

Bringing cinema experiences back: A conversation with Armand Fall, manager of the Complexe Cinématographique Ousmane Sembène in Dakar, Senegal

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Introduction:

On 3 March 2022, while cinema viewers were watching the latest film by Aïssa Maïga, *Marcher sur l'eau*¹, Armand Fall, manager of the Complexe Cinématographique Ousmane Sembène, joined Estrella Sendra to discuss his passion for film, his vision for the theatre and his approach to engaging local audiences and reviving film culture in Dakar. The Complexe Cinématographique is located in the seaside area, near the popular neighbourhood of Sombédioune. It was named after the renowned Senegalese filmmaker, Ousmane Sembène (1923-2007), and launched on 31 March 2018, with three screens equipped to showcase films in 3D and 5D, one of which has a capacity of 400 seats. This cinema theatre, valued at over 3 billion West African francs (FCFA) (or over £3 million) is part of a larger project, the theme park Magic Land now offering a range of entertainment options.

The opening of Complexe Cinématographique followed, first, the disappearance of multiple cinema venues in the 1970s, when the country faced an economic crisis, and then, the increasing number of film festivals and initiatives, trying to recover local interest in cinema, particularly in the last decade. While the programming catalogue of the Complexe Cinématographique tends to feature non-African films, like other cinema venues in the country, Senegalese film festivals have been crucial to bringing not just cinema experiences back, but also, African cinema to Senegalese audiences. In fact, the screening of *Marcher sur*

¹ The film was honoured with Best Documentary Film Award in the 27th Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), one of the longest running and most important film festivals in the continent, and selected also for the Cannes Film Festival in France.

l'eau in the Complexe Cinématographique Ousmane Sembène is brought for free to local audiences thanks to the Festival Films Femmes Afrique, hosted across multiple spaces in Dakar from 25 February to 5 March 2022 and in several regions from 6 to 12 March. African film has been largely marginalised and inaccessible beyond international film festivals, another question which, inevitably, shapes the direction of this interview and raises larger concerns about distribution and exhibition on the continent.

The full interview can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/699426117>



Armand Fall, Project Manager of Magic Land and Complexe Cinématographique Ousmane Sembène in Dakar. Photograph: Estrella Sendra, 3 March 2022.

Estrella Sendra (E.S.): Mr Fall, thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me. Could you tell me a little bit more about yourself and your relationship with film? What was your professional trajectory prior to the opening and management of this cinema venue?

Armand Fall (A.F.): It was not specifically in the field of cinema, but more in relation to the education of Senegalese children. It was a way of contributing towards the government support of the education of children. That is how the idea of launching the thematic park Magic Land came about, and then, to include, as part of it, the Complexe Cinématographique Ousmane Sembène... Cinema is a new field for me, which has allowed me to grow and learn things that I did not know before. I have greatly benefited from it. But I remember going to the cinema when I was little, when venues still existed. We used to enjoy Asian films, with Bruce Lee, Indian films... It was rare to see Senegalese films.

E.S.: And would you like to briefly introduce the space where we are at? How does it operate?

A.F.: Thank you very much for your interest in the Complexe Cinématographique Ousmane Sembène, which is an entity integrated within the project of Magic Land, which is an initiative by the promoter Youssef Saleh. Magic Land was first launched [on 15 December 2004]. It opened the Complexe Ousmane Sembène in 2018. At some point Senegalese cinema was almost dead, one could argue. That is why Mr Saleh had the initiative of launching this Complexe Ousmane Sembène, and with it, both culture and cinema. It is also a project which is for now located at Dakar, but the aim is to expand it towards the regions, namely, Kaolack, Thiès, Ziguinchor and Saint-Louis, where there will be a similar installation of facilities. I am the director of both Magic Land and the Complexe, but I delegate the film programming to another colleague, who works closely with our distributor, who is French. The films we exhibit come from France. The cinema is open from Tuesday to Sunday, but most takings are made during the weekend. However, since the distributors we work with are French, there is a percentage of those takings that go to France, to the distributors, and the rest stays here, in the Complexe.

E. S.: So, could you tell us a bit more about how the film exhibition sector works, here in Senegal?

A.F.: I started by speaking about how cinema venues were in an endangered status. There was almost just one functioning venue where to exhibit film, the Institut Français. When Mr Saleh came up with the idea of a cinema complex, the aim was to diversify the offer and to encourage Senegalese people to return to cinema venues. At the beginning, it was not easy. We arrived as amateurs. It wasn't at all easy. But little by little, we learned how to adapt in order to promote cinema, along with the support from our sponsors, such as the Direction de la Cinématographie [Department of Cinematography], the Ministry of Culture, which has greatly supported us and made our work possible. We had been decades without cinemas. Through this venue, we hope to make cinema return. That is already an achievement, and what has fostered the movement of Senegalese people to the Complexe.

E. S.: But there are other cinema venues in Dakar as well. Would you say you are in competition with them? And what is your strategy for attracting local audiences?

A.F.: I would not necessarily speak about the existence of a competition, because other than the cinema venue Canal Olympia, the other venues do not have the facilities that we have. We have a complex composed of three screens, while they just have one screen. So I don't think we can talk about it as a being in competition. Maybe in the future, because there is a cinema venue being built in the VDN [neighbourhood], but they have not yet launched their programme or facilities. Here the films that attract the largest crowd are usually those joyful

and uplifting films. For example, we recently received the film Spiderman... And well, we have made a boom with that film. We felt compelled to screen it four or five times per day, the very same film. Our target audience is composed of both the elder and young people. In the morning, we exhibit films dedicated to children. But in the evening, we exhibit films aimed at the elder people, of a mature age, we could say. We have a website through which we publish and disseminate our film catalogue, the release of films, the programme itself, and there is also an online booking system to get the tickets for whichever film they want to come and see. We try to exhibit films that resonate with them, that speak about subjects that concern the Senegalese population. Sadly, we do not have African distributors, but it is part of our aims for growth. Instead of receiving films from foreign distributors, so that we can exhibit more local films.

E.S.: The Complexe Ousmane Sembène has named its screens after pioneer local filmmakers, specifically, Safi Faye, Djibril Diop Mambéty and Ousmane Sembène. Do you think that such naming provokes people coming to the cinema to learn about the history of Senegalese cinema?

A.F.: Indeed. We often organise symposium or film discussions with filmmakers, with the support from the Ministry of Culture, contributing to the promotion of cinema. Recently we also included a series of printed photographs of Djibril Diop Mambéty in the screen, around the walls. The seat number 13 is devoted to Djibril Diop Mambéty.

E. S.: Do you think the Senegalese population is interested in watching Senegalese stories?

A.F.: Yes, of course, because in television, with series, for example, what you find is that there are [like] many short films. And most people prefer feature length films. If we had more feature length films, that could attract the local population. Because I get asked by people why we don't exhibit African films. But, unfortunately, we do not have local distributors to make it possible to showcase this kind of films.

E. S.: Now, there are young people in Dakar, for instance, in Centre Yennenga², trying to address that gap, precisely, by putting together distribution platforms. Would you be interested in collaborating with them?

² The first cultural centre dedicated to cinema in Senegal. Its missions focus on creation, broadcasting, and training in order to: help identify future talents in Africa; create the first postproduction facilities in Dakar; establish a context favouring access to cinema with several film screening programmes, free of charge and accessible to the local population (such as Ciné-club, Cinémathèque, documentation center, Archives and traveling screenings); and create synergies, supporting filmmakers, producers, technicians, distributors, and film lovers (For more information, see: <https://www.centreyennenga.com/>).

A.F.: Yes, why not? We already had a collaborative experience with Centre Yennenga. It was a young filmmaker from Ivory Coast who came last June for ten days and offered as a series of films from Ivory Coast, which we exhibited in the Complexe. It went very well.

E. S.: We are currently in the middle of the Festival Films Femmes Afrique [Africa Women Film Festival]. Are you interested in collaborating with film festivals and hosting their screenings? Do you think that these festivals may also bring audiences that would not have otherwise come to this cinema venue?

A.F.: The festivals are very important for us. Before the Festival Films Femmes Afrique, we had also hosted a film festival from Belgium, from 17 to 20 December 2021. Festivals have the ability to give visibility to films from all over the world, so they are very important to us. They allow people who are not aware of what happens in the area of Magic Land to know about the space. There are some who think that Magic Land is just a theme park, and that is not the case. We have several entities, and the festival audiences are able to discover that Magic Land is not just about the theme park. There are several infrastructures, the hotel, the cinema, and so on. We are open to everyone. I often say that the client is the king [“le client est le roi”]. There are no boundaries with regards to festivals. I was recently in conversation with the ambassador of Bolivia here in Senegal, who wanted to organise a festival of films from South America, to see if we could host it here in March. So, this is just a way to say that we are open to the whole world.

E. S.: Since you mention your willingness to be open to everyone, and aware of the fact that one needs to buy a ticket to access the cinema, what are the ways in which you work to ensure that local people can afford going to the cinema?

A.F.: Indeed. That is why I was saying that if we received the films from a local distributor it would be better, because at the moment, we work with foreign distributors. And these impose a fee for the first week of the film release that we must accept. What we do is from the second week we start decreasing the ticket price, week by week, until the price becomes very low. For example, during the first week, the price is 5,000 FCFA [£6.3] for adults and 2,500 FCFA [£3.17] for children. The second week we lower that to 3,000 FCFA [£3.80] for adults and 2,000 FCFA [£2.54] for children, and in the third week, 2,500 FCFA for adults and 1,500 FCFA [£1.90] for children. The films may stay for two weeks, or like Spiderman, over a month, because it was so popular that we had to ask distributors to let us the screen for longer, since the code we are given has a specific period we can screen the films for.

E. S.: Would you say that you are competing with television series?

A.F.: The audience is different. Television series are not feature length films. They are [like] short films and they often have a younger audience. People who enjoy going out prefer watching feature length films in cinema venues, because television series don't really teach you anything new.

E. S.: What are your desires for the future of the Complexe Ousmane Sembène?

A.F.: Perfection! I would like to see us grow with the modern world, for example with the installation of 4D screens, even if we already have a screen like that... The pandemic has been very challenging. We have had to close our cinema for a whole year, but we remained paying all the salaries of our staff members. But we had to close in order to follow the strict health measures established by the government. And I am reminded of the fact that we are the only private promoter investing in the field of cinema. As such, we have not had any financial support from the bank or state. We then started to think about how to fill that void, and decided to, for instance, receive schools for the graduations and certificates ceremony, so that the space could be used. The idea is to expand and progress by bringing cinema to other regions, such as Kaolack, Thiès, Ziguinchor and Saint-Louis. There used to be cinema venues in the regions but most of them have now disappeared, so these venues could bring cinema back. We already have the means and materials, but I think that it is the pandemic which has delayed the development of the project.

Biographical note:

Estrella Sendra is a scholar, filmmaker, journalist and festival organiser, currently working as Lecturer in Global Media Industries, at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton and as Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies at SOAS, University of London. Her research interests include cultural festivals in Africa, film festivals, Senegalese cinema, migration, youth and digital media, and gender. She is Associate Editor of Screenworks and Editorial Board Member in the Journal of African Media Studies and the ERC-funded research project Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies. She is also a co-director of the research group ipic (Intersectionalities - Politics - Identities - Cultures). Since 2011, when she directed *Témoignages de l'autre côté* (2011), an awarded documentary film about migration, she has been developing a regional expertise in Senegal. In 2018, she completed her PhD on cultural festivals in Senegal, funded by the Department of African Languages and Cultures at SOAS. She was the director of the Cambridge African Film Festival from 2014 to 2016 and is currently an advisory board member of it as well as of Film Africa in London. She has also been involved in further festivals in Spain, Senegal, South Africa and the United Kingdom. She is one of the editors and journalists of *Wiriko*, an online magazine devoted to African arts and cultures, and contributes with further media platforms internationally, such as *El País: Planeta Futuro* in Spain and *Le Soleil* in Senegal. Contact: es29@soas.ac.uk.