

Document Citation

Title	Black girl
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	study guide
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La noire de... (Black girl), Sembène, Ousmane, 1966

1966
BLACK GIRL - Directed by Ousmane Sembene
Awards: Prix Jean Vigo 1966; Best African Feature: Festival of African Arts;
Dakar 1966

I. IN GENERAL

Black Girl is the sensitively-told story of Gomis Diouana who is called by her former mistress from Africa to France, with the promise of a more exciting, fulfilling life in a "civilized" country as a nursery maid. She soon discovers that she is little more than an indentured cleaning servant. Her mistress is condescending at best and Diouana in her despair begins to degenerate as a person. The final solution to her problem provides a shocking climax, but more important to the director's statement is the chilling denouement or ending to the film.

Sembene is a novelist-turned-film maker who has found that he can reach more people thru film than thru print. Revealing a writer's propensity, part of his film is summarized in words rather than shown dramatically. Diouana's sense of time passing slowly and her fatigue with the drudgery of housework is reflected primarily in her own words. The pace of the film is, by American standards, slow. But such a stylistic element is part of Sembene's statement and reflective of his feel for the style of life of his people. The film is decidedly narrative rather than impressionistic or documentary in form.

II. USING THE FILM

Many class divisions are shown in the film. The distinction between black and white is the most obvious but Diouana's consciousness of her role as a nursery maid rather than a cleaning maid is important to understanding how she feels. Black Girl provides an excellent opportunity to discuss personal and social relations and distinctions provided one sticks closely to the specifics of the film. To use the film as a springboard for discussing the American race problem is valid but only after the film itself has been analyzed.

Black Girl is the story of one person physically and psychologically trapped in difficult circumstances, and on that level it succeeds very well. Even an initially apathetic audience is caught up in her story. But Sembene also projects his story to the level of allegory. Diouana has the non-militant subservience that characterized African people under white colonial rule; yet their independence has led to subsequent internal tensions that drive them to destroy their respective countries thru civil wars. She is caught up in conflicting value systems: like many blacks who have adopted the intellectual categories of the whites, it is difficult to return to thinking black again. She can find a place in neither society. Perhaps it is the same with neo-independent black nations.

III. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Her mistress complains that Diouana is lazy. Is there any explanation for her apathy?
2. Diouana is not militant or "pushy" regarding her rights. Does she make her desires known in any way to her mistress? Does the mistress "catch on"?
3. Only the blacks are given names; the whites are not. What is the director telling the audience by this deliberate omission?
4. Sometimes objects are superimposed on or written into a story to function symbolically. The best symbols are those which are part of the texture of a story itself and rise from it. Trace the use of "found" objects such as the African mask and Diouana's clothing both as narrative devices and as symbols. Note especially the strong personal reactions that these provoke.
5. How are the textures and relationships of both the African style of life and the European shown visually?
6. Why do Diouana and her mother both refuse the money offered by the master? The master is visibly shaken as he leaves Diouana's village followed by a little boy wearing the African tribal mask. Why?
7. Comment on some of the lines of dialogue such as: "Their independence has made them less natural", or "She understands [French] instinctively-like an animal".
8. Some of the editing of the film juxtaposes rapidly contrasting scenes: Diouana's body is contrasted with affluent whites lounging on a beach, etc. Discuss some of the contrasts and comment on what the director is saying by such editing.

Recommended for: Black Studies, Social Studies, Film Study, Adult Education