact that the nation's resources and most profitable businesses are still controlled by foreign powers.<sup>4</sup>

This specific constellation of celebratory events and critical discourses reflecting the fate and legacy of African politics provides an apt opportunity to reconsider Sembène's postcolonial aesthetic. This article analyzes how *Xala*, Sembène's biting satire of African post-independence governments, remains relevant for contemporary audiences as an allegory of the persistent and insidious effects of colonial ideologies on the ruling classes. Considering the interrelations between medium, language, and audience, I will first outline how Sembène's work contributes to the struggle of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has identified as "the resistance tradition" of the people of Africa. The next section will address the critical insights gained by utilizing an intertextual approach reliant on a paradigm that considers cinematic adaptations as works of translation. In this case, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* triangulates the existing dynamic between novel and film; the three texts illuminate each other as "interpretants," translating messages and ideas across genre and medium.<sup>5</sup> I will conclude by explaining how the visceral aesthetics of the film utilizes the affective power of images to produce a lasting impression that transcends the immediacy of the represented historical context, thereby emphasizing the veracity of Sembène's critique, even half a century after independence.

## Language and Resistance

In his 1986 book, *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ considers that "imperialism is still the root cause of many problems in Africa" (1) and that consequently, "African realities [...] are affected by the great struggle between the two mutually opposed forces in Africa today: an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other" (2). Ngũgĩ explains that the imperialist tradition is represented by the "international bourgeoisie" and "the flag-waving native ruling classes," which are largely responsible for promoting the neocolonial interests (economic and political) of Western Europe and the U.S. In opposition, the resistance tradition is comprised of the working class, peasants, "patriotic" students and intellectuals, as well as the petty middle class (102-3). Drawing largely from Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon, the Kenyan author employs a Marxist historical approach to analyzing class, national struggle, and independence. He argues that language plays a primordial role in the endeavors of African people to liberate themselves from the oppressive traditions of the colonial and neocolonial past because language is "central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (4). The phrase "Decolonising the Mind" is an urgent call to free the colonized people of Africa (and ostensibly, all colonized peoples) from an institutional

architecture of linguistic and cultural alienation instilled and perpetuated through various configurations of cultural capital, including universities, schools, publishers, government offices, and departments of cultural affairs. Although Ngũgĩ concurs with David Diop that “the use of English and French was a matter of temporary historical necessity” (25), he denounces the priority given to these languages by writers such as Chinua Achebe and Leopold Sédar Senghor because it undermines and disfranchises native African languages. More specifically, Ngũgĩ claims the use of English and French is the product of colonial and neocolonial school systems, wherein one is unilaterally exposed to the languages (and cultures) of the colonizer and learns to despise one’s own native traditions (11-13, 16-20).

Triggered by his decisive shift to switch from writing in English to writing in Gĩkũyũ while in captivity, as well as his experiences at the Kamĩĩĩthũ Communication and Cultural Centre, Ngũgĩ advocates a revalorization of the native languages of the African people and their literary traditions rooted in orality and storytelling. This is a necessary step to provide the means to foment bonds of unity between the peasantry, Marxist-liberal artists and intellectuals, and the working classes. Ideally, an emancipated national consciousness would emerge, free from the imperialist ideologies that prevail in post-independence Africa. Sembène’s politics are very much in line with that of the Kenyan writer; his work as both author and filmmaker has systematically denounced the internal and external, national and foreign structures of oppression and alienation operating in Africa in general and Senegal in particular.<sup>6</sup>

Walter Benjamin’s epigraph reminds us that art and politics are inextricably intertwined. Due to Sembène’s radical political aesthetic, many of his films were either banned or censored by Senghor,<sup>7</sup> whose political views and artistic practice contrasted strongly with that of Sembène. Fírinne Ní Chréacháin explains their divergent views in the following terms:

Throughout his life, Sembène has opposed French colonialism, and later the Independence régime under Senghor’s Parti Socialiste. He has consistently attacked Senghor’s *négritude* and African socialism from the standpoint of Communist Internationalism, and also Senghor’s promotion of *La Francophonie* (the French-speaking Commonwealth), which he sees as the post-independent prolongation of the French colonial cultural policy of *assimilation*, a policy which has had more effect in Senegal, where French influence goes back four hundred years, than in the rest of francophone Africa” (135).

And with regards to the specific issue of national languages Chréacháin points out that Senghor,

while paying lip-service to the national languages, did little to encourage their development. Nowadays, thirty years after independence, in a country which recently hosted the *Francophonie* summit, the national languages are still not taught in Senegalese schools. Sembène has been among those who have consistently advocated education for the people in the people’s languages. (135)

Sembène's more uncompromising posture on Senegalese independence is at odds with Senghor's collaborative stance and linguistic policies. For Sembène, Senghor's embrace of *Francophonie* and his politics of economic cooperation are in line with the ideologies of a ruling class and intellectual elite who perpetuated various forms of cultural, economic, and political dependency toward the former European colonizers.

In this sense, Sembène shares with Ngũgĩ a similar ethos of decolonization; a political agenda he clearly depicts in his work. However, in light of Ngũgĩ's sharp criticism of the use of the colonizer's language by African writers in *Decolonising the Mind*, it would seem appropriate to inquire why Sembène has exclusively written his novels in French. When he was asked this question in a 2002 interview, Sembène answers somewhat defensively that languages are a means of communication, and that he does not so much "choose" to write in French, but rather that he utilizes it as a "tool" (577).<sup>8</sup> By rejecting the responsibility of choice, but nonetheless selecting one language over another, Sembène puts himself in a delicate political stance that would seem irreconcilable with that of Ngũgĩ.

Perhaps one way to reconcile Sembène's position with Ngũgĩ's is to approach language more broadly as a system of signs and significations and address how it may affect certain audiences through specific modes of production. Ngũgĩ claims he is committed to writing in Gĩkũyũ precisely because he wishes to reach the community he considers his *primary* audience and that translation is a means to reach an international audience, which he considers *secondary*.<sup>9</sup> Philosophical concerns regarding language and Being set aside, the political implications of identifying one version of a text with a specific audience is echoed in Sembène's perspective on the ways in which he chooses different mediums to reach different audiences. As the pioneer of an authentic form of African cinema,<sup>10</sup> the medium of film is for Sembène his primary language of expression. In a 2004 interview for *L'Humanité* while in Cannes for the showing of *Moolaadé*, Sembène explains it was his desire to speak directly to his fellow Senegalese that drove him to filmmaking<sup>11</sup>:

*Je suis rentré à Dakar et j'ai fait le tour de l'Afrique. Je voulais connaître mon propre continent. Je suis allé partout à la rencontre des peuples, des ethnies, des cultures. J'avais quarante ans et l'envie de faire du cinéma. Je voulais donner une autre impression de l'Afrique. Comme notre culture est orale, je voulais montrer la réalité à travers les masques, les danses, la représentation. La publication d'un livre écrit en français ne touche qu'une minorité, alors qu'avec un film on peut faire comme Dziga Vertov, du " Kino Pravda ", du cinéma forain qui permet de discuter avec les gens, de brasser des idées.*

[I returned to Dakar and I toured Africa. I wanted to get to know my own continent. I went everywhere to get to know different people, ethnicities, cultures. I was forty and I wanted to make movies. I wanted to give another impression of Africa. Since ours is an oral culture, I wanted to show reality through masks, dance, and representations. The publication of a book written in French only reaches a minority, whereas with a

film we can do some type of “Kino Pravda” like Dziga Vertov, a popular cinema that foments discussion among people and the exchange of ideas. (Translation mine)]

Similar to Ngũgĩ’s involvement with local communities, Sembène personally travelled with his films across Senegal to directly engage with his native audience: “It’s what I call the traveling cinema ... I have to be with the public—because if I claim to speak on behalf of the people, then I have to be accountable to them” (qtd. in Klawans 27). To that effect, Sembène claims that “Africa is my ‘audience’ while the West and the ‘rest’ are only targeted as ‘markets’” (qtd. In Gadjigo).

In both its novelistic and filmic guises, *Xala* is an interesting case study. Josef Gugler and Oumar Cherif Diop propose that the slight shift of emphasis between what can be regarded as the denunciatory tone of the novel and the revolutionary message of the film is due to their respective audiences. Whereas the novel was entirely written in French for a mostly foreign audience (or “market” as Sembène calls it), the film’s deliberate alternation between Wolof and French serves an illustrative purpose. The opposition between the two languages, the former being used almost exclusively in the private sphere and the latter in the conversations between businessmen and government officials, reinforces the struggle between the ideal of independence and the neocolonial imperialism of the ruling classes; it is this particular implication of language and ideology that Sembène aims to communicate to his native, Wolof-speaking audience.

Thus, Sembène’s selective use of languages—and particularly, the film medium *as a* language—is as politically motivated as Ngũgĩ’s. For Sembène, the language of cinema fulfills the same function as the Gĩkũyũ language does for Ngũgĩ. Whereas the latter chooses his native language to reach an audience composed of his peers, Sembène uses the oral, visual, and performative language of film. From the perspective of translation, it could be inferred that while Ngũgĩ first writes in Gĩkũyũ before translating his novels for foreign audiences, Sembène’s novels are the written translations of ideas expressed on film for a primarily African audience.

In an excerpt of his authorized biography of Sembène, Gadjigo points out that the filmmaker’s work “is aimed at promoting freedom, social justice, and at restoring pride and dignity to African people.” In analogy with Ngũgĩ’s decision to resort to his native Gĩkũyũ, Sembène utilizes the performative components of cinema to connect with his native, African audience. Accordingly, Gadjigo examines how Sembène borrowed extensively from the oral traditions of Africa to create a “genuine African film aesthetic.” In addition to the relationship between medium, language, and audience, and in line with Ngũgĩ’s own ideological affiliations in calling for “the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle” (108), Sembène makes extensive use of Marxist dialectics to educate the African peasantry and working-class, thus joining in the struggle to emancipate the continent’s disfranchised people from perpetuating forms of economic, political, and cultural alienation.

Suitably, Ngũgĩ and Sembène's genealogy of political activism can be traced back to the Marxist-inspired postcolonial theories of Frantz Fanon.

### Translation and Allegory

In his famed 1961 book-length essay, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon concludes by encouraging Africans to “leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder him everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all corners of the globe” (311). To create “a new history of Man,” Africa should not imitate European states, institutions, and societies (315). Fanon is particularly critical of the “laziness and cowardice” of the national bourgeoisie and the existing disconnect between them and the people, which he identifies as the “incapacity of the national middle-class to rationalize popular action” (149). He further argues that “the national bourgeoisie [...] is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor labour” (149-150); having claimed the governmental positions left vacant by the former colonizers, they have foremost succeeded in defending their own immediate interests (159).

As many critics have pointed out,<sup>12</sup> Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie lies at the heart of Sembène's *Xala* (1974), which is by and large directly based on the novel of the same name. Set in post-independence Senegal, *Xala* tells the story of El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye, a “business man” and member of the African elite who took over the country's reign after the departure of the colonial powers. On the night of his third wedding, he is struck with “xala”—a curse of impotence—and the story traces his endeavor to overcome his debilitating affliction. In this sense, Sembène's *Xala* allegorizes Fanon's thesis; the filmmaker takes the notion of a corrupt, unproductive ruling class to the logical extreme by presenting it not as being merely sterile, but as plainly impotent. Sembène also extends the critique by symmetrically exposing the self-serving ideologies of a patriarchal tradition that maintain existing structures of oppression.

Rereading Fanon's seminal text at the dawn of a new global century, Homi Bhabha notes that the “colonial shadow falls across the successes of globalization” (xiii), arguing that the ideologies of new global empires are very much in line with those of former colonizers. Likewise, in *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe explains that the high level of corruption in Africa involving “international networks of foreign traffickers, middlemen, and businessmen” with “local businessmen, ‘technocrats,’ and warlords” makes it impossible to enact any method of sound economic and political governance (86). The recent work of Bhabha and Mbembe on contemporary globalization and the postcolonial nation-state, as well as the tribute paid to Sembène at the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of FESPACO, revitalize a critical discourse that, juxtaposed against historical and global perceptions of sub-Saharan Africa, provides the opportunity to revisit the ways in

which Sembène's *Xala* produces a compelling allegory of Fanon's thesis on the national bourgeoisie and the pernicious effects of colonization.

In a 1977 review, John Povey intimates that *Xala* "was presumably conceived as a double work," pointing out that "this novel clearly has the air of a script about it" (79). In fact, Gugler and Diop explain that *Xala* was first written as a script; however, in need of funding, Sembène turned it into a novel, from which he subsequently wrote a new script (152). Consequently, and in light of this recent scholarship on film adaptation,<sup>13</sup> it would seem apt to approach Sembène's novel and film from an *intertextual* perspective, wherein neither one is considered the "origin" or the "source" of the other, but where each play weighted roles in the production of meaning.<sup>14</sup> But in order to consider the film and novel as intertexts, we need to move beyond the unilateral discourse of fidelity that has historically characterized studies in film adaptation.

Writing in the early 50s, André Bazin famously claimed, "the filmmaker has everything to gain from fidelity" (65) and that in effect, "a good adaptation should result in a restoration of the essence of the letter and the spirit" (67). Conversely, contemporary critical approaches have demonstrated that the idea of a "spirit"—or the idea of a univocal, singular "meaning"—is elusive. Film adaptation scholars unanimously agree that approaching adaptation from the unilateral perspective of fidelity inevitably leads to an impasse: it essentializes the nature of both literature and film by relying heavily on pre-paradigmatic, hermeneutic approaches based on authority and authorial intention, and overlooks the complex and multifaceted character of both mediums. For instance, Robert Ray suggests that studies in adaptation should take into consideration the historiographical, pragmatic, and discursive dimensions of film and literature, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the "transactional" components of film can be used as critical tools (48-9). Consequently, by configuring adaptation as an intertextual, cross-medium process, the shortcomings of an approach based on fidelity can be overcome.

From a slightly different perspective, in "Adaptation, Translation, Critique," Lawrence Venuti proposes that the hermeneutic process of "translation" may offer a more rigorous and critical methodology in approaching cinematic adaptations. He refers to Stam's observation that the film process "generates an 'automatic difference'" (qtd. in 26-7) and questions the politics of deconstruction of the aforementioned scholars because "the studies show a strong tendency to privilege the film adaptation over the literary text it adapts" (27). He sums up his critique thus: "In adaptation studies informed by the discourse of intertextuality, the film is not compared directly to the literary text, but rather to a version of it mediated by an ideological critique" (28). Venuti declares that although he shares the politics of Stam and other adaptation scholars, he finds their methodology full of lacunae. To bridge these gaps, he proposes to consider a theory of translation based on a hermeneutic concept of language as constitutive of thought (as opposed to an instrumental one)

(28). In this sense, Venuti approaches language in a similar way to Ngũgĩ in *Decolonising the Mind*; considering it not only as a means of communication but also as a carrier of culture (13-16). He notes that the interpretative function embedded in translation triggers a double process of decontextualization and recontextualization; yet, in the case of film, the latter process is much more complex because of the multidimensionality of the medium. Following the work of Mikhail Iampolski and Patrick Cattrysse, Venuti's aim is to investigate the role of the "interpretant" in film adaptation, which he defines as a "third text" that can be instrumental in understanding the relation between intertexts. Interpretants can be either formal or thematic; while the first variety functions mostly at the semantic, lexical, and/or syntactic levels, thematic interpretants are codes, i.e. interpretations, discourses, values, beliefs, and/or representations (31). In film, Venuti indicates "formal interpretants may include ... a particular style, such as a distinctive set of formal features that characterize the work of a director or studio," whereas "thematic interpretants are codes, values, ideologies ... they may include a political position that reflect the interests of a specific social group" (33). Venuti claims that the interpretant does not confine the interpretation of a text to a specific intertext (e.g. a cinematic adaptation to the novel), but rather, "it opens up a potentially interminable range of intertexts" (31). Because of its open-endedness, Venuti suggests, "interpretants enable the film to inscribe an interpretation by mediating between its prior materials, on the one hand, and the medium and its conditions of production, on the other" (33).

The concept of an interpretant provides insightful ways to analyze the multilayered differences between the novel and film version of Sembène's *Xala* as it relates to a multitude of intertexts. The following analytical section will examine the ways in which Sembène "translates" ideas about the neocolonialism of post-independence Senegal from written to filmic expression across the mediums of text and screen. More specifically, I will investigate how various interpretants—thematic, such as the thesis regarding the impotence of the national bourgeoisie inspired by and derived from a reading of Fanon, and formal, such as Russian montage and the Marxist dialectics of social realist cinema—assist in understanding the processes of decontextualisation and recontextualization produced by the novel and film as intertexts. The structure of the novel's narration as well as the beginning sequences of the film provide us with an ideal opportunity to investigate the foundation on which Sembène will scaffold his arguments to further develop his thesis.

## Adaptation and Critique

In the novel, the story is told from the perspective of a predominantly omniscient third-person narrator. There are no chapter divisions: the structure of the novel is loosely divided into sections marked by either a



series of asterisks or a space between them. Although the story unfolds linearly, there are a number of digressions wherein the narrator provides some of the characters' personal histories (e.g. El Hadji, 3; how he met his third wife, N'Goné 5-9; and his first wife, Adja Awa Astou 11). But the narrator's voice—his attitude and demeanor—is that of a *griot* or *jeli*, a caste of Western African poets and storytellers who act as the repository of oral tradition, rather than as an omniscient third-person. The critical distance the narrator adopts vis-à-vis the story is manifest in the discrete, yet satirical remarks he makes in profiling the characters and their sometimes-absurd relations, such as that between El Hadji and N'Goné (58). Not a single character is beyond reproach, and even perhaps the most sympathetic ones, for example El Hadji's first wife, Adja, and their daughter, Rama, are deeply ambivalent figures, a result of the symptomatic contradictions of the post-independence African nation-state.

An insightful way to approach the differences between text and film is to consider the role played by Rama. In the novel, El Hadji's daughter is presented as a young revolutionary idealist who holds strong nationalist and feminist positions; she advocates that Wolof should become the official language of the nation (86) and condemns the polygamous tradition as chauvinistic (12-13). Nonetheless, when she is out with her fiancé (44-46), her comportment is in slight discordance with her presentation as a pro-feminist Afrocentrist. For instance, whereas he orders a local beer, she orders a foreign beverage (Coca-Cola). Such contradictions are certainly subtle but nonetheless insistent: she eventually teases her fiancé into ordering her *another* Coca-Cola. These subtleties are not present in the film, wherein Rama is unambiguously presented as a symbol of modern pan-Africanism. In addition to advocating for women's rights, she only speaks in Wolof and refuses to speak French or consume foreign beverages. In a representative scene showcasing her integrity, she categorically declines a cup of Evian Water offered by her father who claims it is his favorite drink. The opposition between the neocolonial and postcolonial attitudes of the two characters is further reinforced by their dress and the ways in which their figures are framed in the shot: whereas a geopolitical map of Africa hangs over El-Hadji's head, Rama is framed by a pan-African map of the continent which bears the same colors as her African garb (see figures 1 and 2). The difference in Rama's characterization between the novel and the film is a direct result of the difference between the discrete critical subjectivity of the storyteller and the Eisenstein-inspired dialectics of the film's montage. Whereas the text interweaves story and critique, the film unfolds various series of binary oppositions in dialectical fashion. In the novel, the thesis progressively unfolds alongside the story; in the film, it is laid out almost heavily-handedly.



**Figures 1 and 2.** Familiar opposition. El Hadji and Rama symbolize two conflicting faces of post-independence Senegal: the neocolonial patriarchy that perpetuates existing structures of social and political stratification and the postcolonial, pan-African feminism that aims to denounce them.

Critics have pointed out that Sembène's narrative cinematography is "imbued with straightforward didacticism."<sup>15</sup> This is particularly true in the opening sequence of *Xala*, where the filmmaker lays the foundation for an explicit and clear-cut critique of the national bourgeoisie in broad and vivid strokes. The movie opens with a close-up shot of a drummer's face and hands as he plays his instrument. The music accompanies the shot, which then jump cuts to a dancer, before panning a group of musicians and dancers joined in celebration in the streets of the Senegalese Capital. The drumming continues as the image jumps to an over-the-shoulder shot of a group of eight middle-aged males dressed in indigenous garb climbing up the stairs of the Chamber of Commerce, and the following speech (presumably made by one of the members of the group) is heard in voice-over:

Mr. Minister, deputies and honorable colleagues ... Never before has an African occupied the Presidency of our Chamber. We must take what was ours ... what is our

right. We must control our industry ... our commerce ... our culture ... Take in hand our destiny.

The insurgents take over the Chamber of Commerce occupied by three European men dressed in business suits. They remove the ornamental artifacts symbolizing the French administration—a bust of Marianne, a kepi, and army boots—and place them on the stairs outside. The speech continues as the camera zooms in on the small statue of Marianne before the shot cuts back to the chamber:

Before our people we must show ourselves capable like other peoples of the world. We are *businessmen*. We must take over all the businesses ... even the banks. We can't turn back. Our struggle for true independence is finished. This is an historic day.

At this point, the leader of the group points at the three Europeans and with a gesture orders them out of the chamber. The three men are escorted out, and as they make their way down the stairs, they pick up the artifacts while the voice announces: "It is a victory for our people. Sons of the people are leading the people on the people's behalf." The Europeans leave the frame and the image cuts back to the opening close-up of the drummer's hands, before finally shifting to the top of the stairs where the men who took over the Chamber of Commerce raise their hands in victory and wave at the crowd.

This expository sequence marks the process through which, as Fanon delineates, "the national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement [because] it considers that the dignity of the country and its own welfare require that it should occupy all these posts" (152). Heavily marked by symbols of indigenous African culture, the scene clearly aims to present the people's triumph over colonial forces. The visual narration—the drumming coupled with the displacement of the European deputies and the symbols of the colonial administration—is in sync with the voice-over narrative, which retraces the recovery of the nation's economy and finance by the people and its democratically elected representatives (dubbed "Sons of the people are leading the people on the people's behalf" by the narrative commentary). This scene also reinforces the ideal of total independence as achieved through the re-appropriation of the cultural (depicted symbolically by the music and dance, as well as the traditional African dress), the political, and the economic institutions of the nation by the people. The novel begins in similar fashion with the narrator describing how this group, named the "Businessmen's Group," triumphantly re-appropriated the financial institutions of the country. In an extended way, the film relies mostly on straightforward narrative exposition, while the novel fills certain gaps by providing background information.

In the film, the ideal of independence, highlighted by the narrative harmony between voice and screen, is severely disrupted in the ensuing series of events. The next scene sets off with an establishing long shot of one of the Europeans being escorted back to the Chamber of Commerce

by a group of African men in uniforms who disperse the crowd of musicians and dancers upon the white man's orders. Next, the other two former European deputies walk towards the stairs of the chamber armed with seven briefcases, the content of which the audience presumably understands to be money. As they climb up the stairs, the voice-over resumes: "We choose socialism, the only true socialism, African socialism, socialism on man's level." On the one hand, the montage repetition of the frame and shot serves as reiteration of the structural organization of the post-independence state wherein the Europeans retain both military and financial power. On the other, the disjunction between the voice-over proclamation of socialism and the action depicted on the screen makes it clear that the speech vouching for a socialism of the people is an empty promise void of any significance. It is a façade behind which the corrupt "businessmen" operate, guided by their own megalomania. The only "socialism" is in fact that of the film, which exposes through the dialecticism of the sequence the tension between the self-interests of the ruling class and the ideals of post-independence.

In the following scene, after the members of the newly reconstituted Chamber of Commerce open the money-filled briefcases offered by the Europeans, the president rises from his seat and addresses the congregation while standing in front of a geo-political map of the African continent:

Mr. Minister, deputies, honorable colleagues ... Our revolutionary action is not in vain. Our presence in this Chamber of Commerce, is sanctioned officially by our chosen guide ... father of the nation. [The shot jumps to the four members sitting opposite from him, who applaud loudly] We must work together. Our enemies haven't given up.

He pauses before announcing, "To seal this memorable date, we are invited to the wedding of our honorable colleague, El Hadji... who takes his third wife today." After another brief pause he proclaims with a grin, "Modernity mustn't make us lose our Africanity." On these words, one of the members dressed in a white tuxedo applauds vivaciously and cries out, "Too right! Long Live Africanity!" The other members immediately join him in approval. Taking his cue from the president, El Hadji rises from his seat and stands in front of another geo-political map of Africa, which is similar to the one in front of which the president was standing. He informs his colleagues that he is again married "by duty" and invites them to the wedding party. As the audience applauds enthusiastically, the president announces the end of the meeting.

A number of noteworthy visuals reinforce the neocolonial feeling of Senegalese post-independence in this scene. The various maps that adorn the chamber, shot within the frame of the president and El Hadji's speeches, are geo-political maps emphasizing the divisions imposed on the people of Africa by European colonizers (see figures 3 and 4). These maps are contrasted with the pan-African map that frames Rama in the scene described earlier. The European attire of the new members of the Chamber

of Commerce as well as the repetition of frame and shots in the montage of the scene accentuates the existing disjunction between the postcolonial aspirations of the president's speech and the visual signs of persisting colonialism; from the onset, the actions of the members of the group undermine the promise of continued struggle.



**Figures 3 and 4.** Neocolonial remappings. The president of the newly self-appointed Chamber of Commerce and El Hadji each stand in front of a geopolitical map of Africa, thereby signifying the enduring traces of colonial attitudes.

Furthermore, the overwhelming display of enthusiasm for the uneasy collusion between “Modernity” and “Africanity” symbolized by El Hadji taking a third wife—more as a sign of the vanity that characterizes patriarchal bourgeoisie than as an antiquated means to solve social ills or guarantee the survival of the family and the community—serves as a satirical jab against the perverted ways in which traditional customs have been preserved to perpetuate female oppression in modern-day Africa. Similarly, in claiming that his duty (as a Muslim) compels him to take a third wife, El Hadji distorts how polygamy is presented in the Qur’an, wherein it is *permitted* but by no means constitutes an *obligation*. In fact, the Qur’an only sanctions polygamy if a man is capable of treating all his

wives equally (4:3), a condition, which it later declares impossible (4:129). Thus, it can be implied that by strongly suggesting that men should only wed one wife, the Qur'an does not advocate polygamous relationships.<sup>16</sup> As the story unfolds, El Hadji fails miserably in his duties: not only does he fail in his obligation to treat all his wives equally, but he also fails to provide for them at all.<sup>17</sup> In addition to divorcing N'Goné, his financial ruin causes his second wife Oumi to move out of her villa and return to live with her parents, and it also leaves his first family in an uncertain predicament. In thus exposing the self-serving pomposity of the male ruling class—and its consequential failures—Sembène outlines a feminist critique of the bourgeoisie's gender politics and further develops his thesis into a broader critique of patriarchal structures of power and the oppressive systems they legitimize.<sup>18</sup>

The final scene of the establishing sequence further illustrates the co-optation of the national bourgeoisie with colonial interests. The juxtaposition between the end of the opening scene where the members of the group stand atop the stairs dressed in native attire raising their hands claiming victory for the people, and the final scene where the president and the European interact in harmonious collusion as they walk down the stairs emphasizes the contradiction between postcolonial ideal and neocolonial reality: on the one hand, the idea of a victory for the people and by the people and on the other, the idea of a ruling-class colluding with the former colonizers (figure 5 and 6). Although he appears to serve the president, the French character who accompanies him, appropriately named “Dupont-Durand,” never leaves his side: he systematically shares the frame, as if looming behind him. As a shadow of the colonial presence, he is a silent, covert voice that counsels the corrupt bourgeoisie to act according to foreign interests.





**Figures 5 and 6.** Marxist aesthetics. Juxtaposing the shot of the triumphant revolutionaries ousting the European colonial powers and the shot of the government officials co-opting with the Europeans shortly thereafter gives the viewer a sense of Sembène's use of visual dialectics in *Xala*.

The critique of the national bourgeoisie is presented differently in the opening pages of the novel, wherein the dummy-like function of the ruling middle-class is merely hinted at when the narrator indicates that their success as businessmen may be traced in their appearance: "The cut of their made-to-measure suits and their immaculate shirts were ample evidence of their success" (2). The narrator progressively exposes them by first explaining that El Hadji's rise to financial success depended on a number of schemes, some more successful than others (3); for example, his office is a "front," a makeshift space where he and his kind conduct their "business" (55). The narrator delivers the Fanon-derived critique gradually and by implication, until El Hadji pronounces it almost literally in the instance where, as a consequence of his failure to revive his business, he is expelled by the businessmen group:

What are we? Mere agents, less than petty traders! We merely redistribute. Re-distribute the remains the big men deign to leave us. Are we businessmen? I say no! Just clodhoppers! (83)

All right. We are a bunch of clodhoppers. Who owns the banks? The insurance companies? The factories? The businesses? The wholesale trade? The cinemas? The bookshops? The hotels? All these and more besides are out of our control. We are nothing better than crabs in a basket. We want the ex-occupier's place? We have it. This chamber is the proof. Yet what change is there really in general or in particular? The colonialist is stronger, more powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place. He promises us the left-overs of the feast if we behave ourselves. Beware anyone who tries to upset his digestion, who wants a bigger profit. What are we? Clodhoppers! Agents! Petty traders! In our fatuity we call ourselves "Businessmen"! Businessmen without funds! (84)

Indicting himself and his former business partners, El Hadji's intervention echoes Fanon's very words regarding the vanity and futility of the national bourgeoisie; middle-men or "intermediaries" (159) whose "innermost

vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket” (149-150). El Hadji’s sudden confession adds to the ambivalence that inhabits most of the characters in the novel. In the movie translation of this scene, El Hadji’s speech is punctuated by insults as other members of the group protest vehemently against his intervention: the didacticism at work in the movie pre-empts the possibility for the more contemplative ambiguity that the novel permits.

In the final scene of the film, a crowd of beggars breaks into El Hadji’s villa. They ransack the property, and when the family members come out of their respective rooms to confront them, one of the beggars claims he is El Hadji’s half-brother. He tells the family that it was he who put the curse on El Hadji for having stolen his property and profited from its sale years ago. Having thus exposed the self-serving and deceitful ways of El Hadji—and by extension that of the national bourgeoisie he represents—the character explains that in order to lift the curse, El Hadji must stand in front of the crowd while they take turns spitting on him. Drawing from John S. Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy*, Françoise Pfaff explains the symbolic signification of the spitting ritual:

El Hadji’s new manhood is to be achieved through the sperm-like and purifying spitting of the beggars. Their spitting has a spiritual, moral and physical regenerative function—a rite of passage from one state of being to another. In many African countries, such rituals are connected with simultaneous death and rebirth.

This scene underlines Sembène’s political usage of textual and cinematic language to advance Fanon’s revolutionary project. The execution and purification of the national bourgeoisie illustrates Fanon’s ideal of an authentic African consciousness liberated from the scepter of European ideology; the ritualistic rebirth marks Fanon’s call for a “new history of Man” distinct from “the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe” (313-315). But the novel and the film trace two distinct trajectories. In the former, the ending presupposes that “order” will be reinstated through forms of institutionalized violence: “Outside the forces of order raised their weapons into the firing position” (103). In contrast, the film ends with a freeze-frame of El Hadji’s desecrated body. The film opens a door that the novel shuts violently. But there is more to say with regards to Sembène’s purposeful use of cinema to educate African audiences. While the film seemingly leaves the question of Senegal’s future open, one is still entitled to ask what didactic purpose the final image of abjection could serve. Whereas the scene as recounted in the novel is certainly explicit, the direct power of the film’s overtly graphic visuals is sure to provoke a visceral reaction. To that effect, Povey remarks that the novel “allows one to consider more closely the dilemmas that the film had occasioned,” adding that “philosophical issues intrude, whereas in the film they had been set aside temporarily because of the extraordinary visual impact of the director’s brilliant eye” (79). By producing a lasting physical sensation of disgust, the image of El Hadji’s



sullied body will remain in the minds of its audiences who, in turn, will eventually internalize the film's main argument. In this sense, Sembène's visceral cinematics corresponds to Benjamin's claim that in film, "the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide" (59), as the shock effects of cinema can produce a heightened sense of apperception (60).

I have pointed out earlier that Fanon's book is an *interpretant* that assists in understanding how *Xala* is a work of social criticism. In a similar way, the novel and the film act as *interpretants* to each other: the visual didacticism of the film sorts out the ambiguities of the novel, while the descriptive passages of the novel detail the set of complex relations of the post-independence African nation-state. In turn, Sembène's allegory provides for a telling illustration of Fanon's thesis on the "Pitfalls of National Consciousness." In the 2002 interview mentioned earlier, Sembène stressed how the sociopolitical situations outlined in *Xala* were still observable 30 years after its release (574). Homi Bhabha's reconsideration of Fanon's seminal text and Achille Mbembe's essay on the relations of power in postcolonial nations support Sembène's observation. Together, they remind us that some of the issues that plague the African continent in the current era of globalization—that is, specific instances of inefficiency, collusion, and corruptness of the ruling classes—are not new phenomena. Rather, they are the persistent effects of the ideologies of self-gratification inherited from colonial rule.

The situation in Senegal is no exception. Although the last fifty years of independence have been politically stable, the country's economy has not grown or developed significantly during the previous decade under Wade's presidency. Disgruntled observers claim that the country still remains subservient to neocolonial interests, and Wade's government has been tainted with accusations of corruption and racketeering.<sup>19</sup> The Senegalese have manifested their discontent; the gigantic statue Wade inaugurated back in February to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence has been met with scorn and indifference, perhaps as a testament of the resentment towards his megalomania. The specters of the past still haunt the present, and no monument will be able to distract the population from the very same realities that Sembène presented so eloquently and pervasively nearly three decades ago.

## Notes

1. The festival was held from February 28 to March 7, 2009. FESPACO was founded in 1969 and is held every two years: the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary represented the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the festival. I refer the reader to the official website for further information (<http://www.fespaco.bf/>).

2. Sembène died two years before on June 9, 2007.

3. See “La Leçon de Dakar” by François Soudan.

4. Nicolas Dufour’s “Le Sénégal ou la notion d’indépendance” offers a synthesis of articles expressing this concern.

5. While the essay by Joseph Gugler and Oumar Cherif Diop addresses the differences between the novel and its cinematic adaptation as well as Sembène’s indebtedness to Fanon, they focus specifically on the question of medium and audience.

6. In addition to *Xala*, which critiques the egotistical post-independent ruling class, Sembène’s novels and films have addressed such diverse topics as exploitative labor conditions (*God’s Bits of Wood*), corruption and nepotism (*The Last of the Empire*), the insidious effects of foreign aid (*Guelwaar*), and female circumcision (*Moolaade*).

7. The most famous confrontation between the two is perhaps the one that involved Sembène’s film *Ceddo*, which Senghor banned supposedly because the title was apparently misspelled. Some commentators, such as Fírinne Ní Chréacháin believe it was banned because it might have offended the large Muslim electorate on which Senghor relied for support (135).

8. Q: *Vous avez écrit vos romans en français, vous avez réalisé vos films en français ou en langues nationales avec sous-titres. Vous avez fait un choix pour communiquer avec votre public.* [You’ve written your novels in French, you’ve directed your films in French or in national languages with sub-titles. You’ve made a choice to communicate with your public]

R: *Je n’ai pas fait de choix! J’ai un outil et je l’utilise. Les langues sont un moyen qui nous permet de communiquer, c’est tout* [I didn’t make a choice! I have a tool and I use it. Languages are a means that allow us to communicate, that’s all there is to it] (translation mine).

9. While Ngũgĩ’s decision is political in nature, this positioning is made possible by the fact that at the time of his decision to write primarily in his native language in 1979, he had gathered enough cultural capital internationally as a writer of English-language novels for his work to be translated and distributed to both his native and English-speaking audiences. For a detailed analysis, see Simon Gikandi’s “Ngũgĩ’s Conversion: Writing and the Politics of Language,” which addresses the relations between language, ideology, and modes of production.

10. See David Murphy, “Africans Filming Africa: Questioning Theories of an Authentic African Cinema.”

11. Sembène studied filmmaking in Russia, at the Gorky Studio in Moscow.

12. See for example, Françoise Pfaff, “Three Faces of African Women in *Xala*,” Ogunjimi Bayo, “Ritual Archetypes,” and Joseph Gugler and Oumar Cherif Diop, “Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala*.”

13. See, for example, Dudley Andrew’s *Film Adaptation*, Kamilla Elliott’s *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, James Naremore’s *Film Adaptation*, Robert Stam’s *Literature through Film*, and Imelda Whelehan’s *Adaptations: from Text to Screen*.

14. Derived from Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on dialogism in *The Dialogic Imagination*, in which he posits that a given text is in a continuous dialogue with previous existing texts, Julia Kristeva coined the term “intertextuality” in *Séméiôtikè* to conceptualize the ways in which a text’s production of meaning(s) is informed by its intersection with previous texts. Kristeva’s work holds a privileged discursive space in the vast majority of most recent studies performed on cinematic intertextuality.

15. See for example, N. Frank Ukadike, “African Cinema.”

16. This is the “modern” interpretation of the Qur’anic verses addressing polygamy, which is endorsed by a number of Islamic critics and scholars. See for example, Niaz A. Shah, “Women’s Human Rights in the Koran: An Interpretative Approach.”

17. Taking care of one’s spouse is the first duty prescribed in the opening verse (4:1) of the section on women in the Qur’an.

18. For a careful analysis of *Xala*’s feminist politics, see “Three Faces of Africa: Women in *Xala*” by Françoise Pfaff.

19. See “Le peuple se fatigue d’Abdoulaye Wade” by Jean-Claude Pécelet.

#### Works Cited

- Andrew, Dudley. “Adaptation.” *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000: 28-37. Print.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.
- Bayo, Ogunjimi. “Ritual Archetypes: Ousmane’s Aesthetic Medium in *Xala*.” *Ulfahamu* 14.3 (1985): 128-38. Print.

- Bazin, André. "In Defense of Mixed Cinema." *What is Cinema?* Trans. Hugh Gray. Vol. 1. Los Angeles, CA: U of California P, 2004: 53-75. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Foreword: Framing Fanon." *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. NY: Grove P, 2005: vii-xli. Print.
- Chr  ach  in, F  irinne N  . "If I were a Woman, I'd Never Marry an African." *Ousmane Semb  ne: Interviews*. Eds. Annett Busch and Max Annas. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 2008: 134-42. Print.
- Dufour, Nicolas. "Le S  n  gal ou la notion d'ind  pendance." *Le Temps*. 9 Apr. 2010. Web. 25 May 2010.
- Elliott, Kamilla. *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. NY: Grove P, 1966. Print.
- Gadjigo, Samba. "Ousmane Semb  ne : The Life of a Revolutionary Artist." *California Newsreel*. Web. 15 Nov 2009.
- Gikandi, Simon. "Ng  g  's Conversion: Writing and the Politics of Language." *Research in African Literatures*. 23.1 (Spring 1992): 131-44. Print.
- Gugler, Josef and Oumar Cherif Diop. "Ousmane Semb  ne's *Xala*: The Novel, the Film, and Their Audiences." *Research in African Literatures* 29.2 (Summer 1998): 147-58. Print.
- Klawans, Stuart. "African Cinema's Main Man Celebrates Women." *The New York Times*. 11 Mar. 2001. Web. 20 Sep.
- Kristeva, Julia. *S  m  i  tik  *. Paris:   ditions du Seuil, 1969. Print.
- Naremore, James. "Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation." *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000: 1-16. Print.
- Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2001. Print.
- Murphy, David. "Africans Filming Africa: Questioning Theories of an Authentic African Cinema." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13.2 (Dec 2000): 239-49. Print.
- Ng  g   wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986. Print.
- P  clet, Jean-Claude. "Le peuple se fatigue d'Abdoulaye Wade." *Le Temps*. 3 Apr. 2010. Web. 25 May 2010.
- Pfaff, Fran  oise. "Three Faces of Africa Women in *Xala*." *Jump Cut* 21 (July 1982). Web. 10 Dec. 2009.
- Povey, John. Review of *Xala* by Semb  ne Ousmane. *African Arts* 10.4 (Jul 1977): 79-80. Print.
- Ray, Robert B. "The Field of Literature and Film." *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000: 38-53. Print.
- Semb  ne, Ousmane. *Xala*. Trans. Clive Wake. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill, 1976. Print.

- . “Conversation avec Ousmane Sembène.” By Nicole Aas-Rouxparis. *The French Review* 75.3 (Feb 2002): 572-83. Print.
- . “Camarade Sembène, l’aîné des anciens Sembène Ousmane.” By Michèle Levieux. *L’Humanité*. 15 May 2004. Web. 10 Nov 2009.
- Shah, Niaz A. “Women’s Human Rights in the Koran: An Interpretative Approach.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 28.4 (Nov. 2006): 868-903. Print.
- Soudan, François. “La leçon de Dakar.” *Jeune Afrique*. 31 Mar. 2010. Web. 25 May 2010.
- Stam, Robert. “Beyond Film: The Dialogics of Adaptation.” *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. New Brunswick, NJ : Rutgers UP, 2000: 54-76. Print.
- . “Introduction.” *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005: 1-21. Print.
- Ukadike, N. Frank. “African Cinema.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Eds. John Hill and Church Gibson. New York: Oxford UP, 1998: 571. Print.
- Venuti, Lawrence. “Adaptation, Translation, Critique.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 6.1 (2007): 25-43. Print.
- Whelehan, Imelda. “Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas.” *Adaptations : from Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. Eds. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan. London: Routledge, 1999: 3-19. Print.
- Xala*. Dir. Sembène Ousmane. Sénégal, 1974. Film