



## 'The Reign of Hyenas Has Come'

At Metrograph, New York, Djibril Diop Mambéty's newly remastered *Hyènes* offers a darkly comic metaphor of globalization

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If revenge is a dish best served cold, nothing chills it better than money. So, at least, goes the premise of *Hyènes* (Hyenas, 1992), the masterful tragicomic film by Djibril Diop Mambéty, newly restored by Metrograph Pictures. The second and last of the Senegalese auteur's features – coming nearly 20 years after his iconic *Touki Bouki* (1973) – *Hyènes* adapts Friedrich Dürrenmatt's brooding play *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The Visit, 1956), transporting its action from the grey Swiss hamlet of Gullen to the dusty, sun-drenched roads of outer Dakar. There, the village of Colobane has fallen on hard times: its government bankrupt, its buildings crumbling. As the film opens, villagers scramble to welcome their prodigal daughter, Linguere Ramatou (Ami Diakhate) – a widely disliked woman who left penniless decades ago – as she returns to her hometown the richest woman in all of Africa.

Linguere has at least one fond supporter: Draaman Drameh (Mansour Diouf), a kindly grocer, who was also her one great love. When Linguere arrives, swaddled in white silk, hobbling on a golden prosthetic leg with a Japanese valet in tow, she brushes off the sycophantic welcome party and joins Draaman on a walk to the sandy spot where they first made love. There, she bitterly reminds him that he left her for his current wife, then a richer woman: 'You preferred her money to my happiness.' 'You were young and beautiful,' he deflects, 'The future was yours.' 'Now, the present is mine,' she responds. 'Who can abolish time?' he asks, as though wishing to take it all back. She squints at the horizon: 'I can.'

The next day, Linguere announces why she's come: to seek justice for Draaman's betrayal. When they were young, he got her pregnant, then denied the child was his own. The local kangaroo court – siding, predictably, with a male abuser – branded Linguere a whore and exiled her from Colobane. She lost the child and was forced into prostitution, which led her to meet the many husbands who left her their wealth. Hardened and bitter, she has returned to Colobane to offer the townspeople a chance to scrub their consciences with her cash: if they will kill Draaman and overturn her conviction, she will pay them '100,000 million' dollars.



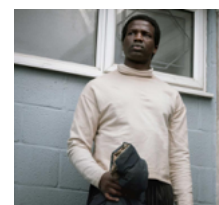
Djibril Diop Mambéty, *Hyènes* (Hyanas), 1992. Courtesy: Metrograph Pictures, New York

While, on the one hand, Linguere's riches rewrite the past, on the other they lend it permanence, by forcing the villagers to acknowledge their complicity in order to satisfy their greed. At first, they refuse to cooperate: who could accept murder at any price? Soon, however, they are crowding Draaman at his bar, asking to charge his finest goods on credit. 'We're not in America; we don't shoot people for nothing,' laughs a beggar as he orders a bottle of calvados he can ill afford. When Draaman notices him wearing expensive yellow shoes, imported from Burkina Faso, he throws sacks of rice across the room in a rage. The camera pans to a monkey in a corner tearing a tricolour flag to shreds; the metaphor is clear. In Linguere's words: 'The reign of hyenas has come' – and the victim is not just Draaman, but all of Senegal.

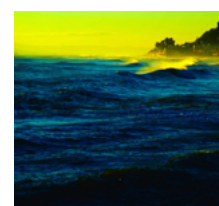
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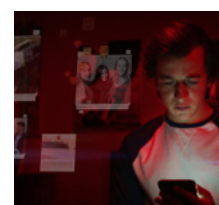
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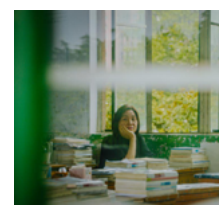
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In Dürrenmatt's play, Linguere's character, Claire Zachanassian, arrives in the company of domesticated hyenas. Written as war-shattered Europe was being rebuilt by the Marshall Plan, *The Visit* is deeply cynical about foreign investment. Zachanassian is the heiress of an Armenian oil fortune and arrives in a town that has been sold off to the highest bidder. 'The country's booming [...] but Güllen goes bankrupt,' the bailiff observes with suspicion. One man blames 'a Free Mason's plot'; another claims the whole thing was 'conspired by the Jews'. The Holocaust has had little effect on old paranoias and prejudices, and Güllen's poor – the same working class that gave rise to Adolf Hitler – are quick to blame invisible bogeymen for an economic crisis they can't understand.

The same is often also said of Trump and Brexit voters, the small-town denizens 'left behind' by globalization, whose nostalgia for glory days forever gone render them susceptible to hollow promises to make things 'great again'. At least Linguere, unlike Trump, is good for the money. She's described early in *Hyènes* as 'richer than the World Bank', a pointed reference to the often-predatory financial institution that – along with the International Monetary Fund – has imposed high interest rates on African debts and propped up countless dictators with so-called 'development schemes'. In 1988, just before production began on Mambéty's film, the Senegalese economy was in freefall, and began to rely increasingly on foreign aid. *Hyènes* is as much about the corrupting influence of such money – and the absurdity of our desperate reliance on it – as it is about its effect on a nation's self-esteem.

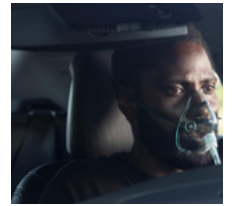
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Djibril Diop Mambéty, *Hyènes* (Hyenas), 1992. Courtesy: Metrograph Pictures, New York



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Signs of new wealth haunt Draaman wherever he seeks comfort. On a visit to the crumbling town hall, he notices the mayor smoking a Cuban cigar, and a model for a grand new edifice displayed on his desk. In the leaky chapel downstairs, the priest is busy installing a crystal chandelier. At a town fair, travelling salesmen hawk refrigerators and washing machines while the night air fills with the crackle of fireworks. 'I want an air conditioner to keep my husband fresh and a television to keep him at home,' one woman demands, as a slick vendor serves her a grin. Mambéty suggests that all utilitarian trade-offs, no matter how small, invite moral turpitude. There's no justice in replacing one ill with another.

By placing a price on Draaman's body, Linguere takes revenge for the prostitution into which his abandonment forced her. 'I'll turn the whole world into a whorehouse,' she cries, swathed in black like an elegant crow. It's tempting to compare her retribution to the recent toppling of male abusers in various industries; but the women who have been brave enough to speak publicly have risked their careers and credibility to do so. They're rarely, if ever, millionaires. Linguere's proposition is a cynical one, crafted by a woman who has lost all faith in the justice system and the integrity of her neighbours to hold it accountable. 'You don't wander the jungle without a ticket to the zoo,' she says, as she awaits her ex-lover's animalistic execution.

With Draaman's death imminent, the film takes on the appearance of a Greek tragedy. He is haunted by a chorus dressed in jute, their faces smeared with dirt in anticipatory mourning. Draaman's 'grave' is dug by bulldozers, as though laying his body for the foundation of a new town to be funded by Linguere's blood money. The real village of Colobane was swallowed by Dakar's sprawl in the 1990s, a victim of its own development – and so the film ends with a view of its new airport. In Mambéty's telling, globalization is a wager for the soul.

Main image: Djibril Diop Mambéty, *Hyènes (Hyenas)*, 1992. Courtesy: Metrograph Pictures, New York

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