

# FILM REVIEW

**Mati Diop, director. Mati Diop and Olivier Demangel, writers. *Atlantique*.** 2019. 104 mins. French, Wolof, Senegal, France, Belgium. Ad Vitam and Netflix. No price reported.

In Mati Diop's mysterious supernatural drama *Atlantique*, a disgruntled, defrauded construction worker Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré) (see [Figure 1](#)) secretly plans his escape to Europe from a gentrifying Dakar, leaving his beloved Ada (Mame Bineta Sane) (see [Figures 1 & 2](#)) to pick up the pieces. Against her will, Ada is coerced into a union with the arrogant and wealthy Omar (Babacar Sylla), who has returned from abroad. As the authorities investigate a series of unexplained fires that disrupt the social and economic order, the zombified bodies of those who remain behind in Senegal host the spirits of the departed would-be migrants.

The ocean looms large in *Atlantique* (English title: *Atlantics*), Mati Diop's stunning debut feature (following up on her short *Milles Soleils*), a work with a deep connection to the socio-realist tradition of Ousmane Sembène. This marine meditation on disenfranchisement, corruption, and irregular migratory strategies thrusts the viewer deeply into the daily inequities and affronts of the postcolony, resonating with Djibril Mambéty's narration of the delusions of power and wealth. The ocean occupies much of the screen, scene after scene. The mood is somber, brooding, and almost malevolent. Currents caution fishermen and undertows rip young migrants asunder. Crashing waves hypnotize impoverished coastal-dwellers, just as they echo throughout the theater. A relentless discordant musical overlay by the Kuwaiti-Senegalese composer Fatima Al Qadiri captures the drowsy fatigue of life centered on a beach. Bedroom and club scenes are bathed in greens, blues, and that calming late evening campfire-on-the-ocean-beach gloss. Even the credits gutter in a luminous turquoise-cum-tourmaline.

Diop's haunting magical realism unfolds slowly, confidently, and powerfully, rendering *Atlantique* highly accessible to a wide audience. The sensuous dialogue and luxurious palette draw the viewer in and down like relentlessly cascading waves. Cinematographer Claire Mathon (*Stranger by the Lake* 2013) wistfully guides the viewer from brightly lit domestic interiors to shadowy, litter-strewn, sandy streets, and hazy beaches and dunes. Only a Senegalese

**Figure 1.** Ibrahima Traoré and Mame Bineta Sane in *Atlantics*. Photo: Courtesy of Netflix.



resident or regular visitor would recognize the futuristic tower under construction in the opening minutes as a fabrication. After toiling in the sun for months without pay, Souleiman and his co-workers quit and then hastily leave on a voyage along the Atlantic coast, though we never see them depart. The inexplicable blazes inside homes and apartments remain contained and out of frame, only viewable as shadows, silhouettes, and smoke. During the still of the night, puzzling illnesses reminiscent of malaria befall the abandoned lovers. Single and in groups, silent, slow, zombified women walk empty streets and gaze with melancholy out to sea. The spirit possession is subtle, playful, and only comes into full gothic view in the last third of the film.

By focusing on the lives of those left behind, Diop and co-writer Olivier Demangel shift the prevailing filmic (and scholarly) narrative of migration away from the traumas of mobility and relocation and toward the disruption and heartbreaks experienced by bereft families and friends. In contrast with the gentle supernatural aesthetic, the richly layered screenplay is familiar, real, all too plausible, and deeply troubling. Young workers are ignored and cast aside by a corrupt businessman. The opening scenes feature men fighting for their salaries, frustrated by their working conditions, and fearful for the families they ostensibly support. Young women are thrust into the fraught roles of sex worker and bar hostess. Their slender, febrile bodies adorn the walls and occupy the stools of beachside nightclubs. Or they candidly consider the benefits of marrying well, and in so doing contribute to the coercion of a forced “marriage” at the behest of senior male lineage

**Figure 2. Mame Bineta Sane in *Atlantics*. Photo: Courtesy of Netflix.**



heads, in the prelude to the wedding ceremony. Police chiefs do the bidding of their wealthy patrons. Migrants drown at sea without a trace.

Exactly how to characterize the genre of the ghostly *Atlantique* has provoked considerable debate among reviewers, fans, and scholars. It screened in competition at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival and won second prize. More astonishingly, Diop, who hails from a distinguished artistic lineage, is the first black woman to direct a film in competition. After this initial success, it was selected as the Senegalese entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Academy Awards. To be sure, it has been superbly marketed by the world's largest streaming platform. Despite its success, however, it suffers from modest scriptural naïveté. Ada's brief imprisonment is largely inexplicable. The detective Issa (Amadou Mbow) stumbles onto data that resolves his own investigation but with a new dilemma. At the same time, the plot resolution only serves to underscore the intractability of the problem at the center of the story, namely the push-pull factors thrusting impoverished West Africans into perilous ocean voyages.

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