

The Good Old Days: This Is My Melodrama... Or Is It?; Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas* (1992)

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The New York Film Festival is always a cause for celebration: A drop of gold rain dripped on to the surface of the black desert, it is often a New Yorker's (and an American's) only occasion to see the new Jean-Luc Godard film, or Agnes Varda, or Aki Kaurismaki, or Theo Angelopoulos, or Jacques Rivette —with English subtitles and on American soil. That we are asked to suffer the latest affront by Jim Jarmusch or Jacques Doillon in exchange, seems a small price to pay, however painful the experience. Any true film scholar or mere (mere?) film enthusiast who values the international cinema and America's limited access to it for the past decade or so (one of the worst cultural legacies of the Reagan era is that the importation of European and international films into the United States became a harsher, costlier, more difficult process), not being in New York during the festival would be the equivalent of a football fan being in Beirut on Superbowl Sunday.

The 1992 festival, held as every year, in September, was a cut below the regular fare. Usual super high standards appear to have given way to a tendency toward pulp and notoriety, as if an opportunity to appear viable to a larger though still limited audience could atone in a way for the limited number of films of interest let alone consequence presented for consumption as if to the starving a dry bone thrown, the meat cut off and eaten by others, perhaps those who wear jackets and ties and place ads in the Sunday New York Times. Aside from the newest Eric Rohmer film (this time, resonantly and beautifully on winter) and the compelling (if overrated) Neil Jordan film *The Crying Game*, there was little to champion or even discuss, unless one had the morbid inclination to reach out to the immensely popular (and impossibly inane) Spanish film *Dream of Light* (heaven forbid), Victor Erice's grossly moribund (and pathetic) mediation on the painter

Antonio López García's loving relationship to his canvas, his brush, his tubes of paint, his smock, his friend, and his subject, not to mention his less than charming self. Compared with last year's festival stunner, Rivette's *La Belle Noisetteuse*, starring Michel Piccoli as an equally obsessed artist (talk about fire in the eyes), García comes off as infatuated less with his art than with his navel. We have all seen artists behave this way in their studios, but the impetus for recording it permanently on celluloid evades me and seems more a weapon of blackmail than a conduit to idolatry.

Erice's film, like a really boring college professor's treatise on the uplifting quality of misery, endeavors with buckets and buckets of sweat (all dripping) to reiterate the importance of and guarantee the future of the quotation marks held firmly around the word Art by formalists and fascists alike, as if letting go of this retrograde ideal might have dangerous reverberations. They're right, it would. This silly film would be seen as the sham that it is. Watch out Hilton Kramer, here is a film even you might like. While I would make no claims against García's approach, work, or career (however boring I might find all of them), I cannot say the same for Erice, who has the subtle touch of a drunkard gravedigger wearing a blindfold. With every stiff stroke, he covers his hallowed subject in piles of dirt. If his subject were alive, I might make a case against him for murder. Instead, I did the easier thing —I walked out the door, quickly and with great purpose.

There was one superb notable exception at the festival however, one film that inspired not only celebration on my part, but even, by turns, love, devotion, and great respect. Djibril Diop Mambety's superior and moving *Hyenas* made me want to hire a one man band to play outside Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall to attract the attention that the film so



Hyenas (Senegal) de Djibril Diop Mambety. 1992.

deserved, but however sadly, would not receive at this time. (I felt the same way at 1991's festival about Michael Tolkin's ambitious failure *The Rapture*. It just had to be seen, if only for Mimi Rogers's mind boggling brave, fresh, inventive performance.) In many ways the power and meta-revelatory framework of *Hyenas* is the utter personification of Erice and his ilk's worst nightmare. A film of great dedication told in the style of a great tradition (melodrama) that is at once beautiful, passionate, horrifying, and structurally subversive. If I was moved to tears toward the end of the film by what Laura Mulvey has called "the struggle of the filmmaker", rather than by the action depicted on the screen, I was simultaneously held in awe of its raw talent, Mambety's well shaped and level headed mise-en-scene, and perhaps most of all, by the film's canny ability to both transgress and reify its own presence within (and outside of) the various cultural canons it appropriates.

Hyenas is a melodrama. And it is a remake. A retelling. Perhaps an untelling. It is a jagged and harsh sea of complexity and contradiction. And it is brilliantly and emphatically conceived, written, directed, edited, acted, and photographed. And for anybody who has seen and appreciated either Friedrich Durrenmatt's play, or the 1964 Ingrid Bergman film vehicle based on it, both titled *The Visit*, the improvement in this telling should ring as clear as does that of Douglas Sirk's latefifties version of *Imitation of Life* starring Lana Turner over the silly one that preceded it in the early 30's starring Claudette Colbert. Durrenmatt's play is flat and inarticulate,

and the Bergman film is a dud, though Bergman does an inspired if hammy star-turn not seen the likes of since her Jean Renoir film *Elena and Her Men*. Rarely have cruelty and revenge looked so glamorous, and like so much fun.

But as is always the case with melodrama, it is the story, the plot —the events that unfold— that are of consequence rather than the words telling or the subtleties of the telling. Whether it be *Stella Dallas*, *Now, Voyager*, *Terms of Endearment*, or *The Prince of Tides*, what defines a powerful melodrama is the empathetic emotional events that unfold within the film's rather broad frame —they must be moving in the particular and the abstract. That, and the strong central place occupied by the woman. And the big bad wolf knocking at the door. ("You must pay the rent."/"I can't pay the rent".) *Hyenas*, thanks to Durrenmatt, has all of these qualities in generous supply. The poignant if rough story of a town gone to serious seed —even the mayor's house and the furniture in it is seized by the state for back taxes and other debts. Its last and only salvation is presented in the form of a returning home town girl who has made good in the world. Once an innocent local waif seduced and abandoned and left pregnant and branded a slut, a whore, and a liar by the locals and the man who denounced her in order than he may marry a more prosperous older woman, she is forced to leave town in shame, humiliaton, and desperation. Now many years later, the woman is a millionaire many times over (or a billionaire, depending on the particular version you are plugged in to), and her ecstaticly announced homecoming appears to offer



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the town its much needed patron saint. Upon her arrival, the woman agrees wholeheartedly, albeit with one stiff condition: that the man who “ruined” her be killed.

Aside from Mambety’s skillfully superior rendering of the material, his primary displacement of it is to move the action from a war torn town in Italy to a poverty stricken village in Senegal. It is a decision that is a willful as it is wise. By refusing to place the blame for the town’s poverty on the outside world so to speak, or the seed for its possible salvation either, Mambety lays the foundation for grand drama, rather than politically correct preaching. The face of the “enemy”—the (female) wolf at the door—is identical to that of the townspeople who must resist her hilarious bribes (refrigerators, furniture, air conditioners, shoes, etc.) and to that of the man who is eventually killed by his friends, who will have to live with the burden of their crime as well. Furthermore, we are never allowed to forget that it was the town’s treatment of this woman (her sex is not incidental to this scenario, it is dependent on it) that has ultimately caused not only her misery and her entry to the West, where she makes her fortune (her salvation), but her insatiable yearning for revenge as well—and the ability to carry it out. And yet all of this too is brilliantly neutralized by the touching scene in the film where the woman meets her enemy, and the two reminisce about their romance—the good old days, as it were.

Hyenas is adamantly not strictly a film of the new gobbledegook multiculturalism so fashionable of late among young academics and merchants in sophisticated culture circles internationally, even though it does indeed emanate from Senegal. Rather, Mambety takes the West at its postmodern word, and then rewrites that word—rewrite, young man—from his own incredible vantage point. Mambety’s film has the power of Ingmar Bergman at his best and the abstraction of Bernardo Bertolucci at his most cogent. I have never really seen anything like it, and it angers me that Mambety may not have the opportunity to have the kind of career he should have. Now I must clarify that I do not mean that if Mambety does not have the sanction of Europe and America that he is “doomed” to a career in Africa. My lament is not a political one. As somebody who cares very deeply about the cinema and its future (and the lack of talent we are experiencing in it and for it at the moment), I would like to have the pleasure of seeing many films by Mambety over the next decades. I would like it if he were to have the freedom to make films (more or less) as regularly as the wishes, so that I can see them, as I do new films year after year, by far less talented auteurs than he. If Steven Soderbergh gets to make *Kafka* and if Mike Newell gets to make *Enchanted April* and if Jon Amiel can get away with *Sommersby*, then Mambety should be allowed to make or get away with any film he wishes.