

MANDABI: The political use of realism

This film essay will discuss the means used to illustrate realism's political use, particularly the issue of exploitation.

MANDABI

Mandabi's political use of realism serves to present a realistic illustration of a system of exploitation pitting the lower classes against the elite classes of African society. Through the life of one man and his family Mandabi illustrates a family's misadventures in a society which functions around exploitation. This essay will illustrate the means used in Mandabi, to illustrate realism's political use. The issue of exploitation, which reflects a reality in African society, does come across throughout Mandabi and will serve as the major political issue in this film.

Mandabi's political use of realism brings exploitation, amongst blacks, to the forefront. This is important because whites, despite the rampant racism, which occurred during the film's release, do not participate in this film's exploitative themes. The theme of exploitation was practiced amongst blacks, which found its start in the era of slavery in the late 18th century to the late 19th century. In fact blacks enslaved themselves as they fought in wars and sold each other off to Europeans in exchange for goods. European conquerors opted for the "divide and conquer" strategy, by having Africans fight it out amongst themselves. In fact there are several scenes in Mandabi where visual illustrations of chaos and anger amongst black villagers can be found such as the fight scenes in the store over Dieng's debt and the fight where Dieng gets beat-up. These scenes allow Sembene to present examples of how the Senegalese bureaucracy lets the poor, fight it amongst themselves. We can see through a film, the lack of money amongst many, contrasted with the abundance of money for very few. Film permits a viewer to look into a situation which allows a person to realize what's wrong with the situation, hence this is precisely what Sembene was attempting to do. Therefore in illustrating such reality to people, Sembene was making a political statement by shedding light to the fact that people must change which implies revolution. In essence we see the development of old traditions based on trust, clash against newer traditions based on capitalism.

This immediately identifies *Mandabi* as a film in the remembrance stage because its theme is based on old traditions clashing with modern value systems. *Mandabi* situates itself in the remembrance phase of third world films because old traditions were implanted into newer realities. These new realities involve a black urban elite class, which exploits a majority of rural illiterate classes. The “new reality” underlines Africa’s post colonial status as a set of independent nations. Sada Niang describes *Mandabi* in this “new reality” phase as being, “an exposé of bureaucratic red tape in a newly independent African state”. This is reflected in Dieng’s difficulty in obtaining a simple picture. We come to realise how many people Dieng must see in order to obtain a picture which reveals the bureaucratic red tape as film provided the Senegalese a panoramic view on how they had been “getting screwed”.

This being said *Mandabi* could also situate itself in the combative phase because the cast and filmmakers are all local and the film does illustrate the life and struggle of Dieng and his family in particular, which represent major themes in the combative stage.

As for the combative stage, the only subtle example of a rising awareness occurs at the end when the mailman mentions that only the people can change these oppressive bureaucratic structures. In direct support of *Mandabi*’s status as a film in the combative phase Sada Niang mentions, “*Mandabi* presents the trite story of a money order gone amiss, but more importantly, it offers an ideological and artistic mandate. It features downtrodden people as the real agents of change, shows a credible resolute and purposeful mety, and pushes questions about the future of the country and its citizens. Lastly, it provides an artistic creation grounded in its characters’ historical context which turns their conditions into a center within the margin”. The film is combative in that it presents an open ended ending which suggests that people must rise for democracy as seen in the mailman’s resolved eyes. Furthermore the ending superimposes Dieng’s picture, which can make many people relate to the expression, with oppression regardless of the level at which it occurs. This open-ended ending implies a political statement, which suggests that they should rise for their freedom. Therefore the realism in the film acts out what people should do politically. *Mandabi*’s realism is direct and illustrates a repressed people with political implications. Sembene himself in an interview for the *New York Times* said that, “what he was trying to do was show Africans some of the conditions under which they live. When one creates, one doesn’t think of the world; one thinks of his country”. In fact when one thinks of the country one brings reflective consciousness to life which illustrates realities making a film like *Mandabi* a political statement. The realism in essence brings forth the ideas, which consequently shape ideas underlying politics. Therefore depending on the realities that African peoples are faced with, political ideas are a means by which one attains an end. In keeping with a realistic situation being brought forth in film, “it is in the corrupt and ineffectual bureaucracy of black neocolonialism that the film finds the

source of Dieng's misadventures", which gave birth to the mailman's last statement. Sembene states his political intentions by saying, "as a politically aware Senegalese he believes that his primary task is to communicate with a large audience in Senegal. Mandabi is intended as a vehicle for social and political persuasion".

In essence Sembene mirrors society and offers the Senegalese an everyday look into one man's misadventures. In doing so Sembene used film's realism to serve a political end, that is revolution and freedom, which once again constitutes the ending of Mandabi. "All of Sembene's "ordinary human beings" are portrayed as victims of a corrupt society, either in French colonial or postcolonial periods. But the white man's presence, even after Senegal achieved independence in 1960, is constantly felt by the Senegalese as a result of a government bureaucracy inherited from their rulers. Whether the bureaucrats are white or black, they have created, for Sembene's characters, a hell from which the director offers no exit". These ordinary human beings are depicted in various scenes such as Dieng's willingness to help everybody else before he helps himself. These instances arise in his willingness to give rice to an entire village, and money to a beggar, while simultaneously increasing his amount of debt assuming he will get his money. Another ordinary circumstance is found in the scene where his wife purchases a bra when they have barely enough food to eat. These instances, once again, illustrate how Africans were exploiting themselves without the mention or site of any white man. They illustrated what the mention of wealth can do to people no matter how strong the social-bond is amongst villagers. The exit which, Sembene mentions brings realism and political awareness to the foreground simply by illustrating the realism of everyday life.

The realism of everyday life combined with the illustration of film allowed the Senegalese to witness the breakdown of their neighborhood. In essence this illustrates an impending western influence which comes between the social structure of the neighborhood. Once money was introduced into the neighborhood by way of the money order, then Dieng's word of honor, in terms of paying back the money owed is worthless. This is yet another impingement of modern ideas over traditional ones.

In essence the role of the cinema is found in the construction of peoples' consciousness and is the mechanism par excellence for penetrating the minds of people, influencing their everyday causal behavior, which served Sembene's political ends in revealing everyday life.

Two scenes which illustrate this construction of people's consciousness were found in Dieng's visit at the bureaucrat's home and his journey to his house. The journey

provides important images of alienation as Dieng walks through a street with modern houses which provides a striking contrast between the elite society, thus illustrating their wealth, and the working classes, just in the fashion in which he was dressed. The second scene provides a more in depth look at images of contrasting wealth, as Dieng looks absolutely primitive in the surroundings of the bureaucrats modern home. These stark images develop a consciousness amongst the people who see these images, especially if the film is depicting the people who are watching, by making them realize everyday realities, which develop into political aspirations.

Film is a reflector of society. However realism can only be an artistic representation. In keeping with these two statements if realism is in fact an artistic representation and film is a reflector of society, then Sembene was indeed making good political use of realism by providing images, which constructed peoples consciousness. In this process Sembene was able to use Mandabi as a means of mirroring everyday realities thus allowing the Senegalese to reflect upon their situation. In doing so their realism shapes their consciousness thus developing political ideologies, which produces an awareness in people that may not have been present prior to the influence of film.

by Pierre Hobson