

FILM REVIEW

Alice Diop, dir. *Saint Omer*. 2022. 123 minutes. French, with English subtitles. France. Srab Films (Toufik Ayadi, Christophe Barral), Arte France Cinéma, Pictanovo Hauts-de-France. \$4.28. Available via Prime Video.

Saint Omer stages a trial for infanticide, but is not a courtroom drama. Rather, it is a meditation on motherhood, the complexities of womanhood, language, silence, invisibility, and justice. The film is inspired by a true story: a young Senegalese woman leaves Paris to abandon her fifteen-month-old daughter at sea. Director Alice Diop was struck by the way the media covered the story. On the one hand, surprise for the accused's eloquence, and on the other, the easy, prejudiced way the incident was framed as a tale of sorcery. Diop attended the trial in Saint-Omer, and thus the film was born, which, like Sembène's *Diouana* (*Black Girl*, 1966), transcends the tragic story in the news to raise existential questions.

The narrative is based on a play of gazes and connections between Laurence Coly (the fictional name of the accused, played by Guslagie Malanda) and Rama (Kayije Kagame), a pregnant researcher and writer, also Black, who attends the trial. The accused's story resonates in part with the voids in Rama's own life, of which—glimpsed through brief flashbacks—reveal a few moments revolving around her relationship with her mother. Rama is working on a project about Medea and teaching works by Marguerite Duras. At the beginning of the film, we see a sequence from *Hiroshima, mon amour*, which grants a “state of grace” to humiliated heroines and, philosophically, poses the question of the fine line separating victims and perpetrators. Laurence's story unfolds following the progress of the trial, presented in a visually striking *mise en scène*. A hard life of solitude, abandonment, and isolation emerges; after various vicissitudes she meets Luc, an elderly white man, who constantly disowns her, as he will do with their daughter, Elise. Laurence gave birth at home, alone and did not register the baby, so until the moment of her death, little Lili, in a sense, did not exist. It is the trial itself that makes her reborn, doing her justice.

The editing alternates between external scenes of Rama—including the moments with Laurence's mother—and those in the courtroom. There Laurence is isolated by the camera, filmed alone like in a painting, in medium shots which are increasingly closer; at times it recalls *La Belle Ferronnière* by Leonardo da Vinci or paintings by Rembrandt, from who inspired the director. Were it not for her long black hair and the intensity of her gaze, she would almost blend into the background of the wall behind her, as a sort of annulment that society—a society that forecloses the future for new generations—inflicts upon her; that contrasts with the red gown of the female Caucasian judge. Instead, she exists with all the strength of her accurate and measured narrative and her silences, as underlined

with long static shots and sequence shots (by cinematographer Claire Mathon). Self-narration here functions as a weapon capable of resisting identity assignments. “For me she is a powerful Medea, and not the poor battered immigrant,” explains the director (Dossier de Presse, Film du Losange). Indeed, *Saint Omer* is a film about the faces, the speaking—where different linguistic registers clash—and about silence; Laurence is forced to tell what she wishes she could forget, while Rama, baffled, seems to express herself through her words. The courtroom becomes a place for reflection, of knowledge, where certainties are questioned and complexity takes the place of judgment; as Laurence says: “I don’t know [why I did it], but I hope this trial will explain it to me” [*Je ne sais pas, j’espère que ce procès pourra me l’apprendre*].

Alice Diop’s first fictional feature film, *Saint Omer* (written with Marie N’Diaye and Amrita David, multi-award winning, including two awards at the Venice Festival) blends her keen documentary eye with narrative elements that delve deep into the human soul, prompting reflection on the place of women and immigrant children in society. Diop states: “Our mothers have been silenced and today we finally have the floor to speak their silenced words” (Première, November 2022). *Saint Omer* interrogates the most intimate aspects of life: the meaning of motherhood, the inner self, but also the public sphere. As is typical of Diop’s cinema, it combines the intimate and the political. Diop, indeed, excels at telling stories that typically remain invisible or reduced to stereotypes—see her early documentaries shot in Clichy-sous-Bois, the Parisian suburb where the 2005 riots started, such as *La Tour du monde* (2005) or *Clichy for Example* (2006). The latter probed the reasons behind the anger, revealing the combination of concrete and invisible violence endured by people, particularly Black people, confined to the peripheries that symbolise systemic exclusion.

Alice Diop, a Black French director born to Senegalese parents, claims herself as filming the edges, perhaps precisely this position allows her to perceive the social fractures and create films such as *Danton’s Death* (2011), *On Call* (2016), *Towards Tenderness* (2016), and *We* (2021) with respectful sensitivity but without concessions. She brings to light human stories, rescuing them from anonymity or prejudice. Filming some faces in a way that elicits empathy can be revolutionary; and empathy is at the heart of *Saint Omer*, which succeeds in engaging viewers, even while addressing a unique story. Alice Diop has succeeded in conveying the universal, something in which everyone can recognize themselves, through the powerful on-screen presence of Black bodies.

Daniela Ricci 
 University of Paris Nanterre
 France
daniri70@hotmail.com
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