

Khady Sylla, dir. *An Open Window*. 2005. Original title: *Une fenêtre ouverte*. 52 minutes. In Wolof and French (with English subtitles). Athénaïse, Senegal. Guiss Guiss Communication. No price reported.

Thirty-three minutes into Khady Sylla's documentary feature *An Open Window* (2005), the writer-filmmaker empties her purse onto the ground. Out spill cigarettes and receipts, as well as an avalanche of prescription medication bottles. In the voiceover Sylla names them: "Anafranil, Largactil, Tranxene, Melleril. . . ." All are pharmaceuticals used to treat psychological conditions ranging from anxiety and depression to psychosis. Sylla's dramatic gesture is deceptively simple. While emptying her purse implies self-exposure, it conceals as much as it reveals: we do not know the nature of her "condition" or whether she takes the drugs she names. Is this an act of (self)-liberation through revelation? Or a performative gesture aimed to challenge her audience to draw conceptual parallels between the inverted, hollow body of the purse and Sylla's own body?

Such ambiguities lie at the heart of this deeply nuanced film, which tackles the subject of mental illness in Dakar. The film builds on themes that run through Sylla's oeuvre (*Les Bijoux*, 1997; *Colobane Express*, 1999; *Le Monologue de la Muette*, 2008), all of which address the politics of social mobility and marginalization in urban Senegal. *An Open Window* is perhaps Sylla's most complex film to date. In it, she intercuts vérité documentary with highly performative monologues to create a subtle investigation of the social/psychological conditions of the city's mentally ill as well as the problem of representing these conditions. Sylla began filming mentally ill Dakarians wandering the streets in 1994, but shelved the project when her film stock was ruined. A decade later, suffering from an undisclosed psychological condition herself, she returned to the topic. Her approach to her subjects thus changed as the representation of this marginal social group also became a project of self-representation.

In *An Open Window* Sylla turns the camera back toward herself and explores the theme of mental illness not as an exposé, but as an intimate portrait of her evolving friendship with Aminta Ngom, a woman whom Sylla encountered while filming in 1994. Drawn initially to Ngom's defiant lack of inhibitions (she walked freely on the street, speaking to herself), Sylla is dismayed to find Ngom ten years later forcibly sequestered in her family's home. The window that she used to climb through to access the public sphere has been nailed shut.

Sylla opens this window both metaphorically and literally through her film. Ngom's spatial confinement hints at the broader erasure of mental illness from public view, which Sylla's film reverses by lending the topic visibility. Sylla nonetheless wonders aloud how one can convey mental illness to those who have not experienced it. Her solution is varied. On one hand, Sylla's camera documents intimate conversations between her and Ngom, showing how their growing friendship breaks their individual isolation. On the other hand, she intercuts these grainy vérité passages with moments in

which she self-consciously and directly addresses the audience in a performative and confrontational manner (“Are you inside or out?”). She thereby extends the evolving connection between the protagonists into a dialogic bridge to the audience.

Yet if making the film enables Sylla to articulate her own voice(s), this is not the case for Ngom, whose expression is dependent on Sylla’s visual and narrative frame. Though the two friends are of similar age, Sylla’s education and class status allow her more freedom. Sylla is the one who wields the portable digital camera. The relationship’s asymmetry becomes an integral part of the film, one that Sylla acknowledges in the subjective voiceovers, which undermine the critical distance associated with documentary practice. In opening the documentary frame to these self-reflexive monologues, Sylla’s work provocatively ensures that the window she opens remains multidirectional, not unified and closed. Her film thus provides no programmatic resolutions, but gestures ambiguously in ways that undermine the audience’s expectations in relation both to the filmic medium and its subject. The viewer must piece together the fractured revelations that Sylla’s camera has wrested from the margins, like the contents of her spilled purse.

In its focus on marginality and its didactic expression, Sylla’s work harks back to pioneering works of Senegalese cinema, like Ousmane Sembène’s classic *Borom Sarret*, whose grainy neorealism draws similar attention to the social margins. Yet Sylla’s work nuances and updates this approach through her deployment of aesthetic techniques more closely aligned with contemporary poststructural performance and video art, as witnessed by her lucid deconstruction of normative subjectivity. As a filmmaker marginalized in terms of gender and, as *An Open Window* highlights, psychological condition, Sylla’s work provides a necessary and invaluable contribution to expanding the frames of contemporary African cinema. Moreover, her mobilization of digital video speaks to the potential accessibility of this mode of filmmaking for viewers and filmmakers alike, even if Sylla’s conceptual embrace of opacity challenges rather than welcomes a broad audience.

Sasha Rossman
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, California
arossman@gmx.net

doi:10.1017/asr.2014.39

Simon Bright, dir. *Robert Mugabe... What Happened?* 2011. 84 minutes. English and local languages (subtitled in English). U.S. Cinema Guild. \$295.00.

Robert Mugabe . . . What Happened?, directed by the U.K.-based Zimbabwean filmmaker Simon Bright, is a documentary chronicling Robert Mugabe’s evolution from his peasant Catholic boyhood, through his days as a teacher in Ghana during the country’s transition to independence, to the time