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The Revolution Won't Be Televised

Rama Thiaw

Producer Rama Thiaw. **Production company** Boul Fallé Images (Dakar, Senegal). **Written and directed by** Rama Thiaw. **Director of photography** Amath Niane. **Editor** Axel Salvatori-Sinz, Rama Thiaw. **Music** Keur Gui. **Sound design** Xavier Thibault. **Sound** Antoine de Giuli, Ivan Broussegoutte.

DCP, colour. 110 min. Wolof, French.

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Old men who brutally and relentlessly cling on to their roles as heads of state have become colossally negative images in many countries of Africa, including Senegal.

When President Abdoulaye Wade wanted to run for office yet again in 2011, a resistance movement formed on the streets. Shortly afterwards, a group of school friends, including rappers Thiat and Kilifeu, set up "Y'en a marre" ("We Are Fed Up"), with filmmaker Rama Thiaw soon coming on board to start documenting events – meetings, campaigns, arrests, concerts, states of exhaustion, trips – from an "insider" perspective. Over several years, a stirring portrait emerged of a youth protest movement to whom independent observers were not the only ones to ascribe the role of "kingmaker" in the last elections. Rama Thiaw shows the rappers and their environment with an intimacy whose cinematographic finesse provides space and context for the thorny conflicts between music and politics, street and state. *The Revolution Won't Be Televised* is a film about a country in the grip of change, in which two thirds of the population are under 25 and long for new beginnings.

Dorothee Wenner

'The revolution will not be televised / The revolution will be live'
Gil Scott-Heron (1949 – 2011), influenced hip-hop and rap music

The Romantic and the revolt

Dakar, 15 March, 2012. On a beautiful, mild morning, my friend Thiat and I enjoy breakfast on a terrace overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

The person who stood against the constitutional coup by President Wade [Abdoulaye Wade, Senegalese president from 2000 to 2012, -ed.] is in front of me. He compares Wade to his hero, former President of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara. Throughout his decades in opposition, Wade was always presented as a revolutionary, but unlike Sankara, who never lost his integrity once he got into power, Wade became a corrupt president. Thiat says one can't become committed: one must be born committed. Having survived several murder attempts from Wade's government, he reflects on his own probable death, which he remains prepared for.

On the radio, we hear 'God' by John Lennon. Looking at the sea, I'm struck by the memory of Lermontov's verses shortly before his death: 'Gone earlier, my time ends now... I shall not create as I foresee; my heart is an ocean, where lies the wreck of my dreams.' Why did I associate Sankara, a revolutionary army captain; Lennon, an anti-war artist; the Russian soldier and poet Lermontov – all three were assassinated in a cruel way – and Thiat, a Senegalese hip-hop artist? Instinctively, I knew that this association of people from different centuries and continents was not fortuitous. This question lived through me during the entire shooting and the response pushed me to find the essence of my movie. Lennon sings that he does not believe in God, nor in Buddha or The Beatles... but in himself. He clarifies: 'I believe in God, but not as one thing, not as an old man in the sky. I believe that what people call God is something in all of us.' It's this absolute that leads Sankara to free his people until his death. This same grace reached Lermontov as he left his military career to die at age twenty-seven, becoming the emblematic figure of the Russian Romantic movement.

I reckon Romanticism is far from the definition of its contemporary ersatz (melancholic and centred on one's own-self): the Romantic is filled with a feeling of revolt, which he expresses through social and political commitment, giving up the cruelty of 'art for art's sake', and searching for the pre-eminence of the divine within each of us, living Art as an experience, a new spirituality through self-transcendence, for us and for the others. But this research or transcendence can only be done if there is consistency in the way we see ourselves, the way we really are and the courage to accept it. And it is this probity that I discovered in the path of Thiat, Kilifeu and Gadiaga, members of the band Keur Gui.

Far from the image given by the western media, I filmed Keur Gui as romantic beings in their 'action', while they are activists for the people, and in their 'dream' of becoming artists.

Rama Thiaw

The film's protagonists

Thiat

Aged thirty-five, Cyril Oumar Touré aka Thiat ('the last-born of the family' in Wolof) is from the city of Kaolack in the middle of the desert area. His father, mixed-race and the son of one of the first ministers of parliament of Senegal, was a banker. Thiat's family belongs to the upper class in Senegal. At a very young age, Thiat was already interested in issues of social injustice. During his teenage years, he refused to follow the path laid out by his father: banking or politics. Today, Thiat is a national icon as a musician and as the leader of Y'en a marre.

Kilifeu

Thirty-six-year-old Mbessane Landing Seck, aka Kilifeu ('the father of the family' in Wolof), comes from a long line of griots and poets. Kilifeu lost his father at thirteen and was raised by his sisters and aunts. However, he became the head of the family, since his brothers had already started their own families. At fourteen, he left school to work at the Kaolack peanut oil factory as he was now in charge of five younger brothers, sisters and cousins. Kilifeu has repeatedly been voted the best hip-hop performer in Senegal.

Gadiaga

With his long dreadlocks and mischievous eyes, Gadiaga doesn't look like a forty-year old husband and father of three. He's the manager of Keur Gui, his only function since 2011. Previous to that, he'd also been their DJ. Gadiaga is the man who makes sure that Keur Gui spreads its message by any means necessary – using the system against itself. Back in 1998, he created an association with the same name as the band, a twist that enabled them to perform on stage despite a banning order. In Y'en a marre, he is the 'field-manager', who conveys information, coordinates members, collects money from T-shirt sales, etc.

Khady Sylla (1964-2013)

Khady received a state scholarship to study business in Paris, but she chose literature and philosophy instead. She published one book then moved to cinema. Her mentors were Mambéty and Jean Rouch, and she became highly regarded director. At the start of the Senegalese revolution, Khady was developing her third film, *The Hidden Face of the West*. Eager to make a concrete contribution to the movement, she asked me to deliver a letter to Thiat. At that time he was imprisoned and I suggested we use a camera instead. This was the birth of her role in my movie: Khady's filmed letter is a voice from a previous generation of artist-activists pledging solidarity and guidance to this movement through Thiat.

The band: Keur Gui

At the age of ten, influenced by a Shaolin monk movie, Kilifeu and Thiat took a blood brother oath to never give up their band. Keur Gui, 'The Household', was born. Its guiding commandments were, and still are, to fight against ignorance by writing incisive texts, to never commercialise art and to stand against a corrupt and hypocritical system.

In the mid 1990s, they continued their fight through spontaneous concerts in the provincial town of Kaolack, where no infrastructure existed for youth, apart from churches and mosques. They were soon in conflict with the mayor, whom they denounced for embezzling funds.

At the age of sixteen, they discovered the 'joys' of prison on charges of contempt and defamation. They were severely beaten by the security forces during their many incarcerations, which resulted in Thiat developing trigeminal neuralgia, a neuropathic disorder. Diabetic and epileptic, Kilifeu avoided death twice, after ignorant police officers refused him his daily injection, thinking it was drugs.

Keur Gui, who celebrate twenty years together in 2016, have grown into a genuinely Senegalese, radical, underground, hardcore rap band: their lyrics, all in Wolof, are designed as a political weapon for disseminating information, in a country where oral tradition remains pervasive and where illiteracy reaches record levels. They are invited all around the world (Spain, Brazil...) for concerts but also as representatives of the Senegalese civil society. They travelled to India to understand the legacy of non-violent philosophy and the development model it stands for. Burkina Faso, the land of Sankara, remains the country where they often participate in political gatherings and hip-hop festivals. This search for knowledge allowed them to design a system of thought that is the basis of the collective movement Y'en a marre.

Y'en a marre Movement

Officially founded on 16 January, 2011, it is an apolitical, pacifist movement uniting Senegalese citizens in their opposition to a corrupt political system. It's not just the system that the movement looks to change: members voluntarily subscribe to a 'Charter of the New Senegalese' which lays out political and social responsibilities for all its members.

By 2013 Y'en a marre reached three million members, including those in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Algeria, and those living in the diaspora.

Rama Thiaw



Rama Thiaw was born in 1978 in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and she grew up in both Senegal and Europe. She studied International Economics at the Sorbonne in Paris and Film at the Université de Paris VIII. Rama Thiaw is a writer, director, and producer for the Senegalese film production company Boul Fallé Images.

Films

2009: *Boul Fallé, the Wrestling Way* (71 min.). 2016: *The Revolution Won't Be Televised*.