

Atlantique:s – on global dis:connection in Mati Diop’s films

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Mati Diop’s short film *Atlantiques* (2009) is a visual poem about the ‘oceanic time-lag’¹ experienced through migration. Relating to Senegal’s *migrations piroguières* in 2005 and 2006, when thousands of young Africans left their homes to embark on often-

1 Dora Budor, ‘Oceanic Time-Lag: On Mati Diop’s *Atlantiques*’, *MOUSSE Magazine*, Mousse Publishing 2020, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/mati-diop-dora-budor-2020/4> February 2025. On this point, see also Dennis Lim, ‘Crossing Over’, *Film Comment*, *Film at Lincoln Center*, 1 July 2019, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/crossing-over/5> February 2025; Olajide Salawu, ‘The Method of Abjection in Mati Diop’s “Atlantiques”’, *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Art and Culture* online (8 June 2020), <http://www.thirdtext.org/salawu-atlantiques>, <http://www.thirdtext.org/salawu-atlantiques>; Gigi Adair, ‘The Spirit of Migrancy: Mati Diop’s *Atlantique*’, *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2208>.

Fig. 1
***Atlantiques*, Mati Diop, 2009, 16 mins., film still, trigon-film.**

deadly voyages to Spain, the film tells the stories of these men, interweaving the lived experiences of the protagonists from Dakar with the ghostly recollections of the dead. Speaking about ‘the most burning desire to throw oneself into the sea’² – a quote drawn from the accounts of survivors of the 1816 shipwreck of the *Medusa* on the way to Senegal (which inspired Théodore Géricault’s painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819) – these ghost stories blur the lines between documentary and fiction to create an oneiric nocturnal imaginary of migration and exile. Mati Diop returns to these stories ten years later in her debut feature film *Atlantique* (2019), which looks to the ocean both as a mythological and political space from the perspective of the women who were left behind in Dakar. The almost eponymous titling of the films blurs the understanding of their relationship in terms of both identity and difference. In my commentary on the short film *Atlantiques* and the feature film *Atlantique*, I would like to share some thoughts and observations about how the disjunctive relations constructed within and between these films – their manifold doublings and splits – can be seen as a genuine contribution to a political aesthetics of global dis:connection.

Atlantiques, the 15-minute short, shot by Diop herself on low-grain video (mini-DV), begins with the dark enigmatic image of turning cogs, rusty as if drawn from the sea. They resemble a reel-to-reel tape recorder playing the voice of a man who recounts his experience of encountering death on his passage over the ocean in a pirogue. The voice seems to be speaking from beyond, the man’s body absent from the image, leaving us uncertain whether he survived the ‘Siram’, the giant wave that hit the boat. The film ends with equally enigmatic images, now bright and glaring, giving an interior view of a system of rotating lenses in the lantern of a lighthouse, which flood the darkness with bright flashes of light before slowly fading at dawn. The rotation of the lenses echoes the turning movement of the tape recorder at the beginning of the film. This scene was likely filmed at the Mamelles Lighthouse in Dakar, sitting on a hill overlooking the Atlantic Ocean at the westernmost tip of Africa. While it was built under French colonial rule in 1864 as a landmark of imperial control of the region, the film lends the lighthouse a transformative visual presence. Like a nocturnal dream machine, it seems to return the fears and hopes that guide the journey on the pirogue, captured in the phrase ‘Barcelona or death’ (Barça ou Barsakh) that has become a common expression in Senegal, originally coined by the migrants.³

2 That is, ‘le plus ardent désir de se jeter à la mer’. Alexandre Corréard and Henri Savigny, *Naufrage de la frégate La Méduse, faisant partie de l’expédition du Sénégal, en 1816* (Paris: Corréard Libraire, 1821), 124.

3 See, for example, Stefano degli Uberti, ‘Victims of their Fantasies or Heroes for a Day? Media Representations, Local History and Daily Narratives on Boat Migrations from Senegal’, *Cahiers d’études africaines* 54, no. 213-214 (2014) <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriques.17599>.



Framed by the images and sounds of returns that open and close the film are scenes of three young Senegalese men, friends sitting on the beach around a fire, the sparks faintly illuminating the dark and grainy images, while they discuss the perils of migrating to Europe to escape the miseries of life in Africa. The scenes are staged but at the same time documentary, the scripted dialogues based on the recollections of the protagonists (one of which is Mati Diop's cousin) who use their real names. One of the men, Serigne (Serigne Seck) has taken the risk of leaving on a pirogue, recounting his experience, his two friends inquiring about his reasons for leaving. Has Serigne returned from his journey alive, after having been deported or as a ghost after dying at sea? The dialogue gives evidence for both interpretations, just as the opening scenes with his recorded voice. The scenes around the campfire on the beach are interspersed with images of mourning women, a mother and a sister, as well as a close-up of the gravestones of men who died at sea, among them Serigne's gravestone bearing the date of his death. Do these scenes of mourning and memorial precede or follow the friends' meeting at the beach? The film's temporal experience is one of haunting, of a time out-of-joint that Derrida described in *Specters of Marx* as 'a disjointed now that always risks maintaining nothing together in the assured conjunction of some context whose border would still be determinable'⁴ and that has since become a recurring concept in postcolonial thought, figuring in the many ghost stories that have emanated from it.

Regarding the state of migration in contemporary films, among them Diop's *Atlantique*, Ekow Eshun speaks of a 'liquid Africa', a political aesthetics of both renewal and remembrance that finds its expression, among other motifs, in images of the sea. 'From its title onward, the sea is the gravitational force that shapes lives and events in the Dakar-set *Atlantics*. (...) As the camera lingers

4 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamut (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

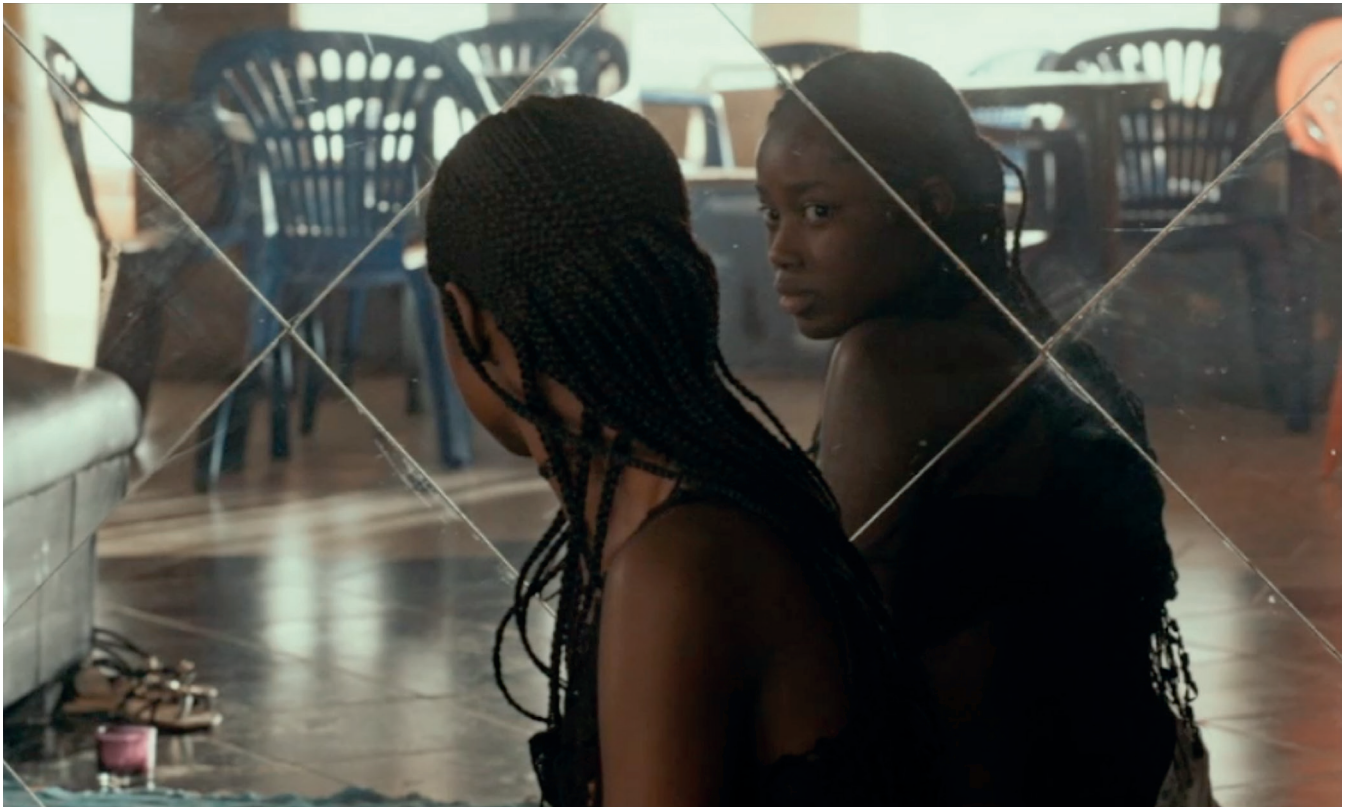
Fig. 2
Atlantique, Mati Diop, 2019, 104 mins.,
film still, MUBI.

again over its surface, we contemplate the water as a repository of countless stories of desire and departure, loss and mourning', allowing the 'film's transition from drama told in the tradition of European realism to a hauntological fable replete with ominous occurrences: mysterious fires and gesturings to the mythic and mystic, chiefly through the figure of the djinn, an Islamic spirit that is able to take the form of humans or animals'.⁵

Atlantique, Mati Diop's feature debut that followed her short film ten years later in 2019, spells out the haunting presence of ghosts, verging on the genre of zombie films infused with West African tales of spiritual possession. Here, the dead men return from the sea, inhabiting the bodies of the women at night to call for justice, for being paid the wages they had been denied after months of work on a construction site. Yet, an aesthetics of dis:connectivity expressing the state of migration is not simply achieved in terms of representation or narrative, however fragmented and ambiguous. Rather, it manifests itself in the multiple disjunctures, the frictions and folds, the absences and missing links that structure the films in both their internal relations as well as their relations to each other. In light of the feature film, Diop's short film has frequently been discussed as a precursor, the experiment from which the later film could emerge. What escapes such conventional consideration is the spectral logic itself, the disjointed time of the present that renders the relation between both films more complicated than that of a simple succession or development.

On the level of the plot, the film tells the story of young lovers, Ada (Mama Sané) and Suleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), who are separated from the first moment they appear on screen: a train cuts between them, raising dust, as they meet in the streets of Dakar, hindering them from coming together. Later at the beach, they are separated even in their embrace: she does not dare to tell him that her parents have arranged for her to soon marry a wealthy businessman; he does not dare tell her that he will be leaving in a pirogue later that night. 'You're just watching the ocean – you're not even looking at me,' she complains. He departs without saying goodbye. The film stays in Dakar with Ada and the other women; we don't get to see anything of the men's departure or their fatal journey across the sea, not even the stranded boat that is said to have been found by Spanish fishermen and might have been theirs. What is absent or disappears from the scene, what becomes unavailable for representation, returns in the film's atmosphere – an atmosphere full of sandy heat, humidity and sea spray, of granite dust, smog and orange haze, polluted with the promises of cosmopolitan progress and haunted by

5 Ekow Eshun, 'A Liquid Africa: Fluidity as Practice and Aesthetics in Diasporadical Trilogía', *liquid blackness: journal of aesthetics and black studies* 5, no. 1 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-8932595>.



the colonial past.⁶ As Diop has stated in interviews, many of the film's scenes were shot at the site of the 1944 Thiaroye massacre by French forces of West African soldiers who had fought for the French army, following their demand for equal pensions, which is echoed in the worker's demand for payment in *Atlantique*. Here, spectrality is also heavily evoked by the films' cinematography, the dark and grainy images, shot with a highly light sensitive 35mm camera (VariCam 35) that renders tangible the invisibilities of migration as a remnant of colonisation. 'The men who died at sea,' as the film's cinematographer Claire Mathon states, 'return via the (sweating) bodies of young girls.'⁷

Mati Diop, as a French-Senegalese director, has created such disjunctive dialogue between films before, with her short *A Thousand Suns* (*Mille soleils*, 2013), in which she relates to the Senegalese film classic *Touki Bouki* (1973), directed by her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty.⁸ *A Thousand Suns* was made for the 40th anniversary of *Touki Bouki*, staged around an open-air screening

⁶ See Lindsay Turner, 'In the Atmosphere: In Mati Diop's *Atlantics*, every breath takes in the evaporated substance of history', *The Yale Review* Summer 2020 (1 June 2020).

⁷ Claire Mathon, 'Claire Mathon, AFC, discusses her work on Mati Diop's film "Atlantics"', *AFC, Association Française des directrices et directeurs de la photographie Cinématographique* 2019, <https://www.afcinema.com/Claire-Mathon-AFC-discusses-her-work-on-Mati-Diop-s-film-Atlantique.html?lang=fr>.

⁸ On this film, see for example James S. Williams, 'A Thousand Suns: Traversing the Archive and Transforming Documentary in Mati Diop's *Mille Soleils*', *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2016); Melissa Anderson, 'Family Ties', *Artforum*, 19 January 2015, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/melissa-anderson-on-mati-diops-a-thousand-suns-222788/>.

Fig. 3
***Atlantique*, Mati Diop, 2019, 104 mins., film still, MUBI.**

of the celebrated film in Dakar by night in the presence of its lead actor Magaye Niang, 40 years after having played Mory, the film's young rebellious protagonist who, at the last minute, decides not to take the ship to Paris with his girlfriend, returning to cattle herding in a repetition of the film's opening scene. *A Thousand Suns* is particularly interested in the coincidence that the actor, just as the character he played, never left Dakar. The opening sequence of the film shows this character, now an elderly man, still herding zebus like he did in the former film. Inscribing the lived time of the actor's body into the fictional character, collapsing and multiplying fictional and documentary layers, the film creates a fractured temporality, in which the man seems to be endlessly returning, visibly aging, yet displaced from progression in time. What has happened in the 40 years since *Touki Bouki*, the actor is asked at the screening. Shrouded in the blue light of projection, he remains silent with his mouth agape. The plural of the film's title *A Thousand Suns* reverberates this disjuncture of time, while the film lends an aesthetics to the philosophical concept of spectrality through the many shifts and splits between different visual and narrative registers, genres and materialities.

The sight of zebus crossing the street returns in *Atlantique*, recalling once again the opening and closing scene in *Touki Bouki* that had already refigured in *A Thousand Suns*. This time they appear even more untimely, crossing the urban building site where a futuristic tower, the only digitally rendered object in the film, is being constructed in the real-estate development area of the city of Dakar, reminiscent of the unrealised project for a multi-million-dollar luxury tower hotel that Senegal's former president Abdoulaye Wade wanted to build together with Gaddafi as a symbol of their shared vision of Africa. Against this vision of economic development and progress in global capitalism, the film sets an alternative future—a future that, in Derrida's words, is rendered possible through 'disjunction, interruption, the heterogenous'.⁹ 'One does not know if the expectation prepares the coming of the future-to-come or if it recalls the repetition of the same, of the same thing as ghost. [...] It is a proper characteristic of the specter, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future, for the revenant may already mark the promised return of the specter of living being'.¹⁰ It is this 'future-to-come' (*l'avenir*) that is announced in the final scene of the film, in which Ada, after her reunion with the ghost of Suleiman, reflects on her memories as prophecies. Flipping the perspective, the camera now looks at Ada from beyond the refracted mirror in the beach bar, that site of spectral returns where the dead men's images appeared, while she speaks the closing lines: 'Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada'.

⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 44-45.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 123.



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Fig. 4
Atlantique, Mati Diop, 2019, 104 mins., film still, MUBI.