

## Meandering through Dakar

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### Flâneurs, Fragmentation and the Flow of Life in Djibil Diop Mambéty's Cinema of Wanderers

by Clare Clements



*Screenshot La Petite Vendeuse du Soleil (source DVD trigon)*

#### **Summary:**

This paper explores the dual nature of the flâneur within Mambéty's cinema. Within the context of these films the analytical figure of the flâneur can be divided between the disconnected observer, represented by the camera, and the protagonist-flâneur who engages emotionally with the city during his or her peregrinations. This paper thus posits that the analytical figure of the flâneur is key to the interpretation of Mambéty's critical exploration of the city because it reflects the mobility and restlessness at the heart of Mambéty's cinema.

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**D**jibril Diop Mambéty's favourite setting for his films is the Senegalese capital city of Dakar. *Contras City* (1969), *Touki Bouki* (1973), *Le Franc* (1994) and *La Petite Vendéuse du Soleil* (1999) are all inextricably linked by their setting; a city that places the viewer at the meeting point of many journeys, each with their own stories attached. People are continuously migrating towards Senegal's capital in search of work. Its borders are expanding daily, encroaching on the surrounding countryside as more and more people flood into the city. These migrants often take up residence in Dakar's outlying bidonvilles and travel the city streets in their everyday lives. This article is about some of these journeys through Dakar; journeys through which the multifaceted nature of city life becomes clear. Mambéty's protagonists restlessly wander the city; each finding themselves on different paths. As the camera follows them it stops here and there to focus on life in the city, revealing much about the varied histories and multi-layered nature of the urban environment. Mambéty's "cinema of wanderers" is thus directed towards an exploration of life within Dakar that goes beyond a surface understanding of urban space. Restlessness and mobility become ways of engaging with the city; the camera, like the characters, is constantly on the move. It focuses on so many different things, highlighting so many spatiotemporal moments, vignettes of life, that the films appear to be concerned as much with the "flow of life" (Kracauer 1960:71) in the city itself as with the individual stories.

Cinema and the city have come to be seen as natural bedfellows in the modern world. Walter Benjamin notes that the rise of the modern city coincides with the development of film technology. The value in this coexistence, for him, has much to do with the vast number of things going on in the city, the range of cinematic possibilities inherent in the perpetual and ever increasing circulation of people, goods, money and ideas (Pile 2002:204). Many other theorists have fruitfully explored the links between film and urban space in a range of texts (Clarke 1997, Bruno 1993, Sheil and Fitzmaurice 2001 and 2003) and have offered a wide range of analysis. These theorist's ideas, while immensely important to the study of the city in cinema, do not take into account the "other" city; the city of the developing world. With the notable exceptions on South African Cinema (Baines 2001) and Nigerian Video films (Oha 2001) few offer a sustained investigation into the representation of third world cities

in cinema. The majority have focused upon the cities of the developed world; London, Paris, Los Angeles. In our increasingly transnational, globalised world, however, the cities of the developing world are fast outstripping those in the West in terms of growth. Their status as “other” must therefore be challenged and their histories and spaces be brought into the global consciousness.

For many ethnic groups in West Africa, travelling and migration have been part of the pattern of life for centuries. Since the 1970s, West African governments have tended to neglect rural communities, leaving young men and women little choice but to look for work in urban areas. High prices and taxes have made it impossible to earn a decent living in the countryside. In all, there are as many as twenty different ethnic groups in Senegal, but four fifths of the population is made up of five key groups; Wolof (40 per cent), Sere (14 per cent), Peulh (12 per cent) Toucouleur (10.5 per cent) and Diola (5.3 per cent) (Sharp 1994:46). Each ethnic group finds at least some representation in the people migrating to Dakar. Many of these young men and women find themselves living in informal settlements and travelling the city every day in search of work.

As a result of this relentless migration, the form that Dakar takes may be difficult for residents of the first world to fully comprehend. It incorporates a fairly well developed commercial centre, the Plateau that is surrounded by thousands of shacks snaking out onto the peninsula. Known as favelas, *barriadas* or *villas miserias* in Latin America and as squatter camps, informal settlements or townships in Africa south of the Sahara, these poverty-stricken formations are ubiquitous within the cityscapes of the developing world. In Dakar they are known as *bidonvilles* in reference to the first shacks whose roofs were made out of metallic fuel containers, known as “*bidons*” (Rosello 2002:247). The most famous Dakar *bidonville* is called the Medina and it lies in extremely close proximity to the Plateau.



*The streets of Dakar: screenshot La Petite Vendeuse du Soleil,  
(source DVD trigon)*

The Medina, like informal settlements the world over, contains thousands of shacks housing more than a million people in incredibly unsanitary conditions and with very few resources. It is an urban formation uncommon in the developed world, yet it forms a fundamental part of the landscape of cities in the developing world. With its uncomfortable juxtaposition of wealthy Plateau and poverty-stricken Medina, the city of Dakar contains an urban formation that may be difficult to reconcile as a whole.

Mambéty's cinema works against this tendency; his camera is constantly on the move examining the various facets of the city. His restless, mobile style of filmmaking breaks up the city; displaying it in fragments, presenting the audience with vignettes of life that focus on individual moments and therefore slow the city down, giving the audience time to look, to comprehend, at least some of what constitutes it and to begin to understand the complex interactions between the constituent parts of the city. Through his style, Mambéty shows that the city is much more than a simple dichotomy between rich and poor, Medina and Plateau. He shows that Dakar is a diverse home to a wide variety of people, all with their own stories and on their own journeys. It is the people, particularly the poor and marginalised; "les petite gens" that Mambéty focuses upon most within his films. In so doing, the spirit and vitality of these people shine through, despite the difficult circumstances in which they live. The director shows Dakar as a multi-layered text blending many cultures. In order to fully appreciate Mambéty's films and his representation of Dakar it is useful to invoke the analytical figure of the flâneur.

### **Contras City: A moving postcard of Dakar**

By travelling and viewing the city as he does through focusing on small details of life, Mambéty's style seems to evoke the Flâneur (See Tester 1994, Burton 1994, Rignall 1992). Flânerie as a practice was developed in the poetry of Baudelaire and fuelled by the writings of Walter Benjamin (1973 and 1978). This urban spatial practice is much more than just walking, just watching; it is an attempt to notice the overlooked, to examine the details of the city to find its hidden secrets, to trace out the stories behind the faces, behind the architecture. The flâneur and his art therefore lend themselves well to Mambéty's style with its restless movement and focus upon the details of the city. Indeed, Mambéty's debut film *Contras City* certainly appears to position the audience as

a flâneurs, asking us to participate in this spatial practice and experience the city in a way that foregrounds the details, the stories and the complex interplay of elements that make up the city of Dakar.

In the film a French tourist and a resident of Dakar, the narrator, explore the city together on the back of a horse drawn cart. As they film the city, the narrator poses questions to the tourist, discussing what they see with a hint of sarcasm. Their camera focuses upon the architectural details of buildings, the coloured tiles of the train station, the angels with African faces on the church and the rooftop ornaments that “look like pastry” (Mambéty 1969) on the chamber of commerce. As the camera picks up the details, a narrator plays with the tourist’s expectations regarding the uses of the various buildings enticing her and the audience to look again, to think again about the nature of the city’s architecture. The pair travels the city in this way, joking about its contrasts, gently mocking it but at the same time examining its past, its present, its surfaces, its colour, and its textures. Their journey in *Contras City* is a deliberate attempt to experience the geography and architecture of the city differently, to view the city through the eyes of a flâneur who picks up on the finest details and comments, sometimes sarcastically, about the contrasts and contradictions inherent within the city. The presence of the tourist makes *Contras City* akin to a moving postcard of the city; a satirical tourist trip that we are invited to take part in and during which we are asked to really look at the city, to see beyond its surfaces, to question its nature. It offers us a sense that the city can be wandered and explored at leisure, its tiniest details noticed and appreciated.



*Screenshot Contras City (source DVD (Badou Boy) raro)*

Siegfried Kracauer’s writings on Berlin could just as easily be an exploration of the way Mambéty represents Dakar in his oeuvre; his films display “an understanding of this city [that] depends on the ability to decipher the dream-like images it generates [...] its contradictions and contrasts, its toughness, its openness, its juxtapositions and simultaneity, its lustre” (Kracauer 1987:41). *Contras City* certainly captures the bizarre juxtapositions and strange

coincidences that make up the city of Dakar. Mambéty uses the cart mounted camera to great effect; his shots are rarely static; emblematic of a city that is in continuous motion. The film cuts between the Medina and the Plateau, often presenting an establishing shot, for example from the bridge looking down into the bustling Medina, then inverting the perspective to look back up at the bridge and the skyline of the Plateau from in the midst of the shacks and market stalls. It pans up and down buildings, zooms in on architectural details, focuses on faces, objects, textures. In so doing it captures the multi-layered nature of the city and presents us with the flow of life, Kracauer's "stream of material situations and happenings" (1960:71) that constitute the city by creating a patchwork of spatiotemporal moments.

### **Vignettes of Life**

Mambéty's later, fictional films continue the style developed in *Contras City*, *Touki Bouki*, *Le Franc* and *La petite Vendéuse du Soleil* all display several spatiotemporal moments, hinting at the overlapping stories. Like *Contras City* they too position the audience as flâneurs by focusing upon small events and small details. Mambéty weaves these moments into the narratives, pausing the story to watch a particular aspect of the city. Mambéty's protagonists are also positioned as flâneurs within these films because each of the narratives revolves around their travels in the city and the audience is often shown the city from their perspective.

*Touki Bouki* follows the journey of two young people as they travel the city trying to obtain enough money to leave for France. Mambéty pauses the narrative at particular points to watch women washing clothes or the bumbling postman traverse the city. *Le Franc* also follows a man's journey around Dakar, this time with a winning lottery ticket glued to the door of his shack which he carries across town in order to cash it in. Once again, the narrative seems to pause to allow the audience to view various aspects of the city, in this case musicians entertaining passengers on the bus or people exiting the train station. Finally, *La Petite Vendéuse du Soleil* follows the exploits of a young disabled girl, Sili, who wanders the city selling newspapers. Mambéty opens the film with a crazy woman stripping off in the street while she is being watched by passers-by. She, like the musicians of *Le Franc* and the postman in *Touki Bouki*, is only loosely connected to the film's central narrative.

It is through these details of everyday life that we begin to understand the connections between disparate events, small details and the histories of the city that they comprise. It becomes clear that in a postcolonial world many of the old boundaries have come down. Dakar is no longer a city of surveillance, oppression, of clear cut contrasts between Plateau and Medina, between rich and poor, coloniser and colonized. Instead, in Mambéty's films we get a glimpse of the overlapping and multiple stories and geographies that make up the Dakar cityscape. As we watch Mambéty's films the city unfolds before us. We get a sense of time passing; buses, people, the ubiquitous "car rapides", all hurriedly traversing the frame in front of whatever the camera is focused upon, each following a different path, all with their own stories. But by looking through this hubbub, seeing beyond it, to focus upon a particular face in the crowd, a specific moment in a person's day, the films and the city decelerate. We watch these vignettes of life take place calmly amidst the hustle and bustle of the milieu. In *Contras City* these vignettes make up the narrative, in Mambéty's later films, as we have seen, they are only loosely connected to the unfolding story but in both cases, like Kracauer's images of Berlin they are "free-hovering images of material reality" that "invite the audience to observe their manifold connotations" (Kracauer 1960:70).

Through the gentle movements of the camera, the lengthy shot durations and pace of the editing we become aware of the spatial rhythms of the city as the camera and the protagonists travel. In *Contras City* as we watch the camera travel up and down the buildings and creep zoom in and out we get a sense that the buildings themselves are caught up in the gentle rhythms of the city. These gentle rhythms are part of the flow of life that is created by the people who thread in and out of them, using them as shade and as meeting places. Through his camera work, Mambéty connects the people to the buildings; tilting down the length of a column to come to rest on the man resting below. When the films slow down to gaze upon these spatiotemporal moments, we begin to see that these vignettes constitute a whole, a city of contrasts, connections, juxtapositions and mergers that is caught up in the flow of life, moving relentlessly towards a not-yet-fully realised modernity in which tradition still has a firm grip. There are several key sequences which help to elaborate this idea.

*Contras City* cuts between images of a barber in a shop, cutting hair with an old fashioned razor blade and one outside, under an imposing baobab tree, cutting hair with electric clippers. From the tree we get a sense of timelessness and tradition in the profession, but this is juxtaposed with the use of electric clippers which suggest the relentless pull of technology, changing the profession, pulling the barber, his patron and the city itself ever closer to modernity. In the following sequence a reversal shows the same to be true; the use of the razor blade suggests tradition while the setting, within a barbershop implies a sense of modernity. The barbers are caught up in but also create part of the flow of life of the city. Through the contrasting of object with setting within these vignettes, Mambéty hints at the complex interplay between tradition and modernity that inflects the flow of life in the city.

Similarly in *Touki Bouki* the camera pauses to watch a bumbling postman climb slowly up a dusty bank. At the bottom of the bank stands a horse lazily flicking flies in the hot sun, next to the cart he regularly pulls; a highly traditional means of transport in Dakar. At the top of the incline is the motorway, with cars and buses rushing past in both directions, cutting horizontally across the frame. The postman stumbles and falters, sometimes sliding back several steps as he struggles up the steep incline. In his struggle up the bank, the postman is emblematic of the city's slow, faltering but none the less relentless movement towards modernity. Occasionally a horse and cart pass by on the busy road, reinforcing the idea that within the modernising thrust, tradition will still have a vital part to play. The postman, like the barbers, is caught up in and at the same time creating part of the flow of life of the city.

Also in *Touki Bouki* Mambéty takes the time to notice the women collecting water from the stand pipe; even after the protagonist, Anta, has walked out of the shot we remain with the women. We see one woman jump the queue and another challenge her. A fight ensues in which the male standpipe attendant is implicated. This, Mambéty seems to be telling us, is part of everyday life in modern Dakar;



Screenshot *Touki Bouki* (source DVD trigon)



the scarce resources, the impatience with long queues, the tensions and frustrations inherent within life in the city for the poor sections of society. Here is a real “material situation” (Kracauer 1960:72) captured for the audience. Within vignettes like the above, Mambéty lays bare everyday life by focussing upon “images of material reality” (Kracauer 1960:71), upon the people going about their daily interactions with each other and with the city itself.

These fragments, vignettes of life, become metonyms for the city as a whole because they make up the flow of life of the city. They are stitched together through parallel editing, graphic matches and match on action shots and in them are found the clues to the multifaceted nature of the city itself. Furthermore, such fragments are exemplary of the everyday life of the city. Mambéty’s films are full of these lingering moments, whether weaved into the narrative of *Touki Bouki*, or comprising the entire film like *Contras City*, these moments frame the city, slowing it down, enticing us to take a second look, from a different perspective. Indeed, by giving us the time to look at the spaces of the city, other aspects of the physicality of the city become apparent: its motion, its speed, its intensity, its endurance, its persistence. Mambéty’s films evoke their own atmosphere through these fragments and vignettes; a surreal sense of the ephemeral yet concrete nature of the city in which the beauty of its people shines through.

If Mambéty’s films are about travelling, they are less about reaching a destination than about the discoveries, frustrations and diversions experienced on the way in the flow of life of Dakar. Here again the figure of the flâneur looms large, for it is through the concept of the flâneur that these diversions and discoveries become visible. As the protagonists embark upon his or her journey, Mambéty ensures that along the way we get a strong sense of the specific filmic realities of the city in which the fictions take place. The vignettes of real life are weaved into the fictitious stories so that the fiction takes place within a setting that potentially incorporates many real stories for the flâneur to ruminate on. Mambéty therefore amalgamates fiction and reality by bringing them together into a form of co-presence through the city setting and in so doing hints at the dream-like qualities of the city that appear to the flâneur.

### Spaces of the City

The director takes this a step further by weaving fantasy moments into *Touki Bouki* and *Le Franc*. In so doing the flâneur protagonists of these films become emotionally engaged with the city. This is something of a digression from Baudelaire's original conceptualisation of the flâneur as an objective observer and suggests a transformation in the analytical figure. The African flâneur is therefore markedly different from his French counterpart. *Touki Bouki's* Mory fantasizes about his return from France, flushed with cash. He sees himself driving through the city in a parade fit for a president while he is travelling the very same streets in a stolen car. In *Le Franc*, Marigo dreams about what he will do with his winnings whilst travelling the city on the top of a bus. He sees himself playing his congoma at an intersection while the audience is treated to a tour of Dakar's landmarks that includes this intersection as well as the presidential palace and the railway station on the route that the bus takes. These moments happen without the conventional signifiers of creep zooms, dissolves and spatial or temporal shifts that signal the transition from reality to fantasy, and in so doing, Mambéty's films imply that the city itself has dream-like qualities, qualities that Mory and Marigo as flâneurs travelling the city, tap into. Indeed their fantasies are played out in the very spaces that they find themselves. We see the real city from their perspective and we also see the city as it could be, in their fantasies. Hence they are emotionally and imaginatively engaging with the city by allowing its real spaces to become part of their fantasies.

We have established, so far, the importance of the vignettes that Mambéty uses to suspend narrative progression and explore the multi-layered nature of city life, and how both the audience are positioned as flâneurs within these moments. We have also examined how Mambéty uses the spaces of the city to trigger fantasy moments at important points within the stories, creating protagonist-flâneurs who are emotionally engaged with the city. Taking this emotional engagement one step further, the director also uses the spaces of the city to echo the psychological and emotional states of his protagonists at important moments, and, because of the subtlety with which he does so, it takes the audience, positioned as flâneurs taking in the details, to comprehend this use of setting.

Towards the end of *Touki Bouki* Mory cannot bring himself to board the ship that was supposed to take him to France and has found himself once again in the heart of Dakar, alone, confused and unsure what to do next. He spots his beloved motorbike that had been stolen earlier, lying broken in the road and goes to retrieve part of it; the ornamental cow horns that remind of his rural past. He flees the scene of the accident and comes to rest in a stairway. This is the final shot we see of Mory in “real narrative time” and the setting is important to our understanding of Mory’s psychological state at the end of the film. The stairway can be described as a non-place, in Marc Augé’s (1995) sense of the word, a space that is not a place or destination but a space of transition, a liminal space. It a space of transit that a person moves through, up or down, in order to get to another part of the city. It is neither a destination in its own right, nor a place of rest, yet Mory chooses it to be so. For Mory, this setting echoes his sense of liminality. The film has shown Mory to be in a state of transition, moving from adolescence to adulthood, from rural to urban, but caught somewhere between the two; not yet fully an adult nor entirely urban in his mind-set. The liminal nature of the stairwell therefore reflects Mory’s psychological state.

A similar use of setting can be found in *Le Franc*. Fairly late on in the film Marigo has tried without success to cash the winning lottery ticket that is glued to the back of the door that he has carried across Dakar. The assistant in the lottery office has refused to accept the ticket unless it can be removed from the door, so Marigo leaves the office with his door and continues across the city. He takes a moment to rest in what looks like a building site, there is rubble and twisted metal strewn everywhere. Whatever had been built here now lies in ruins, in the same way that Marigo’s dreams of cashing in his ticket and raising himself out of poverty are in ruins.



*Screenshot Le Franc (source DVD trigon)*

Finally, midway through *La Petite Vendéuse du Soleil*, Sili is attacked by a group of youths. They knock her off her crutches and leave her lying on the ground in the driveway of an apartment block. Here, Mambéty uses the architecture of the space to great effect; the clean lines and angles of the sandy coloured buildings serve to accentuate how small Sili looks in the frame. The lined pattern of the paving emphasizes the downhill slope of the driveway that works against Sili as she struggles to her feet and reclaims her crutches. Through the minimalism of this shot, the lack of textures, the clean surfaces and angles, the audience's attention is focused entirely on Sili. Her small stature is foregrounded and we get a sense that she is weak and fragile, struggling against all the odds in the big city. The setting echoes her frame of mind and we get a sense that she is a very small element in the immense, impersonal environment of Dakar. She manages to get to her feet and continues on her journey, implying that despite the overwhelming obstacles she is strong willed enough to continue.

## **Conclusion**

The significance of these settings would be lost were it not for our flâneur-informed understanding of the city and the importance Mambéty gives to its often overlooked details, moments and spaces. Taken together, Mambéty's cinema of wanderers constitutes an obsession with the city of Dakar. The director began, in 1969 with a visual postcard style short film, *Contras City* that positions the camera and the audience as flâneurs. With its focus upon the minutiae of architectural details and the juxtapositions of various elements of city life, Mambéty draws out the intricacies, the contrasts and the connections inherent within the flow of life of the city. Through a range of vignettes, he slows down the city and fragments it, giving his audience time to look at and question the complex nature of the city. Building on the style of his debut, Mambéty later created his first full length film, *Touki Bouki* and two more short films *Le Franc* and *La Petite Vendéuse du Soleil* that weave vignettes of real life into the fictional narrative to once again position the audience as flâneur and present the city in fragments. In these examples, however, the director takes his understanding of the city one step further and presents us with an image of the protagonist as flâneur as well. Often using the perspective of this emotionally engaged flâneur, the narratives blend fantasy and reality, foregrounding the

dreamlike qualities of the city. In this way, Mambéty presents a vision of the city as a multi-layered negotiation of intertexts for the flâneur, whether audience or protagonist, to decode; each vignette hints at the story, the history, behind it and through the protagonist's emotionally engaged journeys around Dakar Mambéty's cinema of wanderers offers the audience new ways of encountering the city.

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