

**JEAN LUC HERBULOT Transcript: 6 June 2024**

GABI ZIETSMAN [INTERVIEWER]: If you could tell me a bit about your background in film and your career and why you want to make films.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT [INTERVIEWEE]: Ohh I was born in Congo and I grew up writing quite early in my life - I think about six or seven when I started - because the idea or *envie* [French sic] was to create worlds. I was always fascinated for about as long as I can remember, uh, to create worlds. That was my thing. So I went through a lot of different media or mediums - writing, drawing programming video games, then having a video music group doing music for a long moment which I felt was my thing at the beginning. And then music videos sometimes in my life because I was surrounded by a lot of musical artists and then from music videos, slowly I understood that, oh, you know what I can direct. Because I never did any film school, I didn't want to do it because I didn't want my vision to be - how can I can say that - manufactured by a school or a vision of somebody else.

So I always tend to do the stuff by myself, so I created my own production company when I was like 22 or 23 and then slowly by slowly it led me to film and it led me to realise that that need of building stories was better served in movies, you know. And I grew up also being a fan of movies, so it's not coming from nowhere. And then, you know, from a music video to a short movie to Hollywood - it was a weird journey because I never asked for anything. I was sort of just making my own stuff, and one of my short movies just arrived in Los Angeles and was seen by agents, managers, whatever, blah blah and I still today I don't know how. But it happened and it opened the door in the US and when that door in the US opened, I went there, struggled for three years trying to make a movie, understood the system, understood how Hollywood was working and then I decided to come back to France with a feeling of rage and having wasted my time in Los Angeles, that's what I felt at that time. I decided to do my first feature by myself with a producer that was also the actor that was also a dealer, or ex-dealer, and the movie is called *Dealer* (2014) [laughing] and that was about his life. So that was my first feature and from that first feature came - yeah, my director's life opened at that moment.

So the doors opened to me and - well not open to me, you have to burst them a bit. But it happened at that moment that I did a lot of TV for a moment, because I'm also somebody that loves to learn. So even if I'm uh, 80% film-based, I also love to explore different media in you know, in the cinema, or audio-visual art. So I did commercial films, shorts, uh TV. The only thing that I didn't do yet and I am eager to do, is documentaries. But yeah, I explored everything and after all these years of TV, I was called to Morocco to do TV, then I was called to Senegal by Canal Plus, to do a TV series, and that's when my thirst for Africa came back as a director and a storyteller. Because, again, I'm born in Africa, but I never or I guess at that moment I never said to myself, 'Ohh, you're ready to build an industry, you know, an industry back,' because of course there was cinema in Africa. My goal was always to come back in Africa. And then that travel and that project in Senegal was a good opportunity for me to come back and at the same time to play with better tools, other people's tools, because it was not my story at the beginning. Umm, so it was an interesting exercise. And then when I came back to do - when I finished that TV series, I met my co-producer - Pamela Diop - with who I created the LACME Studios company. And that's when we decided to do *Saloum*, the one that you wanna talk about.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So would you want to make another horror? Why or why not?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: So why I wanted to make an horror. So first of all, that's a very funny thing, because everybody sees *Saloum* as a horror movie. I never wanted to do a horror movie because I'm not a big horror movie [fan], to be honest with you.

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yeah?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Not that I don't have a few that I *love*, because there are a few - I'm a big fan of *The Thing* from John Carpenter, I'm a big *Aliens* fan, the *Alien* franchise. The trailer just came out yesterday [of the latest one]. I'm very happy.

But *Saloum* for me was more about - the first thing that I wanted to do with *Saloum* was a commentary about heroism in Africa. So it sounds very, uh intellectual to say it this way, but that was my main *envie* [sic French] in that moment. I was like, how can I create heroes? Because I'm always - every time that I'm writing a movie, that I'm in a project, there's something that saves me all the time when you are struggling with all that sh\*\* of making a

movie, it's the connection between me and my 7-year-old version. I still remember when I was seven and eight, and when I wanted to watch certain kind of movies and certain kinds of heroes that I didn't have when I grew up in Africa, because basically my heroes were American, Asian - not French [chuckle]. And growing up I made a promise to myself that maybe in music, maybe in video games, maybe in whatever I'm going to do, I'm always gonna pay tribute to that *envie* [sic French] that I have of having a hero, you know? So *Saloum* was a for me, was a return to that, to that statement, a return to that promises that I made to myself. And I wanted to create heroes, but at the same time, I didn't want it to come just with a B-movie and I wanted to explore some deeper themes. And since I'm not a big fan of horror movie, my job was to - yes, I have some horror elements in that - but I was more interested in terror, which is the difference, for example, between *Alien* one and *Aliens* from James Cameron right? You have a horror movie and you have terror movie using horror elements. And *Saloum*, for me was more that uh. And yeah, I think I don't remember your question. I don't even know if I answered, but uhm yeah.

GABI ZIETSMAN: Would you make another horror?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Yeah. Yeah, weirdly enough, it came to me in all the reviews and when people were talking about the movie and said, 'Oh it's a Western and horror', and I was like, 'Huh? Yeah, that's cool. That's interesting.' Yes, the western part was there, you know, when you go in the Saloum and you watch a lot of movies, that's the first thing that comes to you when you go in the Saloum: 'OK, that's a fu\*\*\*\*\* Western setting, you know?' So for me, it became natural to engulf the characters into that. So even the Western feeling of it came by going into Saloum and being sucked into the environment. And I also wanted to create, again, those heroes, uh, this trio of African heroes that I never saw in a movie - it's for me. And I said to myself, 'I want the seven-year-old kids to want to have those guys in toys, you know?' That was the goal, but as you said, the film becomes something probably that's rated more than [for a] 7-year-old.

So on that I didn't do my job greatly, but naturally it became what it became, and the horror element came from the horror of Chaka's past, so for me, that's the [key], and then the monsters and all that came from, uh, yeah, the idea of again making something that is spectacular in the genre and whatever, but in the same time it was a metaphor to what

Chaka has inside, what is hiding and how his past will splash on other people's face in this camp. So, the horror element came as a natural progression in horror, in this character, when he lived with this pedophile guy. So it's all more metaphorical for me, not for the audience. They can see that, but for me, it was a metaphor of what's happening inside this guy and what he has struggled with.

And then, of course, there's the layer of what I grew up with and what we all grew up with in Africa, which is black magic, sorcery and all those African stories about myths and legends and monsters and all that - that was also something that I wanted to tackle with because again, you don't see that much [in] African films, you know, or at least, etcetera Africa, you know.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So also just coming to how you said that you know when people were starting to review it and saying it's like a Western-horror, do you think that there is an issue of how African films are sometimes categorised in genres outside of Africa or do you think Africa has its own way of approaching genres?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: I think it depends on - because Africa is big - so it depends on where you [are], you know. If I look at South Africa, for example, South Africa has an industry already, it's been a long time that they have an industry, maybe more into production service than than the other side. But they have, you know, you guys have an industry. If you go in Morocco, North Africa like north north, they also have this right. Again, it may be more production service-wise, but it exists. In the centre, West, East [flat gesture with hands]. There is an industry, but, and that's my commentary, there is an industry, but there is an industry - uh, what's the English word for that? - that's living with subsidies, you know, and when you live from subsidies and you live with money that other organisations give you to make movies, usually you end up having the same kind of movie all the time, you know? So my big, and again that's my commentary, but my big commentary about African movies, it's that uh, it lives under other people's jurisdiction. So of course, the narrative of these movies won't be as close as we can bring it to the population, to the people that are living there, because again - this is for example, if I take African cinema, Central African cinema or West African cinema in the French language part of Africa, uh, you can't make a movie in the system without having subsidies from France or Belgium. Now tell me what France has to do

with African narrative? How do they know that and how do they know what African audiences wants, you know? So it's not saying, 'hey, we don't want your money, guys, and we don't want your system' at all - it's just that when you are in a system and you are in subsidies, then you have a certain narrative that is coming out of it, you know, and that's what's happening, at least for us in French Africa. Most of the movies that you will see, even the one that goes to Cannes or whatever, blah, blah blah, they just look like another French movie just made in Africa. And that's the feeling that I grew up with when I grew up in Africa.

So my goal, again and how I see African movies, is we haven't seen African Cinema yet. Like it's not there yet. It's just, yeah, we have some great, great directors, West African directors, Central African directors in the 80s and the 70s, you know, and some of them went to Cannes and were big and all that. But it didn't make it into an industry. So it was something spectacular and rare to make movies in Africa at that time. It's less now, but the narrative is the same, you know?

So even when I started writing *Saloum*, I didn't have to be that original and that special to bring something special on the table because there is no fu\*\*\*\*\* horror movie in fact. There are some right, but it's not difficult to make something new. Of course, there is no Western. There was, like in South Africa, you guys had *Five Fingers for Marseilles* which [*Saloum*] looked kind of like that because we had one of its producers working with us on set. But as you can see there's not that much. So it's not, again, difficult to make something different. So that's to answer to a question.

Yeah, we don't have an industry yet and that's my feeling, and it's all about building it now. [At] the same time that, because I feel all those things are connected, because my big example is South Korea. For example, you go for South to South Korea - 30 years ago, they started you know, but nobody saw that. 20 years ago, we had *Old Boy* and all those movies started to come. Before that you have *My Sassy Girl* and stuff like that, but it came very, very, very slowly. But it came and it started with music, with K-pop, then with cinema, then with food. So it was like a big cultural feeling coming from South Korea that now we as consumers we consume, right? And it's part of now South Korea with their TV series especially, *Squid Game* and all that people know of it now, are part of global pop culture,

right? My idea and my goal and what I wanna do and my dream is to bring the African pop culture in the main pop culture. And, for now, at least, for until now, we didn't have it. I can't remember a movie, an African movie, where I can say, 'Oh I like this hero, he's my hero. I want to wear this like him or I want to live this like him' - nothing. And we're like one of the biggest continents, what a shame, you know? And the shame again is like this for me, as a filmmaker, is that we know that is that it's happening right now. What happened to South Korea? It's happening right now, which is music is going outside of Africa, the food, the culture, the clothes. Where are the fu\*\*\*\*\* movies, you know?

So that's my fight. I want to leave this world with my kids saying, 'Hey, my main African hero. My main hero is an African hero because I grew up in Africa'. As simple as it is where an American when he grew up in America, he has an American hero, he has superheroes, whatever, blah blah blah. In France - the French might still have a problem [laughs]. But you know, at least we can have that. So that's what I advocate for, even before being a director or whatever, you know, like it's about the culture, it's about the pop culture, because at the end of the day, what we call pop culture is the identity of a certain population, you know, and to exist in this world, you can't exist without culture. You can't exist without heroes. You can't exist without stories, and for now, I don't have the impression that in Africa we have stories that went outside of the continuum to say, 'hey, we exist'. You see what I mean? The only well, the only big, big, big image that we have and everybody have from Africa comes from media. It comes from people that has a certain narrative narrative for Africa, again, you know. So it's my job, and I hope it's going to be a a job for most of the people who make images in Africa, to make us exist in a cool way, if it's possible. So that's what I call pop culture and bringing African pop culture to the main audience.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK, cool. Coming to African audiences, what do you think of their attitudes towards horror films?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: First of all, I don't know their reaction. I'm gonna be fair with you because I'm gonna give you a simple example. *Saloum* had a lot of problems to be distributed in Africa, but it was very easy for it to be distributed in the US, in France, in Belgium, in now many countries were distributed the movie, but not in Africa. So for a lot of different reasons, you know. So as a filmmaker who did a horror movie, I still don't know

how African audience respond to it, because first, the press didn't really went for it. When the American press went for it, and when the countries outside Africa were way more interested than Africans in Saloum. And when I say that, it's because, again, we went to journalists and people to talk about [the film] but nobody was interested. And they were interested when it made noise in the US, in France and wherever. And then I started to have some journalists and I said to him the same thing, which was like, 'why are you always waiting for this thing to become a standard outside of Africa to come back to something that is African?' Like there's a real problem here, so I'm gonna be very honest with you. I don't know until today how Africans react to horror movies because they're not distributed or they are not distributed correctly. And if they are distributed correctly, then the press is not even interested. They have all their eyes on outside of Africa because they don't care about Africa in itself. That's my commentary. So I don't know.

If you ask me what I think. Uh, we grew up in Africa with black magic, with all the stories that I have been talking about. It will be very hypocritical for me to say we're not interested in those kinds of stories - like we are. We lived with that, we grew up with that. We're passionate about that and you just have to see every time that, well, at least I live in Senegal, every time that's something weird happened with black magic in a neighbourhood or whatever - you have everybody going outside and everybody talks about, you know? You don't have that in Europe, you don't have that in the US - you have that in Africa, right?

So can someone come to me and say we don't have an appetite for horror and black magic and all that stuff you know? So I strongly believe this is our thing. The same thing, the same thing with Asians or Asian people in Japan or in South Korea. When you look at their horror movies, it's very specific to their culture and they really respond to it and, thank God, we also responded to it. So horror movies in Africa - same thing with horror movies in South America that we don't talk about a lot, but there's a lot of horror movies also there that works well, right?

For example, there's a movie that just came out, I think six months ago or a year ago. It's called *When Evil Lurks* (2023), which is from, I think it's from Argentina or something like that. So *When Evil Lurks* and the lore - and I suppose they're gonna make other movies on that lore - is just fu\*\*\*\*\* amazing, you know, and it talks to everybody. But at the same

time, it worked very well in Argentina because it was well-distributed and all that. So that's what I think about all that in Africa. I think we're the same. We're a continent where horror can find a new breath. You know something new that we don't see in the US, and they know that. So I've been working with people, in Hollywood and the US to try to bring that new kind of horror wave or horror vision or however you call that, even without being not a horror fan, so you know.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK, let me just see where I am in my questions. How much of an impact do you think European Hollywood filmmaking practices have on African film?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: You said European?

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yeah - European or Hollywood?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Oh, you know what? I will probably say, at least [for] my generation, but it also goes with the movements in cinema, right. Like 40 years ago, French cinema was powerful. So in French Africa or in French language Africa, that was the kind of movie that was fascinating 40 years ago, uh, if it's not 50 years ago, to be honest. And since the 90s and the 80s, it's the American movies, right? So I think we're more, way more influenced, at least in this part of Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, by American movies and Asian movies. I grew up with Asian movies. I grew up with Hong Kong movies, Indian movies in Congo, uh, and American movies. I never grew up with French movies, for example, European cinema, Italian, Russian... Again, I think some people think that because in French Africa we have African movies coming out that look like their French or they're like from French Wave or whatever, but it's just because, again, it's a question of subsidies - like who gives money for these movies to be made, you know? It's not even like political stuff, it's just like - of course if you have a Russian guy that grew up in Russia and that loves Russia and gives you money to make a movie, of course, there's gonna be a little bit of Russian influence in that way, you know, whatever the movie is. So when it becomes a system and like what we have in central Africa and West Africa, French language countries, then it starts to look like another French movie again, you know. It's not a question of influence in terms of artistic influence, it's the question of who gives the money and who you're working with. So I see it more as a trap



than a good thing, to be honest. But then again, that's my feeling. I don't know if that answer the question?

GABI ZIETSMAN: No it definitely does. So OK, even if you haven't heard of this phrase before, just from your initial reaction, what does the Black Fantastic mean to you?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: You said Black Fantastic?

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yes the Black Fantastic.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: What does it mean to me? Nothing. [laughing]

GABI ZIETSMAN: What do you think it means?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: I think everything that starts with 'black' is never a good thing. And I'm gonna tell you why - it has nothing to do with racism or whatever bullsh\*\*. It's just that when you start putting labels on stuff, uh, usually it becomes sub-stuff.

For example, if I say to you blaxploitation - it's cool, we had all those movies from the 70s, very colourful, blah blah. But, because it was called blaxploitation, not because of blacks or whatever, it has nothing to do with that. But just because it has a term and a label, it has a beginning - it has a start date and an end date. You know, like a movement, you know?

And I'm very careful about labels, which is why when *Saloum* came out and they were like, 'It's a western-horror, blah blah blah', it just came with that word and I said, 'You know what? It's a Southern. What's a Southern?' And I was like, 'It's a Western in the South'. If you wanna give a label, I'm gonna give you my label, you know, and I label the movie itself to be its own label, because I knew they were going to put that in a box or a label, that is like, 'Oh this movement of young African directors, they're all coming out at this time' and that's going to be something, uh, stuck in time. 'At that moment they were like 30 directors that came out and something happened and we don't know why and then it stopped.' So when you say Black Fantastic, I think it's a label to distinguish something that's just gonna evolve. So again, I don't know if it's a label, but I'm just saying my feeling on that.

GABI ZIETSMAN: That's alright.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: So I tend to, yeah, get away from labels and get away from tendencies because at the end of the day, but that's my feeling, as a storyteller, same thing for you when you're gonna talk about and teach about movies and all that, the currency of film is time. I worked for Saloum to stay, to be see-able, in 20 years, you know, like when you see it in 20 years, you were like 'Oh, the story is still the same and I still understand it and it doesn't look like it was made in 2020 and it doesn't look like a certain period of Africa'. Does it make sense?

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yes.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: So I'm trying my best as a storyteller to make movies that can last, because that's how you measure quality movies, you know? That's what I feel and that's what I think. So again, coming back to labels, I'm the kind of a guy that feels all that stuff. When I hear that it doesn't bring anything positive for me, I'm not gonna stay in that box. So that's me.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So, the Black Fantastic is an art term that also applies to films, but it's very African-American focused in terms of the Afrofuturism and magical realism and that kind of thing, and its kind of labelling it under the Black Fantastic.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: You see, I knew that. I knew that there was a group of whatever like trying [that].

GABI ZIETSMAN: Yes, but its definitions have always been about the black diaspora experience rather than about African experience of Africans who still live in Africa. So that's kind of what I'm trying to unpack as well.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Yeah, I think it's necessary to have that because again, it's about [being] part of the human culture - which is because human culture is a lot of different cultures - it's for me, again it's bringing part of the human culture, one human culture into the global culture. So the African one or the blackness culture into the mainstream one, not just in terms of a) 'hear us, we exist', but in terms of uh, we all have to have a voice in a room to discuss, right? So if one of the voices is muted [then] those people don't exist, again. So it may be African, it may be blackness or whatever, as long as the people that are

not heard can be heard, and it's always better when they can be heard with stories that show to the other that, 'Hey, you know what? We share the same fu\*\*\*\*\* stories. We share the same fu\*\*\*\*\* problems. And you know what? What is bread called in your country? In my country, it's called something else, but at the end of the day we have the same thing.

So through stories, monsters, myths, everything that we have in Africa, everything that we have in the black culture, whatever - bringing them to the bigger audiences is to say, 'we exist', but at the same time, 'Come play with us, we're from the same team'. So it's a bigger, bigger, bigger issue, of course, than just making movies. And the fact of having, uh, a culture reuniting or people from the same culture reuniting to say something, it's always a great thing. You know, so in the same time as I'm not into labels, in the same time that movement is a natural one and is an important one and a needed one, you know. So that's what I think.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK. What kind of impact do you think Africa's colonial history has on modern filmmaking?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Everything [big laugh]. Everything. It's like you and me working with our family traumas, you know, like it's a trauma. So however you wanna get rid of it, if you're just gonna work with it, it's there, you know? It's the same way Europeans, the western world or Asians or everybody has their trauma. You know? So, we work with that trauma and we as every[day] humans we are trying to build around it and curate from it, whatever. But at the same time, it's also what makes our narrative a different one from other people, you know? So I think it's a good thing to acknowledge it, to know it, to learn about it, to teach about it, to talk about it and to make it, like the word 'negro' for example, to make it, you know, to disarm it. Because I think the main problem about the inheritance of colonialism is that we don't talk about it. We yell about it: 'We were this and you guys did that to us and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah'. And the other ones are like, 'No, we didn't do it. This was our parents. And their parents, we have nothing to do with it'. But at the end of the day, the trauma is still there. Because at the end of the day, you grow up, the traumas grow up, generation to generation and we all grow up from that.

So I think it's time for Africa to, for my African pals or the young people, to acknowledge that it was there, when in the same time it doesn't define us, and the best way to show that

it doesn't define us is to show our culture, again, you know, and make our culture understood and show that there is a culture, by the way. Like, we're not just asking for money and food and whatever in Africa, right? This is a bit cliché, but it has to be said.

So you know, for example in *Saloum*, the first 10 minutes, my job in the first 10 minutes, because *Saloum* is a work of... it's an evolving beast and that was the most useful stuff for me, which was I'm passing. The challenge was giving the audience emotions through [genres?], not just moments, if you see what I mean? So the first 10-15 minutes of the First Act was I'm gonna show you that these guys are badass pirates/mercenary Africans and it's in the setting of a Western, you know? So it's very testosteronic at the beginning. So you follow them and there is that music and you're like, 'Fu\*\*', it's cool to be in Africa' and then slowly, the more they approach the camp, the more the flashbacks from the past of Chaka and all that starts to appear and now we're moving from a Western/Hero movie to a thriller/drama. You're like, 'Oh, there's something in that group that doesn't work. Like something is hidden, this guy is hiding something,' and the [the closer we get to] the second dinner, the more it's becoming a drama. And after the drama - drama means you want your audience to be attached to the human part of themselves, right? You want to [see] this character is human like me, so I understand his drama, I understand his pain. So once, I think it's mathematically at the 30 minutes of the movie, by the way, once they are in the second dinner and now we know why Chaka came and what he has to do. And he did it. And he does it [kills Omar] . So in the movie, now the audience is ready to move onto something else, because now they're attached to Chaka. They're attached to this group and the fact that, 'Oh I thought they were brothers from the beginning when I saw them being this and oh no they're weaker and their human', you know, and all that testosterone stuff was all bullsh\*\*. And now we are entering into the realm of black magic and monsters, because now that you are attached to Chaka and to his group, now I can make you believe whatever I want, you know?

So instead of having a classical movie that is going from, uh, scene to scene and showing the intricacies of the characters and the story, I made the bet of saying, 'Hey, you know what? I'm gonna have a morphing movie, that morphs with Chaka's emotions. So when Chaka thinks that he is the hero, you have what you have in the beginning. When he's finished with

his mission, he's back to 'Sh\*\*, I still have some stuff to do'. So you have that boat stuff and all the flashbacks and all that - when he arrives in the camp, it becomes more dramatic because that's when he feels, that's his point of view, right? And after that, when he kills the guy, he's like, 'OK, remorse time, you know, like demon time'. So *Saloum* can be seen again as a Western horror, it can also be seen as an action movie, whatever, and it can also be seen as a big metaphor for this guy's mind and what he's going through and how he breathes, lives, you know if it makes sense. So the challenge was there and it was way more interesting again, than just making a succession of scenes and showing the progression of this guy, you know.

GABI ZIETSMAN: So talking about the main character - because you were talking about how you wanted to show a hero and, you know, about his process, his journey that he's going through - then what was the choice behind the ending in terms of him being pulled under by the person that he killed and these spirits and it's kind of insinuated that he's replacing his former tormenter's place within this supernatural realm. Why this choice then, if you wanted to create this hero character?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: So it's useful to say that the ending is not the ending, meaning like the ending that you have in the movie is not the real ending. The real ending was going way further, and when I say way further, it's like 15 years after. Because my main goal, to be honest, was to - and it's still the goal when you watch the movie - my main goal was to also switch from... When I came with the idea of *Saloum*, for me again, it's for me and not for the audience, for me *Saloum* is a study about heroism, how heroism is birthed and how we see heroes. Because at that time when I wrote *Saloum*, it was like the big Marvel stuff and whatever. And I was like, 'OK, how can I make the contrary of that, which is... what's the word that I'm searching? Detox is not the word.

GABI ZIETSMAN: Cathartic?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: It's not the word I'm searching for, but it was like - and it's not about toxicity in the same time also. It's more about - we have an image of heroes and I want to challenge that, and especially with African heroes that we don't know. And then there was also the second thing, which is the vengeance, the revenge stuff. And for me, revenge, that's

what I love and I think that's why people love most revenge Korean movies - you never really get away with revenge, you know? We grew up in the 80s with all those vigilante movies and they had their revenge. And then they're happy and all that. But we all know that in real life it doesn't happen this way. So *Saloum* went the easy way, the easy way of saying, 'Hey, revenge - not a good thing,' you know, it's not new stuff to say, but at least that was my statement about revenge at that time. But the main thing for me was in that heroism stuff, was to pass the torch from Chaka to Awa, you know? That was the biggest thing.

So what was very interesting, when I went to Toronto, uh, and we had the screening of the movie, there was a woman - ultra-feminist - and she said to me, 'I have a question'. I was like, 'Yeah, go!' She was like, 'Why is Awa always behind Chaka? And he acts like she's a kid and he doesn't want to give her the [gun] when she's asking for the gun. He's like, fu\*\* off, blah blah blah, he has a weird relationship with her'. I was like, 'Huh, that's interesting,' because my main message was exactly the contrary of what you're saying, which is: it's a passing of a torch between a hero and somebody that admires that hero and want to be that hero. And at the end of the day, she becomes them without even wanting to, which was the ending or well, which was the original ending. Because the original ending, and I'm coming to your question, was Chaka dies, whatever, blah, blah, blah. And then she takes the road back with Rafa to the plane. And when they arrive in the plane, they take the plane and in the plane, Rafa dies and he dies from something that we cut out from the story that you have in the movie, which is at the very basis of why Rafa is Rafa. Rafa has a bullet in the head so he can die at any moment, which is why these guys are so crazy, because for him, every moment in life is something that he has to enjoy, you know? So that's why he's the craziest one in the group. So there was that back story in *Saloum*, but then we just felt like it's too much and it's driving away from Chaka blah blah. So we cut a lot of that, but he died in the plane and then you just have her [Awa], with the gold and the drugs, right, that they had from the beginning. So you have that and then you see her 15 years, ten years after whatever, becoming the big boss, you know, established and all that. And Chaka comes back.

GABI ZIETSMAN: Ah, okay.

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: That was the original ending. And you were right when you were saying, 'Oh, so Chaka was exchanging his place with this [villain] and whatever - exactly. The real ending was him coming back as a team member, and blah blah blah. The South African team said to me, 'Cut the movie in this moment, it's way better', which is about moment, and I was like, 'They're fu\*\*\*\*\* right'. I think it's even more strong. Like I don't need to show her taking the plane or blah blah blah, because it was like another five minutes, 10 minutes, you know? Because the first cut of *Saloum* is two hours and 40 minutes. The one you have is one hour and 20 minutes, so it's more than an hour that we took out of that thing to recentre Chaka and Awa.

But to come back to my family's friend in Toronto, uh, I said to her, 'That's very interesting what you're saying cause at the end of the day, again, it's the total inverse, which is like, for me, is that Awa is mute. There's a reason for that. It's because in most - that's what I thought and that was my message in the movie - in most stupid horror movies, first-degree horror movie or action movie, whatever, there's always a woman and she has nothing to say. I'm talking about the 90s and the 2000s and whatever, of course it's changing now, but it was in African movies, it was something to say that was like, 'Oh, she's the mute, she can't say anything because the only woman that can say anything [in *Saloum*] is saying bullsh\*\*, she's the other one, you know the single one. So I wanted a feminine figure that looks like she's just artificial and doesn't give a sh\*\*. And I wanted to show the other one, which is like she's mute, nobody gives a sh\*\* about her. She's a woman. She's a black woman. Uh, but guess what? In that universe of if you hear what's happening outside, you're gonna die - well she's the superhero now, because she had the superpower, you know, so the entire movie was to pass from Chaka to her.

And the last answer on that, what I said to that woman was, 'Be aware because that's your *lecture* [sic French] of a guy with a woman, but in Chaka's head, she's not a woman, she's a fu\*\*\*\*\* enemy. He's at the dinner table and he has some [food] and he's basically staying here [at the table] to kill somebody and to get away from that because they [the Hyenas] are wanted, and you have somebody at the table basically saying to you, 'I know where you're coming from, I know where you're going. I'm gonna fu\*\* it up for you if you don't take me'. What are you gonna do? You kill that person. Maybe a woman, maybe a man - you

don't give a sh\*\*, you're a military guy or you're a mercenary, right? So he doesn't care if she's a woman - he probably won't kill a kid - but you understand what I mean.

So, yeah, there's a lot of different *lectures* [sic French] that you can have in that, but at the end of the day, at least for me, it was a passage of the torch from that African hero that we never met and that we're meeting, just leading in that movie to a new kind of hero, you know, and if *Saloum 2* existed, volume two, then it would be on her and her new team and blah blah blah. Right. So that was the goal and I don't remember if I answered your question, I talk too much.

GABI ZIETSMAN: No, that's fine. Umm, so I think just one last question for now and then we'll do the rest of the questions in the second session - what kind of audience did you have in mind for your film?

JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Like I said, I wished it would have been kids, but the movie is a bit violent. You know when, you probably grew up like that, will grow up like that, we are always fascinated when we were seven-eight, we're always fascinated about the movies that are rated under 12, right? Like we want to see these movies that are [rated] and that's what I wanted for *Saloum*. I want it to be that movie that you're eight years old and you can't watch because it's supposed to be violent, but you want to watch, because they look like heroes and all that. The same way for me, [what] *Aliens* looked like, I saw that woman was a girl and I was like 'Aaaah, looks amazing!' Then when I saw it, I was like, it's not for my age. So that's what I want for *Saloum*. So the secret audience would be kids.

But yeah, I made it for everybody, I made it for everybody. And definitely not just African. I just made it for everybody that thinks that they know Africa and show them a part of Africa that they can learn from and that they can be eager to discover. And I couldn't be more prouder of this movie outside of Africa, because now it means that people know that somewhere in Africa, there's a small place called the Saloum, and it's a weird place. And for real, it's a real place. You know? So, yeah to everybody and specifically to kids, but I'm not supposed to say it.

GABI ZIETSMAN: OK. Yeah. Oh can you tell me a bit about Saloum - the real-life Saloum and why that was such inspiration for this film?



JEAN LUC HERBULOT: Believe me or not, it's exactly like in the fu\*\*\*\*\* movie. The only thing that you won't have, of course, it's the spirits and all that. At least you don't see them, but I can assure you that - you may be spiritual or not, mystical or not, believing in stuff or not - you're gonna see stuff in Saloum, I can assure you that. And we did, and even the DP that came from France - even if he is mixed black, whatever, blah, blah, blah, and he has that culture because he's from West Indies, he has his culture as a West Indian guy - when he arrived in the Saloum, he saw some stuff and he was like, 'uuuuuhhhh', I was like, 'yeah, man. Yeah'. And I'm not talking about weird things appearing to you, whatever. It's just like weird stuff, coincidence, weird stuff happening, you know, and a succession of stuff and you're like, 'that cannot be normal' in a normal way, you know. And so the Saloum region is full of that. It's like, yeah, the most mystical region that I've been in, to be honest in Africa and I've been in a lot of places and I grew up in weird places. So the Saloum when I first [went there], my first reaction was 'wow', because you have one, and I'm not exaggerating, you have like - what you saw in the movie, is probably two-tenths of what the Saloum is really. It's way bigger and it's very different and it can be very green as it can be desert and it's basically the desert meets the sea in the same time. So you have a lot of different parts in the Saloum. And when I arrived there, it just struck my mind, as a filmmaker, it was like, like I said, like a Western. Like it's the first time that I can see a Western in Africa and in the same time, it's something very mystical that speaks to me, you know? So for everybody who wants to go in the Saloum, I'm warning you. There's the movie, but I'm not far away in a lot of different stuff. Just go and see.

And believe me, the water when you see the kid walking in the water, then falling in the water and all that - none of us wanted to go in that water. None of us. And if I could show you the B-reel and all the stuff that we shot outside of the movie itself, you will see we were all avoiding that fu\*\*\*\*\* water because it's weird. So when you see the kid walking with his gun and being afraid he didn't need a lot of [directing] to be in that state, you know? He's a non-actor, so he would just go there and he was like, 'I don't like that water'. And I was like, 'that's exactly what you're supposed to do'. So it's very beautiful, very powerful and quite intimidating, uh, to be there, you know.

GABI ZIETSMAN: Awesome. OK. I think we'll leave it that for now.