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Returning home: Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyènes*

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Abstract

This paper investigates how African filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambety transforms the notable Swiss playwright and novelist Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The Visit) into a portrait of the universality of moral corruption in modernity. The title of his film is *Hyènes*.

Q Keywords: [African film](#) [Senegal](#) [modernity](#)[< Previous article](#)[View issue table of contents](#)[Next article >](#)

Notes

Mambety states in Frank Ukadike's *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers*: 'I am interested in marginalized people, because I believe they do more for the evolution of a community than the conformists. Marginalized people bring a community into contact with a wider world' (Ukadike 2002, 124). The interview that began at the Pan-African Festival of Film and Television of Ouagadougou in 1991 and that was concluded during the African Literature Association Conference held at Michigan State University in 1997 is recorded in *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers*.

Marshall Berman explains the dual nature of modernity best: 'To be modern, is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish [...]' (Berman 1983, 15, quoted in Williams 2000). It is within this context and definition that Mambety negotiates modernity in *Hyènes* and forcefully unsettles all conformity. *Hyènes* thrives on the modern paradox.

Hyènes presents the filmmaker's views with regard to the universal condition of modernity while also displaying the life of Africa. Mambety tells us: 'While *Hyènes* tells a human story to the whole world, I also wanted to pay homage to the beauty of Africa' (Ukadike 2002, 125).

'A boundary', in Heidegger's words in 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' (1971), as Homi Bhabha also quotes them in *The Location of Culture*, 'is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing' (1994, 2).

Mambety recounts Dürrenmatt's reaction upon hearing about his intentions to make a film based on the play: 'The master had laughed a lot at the title *Hyènes* [...]. To make advances to the good old lady of Güllen! And to paint her black and gold on top of that! Africa is so far from the Güllen train station where Claire Zahanassian stopped one day' (Wynchank 2003, 74). This was part of an interview for *Pardo News* at the Locarno Film Festival.

Quoted in Grayson (2001, 136).

Cella elucidates Mambety's style: 'It is through [...] images with rhythm that art brings out the surreal and makes it visible and comprehensible through beauty and formal language. And it is these symbol-images with rhythm that return to the screen, each time from a different point of view, that characterize Diop's films' (1998, 34–5).

Kayser, in this influential work, *Das Grotteske*, established the relevance of the concept 'grotesque'.

The uncanny (Ger. 'das Unheimliche' – literally, 'un-home-ly') is the Freudian situation in which something seems familiar, yet foreign at the same time. This results in an uncomfortable feeling of strangeness and estrangement. Its paradoxical nature causes one to be attracted to yet repulsed by an object at the same time.

All translations of Dürrenmatt are the author's.

Author's translation.

The term 'Swiss malaise' had been used to describe this state of being whose symptoms are irritating uneasiness. Dürrenmatt's relationship to his 'Heimat' is hardly straightforward. He loved the beauty of the Alps and the peace of the scenery, yet he was discontent with what he saw as the narrow-minded mentality of the Swiss people. At the same time, he felt that in his situation as the citizen of a small, supposedly neutral state, he was in a position to analyze and criticize the events of the larger world that surrounded him. This critical analysis of global politics was especially directed at the two superpowers, the United States and the USSR, during the days when the Cold War was at its height. His situation in Switzerland also gave him an insight into the hypocrisy and material self-interest of his own and neighbouring countries.

Switzerland, a neutral European country, has a history of being a country of 'solid and self-satisfied prosperity, of petty bourgeois, of bank and office clerks. Its vices and virtues are those of the middle class: preference for stability and security over intellectual daring, for common sense over sensitivity, for careful handling of public and private funds' (Tiusanen 1977, 11).

See also Wynchank 2003.

The word 'home' comes charged with subjective meaning, reminding us that we are bound by our birth, our childhood, our language, our earliest experiences, our gender and identity, all of which somehow shape us into who we are.

Freud, in his essay 'The Uncanny' (*Das Unheimliche*), describes the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (2003, 124). Referring to Ernst Jentsch's 1906 essay 'The Psychology of the Uncanny', Freud writes that the uncanny includes 'persons and things, the impressions, processes and situations that can arouse an especially strong and distinct sense of the uncanny in us' (2003, 135). He also considers the German words '*heimlich*' (homely) and '*unheimlich*' ('unhomely') (2003, 124–5, 132). Loosely related to *heimisch* (native), *heimlich* can mean familiar, intimate, and cherished, but its other definitions can have apparently opposite significations, such as weird, concealed, and secret: '*heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other – the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept secret' (2003, 132). Linguistically, what is *heimlich* can also become *unheimlich*, and for Freud this ambiguity is a constitutive feature of the 'affective nucleus' that characterizes the uncanny (2003, 123).

In creating *Ramatou*, Mambety used memories of his childhood. He tells of a mysterious woman, a prostitute, in his small town of Colobane during his childhood. This prostitute was named Woolof (the queen) because she did not work the lower parts of the port, but rather the high spheres of finance and the business world. Every Friday she descended toward the port in order to share her riches with the lower classes and the poor. One day, she stopped coming and never appeared again (Wynchank 2003, 71–3). Mambety begins to tell a story of his imagination, a story of this *Ramatou* as a girl accused by the village people of placing a magic spell that caused a terrible drought on the land. She becomes a scapegoat, a victim, burned to death in her home along with her family. When her body cannot be found, the villagers begin to fear, but it is too late. This memory serving as a catalyst, the longing to return to the original place of belonging and being, combined with Mambety's appreciation of Dürrenmatt's work *Der Besuch*, led to the creation of this fantastic figure *Ramatou*.

Wynchank writes that 'Claire Zahanassian was a farcical figure with a series of extraordinary husbands that she married, her manners quite vulgar, her clothes loud, her hair red, the wedding gown that she sports for her eighth marriage. Mambety excluded all that from his film. Of Linguère *Ramatou* he makes a very distinguished character, a "Unique Queen"' (2003, 80).

In his article 'Hyenas', Richard Porton argues that '*Ramatou* herself does not embody moral probity of any sort. [...] *Ramatou* is not an icon of empowerment. She can offer only the negative freedom of ruthless demystification' (1997, 51). Porton is correct that *Ramatou* does not symbolize morality or power in a positive sense. It is, however, most interesting to note that her very presence, though clearly a force of 'ruthless demystification', is shrouded in mysticism and the supernatural.

Dürrenmatt writes in the notes to the play, for example, that 'the theater scenes are to be changed without the use of a curtain, also just play the car scene, if possible, with a stage car which only has the basics necessary for the play: car seat, steering wheel, bumper [...]' (1957, 102).

Joya Uraizee, in 'Subverting the Status Quo in Sénégal', gives a vivid, accurate analysis of this scene: 'In *Hyenas*, Dramaan's death scene begins when men (mainly peasants) walk very slowly toward "no-man's land", the cliff outside the city limits where the final judgment is to take place. They avoid surrounding Dramaan at once, and walk instead as a pack, with their hands behind their backs, as if they have become predatory bodies rather than thinking men. [...] We notice for the first time that all of them are dressed in long, flowing but tattered robes, many are barefoot, and many are wearing strange, ill-fitting wigs. The wigs seem to be shabby replicas of the headpieces that the French judges wear, but look oddly out of place on these men and in this setting. [...] The men slowly move closer to Dramaan, and finally, converge on him, but since medium shots are used, we cannot clearly discern their method of attack. Then, they gradually disperse in different directions as the camera closes in on what is left of Dramaan – his jacket' (2006, 318).

Williams explains: 'In *Hyènes* [...], the emphasis is firmly on the negative, predatory, murderous, cowardly-except-when-in-a-pack nature of the animal' (2000, 132).

Sandra Grayson, in her article 'Djibril Diop Mambety: A Restrospective', sees *Ramatou* as the great hyena, even more than the villagers themselves are hyenas: 'Linguère [is] a hyena. She does not kill Dramaan; rather she follows her prey, moves into town, and waits for his death at the hands of the people of Colobane' (2001, 138).

Alessandra Speciale writes in *Ecrans d'Afrique*: 'In the end [...], the splendid colours and extravagant costumes [...], the touches of humor here and there are not enough this time to conceal the sadness and cruelty of the story' (1998, 10).

Quoted in Speciale 1998, 6.

In this context, Dovey, in *African Film and Literature*, emphasizes 'the impact of performativity on the form and aesthetics of African screen media'. She continues: 'Although the filmmaker is, of course, not present in bodily form in a film, many techniques are used so as to mimic the presence of the filmmaker/griot, including the use of voice-over, opening and closing the film with a griot, or having the filmmaker act in the film' (2009, 14). The griot is a recurring presence in *Hyènes*, and Mambety himself plays the role of the professor.

Mambety admits that he got the idea for this from observing a Communist state fair while in Europe (Ukadike 1998, 144).

Porton makes a poignant observation in reference to this image: '*Hyena's* final shot – a bulldozer plowing through the residue of the town's short-lived consumerist orgy' (1997, 51).

In 'De la scène à l'écran', Wynchank (2000) writes that Mambety deeply regretted that the 'great Dürrenmatt', as Mambety referred to him, died before the premier of *Hyènes*. At the premier, at the Festival de Cannes in 1992, Mambety left one chair empty next to him for Dürrenmatt.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) argues that cultures can be understood to interact, transgress, and transform each other in a much more complex manner than the traditional binary oppositions can allow. From Wikipedia.

Quoted in Bianchi 1998, 11.

