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TECHNOLOGY AND EMBODIMENTS IN MATI DIOP'S *ATLANTICS*

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Abstract: Increased securitization of borders and surveillance of bodies has led to an unprecedented precarity in the lives of refugees. With that, an ethical crisis has developed in film practice over the question of representation of these bodies and differentiating them from the crisis and racial images on circulation in mainstream media. In this paper I examine the Senegalese-French filmmaker Mati Diop's cinema, with a specific focus on her 2019 debut feature *Atlantics*, to analyze her interactions with the complex political economy of migration in Senegal. Approaching the films from the standpoint of two questions – of technology and of embodiment, this paper argues that interactions with technological objects in her cinema form crucial transmission points. These interactions play a key role in developing a cinematic language resistant to appropriation by mainstream discourses on refugee bodies and migration.

Keywords: mobility, refugee studies, migration and cinema, technology studies, representation

Over grainy images of a machine's gears whirring away, the recorded voice of a man recounts a perilous storm-tossed voyage across the sea, bombarded with waves on all sides. "You don't know where you are until the impact." In Mati Diop's short film *Atlantiques* (2009), made during a particularly turbulent time in Senegal's history of migration, we later identify the voice with Serigne, a repatriated young man who seems desperate to attempt another voyage. In these multi-layered opening images, we are struck by the formal choices of its low-fi audio-visual mise-en-scene which emphasizes the intense mediatization of the memories of its subject. Eschewing both the truth apparatus of documentary and the clean imagery of modern feature filmmaking, Diop unmoors the film somewhere between essay and document. Its formal techniques make explicit

the presence of film as an active, conditioning medium, highlighting the heavy technological saturation of our perceptual order.

In this essay, I will look at Diop's feature film debut as a director, the very similarly titled *Atlantics* (2019), which germinated from the 2009 short. But in her later film Diop expands her focus, locating the issue of migration amidst a host of other issues that condition being in Senegal. Placing Diop's film in dialogue with recent discourses on border studies and techno-mediated visual practices, I will attempt to argue that the film's interactions with technology present more than a reflection of today's material culture, and form important intersections in forming political collectivities across gender and class lines. Taking into account the socio-historical realities that surround the political economy of migration in Senegal, I will undertake a close study of the film's formal language. Through this, I seek to examine how its representations of embodied being present a visual register that circumvents the discourses on migration that oscillate between the binaries of victimhood and assimilation.

So far, a study of Diop's work has been impossible without exploring the deep genealogical roots she has in Senegal, particularly through the legacy of her filmmaker uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty (Collings, 2020). Diop herself performed an excavation of these links through her 2013 documentary on the making of Mambéty's classic *Touki Bouki* (1973), which has assumed an iconic status in African film history. As mobility forms a central concern in Mambéty's film, *Touki Bouki* will also fall into the orbit of this paper.

I shall approach the subject through the frame of two central questions – of technology and of embodiment. The relation between technology and cinema is a much explored one – as an art form dependent on a machinic apparatus and knowledge, cinema's visual practice and codes precede and transcend its machinic trappings. Cinema as the “social machine” (Comolli, 1980, 121) was uniquely positioned within the economic and cultural habitus of society to reproduce the norms of modernity. Over time, the debates surrounding cinema and technology have become more complex by its crucial position in a visual economy that encompasses multiple forms of media – including advertising, televisual media, video games, and virtual reality. In a society hypermediated¹ through screened images, text, graphics of various forms, our perceptual order is

¹ I use the term hypermediacy in the same connotation as Richard Grusin and David Bolter. It denotes the assemblage of various medial forms to create a combined interface. For a more detailed discussion of hypermediacy and immediacy as the two underlying logics of new media, see Bolter and Grusin, 2000, 20-52.

shaped daily through our interactions with these platforms that appropriate and reconfigure visual codes of representation. Intertwined with this are concerns over data privacy, surveillance and the precarity of struggle for justice in an economy dominated by large techno-media conglomerates.

Marie Godin and Giorgia Dona put forward the concept of techno-borderscapes in their study of the transnational encounters taking place at the Calais Jungle (the infamous detention camp located in France), identifying the crucial role that a technological economy, centered primarily around access to mobile devices, plays in facilitating activism, the refugees' self-representation and government surveillance (Godin & Dona, 2020, 1-17). The first part of this paper will engage with this concept, against the backdrop of the history of Senegal's migratory political economy. In doing so, I will attempt to examine Diop's engagement with technology and its intersections with logistical capitalism and surveillance in her films.

The second part of the paper will undertake a comparative study of *Touki Bouki*, Diop's experimental documentary on its afterlife *Mille Soleils* (2013), in order to draw out the complex legacy of the discourse on gendered mobility that Diop inherits. These two films inform Diop's framing of marginalized bodies in *Atlantics* and the embodied political collectivities she brings to fore. Through this analysis, I will attempt to show how Diop inherits and reconfigures the imagery of *Touki Bouki*, particularly through an engagement with techno-mediation and magic realist imagery.

I.

Diop's film takes place in the capital city of Dakar, which is one of the major centers of Senegalese migration (Uberti, 2014, 85). A key location along migratory routes between Africa and Europe, Dakar's proximity to the island of Gorée, the largest slave-trading center on the African coast between the 15th and 19th centuries, instantly forms linkages with the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Coverdale, 2020, 22). Dakar has historically been a major departure point for Senegalese laborers looking for better prospects in France (between 1940s till the 80s) and more recently in the Canary Islands (Maher, 2017). Over the course of the complicated history of migration in Senegal, several key incidents have shaped its course. It is difficult and unethical to think of migration in Senegal only through the lens of the twentieth century and afterwards. Regional mobility has always been part of the culture of the different ethnic groups that populated the region (Maher, 2017). The binaries of stasis and migration cannot be applied to life in Senegal, as mobility is considered an integral part of daily existence (De Bruijn in Uberti, 2014, 83).

Moving to more recent times, while France has traditionally been the preferred destination for migrants, Spain, Italy, and the United States have emerged as the new destinations after the imposition of a visa by France in 1986. The differential balance of power and neo-colonial tendencies has a role to play here too, as France welcomed Senegalese immigrants till the 80s in order to make up for its shortage in labour force. Its turn away from Africa was also in part due to a reorientation of mobility policies towards an inter-Europe direction, as part of the emerging European Economic Community (Maher, 2017). The relaxation of borders within Europe led to the shutting of doors and restrictions on mobility from countries outside its sphere. However, this did nothing to lessen the desire for migration among Senegalese youth. With shrinking employment opportunities in agricultural and fisheries industries, as well as the circulation of stories of relative affluence from Senegalese settled abroad, migration to Europe kept on increasing (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012, 407). The Schengen Agreement of 1995 (Bayraktar, 2016, 12) and the later bipartisan agreement between Spain and Morocco led to greater militarization and enforcement of border control measures in the Maghreb countries (Uberti 86), creating a situation of differentiated mobility (Massey cited in Bayraktar , 2016, 12).² The early twenty-first century saw a wave of what would be termed pirogue migrations (pirogue referring to the modified fishing vessels used for transportation). While migration from Senegal was previously facilitated by the Muridyaa brotherhood or a network of emigrants, stringent immigration policies rendered such routes untenable (Diop cited in Uberti, 2014, 87).³ Thus, even though pirogue migrations carried an immense risk, it became the only way out for many.

The memory of such a pirogue voyage serves as the crux of Diop's 2009 short *Atlantiques*, recounted by the aspiring migrant Serigne. Diop further emphasizes the loneliness and danger of such a voyage by capturing the journey of a lone boat across the frame, with film's low-definition imagery blurring out any distinction between the sea and the horizon, filling the shot with an immense infinitude. In Diop's *Atlantics*, Suleiman and his co-workers are driven to migrate via pirogue due to exploitative work conditions in a construction company. In an early scene, as Souleiman and the others speed away from a gigantic building in the city, created with CGI for the film (Romney, 2019), the workers break into a song. As a contemplative Souleiman ruminates

² Bayraktar cites Doreen Massey's notion of power geometry, wherein different groups experience differentiated mobility in varied ways. Some are benefitted by it, having a greater degree of access to mobility while others are actually immobilized by it. For more see Massey, 1994, 149-151.

³ For a more detailed analysis of the plausible causes of pirogue migrations see Uberti, 2014, 87.

over the choices that lay ahead, the affective rhythm of the song soon takes over his body. The scene is proleptically punctuated with shots of the sea. Between the phantasmagoric and obscene image of luxury represented by the skyscraper and the potential future of the sea, we catch glimpses of the male brotherhood and solidarity which strengthens Souleiman's resolve to undertake the difficult journey.

As is always the case in matters of life and death, there are contending discourses that present themselves through cultural images. Though economic factors are important, they are underlined by gendered and religious codes. Masculinity is a significant constitutive condition for the desire for migration, going to extent of defining those do not wish to migrate as 'women' (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012, 411). These rhetorics often take on heroic symbolic value, with communities such as fishermen recalling their collective histories as voyagers to justify their willingness to take on a perilous voyage (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012, 414). Marital traditions in Senegal demand of the man the financial power to pay 'bridewealth' and the liquidity to provide stable accommodation. Financial precarity feeds masculine anxieties of 'losing their girlfriends' to affluent émigrés who have completed the circuit of the voyage and successful return (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012, 411). Images of the luxuries of the successful migrant contend with images of the risk of the voyage. In *Atlantics*, this contrast is visible through the figure of its protagonist Ada's wealthy suitor Omar, the 'successful emigrant' selected to be Ada's husband by her family. While Diop shoots Suleiman and Ada's moments of intimacy in furtive, precarious spaces, Omar's claims on her are visualized in public spaces, under the approving gaze of family and state. Omar also gifts Ada an expensive iPhone, the symbolic significance of which will be discussed in detail later.

As Hernandez-Carretero and Carling note, the transition from a poor to a wealthier society paradoxically creates more desire to migrate (2012, 411). Senegalese youth are willing to risk the voyage as well as the subsequent employment in systems conditioned by racism, if it only signifies escape from the stasis of Senegalese life. In *Atlantiques*, Serigne invokes the brotherhood of fellow aspirants and fear for his family's financial security as the factors convincing him for the pirogue voyage. Diop frames Serigne against the flickering light of a fire, with its embers shooting across the frame and the grainy visuals bringing him in and out of focus, almost spirit-like, as he speaks of the pirogue voyage haunting him. The haunted and haunting figure of the failed migrant will go on to play a crucial function in her later feature *Atlantics*. Though fully aware of the risks involved,

Serigne still declares his resolve to leave, even at the cost of his life. These migratory desires are further imbued with religious value through the likening of the voyage to the journeys of saints and the exile and return of Mohammed (Uberti, 2104, 89). The symbolism of the triumphal return assimilates within it both the scriptural undertones as well as the promises of a change of fortune overseas. Technical objects such as the GPS and lifejackets sit side by side with amulets and prayers (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012, 415).

These gender and class-coded values have to contend with images in the mediasphere that aim to discourage migration, partly as a result of increasing pressures from European governments and heightened border policing. The illegal migrant is often visualized as a victim of expectations and fantasies, with the journey itself becoming mythified, a vessel of illusions (Uberti, 2014, 96). The socio-economic background is elided over in favor of a romanticized depiction of the migrant. Television commercials which feature actors pantomiming a pirogue voyage, songs and radio programs warning against illegal migration are often treated with a great deal of suspicion by aspiring migrants. Gender and class intermingle in conditioning this skepticism, as they perceive the warning to only come from those who are already privileged (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012, 414). These media representations rub up against the traditions of transnational solidarities, which valorize the contributions of migrants to Senegalese society (Uberti, 2014, 89).

Migratory networks have to negotiate a complex web of desire and the means of surveilling that desire. Finding secure channels of communication entails contending with the appropriation of those channels for the purposes of regulation. Digital communications between migrants, often through the aid of encrypted apps and burner phones, become an important site where the imaging of migrant bodies and techno-materiality coincide. In this context, Marie Godin and Giorgia Dona's concept of techno-borderscapes becomes an effective lens. While their study concerns the encounters taking place on the transit zones of migratory routes (the internment camps, detention centers) and not the mediasphere of the home nation, it still provides a useful framework to gauge the importance of technology in migrant lives.

Taking their cue from Arjun Appadurai's theorization of global cultural flows⁴, Godin and Dona conceptualize the techno-borderscape as zones of transnational encounters in which refugees' interactions through technological mediums lead to the unlocking of multiple

⁴ Appadurai identifies five dimensions of global cultural flows – ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, finanscaples and ideoscaples which are constitutive of our imagined worlds. For more see Appadurai, 1990, 296.

potentialities (Godin & Dona, 2020, 2). Within these zones, a techno-economy replaces actual currency in which access to mobile phones and connectivity to the internet play determinant roles (Godin & Dona, 2020, 8). But refugees are also aware of the potential for these digital networks to be co-opted by government agents and thus become vehicles of suppression and surveillance (Godin & Dona, 2020, 9). But the importance of these digital networks as sites of resistance and activism cannot be undermined. Images created by refugees of themselves through these devices, and their participation in self-representation become an important mode of contesting the ‘border-spectacle’ (Godin & Dona, 2020, 12). The border-spectacle reduces migrants’ images to the level of spectacle by enacting a heightened visibility of illegality at the border, resulting in racialization of migrant bodies (De Genova cited in Godin & Dona, 2020, 12). It is within these entanglements of mediatization, surveillance and techno-saturation that refugees’ lives intersect with each other, and in this same network we can locate Diop’s characters.

Unlike Moussa Toure’s *La Pirogue* (2012) which focuses on the journey via the boat itself, Diop’s camera refrains from such images. *Atlantics* is a film about those left behind, less about the “crew of Odysseuses” and more about the “collective force of waiting Penelopes” (Turner, 2020, 190). The absence of these images of the sea voyage lends a contemplative yet ominous tone to the shots of the sea in the film. Much has been discussed about the effects of these shots in the film. They participate in an evocation of the histories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Turner, 2020, 190), while also functioning as a border between the film’s realist and fable-like forms. Coming to represent the transit zone between Senegal’s present and its many possibilities (Ekun, 2021, 84), shots of the sea become a decentering gaze in the film as well, replacing the human as the subject of the film (Coverdale, 2020, 24). Within the web of the film’s intertexts, they are one of the many reference points connecting Diop’s film to her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki*. While Mambéty’s gaze is undoubtedly more satiric, using the shots of the ocean as punctuations to give his film a dizzyingly epic structure, Diop’s refusal to provide images of the perilous sea-voyage gives the ocean a spirit-like porous presence. It is dotted with the bodies that are not legible, the spectacle she refuses to engage with. The refusal to indexicalize the experience of passage is seen in her short *Atlantiques* as well, in which we catch a glimpse of the sea only through a grainy image, with an aircraft passing over.

Diop’s implicit acknowledgement of the biopolitics of border-control is in sharp contrast with the gaze of a European filmmaker like Theo Angelopoulos whose *The Suspended Step of The*

Stork (1991) begins with a spectacle of grim witness in the ocean, as two helicopters circle the floating corpses of a group of Asian refugees. The refusal on Diop's part could be seen as part of an ongoing practice to abstain from using crisis imagery, as media's oversaturation with it can hardly elicit an empathetic response. Diop consciously engages in a practice similar to documentary cinema, wherein filmmakers choose to "radically deconstruct or reconfigure representation" (Rossipal, 2021, 35).⁵

If Souleiman's trajectory is subject to policing via the militarized techno-borderscape, the devices for the surveillance of Ada's body have been in place for much longer. A combination of patriarchal codes and capitalist values, they are mediated through new commodity forms. The mediation of social relationships through objects is a norm in commodity-based societies (Marx cited in Ramsay, 2009), and in a society in flux due to global migratory flows, these often take the shape of markers of accumulated wealth. In this case, it is the new iPhone Ada receives from Omar. The gift-giving marks a transition of Ada's body into Omar's 'possession,' as a bordering device between her and Souleiman. Omar's accumulated wealth is displayed in other ways too – in the lavish bedroom where Ada expresses her discomfort in being photographed by her friends. The bedroom later catches fire mysteriously, for which the police suspect Souleiman. Ada's unease and unwillingness to be framed within this network of exchange is palpable throughout, and the iPhone plays an important role in her eventual breaking free.

Throughout the film Ada is subjected to near-constant surveillance: from her parents who momentarily confiscate her phone upon learning of her relationship with Souleiman and compel her to take an invasive 'virginity test,' and the police detective Issa who suspects she possesses some information about Souleiman's whereabouts. Ada is robbed of any agency in the incidents which come to regulate her life – Souleiman's voyage and later mysterious sightings, her marriage to Omar, and Issa's investigations. In these portions of the film, we often find Ada asleep or attempting to fully articulate her suspension in the system that conditions her being. The focus on Ada's surveilled body also brings into focus logistical capitalism's intrinsic relation to surveillance practices, in which as Catherine Zimmer has argued, cinema is already deeply implicated. She

⁵ Rossipal identifies a politics of refusal and opacity in contemporary documentary cinema as an effective tactic to resist the drive towards logistical capitalism, which demands more visibility and access to bodies. This drive towards more visibility is remarkably similar to the conventional humanitarian documentary's desire for more of the 'real'. Analyzing the images in contemporary documentaries centered on refugee bodies, Rossipal finds that imagery which positions the refugee subject to embody the crisis ultimately slots them into the categories of victims. For more on the relations between logistics and visibility see Rossipal, 2019, 105.

identifies the rise of cinema to be linked with that of a culture saturated with mediation and surveillance (Zimmer, 2011, 428). Surveillance practices' origin in those designed to both produce and regulate the visibility of bodies with difference shares with cinema its politics of gaze towards marginalized bodies, attesting to a complex history of visibility.⁶

The first breakage in this flow of images comes in the form of a nighttime phone call and a message, claiming to be from Souleiman. Her friend Dior, who runs a club by the sea which was a popular rendezvous point for young men and women, warns her of it being a police trap. The suspicion is nearly proven true when Ada finds Issa at the meeting spot instead of Souleiman, but a reflection in the mirror shows him to be Souleiman instead. The marriage-gift to bar Ada from her life with Souleiman is actually transformed into a transmission device for a communication from beyond death. The machine is momentarily desynchronized from its function as surveillance and commodity, to serve as an activation of bodies deemed lost and illegible.

The phone continues to play an important role in Ada's journey. After an argument with Omar, she chooses to sell the phone and buy another from a street-side vendor. In severing her ties to the circulation of this object, she immediately associates herself with more clandestine communicative circuits, away from the visibility of the patriarchal gaze. Her actions therefore raise questions about the possible agencies in a techno-surveilled world.

Ada's reluctance to be coded into the networks regulated by the state and patriarchy is an attempt to remove herself from its circulation of self-validating images. In a society of control, subjects are accorded levels of privilege and stability (Deleuze, 1992, 4)⁷, as long as they participate in the continuous flux of the commodity form, in its transposition of itself as constitutive of social relations. Ada's discarding of the commodity which doubled as a tether to a patriarchal marriage-bond, as well as a symbol of her assimilation into a social class detached from her being, is indicative of a desire to render herself 'opaque.' Edouard Glissant defined the right to opacity as 'subsistence within an irreducible singularity' and a foundation of ethical relations with the other (Glissant, 1997, 190). Glissant contrasts opacity to transparency, a reductive

⁶ The configurations of both surveillance and spectacle allow them to manage both attention and bodies (Turner cited in Zimmer, 2011, 433). Zimmer's work on early cinema's production of racial bodies only to deny their subjectivities is an important one here (Zimmer, 2011, 432), as new technologies embed the viewer in embodied experiences similar to that of the rupture of sensory-time caused by cinema at its advent (Hanna and Sheehan, 2019, 7-8).

⁷ Deleuze differentiates the society of control from Foucault's disciplinary society, principally with the notion of the subject being in a continuous network. With corporations and global finance playing a major role in the regulation of these societies, the individual is accorded a sense of privilege in the social order through changing salaries, ensuring a "perpetual metastability."

ontology that attempts to assimilate the other through rendering them visible and legible.⁸ Ada's rebellion against assimilation into the techno-networks of state and family thus initiates a journey into a reestablishment of sociality in the film. Simultaneously it also raises the tensions between political cinema's commitment to making visible marginalized bodies, its complicity with logistical capitalism's drive for more visibility and the need for a politics of opacity. What constitutes a cinema of opacity or rather how does one embody opacity in a medium predominantly indexical?⁹ It is in this context that Diop's critical work with images begins to take hold.

II.

Understanding the discourse of mobility and embodiment in Diop's films necessitates a detour through both her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty's influential *Touki Bouki*, Diop's excavation of Senegalese history, and the afterlife of *Touki Bouki* in the documentary *Mille Soleils*. These films are conjoined by a shared network of images, that through their resonances and differences inform the politics embodied in Diop's *Atlantics*.

In Diop's documentary *Mille Soleils* she takes Magaye Niang as her subject. Niang played one of the protagonists Mory in *Touki Bouki*. Mory who spends most of the film attempting to wrangle a way out of Senegal only to turn back at the last moment. Like Mory, Niang too had decided to stay back in Senegal, and Diop's ruminative film often blurs the boundaries between the two. An exploration of the cinematic afterlife of a classic but also her own transcultural heritage, *Mille Soleils* utilizes both DV and 35 mm formats, in an amalgam of found footage and fictional styles to open up a zone of intersecting temporalities. *Mille Soleils* follows the practice of low-definition filmmaking, it's found footage gaze at Niang at once intimate yet self-reflexive. The dichotomy is best represented in a scene during a public screening of *Touki Bouki*, when Niang

⁸ Glissant's notion of opacity has been explored in connection to its potential to resist the standardization of bodies through biometric surveillance technologies. Its tactical capacity to problematize the effectiveness of digital techno-control and stretch the limits of visibility has been effectively demonstrated in works like the Facial Weaponization Suite by Zach Blas, especially in relation to marginalized queer bodies. For more on the relation between biometrics and opacity, see Blas and Gaboury, 2016, 155-162.

⁹ The desire for more indexicality itself can be linked to the fantasies of reconstructing linear relationships between the state and its citizen, between the nation and its subject. (Brown cited in Hanna and Sheehan, 2019, 3). This can be complicated through embodied sensory images, somewhat akin to Laura Marks's conception of haptic visuality, which defy linear temporalities in favour of multimodal and interactive experiences (for a more detailed discussion see Marks, 2000, 162). With the integration of CGI, 3D imagery, data mapping, video game aesthetics, the evolution of cinema into an assemblage of multilayered medial forms brings to sharp focus the question of the perceptual regime of our times.

points out his image on the screen to a group of boys, who protest saying the ‘real’ Niang has white hair.

Marème Niang, who played the co-protagonist Anta, migrated just like her on-screen character. The film uses these co-incidences to further liminalize the documentary’s propensities towards linear narratives and claims to truth. James S Williams writes,

In an escalating vertigo of floating identities, Magaye and Marème in *Mille Soleils* are actors who are playing both themselves and the reincarnation of their fictional characters Mory and Anta, although in the case of Marème her voice must stand in for her physical presence.

(Williams, 2016, 88)

Williams likens *Mille Soleils* to a trickster tale, with its presentation of real footage getting increasingly implicated into sequences of images that appear more and more fictional (2016, 92). As Mambéty’s film rebelled against social realist tropes, Diop cleverly recirculates and reconfigures pivotal images from the original film to both make a new age *Touki Bouki* as well as explore her own complex reception of her uncle’s films and legacy.

A pivotal moment in *Mille Soleils* borrows its imagery from the most iconic image from *Touki Bouki* – Mory’s motorcycle fitted with the horns of a zebu. In the original, a hyper-realistic scene of animal slaughter set in the abattoir is followed by the first appearance of Mory’s motorcycle, in a point-of-view shot riding through a busy market street. Both the abattoir and Mory’s vehicle are imbued with heavy symbolic meaning in Mambéty’s film. The motorcycle and its adornment allow Mory and Anta a great degree of mobility through the city, mediating their interactions with a wide range of characters, denoting the social relations in place at contemporary Dakar. This is in contrast with their desire for mobility across borders, which is a far more complex affair. When we see the port of Dakar, it is plastered on all sides with prohibitive no exit signs, patrolled by a man wielding a club patrolling in front. But the motorcycle stitches together a tapestry of movement across Senegalese society, a synecdoche image symbolizing the already existent culture of mobility already existent. The horns of a zebu signify the presence of the practices that sustain sociality in society, which have been grafted onto a vehicle of modernity – a visible point of tension that acts as the extension of Mory’s body.

Mory’s relatively easy access to different sections of Senegalese society is not accorded to Anta though. Differential barriers policed by male privilege impede her movement. Hence it is Mory who is seen driving the motorcycle for the major portion of the film. In an early sequence, a

group of left-wing students from Anta's university assault Mory and break off the horns from the motorcycle, further establishing it as a marker of masculinity. Denying him mobility equals to an emasculation. One of the graphic scenes of animal slaughter is juxtaposed with this sequence, and Anta's reaction to it is of visible unease. The only time Anta rides the motorcycle (Mory having ditched it for a car emblazoned with the American flag) she suffers a crash, and the motorcycle passes from their hands to a man dressed like a caveman. The motorcycle thus becomes Anta's biometric of everyday life – simultaneously the device through which she expresses her desire for mobility, yet also a tracker and regulator of it. As she is subjected to the regulatory gaze of society, the motorcycle in her hands becomes an untenable vehicle – its heightened mobility and visibility unable to give shape to her opacity. *Mille Soleils*, in contrast, is marked by the striking absence of Anta/Marème, embodied only as a voice on the other side of a phone call. Her arrival in the film is heralded by the visual shift from Dakar to the icy frontiers of Alaska, framed against the ocean. The sea is an ever-present image across all the films in Diop's corpus, used as an image in contention against more indexical presentations of migration.

The motorcycle has had a long afterlife in cinematic memory – becoming the identifying image for Mambéty's film and an era of vibrant African experimental cinema, used by Beyoncé and Jay Z as a promotional image for their On The Run II tour sparking debates on cultural appropriation (Gilbey, 2018) and of course, undergoing a revival in Diop's *Mille Soleils*. Diop uses the image of a man dressed up like Niang in *Touki Bouki* riding the emblematic motorcycle to once again collapse the two films into one another. The visual register of the film shifts from the grainy found-footage to the more fantastic icy landscapes of Alaska. A conversation follows with Marème about the nature of unhomeliness. "You don't have a home until you've left and as soon as you're gone you can't go back." It could be read as a comment on migratory desires but also a personal coming to terms for Diop with her history.

Touki Bouki can be read in many ways – as avant garde experimentation, as a fable or an historical allegory. What concerns us in our discussion on technology and embodiment is the way Mambéty turns the organo-machinic hybrid of the horned motorcycle into a device of embedding discourses of modernity, masculinity and unhomeliness onto the bodies of his protagonists. The slaughterhouse images and the motorcycle are entangled with each other, forming a coupling of images which pull the protagonists in contradictory directions in each scene, the everyday being in Senegal erupting into Mory's fantasies of escaping it. The machine both molds the fantasies of

the protagonists, but also transmits the point of singularity which ultimately cannot be reconciled with their desires.

Touki Bouki and Diop's excavation of its history in *Mille Soleils* are both characterized by the tensions between mobility and stasis, visibility and opacity and their relation to the practice of image-making. The figure of Ada in *Atlantics* is the inheritor of two politics of image-making: first, the transition from the 'poor image'¹⁰ of *Atlantiques* and *Mille Soleils* which problematized indexicality through their self-constitutive grain and spatio-temporal shifts to the cleaner, and apparently conventional visual register of *Atlantics*. Second, the images of the surveilled bodies of the marginalized, entangled in the extractive networks of extraction through state and family, and their gendered access to mobility, are carried onto a new visual register.

The discourses underpinning Diop's *Atlantics* are very different from *Touki Bouki*, as it is also a different Senegal she encounters. If there is an early shot of a herd of cattle moving across the frame, the focus is quickly shifted to the urban spaces dominated by the CGI constructed tower, and the many construction sites dotting the cityscape. The phallic utopian modernity denoted by the tower is juxtaposed with the sites of exploitation of laboring bodies. Its embedding within a realist framework, as well as the magic realist tropes used later allow Diop to build a composite image interface in her film. The filmed city lays out two futurities for Dakar – one by the virtual tower built on exploitation, the other belonging to a 'magical' community, exceeding the normative and establishing solidarities.

Like Mambéty, Diop too frames an early scene of intimacy between her protagonists by the sea. Except in this case, they are interrupted by another man who violently ejects them from the site. As discussed previously, Ada's body is heavily surveilled, and she has no motorcycle to ride on.

Diop soon casts off realist molds to transform her film into a more fable like narrative. At night, many of the women suffer from a strange disease, which culminates in their possession by the spirits of the men who were lost at sea. They demand justice in the form of unpaid wages from N'Diyaye, the construction tycoon who had exploited them while alive. We are never shown the circumstances that led to their deaths, only a telephonic conversation describing the remnants of a

¹⁰ The integration of CGI, 3D imagery, data mapping, video game aesthetics, the evolution of cinema into an assemblage of multilayered medial forms brings to sharp focus the question of the perceptual regime of our times. As Hito Steyerl points out, the grainy, defocused, experimental images we associated with avant-garde, counterculture cinema have been replaced with flattened 'clean' images, which fit better with the neoliberal economy of images.

boat floating in the sea. Their demands for their pay even beyond death is not only a reflection of the film's radical stance on labor politics, but rooted in the history of the site of filming. The film was shot in the fishing community of Thiaroye which is infamous for the 1944 killing of African soldiers by French officers for demanding equal pay (Freeman, 2020). In addition to this, Diop drew on the folklore of djinns or more specifically the *faru rab* who are spirits of male lovers possessing the bodies of women (Dry, 2019). Diop's interpretation of this bit of folklore throws into focus the logics of capitalism, religiosity and masculinity that condition migration in Senegal. But also like her uncle, they form an aperture for the everyday habitus of Senegalese women to be molded into a magic realist tale. This magical realist turn, effectively bifurcates the film into two temporal zones. During the day, Diop's camera focuses on the supine bodies of the women, struggling to come to terms with the residues of their night-time hauntings. The day also marks the time when Ada is subjected to the state's surveilling strategies. In contrast, under the lunar night, Diop transforms Dakar into a fantastic, haunted space, activated by the phone call from Souleiman. As the women are possessed by spirits, their eyes become opaque whites, lending their faces a ghastly inscrutability. Yet, Diop does not render them into automatons. In one scene, Ada's encounters the possessed women in a nightclub by the sea. This scene provides the only account of the men's migratory experience, narrated by one of the women to Ada, framed against the moonlit sea. As she recounts the traumatic journey, the possessed women are transformed into the images of the perished men, fixated in postures of waiting.

When the men migrate, Ada's friend Dior expresses her concern that their absence will cause a financial decline for her nightclub. Diop counteracts these concerns by consistently framing an existing sociality among the women, who will come to populate the club soon. The tale of the *faru rab* usually functions as a patriarchal gaze policing women's body, but Diop turns it on its head. The possessed women are accorded an almost fantastic mobility across the city space, where even the presence of security and police patrols are unable to stop them from breaching N'Diaye's house. As they walk across the city at night, they take on more masculine gaits. This is most clearly visible when they visit the nightclub, occupying the spaces like the men used to. As they sit, Diop frames them through the crisscross pattern of a mirror, rendering the image kaleidoscopic in texture. The pattern also resembles a border-fence. This queering of their bodies locates them beyond the conventional registers that render bodies legible. Their identities cannot be fixed, leaving them free to traverse the urban space that would otherwise differentiate and

discriminate. The collapsing of bodies is a crucial framing device to transform the community of women into a political collective.

On the other hand, Issa who begins the film as an embodiment of the state's executive arm of surveillance and violence, undergoes a techno-mediated transformation of his own. Plagued by a mysterious disease during the nights (when he is possessed by Souleiman's spirit), he obsessively trawls through camera footage to discover who set fire to Omar's bedroom. In between we are shown his increasingly fraying relationship with the state's authority through his commanding officer's inability to reach him over phone. As he becomes bodily possessed his availability in the state's framework suffers inexplicable glitches. His moment of realization comes when he discovers himself (in his possessed state) in Ada's wedding video. By no means an original trope, he nevertheless finds himself implicated in the gaze of an Other, unable to comprehend the gaps between his two selves – the one where he is consciously present as the policeman, or where he is present as Souleiman. His feeling of dislocation comes mediated through the gaze of the camera, whose presence reveals the limit of his conscious objectivity and the negative presence of his body. Unfortunately for him, Souleiman is well beyond arrest. Diop enacts another moment of collapse here, merging (and yet through the camera differentiating) the bodies of Souleiman, the fugitive and Issa, his pursuer. As a police officer who for most of the film acts as the protector of bourgeois interests, he is compelled to crossover to the other side. This transformation of his body into near-automaton state, buoyed by waves beyond his control, his body responding to a call other than his conscious mind. His interfaces with technology work in two ways – in making explicit the limits of the state apparatus he thought himself to be allied with, and in alienating his self-image from him, allowing for new potential solidarities.

Atlantics climaxes by fulfilling Ada and Souleiman's sexual union in the nightclub. The audio-visual framing turns this tender scene into affective experience, accentuated by Diop's framing. While we see Issa with Ada, in the kaleidoscopic mirror he is transformed into Souleiman. Their exploration of sexuality forms a part of Ada's mourning for Souleiman, replacing the detachment of grief with an affective involvement. The film returns to its framing of the sleeping bodies of women. But these are not the same bodies trapped in stasis of despair and waiting, recognizing their potentialities. These reinvigorated socialities among the women of *Atlantics* forms a crucial distinction from the other films discussed here. Unlike Anta/Marème, Ada is not a

lone figure. She is not framed against an empty, foreboding ocean, but one interspersed with activity as her friend Dior begins a new day by setting the tables in her club.

The state's involvement in the affair is ended in an ambivalent manner, in the form of Issa depositing a pen drive to his boss and declaring the case to be closed. The handover of a device designed for efficient data transfer is instead used to bring an indefinite, inconclusive end. We are unaware of the 'evidence' inside the pen drive, only assured that it will raise more questions than answers, rendering these bodies further opaque and unintelligible from the perspective of power.

While *Atlantics* does not foreground the filmic grain like *Atlantiques* or blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction like *Mille Soleils*, Diop problematizes the legibility of realist cinema through such techno-mediated transformations into the phantasmagoric. The queering of the women's bodies and the haunting of devices of surveillance and control allows her to open a space for a cinematic practice of opacity.

Diop's interfacing of the historical and folkloric with the technological allows us to form new understandings of the processes bodies undergo as they shift between different ontological states. The changing modulations of the filmed city of Dakar, from the CGI tower to construction sites, alcoves of the wealthy to the active community of women present different orders of reality, through which her subjects negotiate a complex path of worlding. In all three of her works discussed here, she presents her characters within intersections of multimedial memories and social codes. The technological mediums impinge upon the filmed bodies their discourses of power and knowledge, resulting in some conscious filmic choices on Diop's part. In her films, she combines her interactions with the history of Senegal with a practice of collapsing of boundaries between fact and fiction, collective and personal histories and most crucially between gendered and regulated bodies. Drawing on and reconfiguring the images of Senegalese cinema history, Diop examines a changed terrain of mobility. She is making her films in an era of intense securitization and emergent technocracies, which condition the unique modes through which her characters resist the positive mapping of bodies. Images no longer contained by bordered definitions of genre, geopolitical identity or linear temporality, can interact with a vast network of images of surveillance, alternative communications and radical politics. In Diop's cinema, embodiment and its complex relationship with technology give us a glimpse into how a new ethics of image-making can take center-stage. The return of repressed and lost bodies, that do not fit their language into

the accepted registers of thought, populate the technological channels and transduce them with different intensities.

While her three films have been received as important examples of a transcultural ethics of filmmaking, they raise several other important questions. The key among them being narrative film's capacity to resist the demands of neoliberal visual modes of production and generate ethical spaces for thought to flourish. The inadequacies of a cine-politics entirely dependent on the imagery of victims and nationalist rhetorics of multiculturalism and assimilation point towards the need for newer modes of presentation of thought itself. This is integral for the process of recognition of a subject – both the conditions that bring it into being and the unsayable, inarticulate negativity of desires. Diop's cinema is a remarkable practice of embodied thought process, which allow us to think of the body as a networked phenomena and how it can be filmed in newer, more ethical ways.

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