



TOTEM FILMS PRESENTS

Berlinale  71^e Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Encounters

we

A FILM BY **ALICE DIOP**

PRODUCED BY ATHÉNAÏSE
IMAGE SARAH BLUM, SYLVAIN VERDET, CLÉMENT ALLINE
EDITING AMRITA DAVID SOUND MATHIEU FARNARIER & NATHALIE VIDAL COLOR GRADING ERIC SALLERON
COPRODUCED BY ARTE FRANCE WITH THE SUPPORT OF CNC, FONDS IMAGES DE LA DIVERSITÉ AND
THE COMMISSARIAT GÉNÉRAL À L'ÉGALITÉ DES TERRITOIRES, PROCIREP, ANGOA, RÉGION ÎLE-DE-FRANCE
IN ASSOCIATION WITH CINECAP 3 INTERNATIONAL SALES TOTEM FILMS

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A FILM BY ALICE DIOP

2021 | DOCUMENTARY | FRANCE | COLOR | 115'

INTERNATIONAL SALES

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WATCH
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synopsis

The RER B is an urban train that traverses Paris and its environs from north to south. Multi-award-winning documentary filmmaker Alice Diop takes us through these suburban spaces and confronts us with some of the faces and stories of which they are composed.

A moving testament to the importance of filming as a process of bearing witness and

remembering, *Nous* is timely in many ways. It is subtle and shrewd in a world which favours shortcuts and easy answers. Justifiably adopting the fragmented structure of a patchwork portrait in order to describe a riven society, Diop displays impressive control of her essay and its impact. In the film's first few minutes, a deer is observed, through binoculars. A certain

sense of awkward, man-made distance stays with us. Isolation, discrimination and nostalgia for hierarchies, inherited from a monarchical past... Divisions haunt France's present. But the human urge to give as well as to receive stubbornly creeps into every situation, observed or triggered. Could this be the one thing that still keeps a nation together?



Biography

Alice Diop

Born in Paris suburb, France. Her films, which question French society and its cultural diversity, have screened at festivals including Cinéma du Réel in Paris, BFI London, Karlovy Vary, the Viennale and the documentary film festival in Lussas, France. Her feature-length documentary *La Permanence* won the main prize at Cinéma du Réel while her short film *Vers la Tendresse* won the 2017 César French film prize for Best Short Film.



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What a short story collection is in literature, *WE* aims to be in film. A succession of stories and portraits threaded together over a territory that is fractured despite the suburban rail link running across it.

Alice Diop

Interview with Alice Diop

This film was inspired by your reading of François Maspéro's book *Les Passagers du Roissy Express* (English title *Roissy Express: A Journey Through the Paris Suburbs*). What was your encounter with this book like?

Maspéro's book recounts a writer's journey on foot along the RER B, a subway line that runs through the banlieue (suburbs) of Paris and crosses spaces that are very geographically and sociologically diverse. I grew up in a housing project in Aulnay-sous-Bois, one of the

stops on that line. I discovered the book 15 years ago, and I remember having had a fairly intense reaction to it. It talked about my neighborhood, the Cité des 3000 housing project, people I grew up around. I recognized my brother's friends, people I had known well, in some of the descriptions. I stopped reading the moment I got to the photo of a young Black girl taken in front of the project's shopping center, where I spent time every day since it was next to my building, and for a second I thought the picture was of me... I was shocked and I closed the book. In retrospect, I think that at that time in my life I was in the process of leaving behind all those places where I had grown up, leaving them both physically and socially. I was leaving the banlieue to become part of the other world. From that periphery, I was trying to make a place for myself in the center, in Paris, through my studies and through my directing career, which was just beginning—but it still felt precarious, I felt unanchored and no doubt the book brought up something unconscious, a past and a history that I was constantly trying to stifle. Today, I realize that that horizon, which seemed so desirable to me at the time, isn't really so desirable anymore, and that all my films have testified to this guilt at having wanted to leave. But at that moment, when I first encountered the book, it felt too brutal to be diving back into that world, so I stopped reading when I saw the face of that little girl who could have been me, and it took



me years to open it back up to that page and to convince myself that it wasn't me. Because fundamentally she is me...

And then I read it again in 2015, precisely at the moment of the terrorist attacks in Paris. That whole period was a shock. I had the feeling—it was vague at the time, but I am able to express it clearly now—that all my work contained within it the seeds of that catastrophe. There are few people who have been able to do what I have done, to come from where I come from and succeed in accessing this other world; that's exactly the problem in France! **But I realized that having made that journey, which for so long was a source of shame for me, was in fact a strength. It allowed me to have a much wider view of French society than most of the people who feel they have the right to have their voices heard in this country.** And that's why I saw the catastrophe coming, and this so-called catastrophe, it wasn't just the progression of radical Islam, but the catastrophe of a country that has been so completely divided that one could legitimately wonder whether it was in the midst of coming apart. The attacks revealed a very deep fracture and I felt it was necessary to acknowledge that.

I remember, in the days that followed, the deafening noise, the blaring commentary of all those people who wanted to explain us, who kept bringing up the banlieues at every opportunity, all those sterile debates with

self-proclaimed experts discouraging on radical Islam and the Islamization of the banlieues. And all I wanted was to tell them to be quiet, I needed silence. I had to get away from the over-reactivity of that media moment, turn off the television, be quiet. Taking the time to take a step back and think was an act of humility as well as a political gesture.

And then there was the big "unity" march on January 11 in response to the attacks. I decided to go, and I felt in my body that my enemies were also in the crowd. I accidentally bumped into a woman and she called me a savage. People were

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The worlds collide, they crash into one another, and it's uncomfortable, but, in colliding, they accumulate, they become connected to one another, and they become extensions of one another.





singing the national anthem, and I wasn't singing; a woman looked at me with distrust and asked "Why aren't you singing?" I answered "Because I don't sing the anthem with just anybody." Her question was almost an order, she was ordering me to prove that I was really French, at least that's how I experienced it. The next day, the newspaper *Libération*, elated by this march that 2 million people attended, ran the headline "We are one people." And I asked myself who this "we" was for them, because I had seen mostly white people at the march, and I asked myself where the others

were, all the others. So who was "we" for *Libération*? What "people" was the newspaper talking about?

I think the desire to make this film emerged from that question, born out of those dire circumstances.

So I went back to the project of Maspero's book: to humbly explore this territory, without preconceived notions, and to try to understand, concretely, what is the foundation of a community made up of people who are so dissimilar, so out of agreement.

The whole film is contained in this question: what is this "we"? Maspero's project had already tried to

give an answer by following this highly symbolic subway line to the banlieue, a line that runs through sites full of history, like the Basilica of Saint-Denis, where the kings of France are buried, and the Holocaust memorial next to site of the former Drancy internment camp. Following this line means traveling through the history of France, but it also means accumulating stories, memories, faces, without being motivated by a sociological or political discourse but driven by the question of who, finally, is this "we"? The entire film is that question, and I think it tries to say that this WE is both a question and a doubt, an affirmation as well as a work in progress. If indeed there are worlds that exist at the periphery of one another, the film tries to create a connection and a bridge between those islands.

The opening sequence of the film is mysterious, unexpected, and it invites us precisely to look more closely at the edges...

This sequence is symbolic, it provides the throughline for the entire film; the hunter on the lookout and the stag both watch and are watched; **we see two worlds in each other's presence that arouse fascination, desire, fear, disquiet... And the entire film is an attempt to come near, to take the time to let the other approach, to see the other—not just from far away, with binoculars, but from very close up.**

The hunter also expresses the film's leaning toward empathy.

I have empathy for Marcel, I think the film shows that, and I couldn't have made it if I didn't, even though it's true that we do not have much in common. Filming the hunt from his point of view meant making him my ally in that moment.

And I hope that people can empathize with a man, Ismaël, who lives in his truck and tells us what it means to be an immigrant in 2021, whereas, when my parents arrived in France, something was possible, but that possibility has been closed. And I hope that people will be able to reflect on what has been lost, on those we are missing out on, because I think that my father, with the 40 years he spent in France, has enriched what it means to be French.

Because of the way the camera takes the time to look at Ismaël when he gets up in the morning and drinks his coffee, he isn't reduced to the stereotype of the undocumented immigrant. Suddenly, because of the focus on his face, he isn't just another undocumented immigrant, but someone who is truly seen. Being with him as he fights off the cold in his truck, hearing his incredible phone call to his mother, it is all these details that make him someone who transcends the ordinary and the trivial to reach the universal.

The inclusion of your family's home videos is both deeply moving and very political. Why was it important to the film's project to bring in the personal?

I had to situate myself within this



“we.” It was very important to say where I'm coming from. If I had just replicated Maspero's method, I would have made a sociological film. And actually, that's how we started—I wasn't in the film at first. At the beginning, I took Maspero literally: to tell the story of France by following this subway line. But something was missing. **And when I agreed to be in the film, all of a sudden, I found something more, I was at the heart of my desire to make this film: to assert that my family archives are part of this story, this history.** And in the name of my mis-

sing archives, of all the moments that haven't been filmed, in the name of all that has disappeared, I wanted to collect traces of other people, other lives.

My encounter with Pierre Bergounioux allowed me to realize the universal desire to “give voice to people of modest means,” which is the project of We. I had read an article by him in which he said that he became a writer to rectify the disappearance of his childhood, which had been overlooked because Corrèze is seen as a place

where nothing happens, a place that hadn't been written about. The non-story of his childhood meant that he "died twice." I find that expression magnificent: the idea that those who aren't filmed or written about die twice because they don't leave a trace. I felt that this was the meaning of what I was doing intuitively from film to film.

Juxtaposing shots of the Mass commemorating the death of Louis XVI—people who for 250 years have come to hear about his legacy, and who pay tribute to him with such emotion and intensity—with images of

my father, the only traces I have of his passage on earth, is a way of asserting that making my father's face part of France's collective history is as important as preserving the memory of a king.

I can also take in the tears and the emotion of this woman mourning the death of her king, even though it is astounding and exotic to me, and I think that a lot of people who have no representation of the life of an immigrant will be moved by my father when he says that there is nothing to say about his life.

That is the project of the film:

to right the wrong done to all the people who have been overlooked, and to give voice to "small lives." Lives that have disappeared without a trace, as my parents' did. I even think that the unconscious desire behind the film was to be able to include the only remaining traces of my mother's existence in it. Thus the obsessive need to collect and preserve the traces of all these lives, to prevent them from disappearing and to archive them in French history. To send a strong, and political, message that they are part of it.

Putting Louis XVI and my father side by side is a provocation that says we are here, we aren't going anywhere, and our memories will continue to accumulate. I'm obsessed with shattering and rebuilding the national narrative, with participating in the construction of a new narrative—a living, dynamic, unfinished narrative. That's what I do in my films. I question all the French myths and the mystification of the republic. And the banlieue is the laboratory of this crisis, but ultimately the real project is to participate in rewriting the national narrative.

You have shot all your films in the banlieue, while deconstructing the image we have of it. Which banlieue is it? And how can cinema help us understand it?

Actually, the film isn't just about the banlieue. Hunting, Bergounioux, people who vote for the far right, the middle-class suburbs, the ban-



lieue of large housing projects, my father, the kings of France, guys from the hood, children, are all integrated into my “we” on an equal footing; it is an open “we.” And starting from the geographical space that is the banlieue, the film questions contemporary societies. **On the one hand, it questions the representation of the banlieue, because I look at ordinary, everyday life there, and that’s already a political act. Because today, making a film about the banlieue means conforming to stereotypes and expectations.** So there is a desire to thwart those expectations, and also to position myself in the tradition of filmmakers and photographers like Pialat or Doisneau. I was greatly inspired by the photographers from the DATAR (Interministerial Delegation for Planning and Development and Regional Attractiveness), who in 1980 were charged with presenting an image of the banlieue at a specific moment in time. The purely documentary aspect of *We* is part of this process of subjectively reexamining the image of the banlieue in order to question how it has been represented.

But, again, the subject of the film goes beyond the banlieue. During the anti-racism protests that took place across the world following George Floyd’s death, I was deeply moved and comforted to see French youth in the streets, whites, Blacks, Arabs, Asians, twenty-year-olds, all of them French, born here, with roots here, and who were demanding in

unison the right to equality. It was extremely moving. And then we saw how the authorities responded: with a law against separatism! How can they deny the reality that already exists? How can they respond to the demand for equality from the youth of their own country with a law that says “beware of communitarianism?” When what is being expressed is precisely a demand that community belonging be recognized—that is, belonging to this “we,” which is much broader than some people think. But this broader “we” that some refuse to see is the reality of French society and

of all contemporary societies. And it is important to say so because it is already here, it has been for a long time, but we don’t know it because we live in each other’s periphery. So it’s also a film that makes these neighboring worlds collide and, in doing so, creates this “we” and makes it visible. **The worlds collide, they crash into one another, and it’s uncomfortable, but, in colliding, they accumulate, they become connected to one another, and they become extensions of one another.** This is the modernity of contemporary societies, and this is the story we must tell.

Interview by Caroline Zéau
Noisy-le-Sec, February 2021



A photograph of an older man and a young boy in a natural, wooded setting. The man is on the left, wearing a dark green sweater, and is looking through binoculars. The boy is on the right, wearing a blue shirt, and is leaning on a wooden post, looking towards the right. The background is filled with green foliage.

cast

Ismael Soumaïla Sissoko

N'deye Sighane Diop

Pierre Bergounioux

Marcel Balnoas

Ethan Balnoas

crew

Produced by **Sophie Salbot (Athénaïse)**

Image **Sarah Blum, Sylvain Verdet,
Clément Alline**

Editing **Amrita David**

Sound **Mathieu Farnarier & Nathalie Vidal**

Color Grading **Eric Salleron**

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