

The Final Scene of *Hyenas* A Parenthetical Incorporation¹

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ABSTRACT: *Hyenas* tends to be characterised as a “biting satire of today’s Africa” that has betrayed the hopes of independence for the false promises of Western materialism. A reading such as this interprets *Hyenas* as an Afropessimist fabulation of the formation of the neocolony in which the victory of materialism over self-determination is staged as the subsumption of Pan-Africanist morality by the modernity of the International Monetary Fund. This reading turns upon an interpretation of the final scene in *Hyenas* in which the passage from poverty to wealth promised by Linguere Ramatou is instituted through the sentence of death visited by the townspeople of Colobane upon the grocer Draman Drameh, the subject that accepts his guilt. In the present text, Kodwo Eshun argues for a different understanding. He posits that the final scene in *Hyenas* can be understood not as a murder, nor as a sacrifice, but more precisely, as an act of occluded incorporation by a corporate personhood whose opacity does not thwart transparency or universality, as Edouard Glissant proposed, but instead acts as the fatal precondition for integration into world capitalism.

In the last decade, artists and critics situated within the continent increasingly pointed out that the Africanity in Afrofuturism took, and indeed continues to take, little or no account of the invention of African futures. That the Afrofuturism formulated during the 1990s was a project developed by and for Afrodiasporic practitioners that remains centered within the UK, the USA, Canada and the Caribbean.

From this position, many now argue that Afrofuturism’s diasporic insularity, its Americocentrism and its Anglocentrism is inscribed within its founding moment of the early 1990s. Instead of attempting to wrestle the term towards an accounting of the contemporary cultural production of African futures, Afrofuturism should be replaced by a new formulation that is capable of grasping the scale and the scope of futurities as they are being forged now, in the West, East, North and South of the continent, in the present of a planet whose future extinction can be forecast with ever greater certainty.

The demand for the new implies that the common task of inventing African futures confronts contemporary practitioners as a present and urgent task that is yet to be achieved. The recognition of this urgency, which is articulated most persistently in literature, in music, in moving images, in video, in animation and in virtual reality, implicitly concedes the presupposition that there have been no African futurisms, no African science fictions, no speculations and no inventions to speak of, until now.

It is the painful awareness of this gap that falls between the cultural horizon of the continent and that of the diaspora

that has to be remedied, now. The widely felt desire for a new futurism that we, generationally speaking, can call our own, however, wittingly or not, inscribes a belatedness into continental cultural practices. Its generational imperative overlooks the cultural practices that have already been produced within and outside the continent which can be grasped as inventions of the future. Its sense of necessity renders it deaf, mute and blind to the range of continental fictions, fabulations, forms and forces that have invented, imagined and intervened in the chronopolitical production of futures.

My aim here is to not so much to invent a new term as to turn towards the overlooked, undertheorised and unacknowledged practices of the new as they have been formulated within this century and within the last century. It is to examine projects that exceeded Afrofuturism before it was even formulated.

Projects whose implications, within and beyond the continent, were inadvertently occluded by the impact of Afrofuturism.

It is this imperative that allows a new return to *Hyenas*, or *Hyenes*, directed by Djibril Diop Mambety in 1992 in 2016. To revisit *Hyenas* and its final scene in particular, is to rethink its specific cinema of demoralization as a hitherto unacknowledged film fable of continental futurism.

In 1992, *Hyenas* was celebrated and criticized for its aesthetic disenchantment of forms of community and morality that were understood, initially at least, to be specific to the continent.

What if *Hyenas*' disenchantment was not only directed at morality and its communal preconditions in the present but was also aimed at the future, at what community, morality, continent would become?

Can *Hyenas* be understood, not only as a satire on greed but as a work that seeks to anticipate so as to undermine the horizon of expectations forecast in the next decade? A work that prefiguratively disenchant the exuberance of the economic forecasts for the continent projected for the second decade of the 21st Century?

From 2016, we can look back at *Hyenas*' forward looking disillusionment of a future in which Africa is supposed to be rising. A future that is enacted in the final scene of *Hyenas*. A future that anticipates this present.

The website of *California Newsreel*, the distribution company that released *Hyenas* in the USA, describes the "long and unexpected gestation" of *Hyenas*:

Years ago, when Mambety was living in Dakar's port district, a beautiful prostitute would descend from high society each Friday night to treat the poor of the quarter to a lavish meal. They named her Linguère (Unique Queen in Wolof) Ramatou (the red bird of the dead in Egyptian mythology). Suddenly, one Friday she didn't appear and Mambety decided to invent a history for her. He imagined her to be the sole survivor of an outcast family slaughtered by a superstitious village which still lived in fear of her return.

Mambety only discovered an ending for his story years later when he saw Ingrid Bergman in a film version of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's celebrated play, *Der Besuch der Alten Dame* or *The Visit of the Old Woman*. In this reclusive Swiss master's bitter tale of a wealthy, aged prostitute's vengeance against the man who betrayed her, Mambety recognized the fate of Linguère Ramatou. In appreciation he dedicated his African adaptation to "the great Friedrich."

In Mambety's version, Linguère Ramatou was a beautiful, spirited but poor young woman from the sleepy village of Colobane who had fallen in love with a young man, Dramaan Drameh. When she became pregnant with his child, he denied paternity and bribed two men to say they had slept with her, so he could marry a wealthy wife. Driven from the village, her ideals shattered, Linguere was forced into prostitution and has miraculously become the richest woman in the world, "as rich as the World Bank" (*Hyenas* [n.d.]. *California Newsreel*).

Hyenas depicts the gradual process by which the impoverished townspeople of Colobane succumb, incrementally and inevitably, to the promise of wealth offered by Linguere Ramatou. The future of unimaginable wealth offered by Linguere Ramatou in exchange for the sentence of death visited upon the grocer Draman Drameh by the townspeople, is staged as the gradual victory of the sovereignty of money over self-determination.

Hyenas appears to us as a fable of female retribution visited upon a former lover whose historical betrayal and perjury forces Ramatou to leave the town of Colobane that sided with patriarchy against justice. The choice presented to the people of Colobane by Ramatou, and the decision made by the town, turns upon the town's capacity for sacrifice through expulsion, recounted by Ramatou and by the lawyer, played by Mambety himself, in the time before the start of the film.

And it is the townspeople's capacity for sacrifice that is ensnared by Ramatou and redirected against Drahmeh the grocer in the name of his past injustice against her that blocks her path to their wealthy future. The seemingly insignificant town of Colobane exemplifies the corruption of the neocolony; its historical gendering of the law which secures its quotidian folk-politics, are channeled towards the future of world capitalism that is personified in the malevolent sovereignty of Linguere Ramatou.

"The universality of the narrative," according to Mercer (2001), "resides not in the translation into an African context of a European story originally set in a Swiss village but in the way Mambety observes the human capacity for violence when shared responsibility is instead polarized onto the scapegoat within the logic of retributive justice" (p.146).

It is not that this reading outlined above is incorrect or mistaken. Far from it. It is more that arriving at such an all too understandable understanding of the fatality and the futurity of *Hyenas* entails reading for a transparency in its final scene that is not, on closer inspection, evident or visible.

The blighted landscape of the desert.

Outside the town of Colobane.

In the desert of the political.

The townsmen walk in line across the mountain's edge.

In the distance, stands the judge.

On the promontory stands Linguere Ramatou.

The male townspeople of Colobane gather to put Drahman to death.

To sacrifice him.

They wear black wigs. Powdered faces.

They gather around Drahman.

They repeat words. Not for the money. Not for the money.

Their muttering increases in volume.

They press around Drahman.

The sound of the wind increases in volume.
 In the distance, the ocean.
 They walk away, leaving a fabric stain.
 Drahman's brown coat which nobody touches.
 A bulldozer pushes red earth over the scene of the crime.
 The sound of an airplane.
 Above the horizon appears the skyline of a central business district.
 The earth reveals the tracks of bulldozers.
 An anonymous man stands and stares at the abject fabric.
 The discarded remnant of Drahman's jacket marks the ground as sacred ground.
 In the sense that it is set apart from common use.
 A man arrives to stare at the jacket as if it is a corpse.

(Description of the final scene. Mambety, 1997).

On the website of *California Newsreel*, the final scene is described as follows: "In the film's climax, the townspeople literally consume Dramaan, leaving only his clothes behind like hyenas."

According to this interpretation, the sentence of death visited by the townspeople of Colobane upon the grocer Draman Drameh is carried out in the ritual of a collective cannibalism.

In a conversation with the critic Judith Rodenbeck published in the journal *October, Issue 133*, in Summer 2010, the respected New York University based Malian critic Manthia Diawara agrees.

He says that Ramatou "just sits down and waits."

Rodenbeck replies, "She waits them out."

Diawara says, "...And it happens slowly, she doesn't get into criticism of anybody. But look! They literally ate the guy! He disappeared!"

And Rodenbeck agrees: "Ate the guy!"

According to this interpretation, the final scene of *Hyenas* can also be interpreted as a ceremony of ingestion and digestion.

In a brilliant recent essay published in *e-flux*, Neo-liberalism and the New Afro- Pessimism: Mambety's Hyenes, the Seattle based Zimbabwean scriptwriter and critic Charles Mudede interprets the final scene of *Hyenas* as a communal killing whose egalitarian ethos can be associated, by behavioral ecologists and anthropologists, with the formation of hunter-gatherer societies.

According to Mudede:

The stark conclusion of *Hyènes* is that the mechanism of communal killing of the egalitarian ethos has effectively been captured by neoliberalism...the mechanism of communal killing that supports the egalitarian ethos...can be argued to be the mechanism by which human morality was spawned and shaped. It is much, much older than democracy, and much more about the animal origins of our humanity" (2015, November).

This ritual of communal killing according to this interpretation, is nothing less than the depiction of the anthropological origin of morality in the process of being captured by neoliberalism. The final scene of *Hyenas* depicts the death of human morality qua morality. Draman Drameh, the grocer of Colobane, therefore:

dies in the poisoned pool of human morality. His death is also the death of what made us human in the first place – our morality, which was itself developed to keep tyrannical behavior in check for the survival of the community or band' (Mudede, 2015, November).

The interpretations by *California Newsreel* distribution company, by Diawara and Rodenbeck and by Mudede all reach a consensus on the final scene as a scene of consumption and cannibalism.

The townspeople of Colobane condemn Drahman.

They sentence him. They repeat sentences.

But what they do obscures what they say.

Their bodies obstruct the viewer from seeing what they actually do.

The townspeople sacrifice the grocer in the name of what they call justice.

But there is no sacrifice.

There is no murder.

There is no putting to death.

What there is is the presupposition of sacrifice.

The inference of murder.

The presupposition of ingestion.

The scene of putting to death is occluded.

By preventing the viewer from occupying a point of view from which to see what happens, what we do see is that justice is not seen to be done.

Instead the ritual of sanctioned murder is mystified.

It becomes an occluded ceremony of hidden justice.

The final scene in *Hyenas* can be understood not as a murder, nor as a sacrifice, but more precisely as an act of occluded incorporation by a corporate personhood.

A corporate body whose opacity does not thwart transparency or universality, as Edouard Glissant (translated 1997) proposed, but instead acts as the fatal precondition for integration into the political sequence of global capitalism.

In *The Poetics of Relation*, Glissant argues that the right to opacity, as an ontological capacity, thwarts the transparency of power and frustrates the right to difference that presupposes transparency.

But it is not clear whether opacity, then in the time of *Hyenas*, or in 1991 or now, in 2016, ever operated as a counter power to transparency of power.

Or rather, opacity is a predicate that is capable of being mobilized on the side of power as much as it is a tactic that can be mobilized against power.

Today, power reserves the right to opacity for itself and imposes transparency upon its subjects.

The final scene of *Hyenas* could be understood as a performance of the sacrificial logic of structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s.

As a dramatization of the cuts demanded by the IMF and the World Bank in return for loans.

As a cinematic evocation of the rituals of murder that founded neoliberalism.

As a fable of the magical practice of market fundamentalism.

As an allegory of the magical thinking that flourishes in the age of market fundamentalism.

The final scene does not reveal murder.

Nor sacrifice.

Nor ingestion.

It reveals incorporation.

The townsmen incorporate Drahrman, the grocer, into themselves.

They become an incorporated body.

This incorporated body serves to distribute responsibility for its actions.

Everybody and nobody is responsible for putting Drahrman to death.

At the same time, this incorporated body becomes a person with rights.

What is performed is the practice of becoming a corporation that, according to the memorandum of articles in commercial law, cannot be killed.

The townsmen become immortal through an act of absorption.

What you hear is the sinister sounds of a corporate muttering.

These voices muttering to themselves cannot be attributed to any specific person in the townspeople.

It is a collective vocalising.

Could this be the sound of a corporation coming into existence?

Could these vocalisations be the sounds of the townsmen of Colabane taking upon themselves the role of the corporate body?

What does incorporation sound like?

If a corporation could speak, what would it sound like?

What would it say?

What would it dream of?

As it institutes itself through an act of self-sanctioned violence.

The townsmen enclose Drahaman.

They circle him.

They surround him.

They bracket him in a scene that takes place between parentheses.

The final scene can be seen as a parenthetical scene of incorporation.

As Gabriel Catren (2011) argues, to bracket is the term that Husserl uses to describe the phenomenological epoch.

The epoch is the generalized suspension of the judgments by means of which the field of experience manifests itself in its pure phenomenological givenness.

Can the suspension of judgment be speculatively extended beyond the precondition for the manifestation of experience, to the cinematic suspension of Linguere Ramatou's death sentence?

What this implies is that the accomplishment of the murder of Drahaman Drahmeh takes place in and through the

paradoxical form of the suspension of Ramatou's death sentence.

Hyenas literally brackets the accomplishment of the sentence of death.

Which is to say that it is not possible to know what happened in the final scene of *Hyenas*.

To force a resolution of the inherent ambiguity of the scene is to miss the point of the final scene of *Hyenas*.

The inscription of this ambiguity can be understood as the only way to withdraw from the dilemma that is being proposed.

Either the townspeople of Colobane accept Linguere Ramatou's offer of money in exchange for the death of Drahaman Drahmeh.

Or they refuse her offer.

If the people of Colobane accepted or refused Ramatou's offer of money, then they would be already accepting the terms of an externally imposed dilemma.

Critical interpretation is quite clear: the people of Colobane accepted Linguere Ramatou's offer.

But the stubborn fact is that there is a blind spot at the scene.

There is a black hole.

A topological anomaly that is inscribed at the heart of the historical process that is being launched in this final scene.

The inscription of ambiguity opens a zone of inherent uncertainty at the very heart of the historical sequence of free market oriented capitalist development that is being instituted.

Drahaman Drahmeh is Schroedinger's cat.

As Schroedinger's cat, he is neither dead nor alive.

It is this uncertainty that 'diagonalizes' the binary dilemma imposed by Linguere Ramatou.

The forthcoming historical sequence is inherently ungrounded by the accomplishment of the sentence in the form of a suspending bracketing.

Nobody knows how or when the hidden potentialities of this liberated zone will explode or unfold.

Drahaman's rumpled coat.

The wind.

The blasted ground.

The disincorporation of Draman Drameh.

Where does Drahman's body go?

Does it become music?

The performance of corporate incorporation produces a disincorporation whose cause and whose effect remains opaque.

It forecasts a future in which incorporation cloaks its causes and shields its effects.

What can be seen in the final scene of Hyenas is the enactment of a shell.

The townsmen form themselves into a shell corporation.

A corporation without active business operations.

Or significant assets.

A corporation that disguises or deflects business ownership from law enforcement or the public.

The townspeople enact the collective figure of a shell corporation that exists as an account.

That counts itself as an account of no account.

As a legally incorporated empty personhood.

A shell corporation embedded in a extra-territorial jurisdiction.

In the distant horizon can be seen a shining city.

Magical urbanism, as the urban geographer, Mike Davis, calls it, emerges all at once, in a scene of accelerated development.

Drum machines beat out a defiant and desolate synthetic tattoo that mixes into the roar of an aeroplane that travels across the stereo field.

A bulldozer reverses.

At the edge of the horizon, over the scored mud, and the single baobab tree, an airplane lands.

Africa rises.

The parenthetical disincorporation of Draman Drameh is the prerequisite for a projected future.

In which Africa is rising throughout the first decade of the 21st Century.

A central business district appears on the horizon.

A horizon that envisages an era in which Africa will rise.

At a time when the dismal science of development economics forecasts continental failure.

In its December 3, 2011 issue, *The Economist* announces Africa rising: the hopeful continent is on its front cover.

The Economist declares that:

after decades of slow growth, Africa has a real chance to follow in the footsteps of Asia. Over the past decade six of the world's ten fastest-growing countries were African. In eight of the past ten years, Africa has grown faster than East Asia, including Japan. Even allowing for the knock-on effect of the northern hemisphere's slowdown, the IMF expects Africa to grow by 6% this year and nearly 6% in 2012, about the same as Asia ("The Hopeful Continent: Africa Rising," 2011, December 3).

The IMF expects Africa to grow by 6% this year and nearly 6% in 2012.

This future forecast by *The Economist* is followed by the forecast of *Time Magazine* in 2012 (Perry, December 3).

Its front cover reads, "Africa Rising."

In its October 2013 issue, *The Harvard Business Review's* front cover reads, "Africa's Time Is Now" (Berman).

From 1992, *Hyenas* looks forward to the horizon of expectation announced in 2011, 2012 and 2013 for the economic future of the continent.

The final scene of *Hyenas* envisions the fatal preconditions for acceleration of economic development.

It is a futurism that imagines the ethical and political costs of the continental futures forecast by the development-complex that operates outside and inside the continent.

In 2016, the forecast, as a chronopolitical practice, can be distinguished from and contrasted with the chronopolitical practice of prediction.

According to Elena Esposito (2016), in "Blindness and Power in Algorithmic Prediction," the forecast and the prediction each presuppose different operations and each create different futures.

Esposito asks the question:

How do we face the future, we limited human beings with limited access to data and limited ability to process data?

We face the future, only at best, with forecasts, which can be more or less precise, but they are always affected by

our unavoidable uncertainty.

We do this using statistical procedures, using probability calculus and sampling and generalising from a sample which is a sample, an inevitably limited part of the universe. We make aggregate forecasts on a microscopic level starting from a sample at a lower level. That's how we predict how the economy will fare, how the political party will fare on the next election.

But big data does not have this limitation. Algorithms can access all data about a phenomenon. They can access an entire statistical universe. They do not need sampling. They do not need statistical procedures. That's why they make predictions not forecasts. They can process the universe. They can process all data about this universe. And in this universe, they look for patterns that the computer can abstract from this so-called ocean of data. And that is something that is completely new in our world.

Esposito distinguishes between two kinds of futures: the present future and the future present. Algorithms predict the "present future" based on total statistical patterns. Statistical samples provide the basis for forecasts that generate "future presents."

The present future of algorithmic prediction is characterized by the forward projection of today's uncertainty. The future present of the forecast is an open future that produces a present that is different from today.

The future that *Hyenas* anticipates is the future present of the statistical forecast of 2011, 2012 and 2013. It forecasts the models and graphs and horizons that *Time*, *The Economist* and *The Harvard Business Review* use to forecast their futures.

The anticipatory power of *Hyenas* seems to reach its limit with the present future of algorithmic prediction. The computational powers of pattern and correlation surely dwarf the computational limitations of the economic forecast.

But the present future of algorithmic prediction can be described as "blind" because the present future cannot include itself. Algorithms cannot predict futures that take account of their own predictions. And this blindness is a limit that is internal to and constitutive of big data.

There is a blind spot at the scene of incorporation and disincorporation in *Hyenas*.

Does the blind spot in *Hyenas* unground the forthcoming historical process of algorithmic prediction whose statistical blindness is operative now?

Does the inherent uncertainty of the fate of Drahman Drahmeh anticipate the uncertainty at the heart of algorithmic prediction?

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Notas

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