

The quest for freedom takes on a colourful, deeply intimate, yet detached form of observation in Ousmane Zoromé Samassékou's portrayal of the migrant experience, taking place in Gao, a city situated in the western African Republic of Mali. Surrounded by haunting ochre landscapes amid a vast desert, Gao is home to La Maison du Migrant – a temporary refuge for travellers from the likes of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea, among other territories. Acting as a meditative halfway house, suspended in time whilst war and terrorism rages beyond its walls, this turquoise-coloured sanctuary welcomes transiting migrants pursuing solace and respite in exile from their homelands. Curiously, in its state of limbo, the shelter affords displaced persons an opportunity to collectively reinvent their dreams of the future. This is particularly prominent in scenes where Samassékou's attentive lens focuses on Esther and Kadi: two young women who have recently fled Burkina Faso. Both are intent on sacrificing their pasts in the hope of fleeing to the idealised paradise of Europe, or perhaps even America.

Through its loose structure, the film prompts the viewer to consider: what price should one have to pay for a dream of a better, or rather safer, tomorrow? And what guarantee is there that such sacrifices, made on long and dangerous routes through volatile deserts, will eventually reveal the road to liberty for distressed migrants? *The Last Shelter* shows that there are no easy answers. However, what we do see through director and cinematographer Samassékou's fly-on-the-wall perspective – which carefully seeks to capture communal dynamics via a non-intrusive camera – is how an air of uncertainty in the refuge invites pilgrims of freedom from all over the sub-Saharan to reimagine their identities and, subsequently, their future path.

On the one hand, one could argue Samassékou's film is a commentary on the harsh realities of existence in Western Africa, as relayed through occasional stories of persecution and ostracism by its protagonists. Yet I see this work as a delicate exploration of diverse imaginaries, sensitively examining how the concept of happiness is a key element in humanity's search to discover the meaning of life. 'I used to hate my life and everything in it,' utters young Esther in a moving monologue toward the end, before setting off for Algeria. 'But since I arrived here, I understood that you should love life, and life will love you back.'

In truth, the loosely structured and meandering narrative of the film is rather simple at its core; we see migrants entering the shelter, briefly sharing their hardships of an unforgiving world, and then continuing on their voyages. What remains fascinating, however, is the nature of their dreams, whether failed or still being realised, drawn to locating what Samassékou describes as 'an imagined idea of El Dorado'.

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