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Nearby the Festival International du Film Documentaire de Saint-Louis: Rethinking proximity in times of COVID-19

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Nearby the Festival International du Film Documentaire de Saint-Louis: Rethinking proximity in times of COVID-19

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It has been a decade since the streets of Saint-Louis have been hosting the only international documentary film festival in Senegal. Travelling speakers and local *griots*[1] enthusiastically announce the arrival of the *Festival International du Film Documentaire de Saint-Louis*, also known as Stlouis'DOCS, gathering around 10,000 people for the past few years. The 11th edition of this meeting point was scheduled from 15-19 December 2020.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had been rather 'benevolent' in Senegal. Shortly after the diagnosis of the first cases in March, rigorous preventive measures were taken. On 11 November, a month prior to the opening of the festival, Senegal registered its lowest rate of positive COVID-19 cases, 22, in a country of a population of over 16 million people. Still under a state of emergency, the measures were eased and the cultural scene, which had been dormant for eight months, started to timidly resurface, experimenting with formats which respected social distancing.

However, the number of COVID-19 positive cases and subsequent deaths started to increase, until reaching 472 by 10 December. Senegalese authorities decided then to readopt strict measures, with an announcement from the Ministry of Internal Affairs banning all sorts of social gathering. This came by surprise to the festival organisers, who would face a dilemma, as expressed by Souleymane Kebe, co-founder of the festival: 'What shall we do? Shall we continue the festival? Shall we cancel it? Shall we adapt it? And if so, how?'[2] Sebastien Tendeng, co-curator and co-organiser, was determined about the

kind of adaptation required, one based on ‘proximity’.[3] This is thus the focus of this review, which aims to examine the various kinds of proximity in times of social distancing.

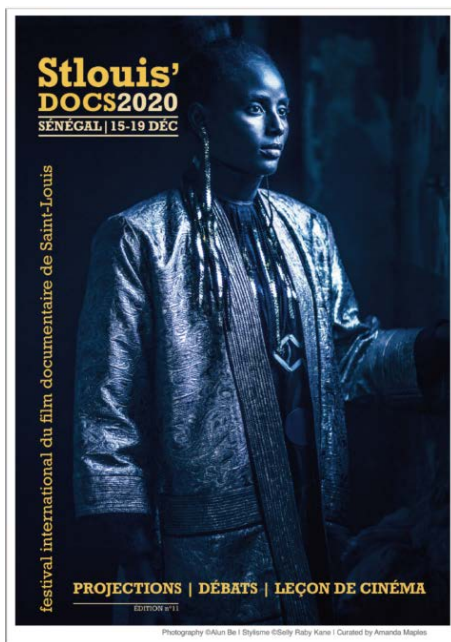


Fig. 1: Poster of StlouisDOCS2020. Photography by Alun Be. Styling by Selly Raby Kane. Curated by Amanda Maples. Courtesy of Stlouis'DOCS.



Fig. 2: Screening of African Photo, Mama Casset (Elisa Mereguetti, 2015) in the intersection of Kahlifa Ababacar Sy street and Aynina Fall street, during the 2015 festival. Source: Estrella Sendra, 24.11.15.

'Nearby' Stlouis'DOCS 2020

The conceptualisation of the festival around 'proximity' calls for a brief reference to the methodological proximity of this review. Inspired by Trinh T. Minh-Ha's emblematic work, our intention is not to speak about the festival, but to 'speak *nearby*' it.[4] This review results from the proximity of the two authors, who represent different audiences and participants approached by this 11th edition of the festival. Laura Feal is a journalist and coordinator of the Hahatay Association in Gandiol, one of the venues of this year's festival. She has been attending Stlouis'DOCS since 2015 and in 2020 became a jury member. Estrella Sendra just attended the festival in 2015, during her PhD field work on festivals in Senegal. Being a 'street festival' has meant that she has not been able to attend it since, as she is based in London. This changed this year, when communication via social media was particularly active. She represents that international audience the festival has approached in times of pandemic. Besides Feal's participant observation in the field and Sendra's digital ethnography, there has been a methodological proximity towards the festival organisers: Dominique Olier, Sebastien Tendeng, and Souleymane Kebe. These were interviewed online, on a screen gathering different geographic points, Gandiol, Dakar, Lille and London.

The project of disseminating documentary films by African filmmakers or shot in Africa on the big screen, publicly and ticket-free, was born in 2010. Back then it was associated with the co-production event named 'Tenk', organised by AfricaDoc, a network of documentary filmmakers and associations in Africa. AfricaDoc offered training at the University Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis and creative writing residences. By including film screenings, the production chain was completed, from pre-production to exhibition. These were hosted by the French production company Krysallide, in partnership with Suñuy Films from Senegal. The initiative departed from the realisation that 'documentary films made in Saint-Louis were not seen in Africa'.[5] In fact, 'festivals are among the few public arenas in which films are screened'.[6] This is the case even more in festivals exclusively devoted to documentary films, therefore making them crucial sites of defining and understanding documentary films.[7] When designing the screening format, organisers decided to focus on the local population. The films would 'go towards them'.[8] The audience perspective would not just be incorporated in the curatorial principles, as often happens in African film festivals;[9] rather, it would be both the foundational and curatorial principle of the festival.

This focus on audiences forged, over time, the transformation of the film screenings into the festival, being referred to as such for the first time in 2014. The festival was preceded by other exhibition projects which did not manage to work. StLouis'DOCS is thus characterised by its malleability and ability to reinvent itself in light of the resources available. It is the fruit of resilient management. The festival enables African documentary films to meet with their audiences. How to achieve such a meeting in times of pandemic? And to what extent would that resilience offer a strong basis to make its celebration possible?

Rethinking proximity in StLouis'DOCS 2020

While the situation in Senegal seemed relatively stable, the foreseen festival format for December 2020 had been reduced. If in previous editions there were around 40 films in the programme, this year there would just be 20; fourteen out of those 20 films were part of the Official Competitive Section, divided into two categories: short films and feature-length films. The section would be complemented by a retrospective of the work of Burkinabe filmmaker Michel K. Zongo, the guest of honour. From the call for film submissions, launched on 24 April through the festival Facebook page, there was an expressed commitment to organising a 'special edition (...) in the strictest respect of the health protocol'. The programme was finally revealed on 24 November, fostering a first kind of proximity, an emotional proximity: the festival was increasingly closer. The reality of its celebration seemed increasingly reachable. In times of social distancing, Facebook offered a space of proximity, of social network, generating expectations among a community of people interested in attending this film date. At that time there was no back-up plan. The organisers were convinced that the festival would take place as planned.

The films were due to be screened simultaneously in two venues: *Le Château* and the *Institut Français*. This double and simultaneous screening format would approach two disperse geographic points in Saint-Louis. However, it would also move away from the main audiences of the festival, those from the neighbourhoods, who used to enjoy the festival as guests across the various streets of Saint-Louis, a walkable city from north to south. The Ministry announcement on 10 December 2020 limited festival travel even more for

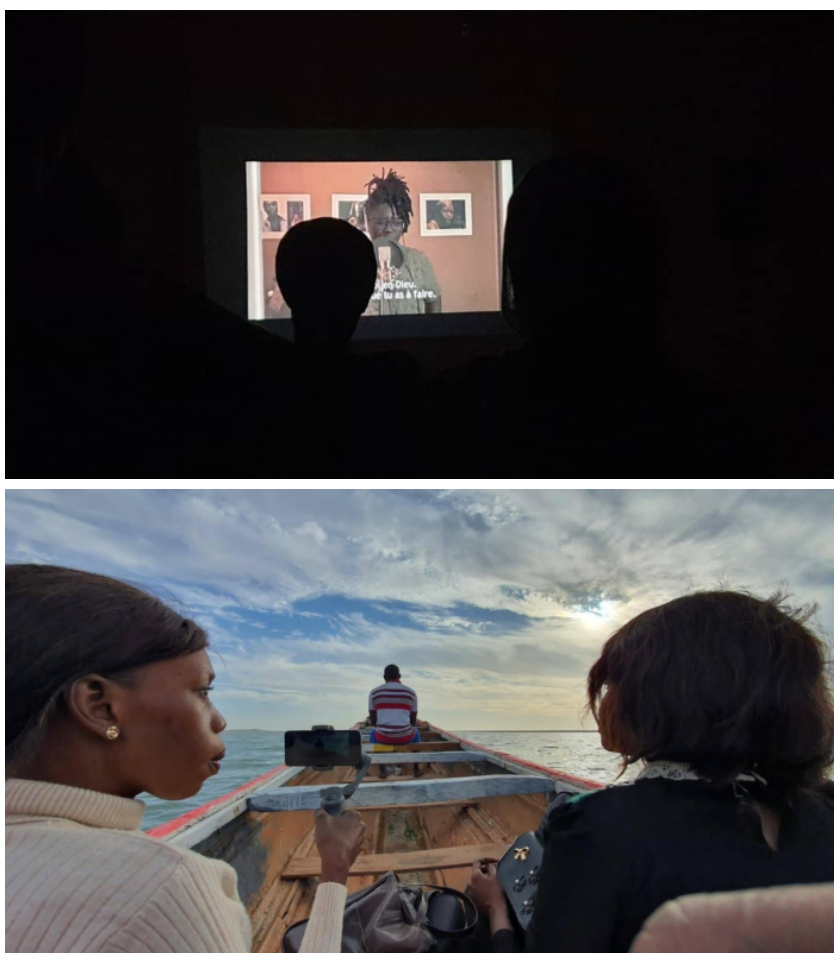
its audiences. *Le Château* and the *Institut Français* decided to cancel all scheduled screenings in those venues. The *Centre Culturel Aminata* (a rural area 20 minutes away from the city) became one of the few meeting points between a documentary film and its local audience.

Plane tickets were bought, guests arrived, films and foldable screen were in hand, and bookings were confirmed in a hotel which had reopened its doors for the occasion after a very hard period for the tourism sector in Senegal. 'We could not cancel it.'[10] It was about rethinking the festival programme in order to do it 'as seriously as possible'. [11] The possibility of doing it online was promptly disregarded. This was 'opposite to the philosophy of the festival to go and meet its audiences'. [12] In a period of social distancing, rethinking the festival format curated for its audiences meant also rethinking the idea of proximity.

L'AGENDA
//// HÔTEL MERMOZ
CINÉMA EN PLEIN AIR / Accès gratuit aux projections sur inscription à : prog.afdocs@gmail.com dans la limite des places disponibles / Port du masque obligatoire /-
MARDI 15 DÉCEMBRE
20H00 SOIRÉE D'OUVERTURE Circus Movements + Méu amigo Fela
MERCREDI 16 DÉCEMBRE
19H00 Dona Mónica + Inkerson
19H30 Sur les traces de Mamani Abdoulaye
21H00 Sankara n'est pas mort
JEUDI 17 DÉCEMBRE
19H00 407 Jow + Up at night
19H30 Mane
21H00 Après la révolte, ton vote
VENDREDI 18 DÉCEMBRE
17H00 MASTER CLASS Michel K.Zongo
19H00 Ethereality + All come from dust
19H30 Radio Congo
21H00 Talking about trees
SAMEDI 19 DÉCEMBRE
20H00 SOIRÉE DE CLÔTURE REMISE DES PRIX + Pas d'or pour Katsaka
  
//// CENTRE CULTUREL AMINATA - GANDIOL
CINÉMA EN PLEIN AIR / Accès gratuit aux projections sur inscription à : prog.afdocs@gmail.com dans la limite des places disponibles / Port du masque obligatoire /-
VENDREDI 18 DÉCEMBRE
19H00 Mane

Fig. 3: Detail shot of the overview programme following its modification. Courtesy of Stlouis'DOCS.

Other than the emotional proximity fostered by the activation of social media, sharing at least a taste of this historic moment for any festival, further forms of proximity were observed. First, the proximity towards the rural population from the *Centre Culturel Aminata*. Other than the film screening of *Mane* (Sandra Krampelhuber, 2020), followed by a Q&A with the protagonist Toussa, a female rapper, the *Centre* hosted a fifteen-day introductory documentary workshop with ten young people. Another screening and Q&A were organised in a local high school, Tassinère, which also fostered proximity between the film *Sur les traces de Mamani Abdoulaye* (Amina Abdoulaye Mamani, 2019), its director, and audiences.



Figs 4, 5: Screening of *Mane* at the Centre Culturel Aminata and documentary workshop with young people in Gandiol. Courtesy of StLouis'DOCS.

Besides the *Centre Culturel Aminata*, there was another festival venue, the Mermoz Hotel, located by the beach in the area of Hydrobase. In previous years, this space had been relegated to the festival management and accommodation for festival guests. However, this was the first year when it hosted film screenings. This led to a spatial proximity of the festival, encouraging the creation of a focal point for festival-goers, at the hotel, with a bar 'where to keep the discussion going over a drink, without the need of changing location'.[13] Mainstream communication for the festival had been cancelled, in order to avoid social gatherings. This triggered a circular proximity, where communication of the festival programme was limited to the circle of festival 'friends' via WhatsApp. The convergence in the hotel meant that spontaneous participation was possible, since it was adequately equipped with masks and hand sanitiser for all participants. The full preservation of the Official Section, in the presence of the festival guests able to attend the festival, further reflected an intention of proximity to the industry, coherent with the festival origins. The films opted for a monetary prize that could boost film careers, through the endorsement of a jury that legitimised the cultural value of the awarded film.[14]



Fig. 6: Dominique Olier and John Schlegel hosting the opening evening of the festival, featuring the films *Circus Movements* and *Meu Amigo Fela*, 15 December 2015. Courtesy of StLouis'DOCS.

Film screenings at schools were also secured, since these were open and guaranteed the respect of preventive sanitary measures. This created a proximity towards the student community, enhanced through debates with festival guests. This was arguably the activity that attracted major media attention in

two newspapers of reference in the country, *Le Soleil* and *Le Quotidien*. The heading of *Le Quotidien* stressed the festival scope, reaching ‘over 2,000 students’.[15] However the body of the article offers a much deeper reflection about the socio-cultural importance of this festival. Stlouis’DOCS, through films whose themes revolve around memory and history, encourages reflection on Senegalese historic figures. The documentary serves as a decolonising tool. ‘Decolonisation and independence are themes that feature in the curriculum. The documentary film will be very helpful to understand them.’[16] It represents people who are often marginalised in textbooks and mainstream screens. The stories resonate with the Senegalese context. They show social commitment, such as the festival award-winning film *Sur les traces de Mamani Abdoulaye*, by Amina Abdoulaye Mamani from Niger.[17] In other words, they are curated for their ‘cultural proximity’, where meaning is constructed ‘from culturally proximate content’.[18] Or, in Moradewun Adejumo’s terms, for their ‘phenomenological proximity’.[19] Audiences appreciate them because ‘the conflicts they represent and the resolutions they offer are perceived to be experientially proximate for postcolonial subjects’.[20]

Whilst programmers insist on the inexistence of a selection criteria and on the independence of the jury, this phenomenological proximity has been greatly acknowledged by the festival participants, and adequately covered by the media.[21] The curation of the festival is shaped by its focus on the local audience. In Olier’s words, ‘when curating we ask ourselves who the films are targeting ... There is just one criteria: this curated programme is targeting Saint-Louis.’[22] The award-winning film, *Sur les traces de Mamani Abdoulaye*, constitutes an excellent example of this audience-based curatorial strategy. It is biographic work, where the director endeavours a personal journey in search of her already dead father, Abdoulaye Mamani. This was an important figure of literature in Niger, author of *Sarraounia*, which would later be adapted to film by Med Hondo. That is how its director, Amina Abdoulaye Mamani, reflected about the film in an interview with Feal for *El País*. ‘In Africa we do not have access to our own history ... it is our duty to research on what really happened to our countries in the past’.[23] Her film competed against highly acclaimed documentary films on the international festival circuit, such as *Meu Amigo Fela / My Friend Fela* (Joel Zito Araújo, 2019) and *Talking About Trees* (Suhaib Gasmelbari, 2019). However, according to the president of the jury, Maji Da Abdi, this film won the award for ‘the importance of its subject, its strength, effort and emergency to remember our forgotten heroes, who can bring strength to the younger generation’.[24] Following the

screenings in school, 'the debates were promptly directed towards the Senegalese contexts, drawing comparisons with contemporary Senegalese figures such as Mamadou Dia, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Lamine Guèye, or Blaise Diagne'.[25] Stlouis' DOCS is thus an example of a festival whose value lies in its 'provision of what is seen as alternative or rarely screened content'.[26] At the same time, it prompts the discovery of the documentary film genre,[27] or the establishment of a documentary film canon in the African context.



Figs 7, 8: Screening of *Sur les traces de Mamani Abdoulaye* at the Tassinere Gandiol Highschool. Source: Laura Feal, 17 December 2020.

Looking forward: ‘New proximities’

The celebration of this year’s festival, despite the complexity of the context due to the imminent second wave of COVID-19 in Senegal, evidences the socio-cultural importance of this date with documentary film in Saint-Louis. This is eloquently reflected in Kebe’s words: ‘The festival has become a *baobab*[28] in Saint-Louis and in Senegal. I do not imagine a year without the festival.’[29] Through its cyclical celebration, year after year, *Stlouis’DOCS* has become a structure.[30] This edition has shown how the foundations which have been building and holding such structure are the people. It proves the importance of social capital in festivals,[31] where the meeting between documentary films and their audiences fosters a whole set of interpersonal relations which resemble a family structure. We have theorised this through the notion of ‘proximity’, which is both methodological and conceptual. Writing ‘nearby’ festivals instead of about them contributes to blurring the distance between films, filmmakers, audiences, researchers, and festival curators and organisers. It further acknowledges the multifaceted dimension of festivals and the need for collaboration when studying them. Conceptually, it suggests different forms of proximity when curating for audiences, namely emotional, circular, spatial, towards rural populations and student communities, cultural and phenomenological.

However, while the biggest success of this year’s festival is having been able to take place, the encounter with the target audience was challenging. The location of Mermoz Hotel, a ten-minute drive away from the Saint-Louis island and with no public transport option, did not favour the participation of the local population. Instead, audiences were mainly composed of foreign residents and cultural agents in Saint-Louis, who could afford ‘making an effort which was a privilege for many’, as some festival-goers noted. According to some festival staff members, the neighbours of Santhiaba had asked ‘when the screenings would take place or why they were not’.

The experience of hosting the festival at an unusual venue, the hotel, prompted reflection among the festival organisers, who identified two main ways forward. The first would consist of creating a focal point for festival-goers to extend the discussions, boosting the community-building ethos of the festival even more. Similarly, organisers considered a new proximity, towards the tourists – that is, an international proximity, so far disregarded as festival audiences. This has encouraged wider reflection on the communication strategy, where social media appear as a necessity. It both allows those

who are not present in Saint-Louis to attend the festival and contributes to the festival goal of becoming a world-wide event. This edition has thus led to a proximity towards the aspiration of becoming international and of making Saint-Louis ‘an indispensable place for documentary film’.[32]

The organisation of this festival under such complex circumstances has also offered an opportunity for self-assessment and acknowledgement of the malleability and resilient management which have defined this project from the beginning. Organisers have realised the strength of their team, and their ability to respond promptly to any kind of obstacle, based on intuition, complicity, and the commitment to take care of the baobab that has now become the festival.

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Estrella Sendra (SOAS, University of London)

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<https://www.facebook.com/StlouisDocs>
<https://www.kdiffusion.com>

Notes

- [1] This refers to masters of the spoken word, a highly respected historic figure responsible for the oral transmission of history and culture.
- [2] Personal communication, 2021.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Minh-Ha in Chen 1992.
- [5] Tendeng, personal communication, 2021.
- [6] Dovey 2015, p. 87.
- [7] Vallejo & Winton 2020, p. 7.
- [8] Kebe, personal communication, 2021.
- [9] Dovey 2015, pp. 87-88.
- [10] Tendeng, personal communication, 2021.
- [11] Olier, personal communication, 2021.
- [12] Ibid.

- [13] Kebe, personal communication, 2021.
- [14] de Valck & Soeteman 2010.
- [15] Thioubou 2020.
- [16] Fall in Thioubou 2020.
- [17] Karama 2020.
- [18] Sawadogo 2019, pp. 4-5.
- [19] Adejunmobi 2010, p. 108.
- [20] Ibid., p. 111.
- [21] Kamara 2020; Ndar Info 2020; Thioubou 2020.
- [22] Olier, personal communication, 2021.
- [23] In Feal 2021.
- [24] Ndar Info 2020.
- [25] Thioubou 2020.
- [26] Dovey 2015, p. 89.
- [27] Mme Sy in Thioubou 2020.
- [28] This is an emblematic kind of tree in Senegal. It is where people have historically gathered together, and thus a symbol for social unity, dialogue, and oral transmission of cultural heritage.
- [29] Personal communication, 2021.
- [30] Harbord 2016, p. 70.
- [31] Quinn & Wilks 2017.
- [32] Kebe, personal communication, 2021.