

THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

The spirits of African cinema: redemptive aesthetics in Mati Diop's *Atlantics*

In Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019), the ghosts of young Senegalese men who have drowned trying to sail to Europe return to haunt their girlfriends in Dakar. The film's mise-en-scène is suffused with images and sounds of the ocean. The Atlantic forms the horizon of narrative possibility for the film's desperate young men, but it also forms the cinematic material of a stranger and more joyful accounting of precarity, loss, and redemption. *Atlantics* centres on young Africans for whom postcolonial economics are personal – Ada (Mame Bineta Sané) loves Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), but he has not been paid in months and goes to sea to reach Europe. His boat sinks, and the drowned men it carried return as spirits. Diop's film understands these spirits as a form of anticolonial realism, capable of rendering visible the affective depths of the Atlantic Ocean: they bespeak the ocean's unimaginable archive of Black death, as well as envisioning beauty and grace in contemporary Black life. At the Cannes Film Festival, where she was the first Black woman selected to compete, Diop said 'I wanted to dedicate this film to a certain youth, firstly those who disappeared in the Atlantic Ocean in trying to reach Spain, but I also wanted to pay homage to the youth of today who are living, full of life.' (Sène 2019) The film is structured aesthetically around this relationship between death and life,

and its scenes of ghostly haunting encode seemingly opposed commitments to the antirealist codes of horror and the realist representation of quotidian – and joyful – life. In this apparent contradiction, Diop's film enables reflections on what anticolonial aesthetics could look like today, for the generation of Black diasporic filmmakers who have inherited both the histories of Third Cinema in Africa and of assimilationism and its refusal in Europe.

Diop is an active voice in understanding her film's style as political, and we will return frequently to her own analyses. 'You could say there's a reparative dynamic in my cinema,' she reflects, 'almost as if by creating a new landscape I'm healing myself from having been exposed to colonial stereotypes for too long' (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 12). Diop calls for a reparation of the image of Africa, and in *Atlantics* the ghost is a formal mechanism for this work. The film's central question is how to represent – or do justice for – those who have disappeared into the vastness of the ocean. Supernatural possession is at once a refusal of colonial realism (in which ghosts don't exist) and a demand to bring the humanity contained in the ocean into cinematic visibility and memorialisation. We cannot see beneath the ocean, but the spirits that dwell there bring a political and affective force to the frame. *Atlantics'* ghosts participate in a history of haunting across the Black Atlantic, from the Senegalese faru rab to the Arab jinn to the Haitian zombie. Indigenous spirits travel from precolonial belief systems to postcolonial cinema, bringing with them complex layers of cultural meaning and a potential for resistance. These spirits are borne on the ocean: Diop speaks of Breton tales of drowned Africans haunting the French villages they never reached (Black 2019). This is also a cinematic history, traced in 1970s African films of postcolonial liberation and in more recent European stories of migration and diaspora. In reimagining the inheritance of these journeys, Diop focuses on the ocean and the ghost as powerful sources of renewal. In *Atlantics*, spirits embody an oceanic history of colonial violence, and create a cinematic optic capable of both memory and transformation. I argue that style in *Atlantics* is legible as an articulation of Black histories, anticolonial aesthetics, diasporic identities, and queer feminism. Its antirealist aesthetic of ghostly haunting encodes both an atmosphere of loss and a reparative politics of Black life.



Mirror reflections

A crucial scene late in the film brings together the spirits of the dead men with the bodies of their girlfriends in a nightclub. Ada realises that the men have returned as spirits and runs to the beach-side club to tell her friend Dior (Nicole Sougou) that 'The boys are back.' As she speaks, we see what the friends already know: the women sit white-eyed, chilling on bar stools and chairs with a masculine ease. The camera follows Ada's look with a series of point-of-view shots of Fanta (Aminata Kane) sitting on a stair, another woman on a bar stool, a group of women posed in various masculine stances, legs open or slouched on plastic chairs. The boys are indeed back and have taken possession of the bodies of the girls. Thérèse (Coumba Dieng) speaks to Ada with the words of one of the dead men. He relates how Souleiman poured out his heart in his final moments, telling her that Ada was the love of his life. We cut to a long take of the sea, in which Thérèse continues as a voice off-screen, describing the doomed voyage. When we cut back to the group, this time we see the bodies of the men they were, not the women they now possess, reflected in the mirrored wall of the bar. Cinematic form allows the spectator to see through the ghostly embodiment of the possessed women to the male-bodied truth of the spirits, but only in the tacky mirror of the nightclub. The shot of the men in the mirror is overlaid with the crisscross pattern of the tiles, reminding us that what we see is not a direct representation of reality. In terms of camera position, it indicates that we're looking at a mirror reflection, but within the film's supernatural realism, that surplus on the image evokes the inflected visibility of

spirits. Revealed in their ghostly form, two of the men look out to sea while the others gaze at nothing. One looks directly at the camera. One lies with his head back, a scarf partially covering his face. They are slumped, exhausted, in a shot that lasts more than twenty seconds. Here, in this lengthy witnessing of embodied loss, we see both the film's antirealism – its investment in spirits – and the deep commitment to the real that such antirealism encompasses.

These spirits who possess women's bodies can be identified within transnational Muslim cultures as jinns and specified further within a Senegalese syncretic worldview as faru rab. The faru rab is an ancestral spirit that is understood as circulating in the sea and air, similarly to an Islamic jinn, looking for people to possess. It remains a reference point in contemporary pop culture, discussed on Tumblr as a 'bad spirit boyfriend' (Nataka-Kusafiri 2013). This combination of Senegalese / animist and transnational / Islamic belief enables the faru rab to perform complex and often ambivalent cultural work, particularly in a postcolonial context. The faru rab explains situations in which women are controlled by the spirits of troublesome boyfriends. In conventional lore, such possession is a consequence of dressing immodestly, and so animist belief is entangled with Islamic codes of conduct to reinforce conservative gender codes. As Fanta says in *Atlantics*, 'The marabout said that a spirit got in through my belly button because I don't dress correctly.' (Her friend's reply is 'The marabout is talking crap.')

As with many supernatural beliefs, spirits can work to limit and define women's actions with the threat of supernatural punishment. But Diop's faru rab are not anonymous bad boyfriends, but the spirits of the women's actual partners. They possess them not because the women broke religious codes but because their boyfriends broke with the untenable conditions of postcolonial capitalism. The resulting possessions are thus not hostile but melancholic, the living bodies of the women doubled by the dead souls of their men. In the night club, Diop presents possession as love.

The figure of the faru rab can offer a form in which to counter patriarchal, religious, and colonial systems of control (Fatou 2016; Sow 2006). The cult of the rab expands social space for women, and Janice Boddy argues that faru rab 'possession is an embodied critique of colonial, national, or global hegemonies whose abrasions are deeply, but not exclusively,

held by women.' (1994: 419) In *Atlantics*, spirit possession doubles gender, offering women power in their new mode of embodiment. We see it in their stances, the immediacy with which maleness gives them permission to take up space, and in the queer voice with which Thérèse, with her long blonde hair and her blue lingerie, speaks of dying at sea with his brothers. Cinema's suturing of sound and image to construct the effect of realism is destabilised when a female-bodied character speaks as a man. The voice remains that of the female actor, however, so the effect is not that of two bodies being spliced (as in voice dubbing) but rather a person containing more than one gender. Spirit possession explains narratively this doubling of gendered embodiment, but it does not exhaust its cinematic effects.

This scene of mirrored genders calls back to the film's first scene of possession, in which the women rise from their beds and converge on the home of N'Diaye (Diankou Sembene), the

boss who exploited their boyfriends and would not pay them for their labour. The film shifts out of realism in this sequence, moving from an uncanny shot of the women waiting silently in the boss' living room into a reveal of their whited-out eyes, as N'Diaye's wife (Seyni Diop) turns to see them. The women advance on N'Diaye, demanding their wages, in a sequence that similarly foregrounds the disjuncture between the image of feminine lingerie and naked legs and their voiced claim to be the male employees. The wife asks who they are and Fanta replies, 'He knows.' The women force N'Diaye to the cemetery, where they demand that he hand over the men's back wages and dig their graves. Only as spirits can this combination of male and female, life and death, become visible. Spirit possession enables this scene of revenge, and it does not have the effect that a ghostly image of the men returning would have: it's the embodied assemblage of temporal and gender dissidence that creates cinematic force. The feminist potential of



the faru rab is closely conjoined to the narrative's critique of corrupt postcolonial capitalism in Senegal (embodied here by N'Diaye), and these strands of political discourse evoke longer histories of both precolonial belief and anticolonial thought.

Diop says of her practice, 'You can see that aspect of past and present informing each other in this way that divests of Western conceptions of time or reality' (Black 2019). This claim that the antirealism of the ghost works against Western epistemologies speaks in a tradition of what Harry Garuba terms 'animist materialism' (2003: 261-285), a cultural practice that includes both literary magical realism and the postcolonial horror film. In addition to the Senegalese beliefs that she cites, we can understand these spirits within the transnational circulation of resistance to colonialism through the imaginaries of indigenous animisms. We might think of the zombie, the figure of slavery's dead labour who comes after those who have stolen his body. Bertrand Bonello's *Zombi Child* (2019), for example, locates its voodoo revenants in the context of a French high school, in which the pedagogic inculcation of national ideologies is confronted with the textually indigestible presence of a Haitian teenager. Other colonial-era revenants haunt recent European cinema. The French horror film *Kandisha* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2020) and the British film *His House* (Remi Weekes, 2020) both address postcolonial histories with their spirits, and the former explicitly links its Moroccan jinn with a history of European colonial violence. These vengeful figures of the horror film – the zombie, vampire, jinn and so forth – are themselves examples of colonial extraction, constructed from the spirit worlds of the colonised. To take one pertinent example, Mark Allen Peterson's tracing of the Arab jinn's transformation into the Hollywood genie illustrates the coloniality that sustains the horror genre (2007: 93-112). There are surely risks for postcolonial filmmakers in turning to horror, and yet as Adam Lowenstein has argued (2005; 2022), horror cinema has also been a powerful tool for navigating traumatic histories and for creating what he calls 'transformative otherness' (2022: 6). Whereas European films like *Kandisha* maintain the colonialist perspective of those who fear the spirit's revenge, in *Atlantics* the possessed women are not victims, and revenge is a more ambivalent goal. What really

matters for the spirits in the mirror is a different kind of restitution; an acknowledgement of what has been lost and what remains. To deploy supernatural horror in a postcolonial cinematic context is, at its most radical, to rescue animism from colonial vision.

Film and media scholarship has addressed the relationship of colonialism to horror in various ways (e.g., Gelder 2000; Aizenberg 1999). Fred Botting argues that whereas the gothic was a mirror to modernity, Glennis Byron's concept of the 'globalgothic' forms a mirror to the era of neocolonial globalisation (2015: 189). The globalgothic, with its words smushed together to suggest the indivisibility of globalisation and its dark mirror, resonates with Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar's account of the 'global-popular' (2022: 1), in which the audible hyphen asks us to think about how and where pop culture interfaces with the worldly, how they are conjoined, and to what ideological ends. Both terms use the space between words to stage the distance or proximity between geopolitics and cultural forms. Together, they speak to Diop's meditation on distances and proximities. In *Atlantics*, Europe is an unreachable distance despite the connectedness of globalisation, and the possessed women experience both a supernatural closeness and a painful ontological chasm between their bodies and the spirits of their dead lovers. As the sequence in the nightclub continues, we cut in to a closer shot, in which the mirror's uneven surface disturbs the image of the men. One man, in the foreground, is blurry to the point that his body is close to dissipating. Behind him, another man's image is doubled. They exist, insofar as they can be seen in the mirrored tiles, but imperfectly, precariously. The final shot of the sequence brings both worlds into the same frame, showing one woman sitting close to the wall, her male spirit double in the mirror. The film makes the distances between life and death, Africa and Europe proximate across the mirror shot of the women and the spirits. It understands horror as a wholly cinematic means of making systems of power visible and of countering them. Bliss Cua Lim considers that 'the spectral alerts us to the contiguity – rather than the subsuming – of diverse ways of inhabiting the world' (2009: 137), and this contiguity perfectly describes the two modes of representation brought together by the mirror. On the one side, a

naturalistic attention to lives lived in the shadow of migration. On the other, a supernatural response to the ocean's archive of Black death. These histories of migration and death, and of Europe's violent significance in Senegal's past, require the intervention of jinns to become imaginable.



Coloured lights

As Thérèse describes the events of the men's deaths from offscreen, we begin to see green points of lights play across the men's faces in lines and parabolas, refracting around the space of the night club. The swell of lights evokes waves, playing over the image and remediating the fatal crashes of water in the intangible, beautiful language of disco lights. We cut to Dior's face in close-up, crying. Green lights play over her but so does sea spray, visually mixing dots that are material – made of water – and those that are composed of immaterial light. As the green lights create swooping and circling patterns, the sea spray moves more randomly. Both forms surround Dior as she listens to this tale: the ocean water that seeps in from the Atlantic, from the space of horror and death, and the lights that decorate the club, a space of tawdry glamour and of life. The journal collective Bidoun describe the film as 'a sensualist's delight' (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 2), arguing that the textural qualities of colour and flashing neon light channel the ghostly realm of jinns. Diop says, 'I'd wanted the *Atlantics* score to sound as if written by a jinn', and sound forms a crucial component of this immaterial haunting. The disco light effect is introduced earlier in the film when Ada



tries unsuccessfully to call Souleiman. She sits in a dark part of the bar, lit only with neon green points of light that swirl around her as we hear the waves crashing on the beach. The electronic score evokes an otherworldly atmosphere, as the lights sweep back and forth, crashing over her like waves in electric form. These coloured lights render cinematically what is written on the body in the forms of haunting. In the mirror we see ghosts, but even in the 'real' space of the nightclub, cinematic form demands that we see the body as more than its manifest self. The lights are aesthetically beautiful, and they compel as a formalisation of the effects of what cannot be visualised – time, pain, love – on the body.

If these lights attune the spectator to invisible pasts, *Atlantics* stirs many such hauntings. Of course, the drowning of Black people in the Atlantic Ocean cannot but evoke the

transatlantic slave trade, in a haunting that is as unavoidable as it is painful. Kobena Mercer writes that the descendants of enslavers and enslaved alike share in a predicament arising from the unrepresentability of the past. While the former may be unreconciled with a history that has been wiped out of collective memory, the latter, it may be said, are haunted by too much memory; ghosted by the floating bodies of lost and unnamed ancestors buried beneath the sea. (1997: 67-68)

Atlantics reckons with such ghosting, both of the female protagonists who are haunted by loss and of a broader audience for whom Black cinema can form a mode of collective memory. Christina Sharpe describes 'Black being in the wake as a form of consciousness' (2016: 14), and we can see *Atlantics* as what she describes as 'wake work', balancing the

experience of that consciousness with something other than the dead weight of trauma. In evoking the Middle Passage through the men's deaths at sea, the film recalls what Hortense Spillers terms the 'oceanic [...]' as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet "American" either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all' (1987: 72). For Spillers, the oceanic bespeaks precisely slavery's stripping of name, place, and identity, and it is this 'nowhere at all' that Diop both recalls and rewrites. Narrated from their point of embarkation, where loved ones remember them, *Atlantics* can imagine its men as retaining their identities despite and through the oceanic. This recall, in bright lights that rain across the women's faces, is part of the work of reparation to which Diop aspires.

This doubling of the oceanic is a consequence of the more recent history of migration and death at sea to which *Atlantics* responds. As Alan Rice and Johanna C. Kardux put it, if there is an excess of Middle Passage memory, in the last two decades there has also been the return of actual African bodies crammed onto ships, trafficked and then washed up on Mediterranean shores – the ghostly memories become emblems of a new and horrific by-product of globalisation. Nineteenth-century slave narratives now have their twenty-first century equivalents in refugee narratives that summon Middle Passage ghosts. (2012: 256-257)

Young Senegalese people leaving the country via perilous boat journeys to Europe account for a high proportion both of migrants arriving in Southern Europe and of those who die en route (Pflaum 2020: 135-136; Mbaye 2014: 4). Many films address the migrant crisis in naturalistic ways – such as Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 *Fuocoammare* and Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea* (2015) – and indeed Diop's own short film *Atlantiques* (2009) is a documentary about young men who go to sea. The first half of *Atlantics* works beautifully as a portrait of life in Dakar, but the film becomes something rich and strange when the spirits return. Diop describes her own encounter with young men who were leaving for Europe, and one in particular who told her, 'When you leave, you're already dead'. This proleptic phrasing prompted her to

'envision Dakar as a ghost city, a city of the living dead' (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 10), and the temporalities at play in the already dead / living dead draw together past and present horrors. The aesthetic work of *Atlantics* is to find a form for the layered depths of this historical haunting.

The lights that play across the faces of Ada and Dior also speak to a more personal haunting: that of Diop's own diasporic identity and cinematic inheritance. As is well known, she is the niece of the filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty, and grew up with the influence of that generation of Senegalese filmmakers who defined the cinema of anticolonial liberation. Maguèye Kassé finds converging in *Atlantics* 'the engagement that Sembène nourished a half century ago with *Le Mandat* or *Guelwaar* and the desperate irony of her other teacher, Djibril Diop Mambéty, brother of Wasis, uncle of Mati, auteur of *Touki Bouki* and *Hyènes*.' (Sotinel 2019a: 12) *Atlantics* is a very different film from these radical texts, much more legible as art cinema. But what should engaged cinema look like today, and how can the descendants of Third Cinema navigate aesthetics and politics in the age of Netflix? Diop pays specific homage to her uncle's most famous work in an early scene in *Atlantics* in which a herd of cows cross the screen, and these cows are also seen in the opening of her short film *Mille Soleils* (2013). These repetitions are not mere echoes, as *Mille Soleils* forms an extended reflection on the historical distance between the production of *Touki Bouki* (1973) and the present. The film focuses on the lead actor in *Touki Bouki*, Magaye Niang, who forty years on is still driving cattle in Dakar. In one striking scene, we see a cleaner working in a nightclub not unlike the one in *Atlantics*, with mirrored tiles and coloured lights. In voice-over, we hear Niang describe a life story that echoes that of *Touki Bouki*, in which he wanted to go to France with his girlfriend but had no money. We cut to Niang, in the club, only for the punch line: 'She left. I stayed.' The nightclub is a space out of time, in which the many stories of lovers who left can be told. In another emotionally freighted intertwining of temporalities, Niang attends an anniversary screening of *Touki Bouki*, and in that film's climactic scene, he is sutured into the play of looks between the lovers. He looks through the audience, their heads partially blocking the screen, at the image of a woman standing on a ship, choosing to leave. In



the film, she looks back at Niang's character, ashore in Dakar, and we cut to him still, half a lifetime later, in more or less the same place. The film asks insistently what has changed in these postcolonial decades and what, despite political disappointments, could be a redemptive inheritance from Third Cinema?

Atlantics extends Diop's attention to these questions and insists that the inheritance is not only familial but is formed from the whole culture of Senegal's liberation cinema. Diop shares with Sembène an interest in the spaces in which the anti-modern or supernatural emerges with political force within realist texts. The use of an indigenous mask in *Black Girl* (1966) and the curse of impotence in *Xala* (1975) point to the recurrence of anti-realism in his political aesthetic and offer a lineage for Diop's spirits. Sembène, along with other West African filmmakers of liberation like Med Hondo, used anti-historicist forms to animate the forces of European

colonialism, religion, and African resistance. *Atlantics* does not reject realism in the same way – its use of the supernatural means that its anti-realism is diegetically contained. Nonetheless, there are significant continuities. In *Ceddo* (1977), for instance, an English-language gospel song disjunctively flashes forward to link enslaved Africans to their future in America. *Ceddo* evokes transatlantic Black histories through times and places that are not directly represented, and that are reinscribed in relation to specifically African postcolonial accounts of politics and belonging. *Atlantics* similarly evokes histories of colonialism and slavery through what is unseen, and similarly insists that these formal mechanisms are most vivid not as memorial but as present-day politics. Another echo of Sembène can be discerned in the choice of the Thiaroye neighbourhood as the film's setting: his 1988 film *Camp de Thiaroye* narrates the history of the infamous massacre in 1944 of West African infantry in the French

army by white French troops. Diop references the massacre in a press conference in Dakar, at which she says that she chose Thiaroye as a location for reasons both aesthetic and historical. 'It was almost an ethical choice, and it could only have happened here, a history of revenants who reclaim their due, that could only be in Thiaroye.' (*All Africa* 2019) The ghosts of Senegal's colonial history are also the ethical inheritances of Diop's cinematic forebears.

This legacy also falls differently on the diasporic artist. The wave of migration in the 2000s echoes the departure of so many in the post-independence years, the generation of Diop's parents, as a result of whose choices Diop was raised in France. She has reflected on her formation, noting that as a young adult, she lived in a very white world, quite distanced from her African origins (Sotinel 2019b: 3). It was not until she took time out of school to visit Dakar that she began to connect with her Senegalese family and culture – and there she witnessed the desire of so many young men to leave for Europe. A profile of Diop in *Le Monde* identifies 'shockwaves between the director's desire to return and the exodus of the young people' (Sotinel 2019b: 3). This tension between her diasporic impulse to remake an African identity and the urgency of the young men to find a European one fuels the film's complex accounting of desire and mourning. Upon Diop's return to Dakar for the premiere of *Atlantics*, she was greeted by Lebou women wearing traditional boubous and performing a Ndawrabine dance. They fêted her, singing 'thank you Mati for this blessing, little girl of Dial Diop ... thank you for this blessing, niece of Djibril Diop Mambéty!' (Leye 2019). These Lebou women perform a benediction on the diasporic daughter's return in a language that is at once feminine, traditional, cinematic, and generational.

In his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre conjures the generation of anticolonial resistance and liberation as men gathered around a fire, who ignore the French: 'a fire warms them and sheds light around them,' he warns, 'and you have not lit it.' (1963:13) These are the sons of the colonised – they refused to be 'dead souls' like their fathers, whose possession by colonial power rendered them 'zombies'. This classic text of French anticolonialism finds strong echoes in Diop's short film *Atlantiques*, which focuses

on just such a group of young men, gathered around, and lit by a fire, and which she shot on that first adult return trip to Dakar. As with Sartre's metaphor, these young men are the descendants of colonialism, but they are not the generation who rose up in the moment of anticolonial struggle, but their children, who long to leave for Europe and to escape the precarious conditions of postcolonial capitalism. In *Atlantics*, these are the men who return – if not quite as zombies, then certainly as another vision of dead labour. Thus, in Diop's intellectual inheritance, there is something of an elegy for the heroic era of anticolonial thought. (*Mille Soleils* is also very much an elegy for the lost artistic and political potential of that moment.) There is so much loss in the film, and yet there remains an echo of that fireplace as a legacy of anticolonial energy.

Atlantics also features fires set with purpose and replete with political energy: the spirit of Souleiman burns the marital bed of Ada's wealthy suitor Omar (Babacar Sylla) and the possessed women set ablaze the house of the corrupt boss N'Diaye. Fire is deployed as a form of refusal and resistance, in the sense that we use 'burn it down!' as a political demand to wholly remake systems of oppression. This violently vengeful energy of fire is largely replaced in *Atlantics*, however, by the radiance of disco lights, which awaken another affective register. As a visual mode of illumination and as a cultural form, disco lights offer a radically different set of connotations from fire. They are pretty, decorative, and colourful, in ways that are understood as feminine and can be dismissed as trivial, but which nourish intersecting forms of aesthetic resistance. Disco itself has long been theorised as a queer form (see Dyer 1979; Lawrence 2011) and it is equally a Black form, closely linked, as Jafari S. Allen (2022) has argued, to experiences of Black queer healing. This is also a cinematic history: *Atlantics'* nightclub evokes the final sequence of *Beau Travail* (Claire Denis, 1999) in which Denis Lavant dances alone in front of an almost identical mirror tiled wall, surrounded by sparkling disco lights. More recently, *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2018) deploys the neon lights of a nightclub to envision a space of refuge and joy for queer African women. When *Atlantics* shines disco lights on its characters, it conjures rich histories of queer and Black cultural resistance.

Ocean

Although it is set in a nightclub, the scene of the men's return reiterates images and sounds of the ocean. The club's architecture is open to the beach, constructing a space that is at once exterior and interior. We begin with Thérèse talking to Ada, the ocean visible in the background and the soundtrack layering waves crashing with eerie music. A reverse shot of Ada has a narrow focal length so that as the story of Souleiman's journey grips her, the ocean becomes blurry and abstract, yet still recognisable. As Thérèse moves toward the disastrous climax of her tale, we cut to a direct and frontal shot of the ocean, an empty and unchanging vastness, which discloses no detail of what has happened within it. We hold this unmediated view of the ocean for a long time as Thérèse speaks off-screen, the visual field at once empty and full. The tension created in this sequence between the complex resonance of the Atlantic in the film's textual system and the blankness of the shots of the ocean itself reiterates across the film. In an early sequence, Ada meets Souleiman for a rare moment of semi-privacy by the beach. Over another cutaway to the sea, Ada's voice off can be heard complaining that 'You're just watching the ocean, you're not even looking at me.' When we look out at the ocean, we are turned away from the people on land: point of view is always a restriction of attention and *Atlantics* makes the spectator feel the weight of that sensory distribution. The ocean is over-visible in the way that these images recur, punctuating the narrative and coding the sheer ubiquity of this view to life in Thiaroye. The view to the horizon is impassive, flat, and shimmering. We actually can't see anything when we see the sea. We can't see Souleiman's desperation or the way that the presence of the ocean tempts departure. There are no shots 'at sea' of the voyage, or of high waves, exciting peril, or of terror and catastrophe. No, we simply see the flat line of the horizon, viewed from the shore, just as we might see the sea from Marseille or Brighton or anywhere else.

The ocean is always there in *Atlantics*, offering an ontological aesthetic in the profilmic realism of city, shore, and sea. But the stories that it holds are legible almost everywhere else but in those flat, static views of the horizon. Lindsay Turner argues compellingly that the ocean imbues the entire atmosphere of the film, not only in the sense of mood or feeling



but materially, in the hazy polluted air of Dakar, 'The Atlantic, resting place for enslaved people taken from Senegal centuries ago and for migrant people leaving right now, repository of collective grief, literally becomes the air we breathe. The moisture in the air is the moisture from the sea; it is the evaporated substance of history' (2020: 190). What we do not see in the indexical thereness of the ocean image, *Atlantics* reveals in other ways: in the air, in spirit possession, and also in special effects. Diop's film does not use many visual effects, and the most computer-generated object in the film is not its ghostly revenants but the perfectly realist skyscraper that dominates its view of Dakar. The ocean's mute horizontality speaks in relation to its opposite – the vertical line of this shiny and fictional new development. This spectral building is a key part of the film's visual economy: built with real labour but fraudulent finance, it is the cause of Souleiman and the others going to sea. As a visual object, it condenses many kinds of postcolonial capitalist exploitation including corrupt development, the macho construction of giant statement towers, global speculative fantasy, the reproduction of local elites, and the contrasts in Senegal of extremes of wealth and poverty. These are all real things, but they're things that are hard to see. The not-real tower that we can see through cinematic effects enables us to see that which does not always register visually.

The climactic nightclub scene has a second part, and between the two, the possessed women take N'Diaye to the graveyard and insist that he dig the graves that their bodies cannot fill. As the men's former boss finally does some work,



struggling to dig the hard earth, Thérèse tells him, 'Every time you look at the top of the tower, you'll think of our unburied bodies at the bottom of the sea.' Her statement makes explicit the relationship between height on land (monuments to exploited labour) and the depth of the ocean (the nonhuman memorial to that labour). Cinema provides a visualisation of the human-built environment but it cannot easily see the bottom of the ocean. With its CGI tower, *Atlantics* does not only provide a synecdoche for neocolonialist capitalism in Africa, but for the challenge of engaged cinema in a neocolonial world. Cinema, the film proposes, is an apparatus primed to see with the eye of the boss, to see the glamour of capitalist environments and not the human and nonhuman spaces that represent their cost. By imagining the tower as a special effect, but the men's spirits as materially embodied – played by real actors, and simply composited in the mirror shots – *Atlantics* uses cinema's capitalist optics against itself. The camera cannot reach the deep of the ocean's dead, cannot ever see Souleiman again or fully register the depth of generational loss. But in dispersing the meanings of the ocean across the film's formal systems, *Atlantics* sees what (neo)colonial capitalisms do not want to imagine.

Bodies

When *Atlantics* returns to the nightclub, after N'Diaye has been dealt with, Ada walks in alone, without her girlfriends. The first shot of this iteration of the club is empty, only the

end of the bar orienting us to space, as blobs and lines of green light swoop across the frame and waves crash on the soundtrack. We cut to Ada, sitting alone and staring intently out of shot. Instead of a camera sweeping inclusively across a group of friends, the sequence introduces a much more spatially constrained and expressive relationship of camera and editing to bodies. As Ada gets up and walks nervously toward the unseen object of her gaze, spatial relations are rendered disjunctive. The next shot is not, as the spectator might expect, a point-of-view shot; instead, it cuts across the 180-degree line to show Ada walking back into shot in the opposite direction. She turns almost directly to camera, smiling, and we cut again, this time right on the line, but also unexpectedly jumping behind her. This series of cuts renders Ada's return to the club as uncanny and locates her – not one of her possessed friends – as prised out of quotidian experience. The reason for her dislocation becomes clear when Issa (Amadou Mbow) walks into shot: he is the policeman who has been possessed with the spirit of her dead lover.

As Issa walks toward Ada, we cut to a mirror shot, in which he is visible as Souleiman. They embrace as green lights swirl over Souleiman's white T-shirt. This embrace extends, expanding their amorous reunion across the entire remaining time of the scene. In medium shot, lights play across Ada's bare back as music gradually enters the sequence – first a melody, then chirruping cicadas, in an otherworldly soundscape. As they kiss, lights arc back and forth, and camera and editing likewise switch back and forth from Souleiman to Issa. After cutting between them, the camera tracks from Issa in the real world to Souleiman in the mirror, grounding both men in the same visual field. The camera moves down their bodies as Souleiman caresses Ada's butt and she smiles in pleasure and holds him closer. Time is elided and now we see the lovers naked, lying in front of that same mirrored wall. In a reverse shot of the empty club, white-capped waves roll in rapidly. In response to this breath-taking sequence, Diop speaks about cinema's dearth of images of Black love (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 14). In part, this scene is powerful because it is rare, but *Atlantics* moves beyond the simple fact of representation in the formal complexity with which this layering of mirrors, lights, ocean, spirits, and



desiring bodies moves us from postcolonial critique to reparative relationality.

Ada believes that Souleiman exists within the body of Issa, and in this corporeal doubling we find multiple openings to alterity. Contrary to most possession narratives, the humans possessed with these spirits are not viewed as violently dispossessed of their selves. The girls do not seem frightened by the presence of their former boyfriends within them, and Ada knows that she is embracing both Issa and Souleiman at once and accepts this multiplicity. But why does Souleiman return in the body of Issa, when all the other men possess women's bodies? Diop initially thought that Souleiman 'would return to haunt the body of a woman who would make love to Ada' (Cahen 2020). She explains that 'we abandoned the idea because I thought the Senegalese public was not ready for that' (Cahen 2020). Diop avoided a direct visioning of homosexual sex, but the film nonetheless registers queerness in its multiplicities of desire. Even without a same-sex couple, the multiplicity of Ada-Souleiman-Issa makes for a

queer relationality, a kind of polyamorous 'V' in two bodies. Moreover, a queerness remains within the film's regime of spirits. Most of the dead men return as women, and as we move back and forth from mirror to nightclub, each of the characters changes visible gender. This effect of mixing, crossing, and fusing evokes what Eliza Steinbock calls the 'shimmering' of trans cinematic forms (2019: 3), in which gender's mutability registers across the visual field. These are not queer or trans characters, but the mutability of gender, sexuality, and desire reimagines bodily hierarchies at the formal level. Diop's reimagining of the faru rab works against patriarchy, at once transforming women's agency and their relationships to their own and others' bodies. These hinted refusals of cis- and heteronormativity contribute both to the feminist force of Ada's refusal of marriage, and to the aesthetico-political force of staging Black love.

This corporeal politics resonates with the film's narrative of migration. In 2012, a wave of popular protests led by the 'Y'en a marre' movement, often called the Dakar Spring, helped

topple the corrupt president Abdoulaye Wade. For Diop, 'Y'en a marre turned the page on the attitude of "Barcelona or death". I told myself that the young people who went out into the streets to say "no" carried in them the youth who were lost at sea' (Sotinel 2019b: 3). Here, Diop describes the protest movement in the same terms as faru rab possession, with bodies containing within them the spirits of others. Just like Ada and her girlfriends gathering in N'Diaye's house, protests work by way of bodies simply being in public, creating political pressure from the solidarity of those who bear witness. As Diop describes her experience, 'the Dakar Spring "contaminated me", this vital insurrectional force inspired me to get to work and set my cinema at the same frequency as the uprising' (Goodfellow 2019). This idea of a cinema set 'at the same frequency' as the uprising emphasises the processes of attunement, both aesthetic and political. Frequency asks us to think about sound, pacing, temporality, and rhythm, which is one way to describe the film's gradual and then irrevocable disclosure of spirits' return. It also suggests frequencies that cannot be heard or immediately processed, but which must be sensed in other ways. Haunting imagines a supernatural frequency beyond normal human perception, but one not disconnected from the political. To be attuned to this frequency in *Atlantics* is to open oneself to a decolonised sensory register.

In Ada's love for Souleiman, *Atlantics* stages this frequency through emotion. From the beginning of the film, we are attuned to some inchoate sense of wrongness, and this sense is routed primarily through Ada's bad mood. She is not allowed to be with Souleiman, and she feels awkward in their secret embraces. She puts him off as he tries to tell her how he feels. Moreover, her mother and grandmother are angry with her for not being happy to marry Omar. She's not quite in synch either with her pious friend Mariama (Mariama Gassama) or with her more secular friends Fanta and Dior. Ada's mood is off, and she does not align with the prevailing social organisation of affect. Robert Sinnerbrink writes of cinematic mood that it 'is not simply a subjective experience or private state of mind; it describes, rather, how a (fictional) world is expressed or disclosed via a shared affective attunement orienting the spectator within that world' (2012: 148). Ada's bad mood orients us to a network of dissatisfactions – around gender,

economics, and social power – that will resonate across the film. As Sinnerbrink suggests, this production of mood does not merely build character but rather works to orient us to and within worlds. Kathleen Stewart writes of the ‘charged atmospheres of everyday life’ (2010: 2) and proposes atmospheric attunements as ‘forms of attending to what’s happening, sensing out, accreting attachments and detachments, differences and indifferences, losses and proliferating possibilities.’ (2010: 4) In the movement from Ada and Souleiman’s violent separation to their joyful supernatural reunion, *Atlantics* more than anything plays with the political potential of a change in atmosphere.

For the first half of the film, the atmosphere is one of impossibility and conflict. The men shout angrily at their bosses, who have not paid them in months. Ada is sullen when forced to spend time with Omar and quiet when she must undergo a humiliating virginity test. At her wedding party, Ada’s secular friends wear shiny dresses and pose for selfies in her ugly new bedroom, while her more religious friends gossip about how Ada should not hang out with those sluts. Ada herself skulks at the edge of the bedroom, refusing to step into the photos, and eventually leaves the room altogether. Everyone is at odds. But when Souleiman dies, the atmosphere changes. Ada becomes attuned to the ocean and when the spirits of the men return, the film’s opening onto supernatural horror precipitates a shift into a mood of agency and resistance. Ada and her girlfriends become attuned to the men who possess their bodies. There’s a solidarity in the emotional expression of all the girls (including former enemies Mariama and Fanta) and all the boys. They speak together, bodies and spirits combined. Political action – the revenge of the spirits against N’Diaye – emerges from this solidarity of attunement. And for Ada, her bad mood becomes not a way to disassociate from her inevitable marriage but a way of actively refusing it. She shrugs off Omar, refusing to align herself with his body or his values. Possession realigns attunement as Ada senses out the proliferating possibilities of her life.

The film’s final scene depicts Ada waking up alone, as her friend Dior cleans the bar. The women continue life, at the very edge of the Atlantic, in a dual space of neon waves and real ones that is always listening to the histories of the ocean. Its terrifying archive of death is right there, intimately understood, but life is produced alongside and separate from its weight. The

return of Souleiman’s spirit as a faru rab draws on animism to provide an alternative epistemology to that of neocolonialism but it cannot, on its own, offer freedom to Ada. In the aftermath of the night-time acts of just revenge and reparative love, *Atlantics* leaves us with Ada’s own sense of self. As she dresses, Ada looks toward the mirrored wall and for the first time, we hear her thoughts in voice-over. She says, ‘Last night will stay with me to remind me of who I am and show me who I will become.’ She looks directly to camera and announces herself as ‘Ada, to whom the future belongs.’ This final powerful shot is from the point of view of the mirror, which the film has consistently associated with the spirits of the dead. From this location, the camera position implies, the spirits also see Ada and witnesses her moving beyond them in time. Future is what Souleiman does not have, and the film thus points toward a beyond, after this space of ghosts and possession toward what Ada (the only woman not possessed) might do.

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