



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 95=

# Black Girl

## (*La noire de...*)

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending

Ousmane Sembène (1923-2007), often regarded as the father of African cinema, came to moviemaking late. He was 40 before he released his first film, the 20-minute short *Borom sarret*, and made his first feature, *La Noire de...* (*Black Girl*) three years later. By the time he died, aged 84, he had completed nine features, all infused with historical awareness, strong socialist principles and a determination to give voice to unheard African stories. Less often celebrated is the quietly subversive humour that often infiltrates even his most serious subjects.

Born in Senegal, the son of a fisherman, he was expelled from formal education at 13 (apparently for slapping the headmaster) and found work as a manual labourer before being drafted into the French army as an infantryman during World War II. At the end of the war he was discharged for insubordination (does one see a pattern beginning to develop?) and in 1947 migrated to France, where he became a dockworker in Marseille. There he joined the left-wing CGT union, taught himself to read and discovered Marxism.

As an active member of the French Communist Party, Sembène soon made a name for himself as an advocate of black liberation and independence for the colonised African nations. An enthusiastic autodidact, devouring everything he could find in the CP libraries and literary workshops, he decided to become a writer. His first novel, *Le Docker noir* (*The Black Docker*), about an African docker who suffers mistreatment at work and is executed after accidentally killing a white woman, was published in 1956. He went on to write six more novels and four novellas, including *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (*God's Bits of Wood*), a fictionalised account of the 1947-48 railroad strike on the Dakar-Niger line that's generally reckoned his finest novel.

Literature always remained Sembène's first love. But he came to realise that it wasn't the best way to reach his intended African audience, many of whom read little or were illiterate. Film offered a more promising medium with a far wider reach. In 1961 he travelled to Moscow for a year to study filmmaking at the Gorky Studios with Mark Donskoi and Sergei Gerasimov, and on his return to Africa he launched his career as a writer-director with *Borom sarret* and *La Noire de...* (A previous documentary short, *L'Empire songhai*, on the pre-colonial empire that dominated the western Sahel in the 15th and 16th centuries, seems to have remained unreleased.)

A key strength of Sembène's work was that, while consistently exposing and condemning the exploitation of Africa by the European colonial powers, he unhesitatingly turned his critical gaze on the way Africans themselves – especially the new African bourgeoisie – abused their power and exploited their fellow citizens. His Marxist background never misled him into taking a simplistic, blame-it-all-on-the-colonialists attitude to the problems he explored. So while the white French family are the target of his anger in *La Noire de...*, the wretched hero of *Borom sarret* (played by Ly Abdoulaye) is the victim of those around him.

Reflecting Sembène's inexperience – and that of his actors, who as almost always in his films were non-professionals – all the dialogue in *Borom sarret* is conveyed in voiceover. The same is true of some of the dialogue in *La Noire de...*, though altogether the film shows an increase in the director's confidence and sophistication. It's unique among Sembène's films in that most of the action takes place in France, with brief flashbacks to Dakar; after this, all his films would be set entirely in Africa.

*La Noire de...* is based on a real-life incident which Sembène had used as inspiration for a short story included in his collection *Voltaïque (Tribal Scars)*, which he now adapted into the first feature-length film to be produced in sub-Saharan Africa. In Dakar, a young woman, Diouana (played by the graceful Mbissine Thérèse Diop), is taken on by a French couple to look after their young children. She's overjoyed to have found work, and even more delighted when they ask her to come back to France with them, telling her how beautiful and exciting their country is. But once in Antibes, where the family live, she finds things are very different; rather than just looking after the kids, she's expected to do all the cooking and the housework, she's verbally abused by the wife and all she sees of France is through the windows of the apartment. 'I'm a prisoner here – I'm their slave,' she reflects. Finally, lonely and wounded by the mistreatment she's suffering, she kills herself.

Diop, interviewed for French TV 40 years after the film was shot, recalls Sembène as a 'dur' director (hard, difficult), though constrained by his tiny budget. Her chief support during the shoot was fellow cast member Robert Fontaine, playing the French husband, who had been her drama teacher.

If *La Noire de...* has a primary fault, it's in the caricaturing of this French couple, and in particular the wife (Anne-Marie Jelinek). Later Sembène would come to portray his villains with more subtlety. But he makes telling symbolic use of an African mask, first given to the couple by Diouana in gratitude for employing her, later seen hanging in lonely isolation on the pristine wall of the Antibes apartment. As their relationship sours, Diouana and the wife tussle over it, and after the young woman's death the husband takes it back to Dakar with her other possessions to return to her family. Diouana's little brother picks it up, puts it on and follows the discomfited man through the streets – the vengeful spirit of wronged Africa?

All the dialogue in *La Noire de...* is in French – the last time this would happen in Sembène's films. Starting with his next feature, *Mandabi (The Money Order, 1968)*, his films would be largely or entirely in his native Wolof or in Diola. (*Mandabi*, though, was also made in a French-language version to satisfy its French backers.) Filmmaking was never easy for Sembène; not only did he have to overcome the vagaries of African production and distribution but also, as often as not, the disapproval and censorship of the same national authorities from whom he was obliged to seek funding. But he rarely compromised, seeing his work as a mission and his films as 'introductions to a universe that we can transform'.

**Philip Kemp, *Sight & Sound*, December 2015**

---

**BLACK GIRL (LA NOIRE DE...)**

Director: Ousmane Sembène

Production Companies: Filmi Doomireew, Actualités Françaises

Participation: Ministère de la Coopération

Production Manager: André Zwobada

Assistant Directors: Ibrahima Barro, Pathé Diop

Screenplay: Ousmane Sembène

Director of Photography: Christian Lacoste

Editor: André Gaudier

**Cast**

Mbissine Thérèse Diop (*Diouana*)

Anne-Marie Jelinek (*Madame*)

Robert Fontaine (*Monsieur*)

Momar Nar Sene (*the young man*)

Ibrahima Boy (*boy with mask*)

Toto Bissainthe (*dubbed voice of Diouana*)

Robert Marcy (*dubbed voice of master*)

Sophie Leclerc (*dubbed voice of madame*)

Bernard Delbaro, Nicole Donati, Raymond Lemery, Suzanne Lemery (*guests*)

Philippe, Sophie, Damien (*children*)

Senegal/France 1965

65 mins

Restored by Cineteca di Bologna

---

**SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022****The General**

Sun 1 Jan 12:10; Sun 29 Jan 15:10

**The Leopard (Il gattopardo)**

Sun 1 Jan 14:10; Thu 5 Jan 18:40; Fri 20 Jan 14:00

**Sunset Boulevard**

Sun 1 Jan 15:50; Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50

**Metropolis**

Sun 1 Jan 17:55 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator); Sun 15 Jan 14:40; Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

**L'avventura (The Adventure)**

Sun 1 Jan 18:05; Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15

**Touki-Bouki**

Mon 2 Jan 13:40; Tue 31 Jan 17:40

**The Red Shoes**

Mon 2 Jan 13:50; Tue 24 Jan 18:05

**Once Upon a Time in the West (C'era una volta il West)**

Mon 2 Jan 15:20; Sat 7 Jan 17:15; Sun 15 Jan 16:15 BFI IMAX

**Get Out**

Mon 2 Jan 18:40; Fri 6 Jan 17:50

**Pierrot le Fou**

Tue 3 Jan 18:10; Wed 4 Jan 20:30; Thu 19 Jan 20:30

**My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)**

Tue 3 Jan 18:20; Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40

**A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé)**

Tue 3 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 20:30

**Black Girl (La Noire de...)**

Tue 3 Jan 20:30; Thu 12 Jan 18:15 (+ intro)

**Ugetsu Monogatari**

Tue 3 Jan 20:50; Tue 17 Jan 20:30

**Madame de...**

Wed 4 Jan 14:30; Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

**Yi Yi (A One and a Two...)**

Wed 4 Jan 18:40; Sun 22 Jan 14:00 (+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film Programmer, BFI Festivals)

**The Shining**

Fri 6 Jan 20:10; Tue 10 Jan 20:10; Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX

**Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)**

Sat 7 Jan 12:10; Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX

**Tropical Malady (Sud pralad)**

Sat 7 Jan 13:50; Mon 9 Jan 20:40

**Histoire(s) du cinema**

Sat 7 Jan 16:30

**Blue Velvet**

Sat 7 Jan 20:30; Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

**Sátántangó**

Sun 8 Jan 11:15; Sat 21 Jan 13:30

**Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau)**

Sun 8 Jan 14:45; Sat 21 Jan 17:00

**Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)**

Sun 8 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

**Parasite (Gisaengchung)**

Mon 9 Jan 17:50; Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

**The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée**

Wed 11 Jan 20:30; Mon 23 Jan 18:10

**A Matter of Life and Death**

Thu 12 Jan 20:40; Sun 22 Jan 11:30

**Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)**

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

**Modern Times**

Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

**A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian)**

Mon 16 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:00

**Imitation of Life**

Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

**The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)**

Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

**Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)**

Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50

**Andrei Rublev**

Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

---

**BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

**BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

**BFI SOUTHBANK**

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)