

JEAN LUC HERBULOT Transcript: 13 June 2024

GABI ZIETSMAN [INTERVIEWER]: Today I'm gonna go a bit more into *Saloum* specifically, so just to start of, firstly - what was the inspiration for the film?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT [INTERVIEWEE]: I'm very tempted to say none, to be honest. Because the big challenge on *Saloum* for me as a director and I'm talking about scenes by scenes, right, was to try to not have references or try for once to get out of references. So, of course, it's part Western, part horror, and stuff like that - so people saw that already - but the idea was that nobody shot a western in Saloum. So my idea was I don't wanna be influenced by anybody, I just want my eyes and, you know, what I feel. In that time of my life, I was being a bit more spiritual, so there were a lot of subjects in Saloum that were quite personal to me. So this entire movie is probably the most personal one that I did in a lot of stuff.

So yeah, maybe the one in the main influence would be on the structure of the movie and that would be - because that's the movie that we kept talking about with my co-producer Pamela Diop - it was uh *From Dusk till Dawn* from Robert Rodriguez, in terms of structure, you know, where you start with a movie that is something else, then something happened that turns the movie into a different genre, you know. So yeah, that would be the only reference, you know, at least the conscious one, because of course you always have unconscious references. So that's yeah, that's the one if there's one.

GABI ZIETSMAN: And what was it that inspired the story idea? What triggered the idea for the story?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Umm, again, same thing. Ohm. There was some particular subject that we wanted to tackle with Pamela. First one was vengeance because we love vengeance movies, I love revenge movies, so that came first. The particular case of *Saloum*, for example, it's not a project that I got from - because sometimes as a writer or director you have a project for 10 years, 15 years that you wanna put on screen and you keep writing it, you keep coming at it, you keep throwing it, blah blah blah. *Saloum* came like a frustration - we want to do something that people don't allow us to do so we're gonna come with this. And it was the same thing on my first movie [*Dealer*], by the way. So the moment camee

when we discussed about, 'Oh, what do we wanna do? Oh, a revenge movie. Oh what do I want to do as a director? Oh I would love to have the chance to do a Western and some R-rated stuff like that'. All those *envie* [sic French] and all those things that I wanted to do became *Saloum*, you know, and it became *Saloum* in the very, very fast way. Like I wrote the script in a month or three weeks, something like that, which was my mistake, because then I had to pay that in post-production, which is always the case when you do that sh**. So now I learned [that] everybody can write a script very quickly, but then it's about making different versions of the script, it's about, yeah, correcting the mistakes and going deeper and deeper. And *Saloum* didn't have that chance, at least when I wrote it, and it got that chance when the actor came and when we went on the location, found the location and all that, it became way more profound with time going. But the idea of *Saloum*, it came very quickly and out of frustration, so it came again from that *envie* [sic French] of doing revenge, and from my *envie* [sic French] of talking about African heroes and tackled that with monsters, you know? So it's one of those things that comes in one night and just like, yeah, well, you know, why don't we do that? And *Saloum* - the very first idea, if I remember, and it was from Pamela, was she wanted to do something in the vein of [an] Agatha Christie type of movie, you know, like the whodunnit type of movie, but in a vacation camp, and I felt it was interesting, but not exciting for me. So that's when you know all the horror Western revenge stuff arrived, that thing. So it came quite fast and it was like a very, very organic process and it was not like, oh, we're going to think about it for 10 years or whatever.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK. Is there anything you would have liked to have done differently in the film?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: The script [light laugh]. I would now, if I was going back to that, I would have taken six months on the script because I paid a lot of price in postproduction about that because the movie was supposed to be two hours. Well, the first version of the edit was a two-hour-30 movie. Uh, now it's a one-hour and 20 movie. So we took out a lot, of course, and most of the time you take out a lot when you're doing a feature. But this one there was a lot of things that for me was important that went out and I was like, 'That's my fault,' because it should have been more organic in the script. So by thinking that I was

smart going fast on the script, it just made me do a lot of mistakes after, you know? So that's one of the main regrets.

And after that, no, honestly, from how we did that movie with the budget that we did and where it's going still today; for example, I just heard the news that the movie is gonna be on Blu-Ray and DVD in the US and there's a release and I just happened to know that two days ago. So this movie is never stopping, and that's what happens when, at least for me, when you're doing a movie and you put everything in that to make it truthful, [it] usually pays even if the budget is low, even if the quality of the movie is not where you want it to be. Because honestly, it's never the case, on my side - like I'm never happy. But this one I'm really, really happy where it's going and that people get the message and, by the way, at the end of the day just thinking about the fact that well, most of the people don't know what the Saloum is. Now this movie has went through the entire globe and now you have some people knowing about the Saloum without having ever gone there. You know? So that's the fruits of that and that's where I'm very happy. You know.

So yeah, probably just the script, you know, outside of that, I'm very happy with everything in that and where it's going, so it's a good proof that we should have done that, and talking with you.

GABI ZIETSMAN: And for you, which would you say is the most important core theme of the film, outside of vengeance?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Ah, that's a very interesting question. Well, obviously the message, the first message is revenge leads you nowhere, right, which is the core message of *Saloum* I guess. But there's so much deep in layers in that movie that I don't wanna give any themes, to be honest, because there's a lot. There's also a lot that are not there, like I said previously [with] the editing, so, I don't know, that's a good question. I think that's not my job to say that, because if I do that or if I think about it, then I'm killing the magic, you know?

Sometimes you do a movie and you put a lot of yourself in that - I'm gonna give you an example. Umm, the movie starts with that kid drowning, right? It was not supposed to be the beginning of the movie, the beginning of the movie was something else that has been shot. And basically the final editing was about putting everything on Chaka and staying with

him and staying with this guy because it's his point of view. By doing that, we brought that scene back in the beginning of the movie, and there was a journalist asking me basically not a question looking like yours, which was like, 'Yeah, so what's the main theme? And my question is also why the drowning at the beginning of the movie?' And I realised at that moment that I never realised that even when I was writing the movie, shooting the movie, editing the movie, that I drowned when I was a kid and I forgot. And it happened to me. Uh, so when I was discussing with the guy, I started having goosebumps because I was like, 'Sh**, I think it happened to me' and then I remembered, I was like, 'Ohh yeah, it happened to me, blah blah blah' and I never thought that I would bring that back in a movie without even noticing it.

So all that to say, as a director, our job is to work on giving something that's gonna trigger emotions in people. But what we put in the recipe and why we do it? Sometimes it's just part of the magic and you don't want to know why you're doing it this way, you know? So I don't know really what's the main thing of *Saloum*, to be honest. What I can tell you is that it's as honest as it can be, you know? So hopefully like every good movie, if it's a good movie, everybody takes his own, you know, stuff in that. Some people will say, 'Hey, I [was] raped when I was a kid and this movie talks to me because it's talking about that, right?' But when I wrote the movie, it was just a way for me to say, 'Hey, I want you to root for this guy, for Chaka, and I want you to deconstruct that thinking of, 'Ohh, we started with a very testosterone masculine hero, blah blah, blah, blah, blah'. And I'm gonna show you that this is not about that. And this is not about - what's the word in English for that? - this is not about virility. It's about sensitivity and how sensitivity is triggered and how it can turn your path into the revenge path if it makes sense, what I'm trying to say. So that was more interesting than just the monsters, the guns and whatever, blah, blah blah, which were there for fun, but also there as a bait for young people and people who loves action and whatever, to go into something deeper, to also go into some deeper African stuff that you're not gonna enjoy if you just see them this way in front of you, right? So *Saloum* is a big, big, big booby trap into leading people that don't know nothing about African countries, don't know nothing about Senegal, don't know nothing about black magic, don't know nothing about the *Saloum* itself, and just have a simple entry to go to complex stuff, you know? Yeah, I don't even remember if I answered your question again.

GABI ZIETSMAN: No, it's all good. So we've talked a bit about, you know, how *Saloum* as a genre is defined as a horror-Western hybrid. And both of these genres, horror and Western, have been shaped by the American film industry quite hectically in terms of how we define it - what are some of the ways that *Saloum* maybe moves towards a more African interpretation of those genres?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Uh, sorry. Can you repeat the question?

GABI ZIETSMAN: Sorry, so it's horror and Western are very American genres - how do you think so *Saloum* approaches it in from an African perspective or African interpretation of those genres?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: First of all, I told you that last time, but it was a surprise. Well, surprise, I knew I'm not stupid, but I never really tried to do the horror movie. Like for me it was more terror, to be honest, than horror, so when the first reaction from audience and press came back and they said to me, 'Oh, it's an horror/Western, I was like, 'Oh, I love it that you took it this way. For me, it's just a movie or it's just a story, and because, weirdly enough, I grew up with black magic with the stories with those kind of things. So for me it's normal. I'm not saying it's normal to have monsters outside your door, but it's normal to talk about those things. So I never really pictured myself doing horror movies, it was more about the trauma and terror for this character and what's happening in the *Saloum* for them.

Uh, now for the African perspective on that. Well, I think the easiest way to answer that would be the black magic, you know, and the use of what we know and what we grow up with as African, as black magic or black spirituality, or spirituality itself? I don't know, but that's maybe the new color of that in horror, maybe, I don't know, but I'm not a horror fan and horror practitioner, if it makes sense? Usually horror movies, they make me laugh to be honest, because I don't believe in God and the devil and all this bullsh**. But I believe in evil, which is something different. I believe in good and evil. I believe in spirituality, but then when you start talking to me and say, 'Ohh the devil with horns' and all that, I'm like, 'Yeah, whatever. So that that doesn't talk to me. So I can watch *The Exorcist* and have fun with it. But, you know, horror in general, and especially horror in Hollywood and horror in big movies are always based on that Judeo-Christian fact that there is evil and good, right. But

in a lot of different countries, in a lot of different cultures, it's different, you know? So my guess is going back to *Saloum* and going back to African stuff, we have our own codes and our own specificities. So of course, once the people will see them, they will consider that, 'Oh it's a new take on horror', but it's just a different view. The same way Japanese horror is Japanese horror, the same way Korean horror is Korean horror, you know, and the more we go to our own specificities as cultures, the more it's become original. Like take a movie that I don't really like, to be honest, but I love that it exists. It's summer or something, uhm from Ari Aster...

GABI ZIETSMAN: Oh *Midsomar*.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: *Midsomar*. People will say to you, 'Oh, it's a new take on horror, blah blah blah,' and I'm like, 'Yeah!' But because it's Ari Aster specifically, he took that folklore, that European folklore, North European folklore and played with it, you know, and most of the time Americans don't do [that]. So of course for you it's like a new horror and blah blah blah, but it's using the same old story of horror movies and terror movies and whatever and just brought something new on the screen that is not new for these people. So it's the same with *Saloum* and I hope it's gonna be the same in the future when they talk about horror, I hope that we can have that African horror box somewhere and say, 'Oh this is an African horror. Ohh, this is Korean horror. This is the blah blah,' because at the end of the day again, the more you know about other people's cultures, the more you know them and the more you can appreciate other humans. So that's why culture is culture, right? So that's why I was saying I'm very happy that *Saloum* is traveling that much and all this, because at the end of the day it's about people putting their feet in another people's culture, you know, through the prism of stories and emotions and all the things that we put on the paper and on the screen. So horror, as much as I'm not a big fan, is very useful because it tackles emotion and it goes through the very core of the point of view experience, which is... you play with emotion [through] trauma as then things that everybody share, you know.

So horror speaks and that's why horror movies usually, especially when they're good, they sell very well, it's because everybody understands them, because we all share the same type of emotions and that's why comedy, when it's very well done and it speaks to everybody, works so well. And same for action movie. It's always like the more you can find the very

specific thing that makes us all human as a director and as a writer, the more you find it, the more you win, because that's what we all share, you know, and that's the director language, the universal language. If you're a good director and you can speak it, you can speak to everybody in every country without just using a language, does it make sense?

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yeah. OK, so you know what's interesting about *Saloum* is one of the mercenaries Minuit who uses his bwiti spiritual practice to help protect his brother in arms, which is quite, you know, positive representation of that spiritual side of African spirituality. But were there any cultural sensitivities taken into account in the depiction of those practices and where there any challenges?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Yeah, you were supposed to be to see more than that. It was lost in the two-hour-30 stuff that I was talking about. Again, it was more cultural stuff for me because at the end of the day it's not very well-specified in the version now that is the movie. But the three of them are not just Senegalese, like one is Senegalese, one is Senegalese and Congolese, one is Senegalese and Gambian, blah blah, blah, blah blah. So they have a different cultures, and the bwiti and iboga stuff that they're talking about, it's something that is coming from Central Africa. It's very specific to Central Africa, it's specific to Gabon, specific to Cameroon, specific to Congo, you know. So Papa Minuit, or 'Midnight' in English, is supposed to come from this part and I won't go deeper into the bwiti stuff and all that - the people can do some research - but there's part of the bwiti that is, well, most of the part of bwiti is about healing people, or healing the soul, healing the body and blah, blah blah. So Minuit and that practice and the practice of iboga and bwiti and all that made sense for this guy, because like every battle unit, you're gonna have the chief, you know, the strategy guy, you're gonna have the weapon guy - and then you're gonna have the medic, right. And for me, he was a medic. Does it make sense?

Well, you not supposed to know that, but [when] we have the conversation last time when we're talking about uh, Rafa - in the big version of the script, he has a bullet in his head and Chaka as his own trauma, right? So the idea was also to show that Minuit is not just with them, because he's strong, he's also with them because he's treating them. There's a scene in the movie that not a lot of people understood, but I chose to keep it there, where you have Minuit doing this [moves hands] on Rafa's body, you know like he's doing something

and then he says to him like, 'We shouldn't stay here', you know, but we change that 'we shouldn't stay here' because what he was saying before was 'it's not going good', you know and it was not going good for him, for Rafa, because the bullet is moving and blah blah blah blah. So there was that entire thing of 'Oh, I'm gonna show you heroes at the beginning of the movie and then slowly by slowly I'm going to show you that those guys have real issues and they're not the heroes that you think they are'. And I'm slowly gonna kill that reality, that testosterone is stuff that you think is the [salt?] of action, but it's not the [salt?], you know, the [salt?] is the emotion and the [salt?] is the roots of their problem, you know.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK. So I just wanted to know if, when showing Minuit from practicing those those elements, those spiritual rituals, there were any moments where it was like, 'Oh, can we show this on the screen or not, or was it all fine?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Yeah, that's a very good question. That's why I'm very vague on the iboga stuff and all that because they are supposed to be secret ceremonies and all that that you're not supposed to talk about and you're not supposed to talk about what's happening inside. But that's why even in the movie I tried at least to stay quite subtle about that, because I also wanted the people who knows, you know, what I'm talking about and the people who doesn't know that maybe it's not talking to you and that's not important. You see what I mean?

So there is a good example for that. *Saloum* was supposed to be a bit more punky... and be a bit of a mix between Western culture and African mysticism... And there is a good example because most of the people, when they saw that scene, they were like laughing or probably because it was just humor, but when you have the the Hyenas [mercenaries] running in the desert and they run for a very long distance with the guy on their buddy and all that and they keep running and running and running. Just before that I had to cut it, but just before that Minuit - Midnight - was giving them uh ecstasy to run for a very long time. So it was a way for me to to show, yes, we're gonna be in African mysticism and in some stuff that you don't know. But at the same time, those guys are soldiers and they travelled a lot, so they don't give a sh** about being cultural and, you know, like it's a mix of both. For me, they were always a mix between mercenaries and pirates, you know, good guys. So I couldn't go too deep into some stuff because I'm not allowed to, but in the same time I want to

acknowledge the fact that a) it exists, and if you know it you can go deeper by learning what it is and blah blah blah blah blah. So it's more like Easter Eggs, putting it here and there to say, 'Hey, we're talking about that, but we're not talking about that'. So go check if you want to check.

The entire military story of the movie, it's true, like I didn't change anything when they're going in Guinea Bissau and everything that is written about the drug stuff and all that, it really happened like I didn't change anything. So, I really wanted the movie to be grounded in real stuff and everything that they're saying about the Saloum, the fact that you have people fishing and destroying the environment, and all that is true. All that is happening, you know, and I want it to have that real layer before [adding] the monster one.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So we're coming back to the vengeance aspect and you know the the big line in the film that says, 'we say that revenge is like a river whose bottom is only reached when you drown'. Umm, where did this phrase come from?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: I made it up. I completely made it up. I can remember, I think it came to me - because in post-production [is] when I realised that, after writing the script, which is why when you asked me [about] regret I was like I should have spent more time on the script. I realised when we added that final form of the movie, which is the beginning, is the ending, which is what I wanted at the end, I wanted it to be like a a circle. I was like, I want that to make sense. It need to make sense. It was making sense when we were seeing the movie, but there was no quote about why it made sense if what I'm saying is making sense. So, yeah, it just came like that. You know, it came by being haunted by the movie also because at that moment, you know, as a director, when you finally see the movie with the music and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah and the special effects nearly finished, you're like, 'What did I do?' You know? And it was this kind of moment of what did I do without realising that the movie could be great or not or whatever. It was just like, 'What did I do? OK, I have that object now'. I don't know if it's good, but it needs to make sense and for me it makes sense. So I was asking all the people in the team around does it make sense for you? Does it make sense for you? And for all of them it made different sense. So I said to myself, 'OK, I wanted to make one sense at least that we can all be tied up with, which is we're talking about revenge anyway'. So in revenge, what's our African philosophy about

revenge and all that? So it was a mix between what I heard when I was younger and I just made it up, you know, and the fact that visually, because again, I didn't realize that visually, it's all about that river, you know? And it became like - it's also our job, but maybe my vision as my job as a director is - sometimes it's good when you make a movie to start even without images, but start with, in French we say 'lexical language'. I don't know if it makes sense for you guys in English, but you find stamps, visual stamps, you know, visual identity stuff, small stuff. So if I say *Saloum* for me, I see the river, you know, I see water, I see a water element. If I say *Transformers*, I see the metal stuff, you know, for example. So it's good sometimes to have those items in your head, those visual stamps that you're gonna use in a macro way. And when I realized that *Saloum* was all about that water, when for me when I did it, it was all about the sand, you know? I was like, 'Ah, OK, I understand'. The movie is more about that river and the fact that whatever you're gonna do, whatever current you're gonna fight against, you're gonna come back to the very truth of evil. If people do evil to you and you do evil back, that's just staying evil. That's it. You know, that's simple as it is, and that's what the movie made me feel when I watched it. So this came out of nowhere when I was watching the movie by myself and being the first viewer of it, you know.

But then that was just for this part. So the beginning and the ending, what she says, that the entire order [of the] voiceover was already written. So this came as a supplement, yeah.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So, you know, one's sense also plays a key role in *Saloum* in the way that the Hyenas communicate with each other through sign language as well as with the deaf women and then also to how the spirits kill their victims. And also in horror usually, even though you didn't actually set out to make a horror, but horrors are also a lot about the audience's senses and how it heightens their fear. And I wanted to know was that choice influenced by the terror, like hyping up that terror, or more by the story?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Again, that's a very good question. Again, when I was talking about this items, this visual *tampons* [sic French] and all that and small images - this is also something else which is before going for a terror movie with monsters, I have to ask myself what has been done and what hasn't been done. And I found it funny at the moment when I was writing *Saloum* that there was, uh, so there was that movie called *Bird Box* on Netflix. It

was all about, I think, you don't see them [monsters], something like that. Uh, maybe I don't remember exactly, but I think it was that. And then there was *A Quiet Place* and [it] was don't make noise, you know. So for me was it was like, 'Oh, so it's the three monkeys right? So what is the one missing? Don't hear, right? So I just came with that. So, as simple as it is, it came from that, but it came from that before writing the script. So then when I was writing the script, I had to ask myself, 'OK, who's gonna be the superhero in that?' Because you always have a superhero in those kind of movies, right? Like if you can see and there is that person that can see without seeing, you know, or in *A Quiet Place* it's gonna be the mute one, blah blah, right. And of course here [in *Saloum*], well, who can have the superpower if you shouldn't hear, it'll be the person that can't hear, you know? And I found it interesting - I think we had the discussion last time - that it would be the woman and it would be a woman that can't talk. So well, the first time you see her, you're like, 'She's useless. She has no power. She's, if you wanna consider, handicapped or whatever'. But no, she's the real force of this movie because at the end of the day, she's invincible, because those spirits can't attack her when you think about it. So all those elements and the characters and all that came from that first configuration.

And what I called the first configuration, again, it's, 'OK what are my first stamps? My picture stamps. What are the things that I wanna do that are not done everywhere, right?' And always, but that's me, as a director, I always have the same question, which is, 'OK what has been done and what can we do? We can do this and this and that. But what are we stopping ourselves in not doing?' If it makes sense, you know. David Fincher, the director, has a very good catch phrase. But I won't remember exactly the phrase, but basically he was saying like, 'Stop thinking about everything that you can do, because you can do everything today, right in cinema, and start by saying, OK, what shouldn't I do, you know? And from that, usually you slowly, slowly, if you respect that and you're very strict with that and yourself and your work and your writing and your directing, usually come with something unique, you know?

So that's the way I always attack a project and especially because sometimes I also receive scripts - I don't just write. The first 10 minutes, I know [if] I'm gonna do this thing or not, you know, just in the dialogues or the scenery or how they present the scenery and whatever.

Yeah, you already saw it. Or I want this movie, but please, can we change that or this or that, we saw that in multiple movies and blah blah. So not saying that *Saloum* so much original and all that, but at least I'm trying as much as I can to bring something on screen that you never saw, you know? So that's the philosophy.

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yeah. OK, cool. And what was the inspiration for the visual creation of the spirits? What was the idea?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: So that's a funny one: because, so first of all, spirits were things that I wanted to play with for a long time in the form that they are, because I'm an art director. So that came from a long time of me working on monsters and trying to train different stuff, and it also came as an accident, because on *Saloum*, basically we didn't have money, we did that movie for less than USD 100,000. I didn't have money to do monsters, special effects and all that, so I didn't want it special effects at the beginning and it was all about the costumes of those monsters, and because I'm coming from central Africa and even in West Africa, you have those guys in costumes in villages and all that that sometimes can be very scary, we all saw those kind of movies or videos where you see them dancing and they're like weird costumes and you're like, 'Whoa!' And most of the time, it was always the same thing in my friends and all that they were like, 'Whoa, it could be great in a movie and horror movie', and I kept that in my head for years. And there was like, that's the time for me to use that.

So at the very beginning, it was all about the costumes themselves, and it was supposed to be the guy from the village are putting [on] costumes, and they're coming to kill you and they are possessed by spirits - that was the first thing. Then, the reality of the shooting happens like always, and the first day I saw the costumes and that was the first day we were supposed to shoot. So the first day I saw the costumes, I knew that we're fu****, because the costume were awful. And I was like, 'I can't change them, don't have the money to change them, we don't have the people with the talent to change them', so I was like, 'You know what? Post-production! Whoopie'. But I knew when I said post-production, I knew that at least I could put what I was talking about before, which is that thing that I had in my head for a long time - OK, I'm gonna use that in this movie. So it came as an accident and then usually in every movie when accident happens and you keep it in the narrative, then

you push it, you push it, you push it until it becomes organic, you know. So that's the thing about those monsters - [they] became organic. Because once I have the monster, then I said to myself, 'OK, but if I have the monster, then I can also have the swarm, you know, the swarm came after the monsters. It was not in the movie at the beginning, you know.

So for example, when you have one shot in the movie where we are up upon the camp and you have that aerial shot of the camp - it was not made for the monster or the spirits, it was made just as an exterior shot, right? And once I had the monster I was like, 'I need more shots'. And then we use that shot and I added the monster stuff, so it became organic, but it was not the case at the beginning of the movie, it was just supposed to be guys in costumes, right. And I'm very happy that it became what it became and thank[ful] for this accident. Same thing with classical movies like *Jaws* and whatever. They're like, 'Hey, we were supposed to show the the fu***** shark, and then it was not working, so we decided to not show it'. And then it was better. So that's this kind of thing. Umm, so I would love to answer that I thought about it from the beginning, but it it came from an accident.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK. I mean that's how a lot of movies happen. So some of the characters in *Saloum* talk about destructive post-colonialism - what what does that mean to you?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Ohh, it means books and books and books that we won't have time to talk about and that we won't have time to write [laughs]. The movie [*Saloum*] is happening in 2003/2004. I won't say it's a different Africa that we have today, but this question were not on front of the screens and papers like it is today. But I wanted, since they are part of a lot of different conflicts and wars and all that, I wanted the the Hyenas to be very, very smart and intelligent about who they are working with, why. Because when you're mercenary, you're not supposed to have a conscience, right? But I wanted these guys to have a conscience, and especially if I wanted those guys to be African heroes, I needed them to be, in a way, [role]models. When I say 'model' is like cultural model, like people that you want to follow or you want listen to. So that's why even Rafa, who is supposed to be the dumbest of them all, I wanted him to be: yeah he can be dumb, he can give the finger, he can do stupid stuff, but when it's about political stuff, he's there and he knows exactly what he's talking about. So I wanted the Hyenas to have, again, that action hero stuff that makes them look tough and whatever. But also have the brains, sufficient matter in their brain to

say, 'We go in conflict because we chose it, and we choose to do different types of operations because we choose to do it'.

Because there's a narrative beforehand [the film's story] and that's why at the moment in the movie I didn't want it to go too much into Hyenas because the movie was not about them. It was about that precise moment of Chaka's [life] and the entire movie is about the end of the Hyenas, not the beginning, you know. So the entire concept of *Saloum*, again, going into what I said to you before, which was trying to not do what has been done, I found it interesting to start a movie, or to start a subject, [with] its third act. This is the third act of the Hyenas, because after that they're dead, right? So the easiest part would have been to, 'Oh, I'm gonna take the Hyenas and show you how they get formed, how they know each other, who they are and what they're going through. That would be a first act or a second act. And I was like, 'No, I'm gonna show the end of these guys'. But to show the end since you don't know these guys, I still have to do some, you know, work to show you who they are and what their principles and all that, which is why there's a moment in the movie when Chaka is going out with the girl and they're talking in sign language and she says, 'I admire you guys, blah'. And he's like, 'We're not heroes' and the same time she's confronting them because of what we saw at the beginning of the movie with all the dead people and all that. And she's like, 'What about all those dead people and all that?' And Chaka just says to her, 'They were already dead, like we don't kill civilians, that's not our [style]'. And when he says that you're supposed to have a glimpse of who these guys are in terms of mercenaries, you know, so the job was to try to be subtle with this kind of thing, because of course, we saw a lot of different movies with mercenaries in Africa and all that. But that was the first time, at least for me, that I was seeing African mercenaries, African *black* [interviewee emphasis] mercenaries. Usually when you talk about African mercenaries, it's South African guys or guys from ancient Rhodesia or stuff like that. And here it was about, 'OK. What if?' Because I saw them.

Because yeah, I should have said that to you at the beginning of our conversation, but when I grew up, I lived [through] the civil war in Congo, I survived the Civil war in Congo for two years when I was 15 to 17. So I saw violence, I saw blood, I saw people getting killed, I saw a lot of different stuff. The trauma came way later in my life because when you're a teenager,

basically everything is a movie or is a game. So for me it was not that traumatic until it became more traumatic later in my life when I realized that, 'Ohh sh**, I lived some stuff, I got some guns pointing at my head' and stuff like that, and it was like, 'Oh, I have some stuff to tell', you know? But I never wanted to tell that and show that as a victim or whatever. I wanted to show that, yeah, there are conflicts in Africa, but you know what? Sometimes in conflicts that's when you see the people living at their best because they never know when they're gonna die, you know? And that's Raffa, for example. And I wanted to convey that, going back to what you asked and the Hyenas, I wanted to convey that through the Hyenas, when we talk about Africa and post-colonial Africa, I didn't want them to be victims. I didn't want them to talk about being victims. I wanted them to be at the front center of the screen and say what they want to do, why they're doing it and be the leader of what they're doing and be the leader of their own demise, you know? That was important and I didn't want it any [big] colonial discourse about 'Oh, we've been colonised, we've been this and that' - this is not a movie about victimisation. This is a movie about guys who were supposed to assume [control over] the sh** that they're doing, you know? But, I had to be realistic and also talk about it a bit. So that's why it came [up] in the dinner, when you have the rapper, seeing the Hyenas talking high about a lot of stuff and having the white guy being their boss. And he's like, 'Yeah, you still talking, but you still carrying the fu***** luggage of your boss', right? And they're like, 'Well', and that's Raffa talking, when he's giving that phrase from Sankara, it's basically saying, 'Stop seeing the evil everywhere outside and start asking yourself the question about how I can make all of this better', you know? That's what Sankara was talking about at that moment. He was like, 'Yeah, we have enemies, but at the end of the day, if we don't start taking responsibilities from inside, there's no point', you know, and that's the point of what Raffa is saying at that moment, which is 'Hey, this is not the place in this movie to talk about that. But if you want, I'm gonna show you that I know what I'm talking about'. So there was a lot of little moments like that in *Saloum* that I tried to put to say, 'Hey, I know it exists. I know it's here and I'm going to show you that it's here, but that's not the subject of the movie, but it exists, you know? So environmental questions in the Saloum, certain type of people in the Saloum, certain type of African people, call them African, but come into the Saloum for vacation, blah blah, blah, blah blah blah. You know, like there was a lot of different colours in that and a lot that we cut [out] also because it was too much.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So what is your relationship with your culture's mythology and folklore.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: You mean the Congolese one?

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yes.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Well, The funny thing is that, uh, Congo is historically supposed to be part of the Congo realm, right, which is a lot of different countries together. So I share a lot of similar stuff with other countries, so it was not difficult to say to myself, I'm gonna put that on the table and it's gonna speak to a lot of people. Uh, I can say Mami Wata, for example, it's like a myth that has been there in a lot of different African countries and we all share that and those kind of things. So I tried to [focus] on those kind of things which are more African culture than just Congolese culture. Same thing for Senegal, because I could have just said, 'Hey, you know what, we're in Senegal, we just gonna talk about the Senegalese folklore.' I'm never really interested in folklore. I'm interested in, in this movie I'm talking about, in the global African culture and the global spirituality. And then I can show you some doors to enter: the Papa Minuit or Midnight door is iboga and the Central African black magic. So the assistant of the bad guy, the bald guy that you see in the movie - his entry is very Senegalese in terms of his black magic or his magic. So the idea was to free myself from just a Congolese thing, just my folklore, and make something that looks more, uh, African, the same way you wanna talk about something happening in Texas, but you're just gonna make it look like it's in America, you know, instead of something very specific.

So that was the challenge. It's to be specific, without being exclusive or exclude other stuff if it makes sense. It's a very good question. That was a struggle and I think you also have to acknowledge the fact that some people won't get it and that's OK. And if they want to get it then they just [have to] go research, like the iboga stuff, for example. Or for example, when I was saying to you most of the things that you're gonna see in this movie or that you saw in this movie are based on real stuff, the monster themselves are not based on real stuff, but the legend around it - it's real, like I didn't write it, you can find it on the Internet, the Gana Sira Bana curse and the curse of this king with these people - it exist, it's there. And even some people from the Saloum they don't know that story, but it exists. It's there, everybody forgot about it.

So it was all about making a melting pot that makes sense for Africans and in the same time that it respectful for the Saloum, because - I didn't go in details with that - but when you arrive in the Saloum, the Saloum is a witch doctor region. So you don't enter the Saloum and you just come and put your camera down. You're gonna have some big problems, physically and spiritually. So the big job for us, that you're not gonna see in the movie and that is not part of the marketing and all that, was to go in the Saloum spend some days there talking with the witch doctors, showed them the project, have all the *bénédiction* [sic French] to do what we're gonna do because that was also heavy, in terms of what we were talking about. So there was a big preparation around all that to talk about the subject, and in the same time, my job was to not go too much into the stuff that I'm not supposed to talk about, and just stay on the surface, you know? Which is why I guess most of the bad reviews that I have from *Saloum* where most of the people [were] saying to me, 'Oh, we love the action and blah blah blah. But sometimes the story or some specifications are weird and not explained or I don't understand,' and I was like 'Well, some of them are mistakes and that's my fault coming from the script, and some of them are like, I don't want to tell you, you know'.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK. Thanks. that's good to know. Is culture political and can it be political in the horror genre? Or is it rather exploitative?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Every time that you take a camera and choose to film something, it's political. That's the only thing that I can say when people say to me, 'I did this movie, but I'm not a political person, blah blah blah'. Well, my friend, every time that you turn on the camera and you choose to put a narrative on the screen, you are serving a politic, may you know it or not, that's your problem, but making a movie, it's political. If you make a comedy that, yes, it's a comedy, whatever, but you're gonna put some people in front of it. You're gonna put some characters in front of it. They're gonna say stuff and blah, blah, blah and whatever they're going to say, this is a part of the population that you're showing and if you're showing a part of the population, then you're talking about the population, then you're making politics, because you're showing something, you know? If you don't want to do politics - I was about to say, go to documentaries, but even documentaries, you can see some documentaries where the guy is saying nothing he's just [using] his camera, but what's happening in front of you, the more you keep filming, the more it's becoming political. So

every time that you choose to create it's political and some people want to assume it, some don't. But that's their problem, you know? So yes, to answer your question, I didn't want anything to feel political because that's not a political movie. But of course it's political, you know - the truth of subject, the truth of characters and what they're doing. So yes, it's political.

Exploitative? Uhm, it can be. I'm not talking about *Saloum* because that was not my take, because it can be a take, right? Because making a movie - a movie can be a weapon. About spirituality, black magic and all this stuff. If you're trying to be exploitative, you're gonna have some big problems. So I'm not doing it. I don't wanna do it in the case of *Saloum*, but yes, there's a lot of movies in Africa and African movies that are exploitative and sometimes even without knowing it, you know. So, but that's my interpretation also, you know? So yeah, I'm agreeing with you, it can be. *Saloum* is not because *Saloum* is very truthful and it's coming from a lot of different spaces in my life and things that I lived and same for the actors who played them. But yeah, it's political. Of course it's political.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK. Do you think horror can offer a certain catharsis for African issues?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Yeah, yeah, of course. Of course, This is why, not just horror, yes horror always works on catharsis - because at the end of the day, like we were saying before, it's about emotions. A horror is one of the easiest *vector* [sic French] to bring emotions. Because it plays with the proximity with the the audience, and it plays with the point of view. So yes, horror is that. Now for African people? Of course, which is why I regret that we don't have enough horror movies and genre movies because genre movies are done for that. And this is why genre movies are so essential with especially for young people, because it gives you a sense of what I feel is normal, what I feel is not normal, stuff like that. Being afraid is OK, being not afraid about this thing is OK also blah blah blah blah. So, horror movies, genre movies - what they call genre movies, because for me, every movie is a genre movie - but genre movies in general are made for that. They're direct access to your emotions versus when you're watching a Darren Aronofsky movie, it's not really a direct access yet, right? You have to wait. Understand. Analyse. When you're watching *2001*, you have to analyse, you have to understand the message and then understand why you were feeling this, blah blah, blah, blah blah. And horror movies are not, at least at the very basis

for me, is not supposed to work this way, it's supposed to be a very direct link between what the author has to say, what the story has to say, and the emotions, which is the deep language that we're sharing with the audience, as directors and as a storyteller. So I think horror in Africa is very important, even more than other countries. And genre movies in general also and I will finish [with] it's essential. And it's also helping to build heroes, which is why *Saloum* exists.

For me, *Saloum* was a way to say to the 7-year-old version of me - you wanted your heroes, here they are. And it was also a way to talk to my adult self which was 'Oh, you like soldiers? Well, some soldiers have some bad stories. Let's go deeper in that.' you see what I mean? So the kid will be very happy with the first 10 minutes of *Saloum* and the adult will be fed for the entire movie, and that's what I crave in genre movies.

The first genre movie that I watched that struck me and stayed [with me] my entire life was *Aliens*, for example. When you think about *Aliens*, you can see the terror movie, the action, whatever blah blah blah. But I can also see the relationship between a mother and a kid and a mother who just lost her kid. And we are learning maternity through fighting another mother, which is the alien mother. There's a lot in *Aliens*. There's a lot in the first *Alien* too that not just what you're seeing on the screen, and that's what fascinates me about horror movies. It's how you bring a lot of messages through simple emotions, which is usually the contrary for me in other movies, not that I don't like other movies, but it's not a way of doing it in a very long process for the audience, you know.

So yes, we need it and we need it in Africa, we need horror, we need it for catharsis, because we need catharsis, definitely, because that's what every traumatised civilisation need, because we're dealing with a traumatized civilization now. So, it's as important to deal with those traumas, but in the same time, as you deal with your trauma, you also have to create your own hero. And when I say hero, it's not just 'Ohh, he's a hero, he's a badass' or whatever. A hero is a better version of what we can be, you know, and we don't have that in our movies. Like most of African movies are always about *miserabilism* [sic] and problems - most of them, because it's changing now, right? But most of them has been that and I can't bear that, you know. So that's why *Saloum* and that's why most of the movies, at least that I'm trying to do, the African ones are working this way, which is let's work on our traumas,

but in a fun way, you know. And with emotions and not just like intellectual stuff that are gonna go in Cannes.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So another key trope in horror films is the idea of the Other, you know, and who or what is framed as the Other do in your film? And is it implicit or explicit?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: It's interesting question. I think it's both - the Other in *Saloum* can be Chake and Awa, you know, Chaka being the face of the heroism and Awa being the fan of those guys. Uh, there's a discussion between the two of them, even if she can't talk, that's why he goes to her level and try to understand what she wants. So there's that relationship with the Other.

But *Saloum* is all about that, at the end of the day, it's a relationship between those three guys who were supposed to be brothers and a group, and they realised that their chief or leader is hiding something that's gonna kill them. So there's the discussion between them inside the group. There's the discussion with the drug dealer who's supposed to be the one that is leading the mission, but we'll start to realize that, oh, the mission is not the mission. There's the relationship between Chaka and his aggressor, which is a very interesting one. When you watch back the movie and you see how they all play that - Chaka knows him, the bad guy doesn't know him, but there's a weird son-and-dad relationship to that. And in the same time it looks like Chaka's enjoying it when he has it with him, but in the same time he knows that he cannot enjoy it because this guy is the aggressor. And I wanted the bad guy to be as welcoming, as fake that he can be to show the audience that evil will never have to face that we think it has, but in the same time it's also about the more welcome he is, sometimes the weirder. And especially [because] that was a basically a joke in Senegal, because Senegal is all about, 'We welcome you' - it's the *teraanga* [sic Wolof] stuff - and I found that, for me personally, funny to go in that camp, and this guy is like, 'Hey, welcome guys, blah blah, this is the *teraanga* [sic Wolof]. This is a Senegal' and all that, and if you go deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper, it's all the problems of everything that Africa has been dealing with - rape, wars, lies and deceptions and traitors. So this entire movie is a discussion between characters, you know, and when they can't discuss it becomes a monster movie.

So it's a very interesting question that you asked me. I never thought about that, but yeah. So it's a dialogue, if it answers your question.

GABI ZIETSMAN: A little bit of, but also when I talk about the Other, you know, in a lot of horror films, there's always the monster, the Other, the thing that's outside of the norm, the normal and what in your film do you think is that Other that is not normal in the universe that the film is set in?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Not sure I understand the question but I understand where you're going with it. If I focus on the monster - in the case of the story of *Saloum*, the monsters and the main monster in the movie is there to suck back Chaka, right? So he's there to bring him back and to make him a new bad guy, like Chaka is supposed to replace the bad guy. That's the goal of this entity who feeds on - like in spirituality, when you study that and you start to realise that what we call demons are entities that basically suck and nourish themselves on all our fear and bad stuff and all those things. The entity in *Saloum* and the Other in *Saloum*, it's about that, Now, the dialogue between Chaka and this thing, of course symbolically, it's about Chaka overcoming his past right, and what he doesn't do and what he fails to do is by killing this guy. Because if you never killed him, none of that would have happened. They would have [taken] their plane, with the money and all this, but he chose that way.

So by choosing that way, he chose to feed himself, or he chose to feed the wolf inside of him, he chose to feed the wolf of revenge and that stuff, which is why that spirit got awakened because he killed the guardian and now this entity needs a new guardian. And who else is better than the one that is the one in the room that is pissed off and afraid and you know, all those things. So this is, profoundly, this is what I was writing, what I was feeling about the relationship that they have, you know. Now the way it came out on the screen and what the viewer thinks about it, I don't know and I'm not in control. So on that I can tell you, but at the very basis there was of course David against Goliath, which is this guy against the big entity that is feeding on himself and if he wants to overcome and become an adult, then become a better person - well, don't confront that entity and don't feed it, you know? But he doesn't understand that. And then the movie is the movie. So that's how I interpreted that. Yeah, again, I don't know if I answer the question.

GABI ZIETSMAN: That answered it. And I think for my last question - is there a positive way and a negative way to incorporate African mythology into a film?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: I think every way is a good way because we don't see it anyway. Everything that we can show about Africa outside of what has been shown for the last 30 years is a great thing - outside of that narrative of miserabilism. uh. You know, *Saloum* is a bit of a complex subject on that, because I can also tell you if I don't like the movie and I'm going against what I just said - I can watch the movie and say to you, 'Oh again, another movie about soldiers and people getting raped', right? Like those child soldiers and all that. But that entrance fitted the character that I wanted to talk about. It didn't fit the narrative about Africa. So that's the difference, at least when I did that. And I wanted to show that doing something different, even with some things that we already know about Africa, because we have to talk to other people and show things that they think they know. So conflicts and all that, for example, when you start the movie, because that's the image that people have about Africa, it's a continent where you just have conflicts and people are suffering and all that. I started with that to put a reality on the screen, but then my idea was never to go to this clichés of African movie. So again, going back to what you just said, every movie that can talk about it is good. You know, there's no positive or negative, and the positive and the negative is in the people that is telling you the story.

The spirituality is there. Same thing with spirituality, for example, same thing with magic, you know. Like people will say, 'Oh, black magic and good magic' - there's bad thing in good magic, there's good thing in black magic. You know, who are we to judge? But we can judge the consequences, you know, we can judge the result and the execution. So at the end of the day, no subject is taboo and we're missing a lot of subjects in Africa. So the more we can talk about different stuff, even outside horror, it's the best, you know? I can talk to you about - when was the last time that we saw a movie about black love in Africa? And is there a couple, an African couple that comes in your head and says, 'Hey, I love these movies so much because this couple is so iconic'. We don't have none. There is no *Pretty Woman* in Africa and don't tell me that we can't do it. Alright? Uh, we don't have a heist movie in Africa. We don't have our *Ocean 11*. We don't have our horror movies. And we don't have our action movie. There is nothing outside of this miserabilism or this movie about terrorism

or this movie about corrupt cops. It's always about the negative aspect of Africa, and it's never about something that we can make an icon of and be proud of it, you know?

So for example, I did a TV series called *Sakho & Mangane* in Senegal. The first time that I arrived on the TV series, the narrative was 'Oh because we are in Africa, it's gonna be fun to see them struggling with - they don't have cars, they don't have this and this is not working' - and I was like, are you fu***** serious? It's the 21st century when people in Africa are watching Netflix and all that, you really think that your TV series [is] coming [in] and being funny because they don't have cars? That's gonna be the original stuff, and especially for Africans, because you want an African audience. I'm like, 'You're out of your time, you know, that was 40 years ago. And it's not mean to say that to the people that I was working with, I was just like, 'You don't understand that narrative and you should understand that very quickly if you want to talk to that to that market', because at that moment I was my 30s and you guys wanna talk to guys in their 20s, you know? And this is the population that is becoming younger and younger, as we all know, in Africa. So who are you talking to when you're doing this stuff, you know?

So that's coming back to that question of as long as you want the people, the audience to get - I don't like the word educated - but elevated in what they're watching, the same way you're doing [unknown word] and you want people, when they hit up your play, to have emotions and not just say, 'Oh, it's good', you know? That's the same thing. You want the people to grow up from that experience and you want the same people to make you grow up from what they took from that experience, you know. The same way when I'm talking to you as a director, you are asking me questions and sometimes I'm like, 'Oh, sh**, I didn't think about that, that's interesting'. So you're making me growing, but you're making me growing because I put something in that movie that also makes you think, right?

So for me as a director and I will finish on that, we put so much effort in the work and so much years and so, so much everything, that if it's to make a movie that doesn't serve something that is elevating myself, I don't do it. No way I'm gonna do it, you know, and *Saloum*, and I wish movies in Africa, if we can have that, if we can have movies that are there to elevate and to magnify. Because it's a weapon. It's political, whatever people think about movies, it's political and it's a weapon because it goes into people's heads and it gives

images. You insert images in people's mind, so I love that people now can have that image of that kid on the water having chains on one side and the gun on the other side, meaning 'I'm a slave, but I'm gonna fight to not be a slave'. And in that case of *Saloum*, slave of his past and traumas and revenge, right, and he chose to deal with it with that gun. That was the instrument of his pain, by the way.

So, interestingly enough, that image that, again, I never thought about it when I was shooting it, I was like, 'That's gonna be beautiful to have this kid with the chain and the gun and he's walking and he's lost'. And then I thought about it and I was, 'Shi**', this is exactly the path of Chaka, which is what you're holding in your hands are always gonna be cycle of your life, which is you always gonna be a slave to your pain. And you always gonna deal with that pain with that gun, and that gun is the instrument of your pain - a cycle. And when I first saw that image as a poster for the movie, I was like, 'Whoa, oh that's deep', but I never, never thought about it as a director myself, you know? I just wanted people to feel something, so when you go this way, you're always gonna have magic, you know? And we're magic seekers as directors. Or at least, you know, writers, storytelling.

GABI ZIETSMAN: That's really cool. And I think that's everything.