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Sonic Space in Djibril Diop Mambety's Films by Vlad Dima
(review)

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Vlad Dima*Sonic Space in Djibril Diop Mambety's Films*

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review by Chris Letcher

Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambety, who died in 1998 at the age of 53, made just a handful of films, and amongst these only two full-length features. Despite this lean output, Mambety's body of work, often stylistically subversive and experimental, places him amongst cinema's great iconoclasts. The dream-like *Touki Bouki* (1973), his standout feature and a cinematic landmark now digitally restored by Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Project, is illustrative of a number of Mambetian approaches and concerns: a young couple, Anta and Mory, dream of leaving Dakar for France but have no money. After various outlaw-style escapades in which they attempt to steal money for the trip, Mory finds his ties to Senegal are too strong and only Anta leaves on the ship. Spun from a simple tale, it is a layered and complex film about the difficulties and contradictions of the postcolonial condition. Stylistically, the film has a vivid, countercultural pop energy with frequent narrative fragmentations, doubling-backs, surreal touches – the film's form reflecting the disorientating, ambiguous states in which the protagonists find themselves. For Vlad Dima it is a 'lynchpin' film that connects themes and style across Mambety's films; and, as he demonstrates persuasively in *Sonic Space*, this is particularly true at the level of the director's use of sound.

Early on in the book, Dima retells the story of Mambety as a child going to an outdoor cinema in 1950s Dakar; he and his friends were unable to afford the price of a ticket so they simply listened from outside (pp.38–39). It is an evocative anecdote offering a possible backstory for the book's central argument, that sound is key to the innovative cinema of Mambety: by foregrounding sound as a storytelling tool (through voices and spoken language, nonsynchronous use of sound, the charting of space on the soundtrack, and music), Mambety re-orientates the conventional relationship between sound and image, and in the process creates new forms of cinema. Dima posits that the productive tension between image and sound in the telling of, at times, concurrent stories – a visual narrative and an aural (primary) narrative – leads in Mambety's hands to a decolonised fusing of Western and West African aesthetics.

In demonstrating ways in which Mambety privileges the soundtrack, Dima coins a number of new terms that are useful additions to screen

music studies terminology. The 'sonic rack focus technique' is one such term Dima employs for exploring ways in which Mambety constructs or 'maps' space with sound. If a visual rack focus technique consists of visual objects coming in and going out of focus in a shot, Dima hears a similar effect operating on the soundtrack of Mambety's films: certain sounds take turns in becoming dominant. He uses a description of a scene near the beginning of *Touki Bouki* as an example: while the camera is relatively constrained, Anta's neighbourhood is mapped sonically by focalising the listener's attention, in sequence, on the sound of a descending aeroplane, a baby crying, an Islamic call to prayer, a dog barking and a siren – drawing attention to each in turn and emphasising the symbolic potential in the different sounds. While examples of this technique in operation in Mambety's films are relatively rare – more often he produces a dense layering of sound rather than a focalisation from one sound image to another – the idea of a sonic mapping of space is helpful in understanding Mambety's method.

Another valuable new coinage is Dima's concept of the 'acousmatic panopticon', a combination firstly of Michel Chion's concept of the *acousmètre* (a disembodied voice in cinema that has mysterious and limitless powers from being heard but not seen), and secondly of Michel Foucault's invocation of the panopticon (a viewing tower that allows inmates in an institution to be constantly monitored and therefore controlled – a metaphor for the normalising and maintenance of institutional power). By making use of culturally specific sounds, either as source or disembodied/off-screen sound – sung and spoken language, regional music, environmental sounds – a film's soundtrack has the potential to map a space according to local perceptions and cultural meanings. In Mambety's films this results in sonically generated 'uniquely Senegalese, uniquely Dakarais, or uniquely Mambetian' spaces (p.146) – a more all-encompassing version of Mark Slobin's soundtrack-as-ethnomusicologist concept (2008). If Foucault's visual panopticon unifies and normalises power, the acousmatic panopticon 'unifies and normalizes the diegetic space of the films, at a first level, and the larger postcolonial space of an entire country at a second level' (p.145). Mambety's moving and optimistic *La petite vendeuse de soleil* (1999), which he was editing at the time of his death, provides a good example of the acousmatic panopticon in the form of a traditional song used as a leitmotif throughout the film. Sili, the film's protagonist, is a young paraplegic girl who traverses the obstacle-filled city on crutches to sell the daily *Sun (Soleil)* newspaper and support her family. She overcomes prejudiced policemen as well as competitive young male newspaper vendors to become the first girl to sell the newspaper. The song sung by Sili's blind grandmother, sometimes off-screen, sometimes on, functions as an

acousmatic panopticon – the voice of the grandmother ringing through the city unifies the depicted world and offers a protective space for the protagonist, a very different kind of panopticon from Foucault's. Here, 'towering sounds' (p.35) redirect power away from a neo-colonial force monitoring and controlling Sili (and by extension Senegal) to one that has all the mysterious power of the *acousmètre* but is rooted in the local, thus 'limiting the influence of the West and [...] recharting and potentially homogenizing the space that rightfully belongs to the postcolonized' (p.38).

By drawing our attention to Mambety's radical use of sound, Dima effectively illuminates Ukadike's description of the director 'appropriating and then subverting conventional film techniques and the thematic-narrative elements of traditional African tales' in a 'total decolonization of both content and style' (1994, pp.172–173). While Dima's arguments are on the whole convincing, such discussions have the potential to be reductive – a non-specific West, a generalised Africa, African narratives reduced to oral stories, etc. – and that is occasionally the case here. Dima describes Mambety's cinema as one 'that is closer to African expression' (p.191), and one that constructs a 'unified African space' (p.193) on the soundtrack. While one takes his point, could similar statements be made about Mambety's contemporaries who also make use of nonsynchronous, experimental uses of sound? Is a 'unified European space' evident in Godard's films, for example, or a 'unified Eurasia' in Eisenstein's sound films, a 'unified America' in Altman?

Indeed, an ontological difference between Mambety's use of sound techniques and those of his contemporaries and kindred spirits is not always apparent. There's an odd, humorous moment in his second short film, *Badou Boy* (1970), where the central character relieves himself against a wall and the sound of a flushing toilet is heard on the soundtrack – it is similar to the pretend shooting of the sun in Godard's *Breathless* (1960), accompanied by the sound of a real gunshot, or the expunging of dance music in the café scene in *Bande à part* (Godard, 1964). Mambety undoubtedly makes use of West African storytelling themes and approaches at visual, narrative and aural levels – and certainly regarded himself as a modern-day griot (Thackway, 2004, p.58). But is his use of nonsynchronous sound necessarily evidence of a West African orality rather than simply a way of making the ordinary extraordinary, and provoking a response from the audience?

While Dima draws on some screen sound/music theorists – Chion (1994; 1999), Altman (1992) and Stilwell (2007) – there are also omissions, most notably the work of Alexander Fisher. While it is largely true that 'only in the last couple of decades has sound claimed its rightful place as a crucial element in our understanding and analysis of cinema [...]

work [that] has mostly been done in the context of Western cinema' (p.2), Fisher has been a prominent theorist of music in postcolonial West African cinema, including the music in Mambety's work. Fisher's article 'Modes of Griot Inscription in African Cinema' (2016) deals directly with *Touki Bouki* and he considers Mambety's work in much the same terms as Dima – investigating the oral storytelling roots of Mambety's cinema – though with a greater emphasis on music. Fisher argues that frequent musical repetitions in Mambety's films (as well as in the work of other directors from the continent) are, in the context of oral narrative techniques, 'a signalling of the intervention of the griot-like narrator' (p.5). This is certainly true of the repeated use of a tape loop from Josephine Baker's 'Paris, Paris, Paris' in *Touki Bouki* – the insistent repetition, each time generating different meanings, indicating a griot-like intervention. Here, Fisher argues compellingly, we can detect 'the clear lines of continuity that exist between the oral tradition and the enunciative strategies deployed by the film' (p.12). Fisher demonstrates that West African cinema is far less interested in spectator identification with the protagonists than supercultural cinema, and far more interested in shifting attention to the act of storytelling, a perspective perhaps somewhat at odds with Dima's psychoanalysis-influenced approach.

Sonic Space 'proposes new ways of analysing (and listening to) sound in cinema' (p.4), yet it occasionally seems rather too tied to conventional analytical modes. Dima's reliance on categorising sound as diegetic/nondiegetic, while acknowledging frequent blurrings and crossings (Stilwell's 'fantastical gap'), is a case in point. More recent scholarship that has attempted to rethink this reductive binary could be productively applied to Mambety's cinema. Ben Winters (2008; 2010) has argued that music/sound that has normally been considered nondiegetic should more properly be thought of as 'belonging to the same narrative space as the characters and their world' (2010, p.228). He argues that traditional film music theory, drawing on narrative theory developed to interrogate the novel, has been applied inappropriately to the study of film and film sound/music. 'The physical presence of music in the space of the story can be [...] entirely consistent with the rules of an imagined filmworld' (Kassabian et al. 2017, p.114). Rather than banish non-source sound/music from the diegesis as a 'manipulative, secondary force interpreting the fiction for us', it can be thought to simply be a part of the depicted world, whether characters give an indication that they are aware of it or not (2008, p.8). Winters's reconceptualisation of the soundtrack, which moves away from psychoanalysis-influenced film music/sound theory, might be a more productive way of thinking about a cinema infused with the 'enunciative strategies' of West African orality.

Dima's dealings with musical aspects of the soundtrack are sometimes too non-specific or inaccurate to be helpful – 'multiple-instrument jazz band music' (p.71), for example, or 'neutral nondiegetic music' (p.72) – and have the effect of flattening his analysis. In discussing the opening sequence of *Badou Boy* (1970), 'a film about music and sound more than anything else' (p.99), Dima writes,

the shot is covered by African rhythms, mostly percussion. There is also a tune that sounds like an organ mixed with drums that keeps replaying from a synthesizer and eventually leads to a sharp noise outburst.

(p.100)

This is far too muddled and generalised a description of what we actually hear: a frenzied kit drum and West African percussion improvisation before electric guitar and bass lock into a Jimi Hendrix-style riff, with a regular offbeat distorted slide down the neck of a second electric guitar played through an amplifier with the spring reverb turned up high. There is no organ here (although a Hammond appears later in the film) or synth. The band brings the piece to an end after a drum/percussion fill with a unison chord on the first beat of the bar, the sound of the loud spring reverb tailing off into the next scene. It is a bold, swaggering opening move to the film, the music akin to the countercultural, psychedelic funk and rock music being produced in the US and elsewhere at the time – the presence of the percussion giving it a particular West African flavour. Perhaps Mambety is aligning himself and the cool young Senegalese men in the scene with a global youth movement, and in the process distinguishing this early film of his from the more staid films his fellow countryman and elder, Ousmane Sembène, 'the father of African film', was producing to great acclaim at the time. The sound of the spring reverb returns later in the film as a stand-alone sound effect – Dima hears this as a gunshot but in fact it is the sound of someone hitting a guitar amplifier like a Fender Twin Reverb and recording the sound of the noisy reverberating springs, a hard, explosive attack with a metallic, ringing decay. It is another kind of sonic mapping, centring Mambety's Dakar in contemporary global youth culture.

Dima's third and longest chapter 'Trauma and Zombie Narratives in *Hyènes*' oddly has very little to say about sound or music. Dima argues the film 'relies more assiduously on the narrative powers of the visual' than on a 'sustained treatment of aural narrative planes' (p.107). His brief, rather general descriptions of music in the film, composed by Mambety's brother Wasis Diop, fail to do justice to its richness or strange power. Dima tells us 'soft guitar music and harmonies are played on the soundtrack'

(p.123) as the film's elderly central characters revisit the site of their youthful romance – a somewhat reductive description of the flamenco-inflected, nylon-string guitar figures that mix with a deep electronic club bass drum, unsettling electronic textures as we see a shot of two children running away across the sand, and then a woman's voice improvising single note 'aahs' as the music develops a dub-like pulse. This strange music, almost a kind of Europop, does little to locate us geographically or culturally, but weaves a strange dreamlike sense of unreality over the scene. There's an extraordinarily beautiful sequence of music later in the film when the central character enters a church – the word 'heaven' spoken by another character triggers a long, sustained pipe organ pedal note before women's voices enter, singing a wordless, swooping sequence of chords together with the organ – both so heavy with vibrato they sound uncannily like a pedal steel guitar – before another static pedal note on the organ appears to suspend time. For Dima it 'is the type of music one associates with Catholic churches' (p.141) but the peculiar and otherworldly music sounds anything but to this reviewer. A 6/8 percussion pattern enters and the organ/voice chord sequence is repeated before exploding into an ecstatic, heavily phased, distorted electric guitar solo. Dima argues *Hyènes* (1992) is 'seldom exemplary in terms of sound use' (p.130) but the use of music in the film is highly unusual and there is room here for a more detailed consideration.

Music in the films of other directors, too, appears to elude Dima, who argues that Sembène 'rejects heavy doses of music on the soundtrack[s]' to his films (p.96). This is not the case with *Borom Sarret* (1963), *La Noire de ...* (1966), or *Mandabi* (1968), all of which are full of music – kora music, Senegalese songs, Western art music, with Sembène sometimes making use of the same kora recordings as an auteurish/griotic signature across films.

For this reader, the frequent allusions in the book's middle sections to psychoanalytic theory did little to aid interpretation of the richly resonant power of Mambety's films, or the workings of symbols and metaphor in them. A psychoanalytic consideration of fantasy, for example (Lacan and Žižek on *objet petit a*), seemed gratuitous in elucidating ways in which Gorée Island, just off Dakar and a centre of the slave trade, functions as a powerful symbol in Mambety's films.

Despite these gripes, as the first monograph to focus on listening to a body of cinematic work from the African continent, Dima's book makes an undeniably welcome contribution, adding useful new critical concepts. African cinema has on the whole received short shrift from screen sound and music studies, a state of affairs the book clearly demonstrates is unjust. By focusing on Mambety's often radical use of sound, Dima

argues forcefully that this rich and innovative body of work needs to play a far more central role in our understanding of the ways in which sound and image operate. This book points to numerous diverse avenues for further research.



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