

Katrin Pesch

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Realism as ontological unrest: Digital aesthetics and reparative dynamics in Mati Diop's 'Atlantics'

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Abstract

Grounded in Dakar's elemental properties as much as manifestations of immaterial and virtual presence, French-Senegalese director Mati Diop's film *Atlantics* (2019) embodies what Thomas Elsaesser has described as a post-photographic realism of world cinema. In this article, I show how *Atlantics* collapses divisions between the evidentiary and the ghostly within the same realist impulse to create a reparative postcolonial aesthetic. Furthermore, as seen in the lucid depiction of Dakar's clairvoyant nights, the ontological unrest of the film's post-photographic realism also happens at the level of image aesthetics.

Keywords: ontological turn, materiality, virtual, digital night filmmaking, neo-colonialism

Within the past decade, world cinema has increasingly been theorised as a realist cinema, whether as a new post-photographic ontology inflected by the re-evaluation of human and non-human relationships), a sensory mode of address drawing from the engagement of physical reality, or a mode of production particularly invested in location.[1] Shot on location in and around Dakar, featuring predominantly local non-actors, and deriving recurring themes from the material, elemental qualities of the city, French-Senegalese director Mati Diop's film *Atlantics* (2019) is situated within this nexus of realist world cinema. Revolving around a doomed love story between soon-to-be married Ada and construction worker Su-leiman, the film tells the story of a group of desperate young men and the women they leave behind. Driven by outstanding wages, the men take to the sea in search of a better life in Europe only to succumb during their attempt to cross the ocean.

At once a body of water and geopolitical space marked by the violence of the transatlantic slave trade, the ocean takes on an inhuman presence. The film swiftly crosses from realism into the supernatural when the spirits of the men return from the depths of the water, possessing the bodies of the women to claim what is owed to them from their former employer.

Grounded in Dakar's material properties as much as manifestations of immaterial presence, *Atlantics* embodies what Thomas Elsaesser has described as a post-photographic ontology of world cinema, a new realism characterised by a tension between physical and virtual presence. 'To address realism in world cinema, today', he writes, requires engaging with what has been termed the 'ontological turn', the return of the real, the presence and agency of 'things.' On the agenda is a new materiality, a new concern and respect for reference in the visual media.[2]

Despite its concern for the physical world, however, 'the new realism or ontological unrest' often features haunted space or 'protagonists where it is not clear to either themselves or the audience whether they are still alive or dead, whether they inhabit another realm altogether or have come back from the dead'.[3] The ontological unrest in world cinema, so says Elsaesser, helps cast doubt on 'our most fundamental assumptions about the diegetic world as a coherent time-space continuum'.[4] In its conflation of the evidentiary and the ghostly, *Atlantics* exemplifies the new post-photographic realism of world cinema. As the film slides into the fantastical, the realist depiction of Dakar is increasingly altered through digital manipulation while the viewer is confronted with invisible yet palpable forces that are haunting the characters. However, as Diop's use of digital technology shows, a post-photographic ontology affects not only our epistemological horizon and spectatorial position, but also requires attention to the role of digital photography itself. In *Atlantics*, the ontological unrest also happens at the level of the image. The digital becomes a way to modulate the relationship between reference and artifice to create a reparative postcolonial aesthetic.

Traditionally, realist ontology – ontology mark one, to use Elsaesser's term – has been associated with André Bazin whose ontology of the photographic image highlights film's capacity to capture a trace of physical reality, and, in its cinematic form, preserve the temporality of a past presence. Bazin's ontology provides a touchstone for scholars of contemporary realist world cinema such as Nagib and de Luca. Nagib lays out a taxonomy of theories of cinematic realism that moves from modes of production to modes of address, exhibition, and reception. The principal mode for her is production, as it provides 'the only clearly identifiable and measurable cinematic realism'.^[5] Closely modelled on Bazian neorealism, albeit decoupled from its Eurocentric roots, the characteristics of this mode include engagement with the pro-filmic, identity between the cast and their roles, location shooting, and emphasis on the index. Nagib glosses the challenge posed to cinematic realism by digital cinema formulated by Miriam Hansen (and we may add here Paul Willemsen and Dai Vaughan), where the indexical link between film and its physical referent is severed and, as David Rodowick points out, the temporal continuity of transcription is broken.^[6] Even though the increased ability to manipulate the physical reality captured by the camera undercuts the traditional foundations of cinematic realism, she dismissed the concern on practical grounds, given that the accessibility of digital cameras affords otherwise 'unthinkable realist ventures'.^[7]

Nagib's reference to the loss of the indexical trace in digital cinema shows the persistence of a debate around 'perceptual realism, indexicality, and witnessing – ethical terms associated with celluloid' as Jennifer Fay points out, that for some has long been settled.^[8] As Mary Ann Doane writes, 'the relation of digital representations to their material conditions of existence (which does exist) is so abstract as to be almost unattainable. For the digital exudes a fantasy of immateriality, in contrast to the fantasy of referentiality of the indexical'.^[9] By shifting the focus from the indexical trace to the deictic index that 'points to and verifies an existence', Doane (as does Fay) instead redirects our attention to the specificity of digital media.^[10] Importantly, she argues that, 'it is crucial not to forget the inextricability of the medium and the aesthetic object which not only bears the imprint of its material conditions of existence but continually struggles to redefine and expand the limits of the medium'.^[11] For de Luca, the index is not at stake in his

understanding of cinematic realism, but neither are the specificity and material conditions of digital cinema's aesthetics. He takes the experience of duration afforded by the long take as his starting point, stating that cinematic realism can thrive 'in spite (or rather because) of digital temptations'. [12] Not only have scholars such as Doane and Tom Gunning (2004) pointed out that the indexical persists in digital photography, de Luca underscores it also has a phenomenological impact as the superior recording capacity of digital cameras allows for an even more prolonged sensory experience of physical reality.

In the functionality of the digital and its affinity to analog production, neither Nagib nor de Luca consider the different aesthetic values, epistemological registers, or material properties that a post-photographic realism may entail. From this perspective, digital cinema largely adheres to conventions and social expectations – and, by extension, truth claims – associated with photo-chemical media. In contrast to filmmakers who eschew the possibilities of post-production, Diop's embrace of the malleability of the digital provides an example for a realist approach that deliberately incorporates digital technology to respond to tensions between material and immaterial presence – ontology mark two according to Elsaesser. *Atlantics* thus allows us to add the digital to debates around realist world cinema, both in terms of its aesthetic properties as well as its epistemological implications. The film moves through several registers in which documentary immersion, virtual presence, and digital manipulation congeal to create a fantastical narrative that transcends Western conceptions of time and space. Past and present are put in dialogue to counter the social violence that carries over from colonialism. In Diop's case, the loss of film's indexical quality and temporal continuity is not irrelevant because of digital cinema's perceptual realism, but because she seeks to tell a story of migration that captures a 'multi-layered conception of space and time', where the past communes with the present. [13] For Diop, decolonising the language of cinema involves acknowledging 'temporal dimensions beyond what has been proven as "natural" scientific fact' as well as invisible, virtual presence. [14] The digital and its epistemological implications are thus well suited for her intervention into contemporary representation of stories of migration. The film's cinematic realism, then, 'does not mourn the so-called loss of indexicality of the pho-

tographic image' and temporal discontinuity of digital conversion but rather embraces it. In addition, as we shall see, the aesthetic qualities of the digital not only add a sensory dimension to her film but also contribute to the film's reparative project.

The digital tower: Reclaiming the virtual cityscape of Dakar

Set in the dust-covered outskirts of Dakar, *Atlantics* opens with social realist overtones. A wide shot introduces the locale, a construction site at the edge of the city. Set against a milky sky, bare concrete structures frame the image on one side, the facade of a glass tower on the other (Fig. 1). Space contracts as the camera moves closer. The men working on the concrete shell lack space, enclosed by the scaffolding as if behind bars. Hidden behind the reflective surface of the windows, they appear like ghostly silhouettes. They will not be able to live in the city they help construct; when their work is finished, they will be made to disappear. The shooting location of the film's opening scene, the construction site of the Diamniadio Lake City, an upscale enclave 20 miles from Dakar, announces the film's commitment to capturing the texture and social realities of contemporary Senegal. The dust and the heat are as palpable as the unjust treatment and despair of the young workers. In realist fashion, many of the actors come from the same social environment they inhabit in the film. In fact, Diop found the man playing Suleiman on a construction site.



Fig. 1: Diamniadio Lake City construction site, courtesy of Les Films du Bal.

The juxtaposition of futuristic architecture and a herd of skinny cows treading along rugged roads encapsulates both the place's hybridity and precarity. As a self-conscious reference to Djibril Diop Mambety's seminal 1973 film *Touki Bouki*, the image of the cows functions as a portal into cinema history, claiming the film's space within the legacy of modern Senegalese cinema. But it also transports us into Senegal's future, into the new urban city development of Diamniadio that currently exists in a realm between image and physical space. The computer-generated image of the tower takes on a spectral quality, representing, as Vlad Dima writes, 'the ruinous, perhaps inescapable, status quo of the postcolonial world that has morphed into the current neoliberal global order'.^[15] Though firmly grounded in the material realities of contemporary Dakar, the film's narrative takes place in a near-future that has yet to be realised and, as we shall see, is at the same time haunted by the past. Soon, the observational tone subsides and we are placed right in the middle of a heated labour dispute between the project manager and the construction workers, who demand three months' worth of outstanding wages only to leave empty handed again. As the resigned young men drive off huddled in the bed of a pick-up truck that takes them back to Dakar's suburb Thiaroye, the glass tower rises behind them, growing larger as the distance between the men and the developing city grows (Fig. 2). An emblem of global capitalism, the tower stands in stark contrast to the historic fishing community where the young men live, a neighbourhood troubled by high levels of unemployment, pollution, and migration from rural areas. Though in the grip of neo-colonial structures that drive the boys away, Thiaroye is also shown as a place of belonging, where extended families live in close quarters with tight communal identities.



Fig. 2: The futuristic Burj Mejiza tower looming over the construction site, courtesy of Les Films du Bal.

The soon-to-be inaugurated Burj Mejiza, Arabic for miracle tower, is inspired by a luxury solar-powered tower envisioned by former Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2006.[16] While the ambitious plan for the largest structure in Africa did not come to fruition, an updated, reimagined version of the building continues its virtual life as a computer-generated image in fly-through videos of architectural renderings that promote Diamniadio to international investors (Fig. 3). A pet project of president Macky Sall designed by the Lebanese Dubai-based architect Hussein Bakri, the upmarket development was pitched in 2012, approved for construction in 2014, and scheduled to be finished in 2035. As of 2022, 10 years into the process, little progress has been made. At the same time real and fantastical, the CGI renderings and the mega project they represent are part of a larger neoliberal urban planning trend across the African continent. Other examples include Eko Atlantic City in Nigeria, Konza Technocity and Tatu City in Kenya, and Hope City in Ghana, all of which are driven by international private-sector architectural, planning, and engineering consultants.[17]

Computer-generated images, according to human geographer Gillian Rose, 'have now become *the* most common type of image media used to visualise and market future urban redevelopments'.[18] The main purpose of these CGIs is not to pro-

vide actual blueprints for urban developments but to create marketable imaginaries. Like the images of Diamniadio, they are made to exist in the digital realm and circulate among international actors across a range of digital interfaces – first as website graphics of international consultants and architects and promotional videos for YouTube channels to attract investors and later as content for web news and local television broadcasts reporting on the public-private partnerships they generate. However, though virtual they are, these images have an impact on material reality. What stays locally is an imaginary cityscape accompanied by stalled – if not failed – urban developments. These projects look nothing like the images that spurred their creation but are still completely disconnected from the local environment.



Fig. 3: Planned tower for Diamniadio Lake City featured in promotional video by Semer Group.

There is an eerie parallel between Diop and Bakri, the architect behind the design of Diamniadio Lake City, in that they are both cultural producers who use digital (moving) images to create place-based imaginaries of Dakar that will reach local and international audiences alike. Their approach, sensibility, and aim, however, and their engagement with place and locality, could not be more different. To a certain extent, their projects are emblematic of the fact that evocation of place is inevitably unstable, as Doreen Massey reminds us, and can be equally invoked in progressive and conservative discourses.[19] Bakri's approach to place conjures universalist ideas of naturalness and essence. Diop, on the other hand, starts with

the conviction that place is inevitably caught in political struggles and that its representation carries an ethical dimension. While Diop's film is distributed by Netflix, and will most likely find its biggest audience through the streaming platform, it is 'addressed to African people and others who can identify with it'.[20] Shot predominantly in Wolof and set 'in a specific time and place in Dakar,' it is driven by the desire to produce counter-hegemonic images 'for myself and the community'.[21]

Diop names Thiaroye as an essential location both aesthetically and politically.[22] The streets of the neighbourhood are imbued with the memory of the 1944 Massacre of Thiaroye, when a protest for equal pay by African soldiers fighting for the French was violently struck down by the colonising forces. While this historical reference may escape international viewers, the uprising is well-remembered in Dakar and thus resonates with local audiences. In sharp contrast, the vacuous imaginary that Bakri seeks to sell is not grounded in history or contemporary social formations. His statement knowing 'the culture of a country perfectly' does not mean one can 'represent it ideally'; while he is able to provide 'Senegal its own architectural style', it is not just ignorant but insulting.[23] Rather than contribute to building community and offer representations that emerge out of the local, as Diop intends, the Lebanese architect capitalises on the pretence of creating an infrastructure for creative industries, where the local is represented through a smattering of Baobab trees, Senegal's national symbol.

Dakar's unique location as the westernmost point of the African continent is crucial for both projects. Both Diop and Bakri have spoken about the ocean as a place imbued with history and agency and they each reference its role within the Atlantic Slave trade – as a place of violence in the case of Diop and as a place supplying atmosphere in the case of Bakri. Having never been to Senegal before he worked on the project, the architect describes visiting the House of Slaves on the island of Gorée three miles off the coast of Dakar as a formative experience. 'I sat next to the Gate of No Return [...] for 45 minutes to soak up the place', he states in an interview, and explains that his project is inspired by the oceanic features of Dakar, such as 'the waves hitting the Senegalese coastline'.[24] For Diop, the ocean is not only 'a mystical place for Senegalese people', but also 'a common territory for a

global black community [that] started with the slave trade and then colonization'. [25] It is a territory that is at the same time threatening and meaningful, imbued with hope for a better life as much as devastation. This tension between hopefulness and despair is captured in one of the film's key scenes. Set at the beach bar to the sound of the ocean, it shows the boys who have returned in the body of the women. The sequence is intercut with long shots of waves lapping the shoreline, as one of the boys tells Ada about their final moments on the boat. He was excited when he spotted a mountain in the distance, believing they were about to reach the Spanish coast. But the ocean tells a different story, and as a 'strong wind whipped up the sea', joy turned into despair. 'Some were shivering with fear', the boy recalls,

Others were sobbing with distress. What I'd thought was a mountain was a wave. Immense. It lifted up our boat, which collapsed like a building. We were cast into the depths.

In Bakri's vision of Diamniadio, the image of the waves that inspired him finds a different expression. Shiny glass facades glistening like water and the free-form buildings adorned with undulating bands build a cityscape composed of imposing, if domesticated, waves (Fig. 4). Considering Suleiman's friend's description of the fatal event, the buildings emulating ocean waves for a luxury enclave protected from the very elements that control the boy's fate seem to mock those whose boat collapsed 'like a building' under the sheer force of the roving waves – and with them all the others lost at sea that they represent. Representative of the neoliberal order that drove the boys to sea, Diamniadio does not provide shelter but poses a threat.



Fig. 4: Building designed to look like a giant wave featured in promotional video by Semer Group.

In this haunting sequence, Diop captures the mystical allure of the ocean, its fatal attraction, and the terror it brings. The repeated images of the coastline attest to the potentiality and constraint contained in Dakar's coastal geography and the city's complex political history as both a point of departure and trap. In images like these, grounded as they are in lived experience and deadly encounters of a people struggling with the aftermath of colonialism and the pressures of global neoliberalism, Diop reconstructs the identity of Dakar's places and communities. Her cinematic project is driven by the desire to 'decoloniz(e) the language of cinema', which, she says, is 'at the centre of every image I create'.^[26] In contrast, the commodification of the waves in Bakri's design can be seen as a continuation of the project of colonisation that used media, to borrow Diop's words, as a way to 'corrupt the image of some territories and their people'. By claiming that his design 'contributes to the development of the country', Bakri assumes the patronising tone of the Western coloniser. For him, the 'universal language of architecture' is disconnected from place, his unfamiliarity with Senegal's history irrelevant.^[27] In quoting Bakri at length, my intention is not to dwell on his personal failure to engage with Senegalese culture in a respectful and meaningful way. Rather, his complacency strikes me as representative of the attitude that drives the many development projects resembling Diamniadio. Practised by a fleet of international consultants, they embrace a style that commodifies the local to create a digital elsewhere, with buildings that can be indiscriminately plopped into visualisations of urban-mega projects across the African continent.

This reliance on flashy renderings, rather than traditional planning tools such as models and plans, helps sidestep regulatory and participatory urban planning processes. Commonly, the exclusion of local stakeholders promotes urban inequality.[28] As *Atlantics* shows, these visualisations are essentially tools of spatial injustice. However, through her own digital intervention, Diop reclaims the commodified image of Dakar's fantastical tower for her own critical project. Inserted into the footage shot on location at the Diamniadio construction site, the CGI tower looming over the city fuses the actual site with the virtual cityscape featured in the promotional videos. Given the ubiquity of CGI within neoliberal urbanism, paired with the fact that the tower envisioned for Diamniadio is meant to exist exclusively as an image in the digital realm, the film's digital representation of the futuristic glass structure is crucial. More than a necessity (because the tower is not there) the use of CGI highlights that the tower, as image, visualises an abstract idea – a commodified amalgam of luxury, innovation, and futurity that is as unimaginative as the tower itself. As a virtual cityscape, the visualisations of Diamniadio Lake City create an imaginary in which technology, sustainability, and innovation promise global city status and economic growth. In appropriating the image of the tower, the digital space of the virtual cityscape becomes profilmic space. Not solely based in physical reality, the profilmic is both real and imaginary, present yet remote. By capturing Diamniadio's urban imaginary, the film's post-photographic realist ontology is based on 'conditions of visibility and presence that include invisibility and virtual presence'.[29] Place is co-constituted from material and immaterial properties; reference goes beyond the index or visual presence.

The ocean: Elemental force and geopolitical space

In addition to its virtual appearance as a CGI embedded in the documentary images of Dakar, the tower has a physical presence as a digital object in the everyday life of Dakar in the film. Material markers of the new urban imaginary, CGIs of the tower appear in the world of the film, in particular in places created and inhabited by the rich. In the private beach club frequented by Omar, the man to whom Ada has been promised in an arranged marriage, the digital rendering of the tower

plays on a monitor displayed next to the bar. As a wealthy immigrant visiting Dakar for three months at a time, Omar represents the very demographic targeted with the development project and can even be seen as a stand-in for the architect who designed it in the first place. Similarly, the iPhone he gifts Ada stands in for the digital devices assisting the entrepreneurial class imagined to work in start-ups and ICT companies in the future Diamniadio.[30] Apart from their association with luxury and wealth, the CGI tower and its digital image are continuously connected to the ocean, whether it is as a landmark perched on the coast gleaming ominously in the night or as the seemingly innocuous image flickering across a screen at the sunny beach club. In the controlled environment of the club, the ocean is shown as a place of consumption that is used for leisure activities, claimed as a space for art, and subject to human domination (Fig. 5). The sparkling seawater pool Omar swims in stands in stark contrast to the images of the ocean as deadly space, an 'inhuman planet' that consumes young men who fall victim to the same capitalist regime represented by Omar.[31] In contrast to the private club, the bar on the beach where Ada and her friends meet is shown as a communal space for collective activity. Here, the ocean is not a place to be consumed but endowed with agency, persistently nudging the women walking along the shore as if to intimate the devastating news they are about to receive about the departure of their lovers.



Fig. 5: Commodified ocean in the luxury beach club, courtesy of Les Films du Bal.

From the beginning, the omnipresent ocean presides over people's daily life. Though the allure of the sea is already present, the images have a documentary feel to them, capturing the misty heat of sun-drenched locations and the exhaustion afflicting those passing through them. The first meeting between Ada and Suleiman takes place at this beach. 'You are just watching the ocean', she observes following his weary gaze. The young men returning from the construction site, too, watch the ocean on their way to Thiaroye. People go about their day; waves crash onto the beach. Once home to local fisheries, the beaches that flit by have turned into Senegal's main points of departure for clandestine immigration. The pirogues the boys will board later that night had once been used for fishing. In the past decade, the increased competition from foreign commercial fisheries had destroyed Thiaroye's local economy. The demise of the local fishing industry due to industrial overfishing is a leading cause of immigration.[32] More than a place of leisurely consumption for the county's elite, the ocean also has become a commodity sold away by the Senegalese government to foreign countries in agreements framed as partnerships.[33] Given the extraction of the country's natural resources at the expense of the population, which is left with nothing but dust, global capitalism here takes a neo-colonial guise.

The devastation caused by the destruction of the local fishing industry is addressed in a dream sequence featuring an image of the ocean that lasts 45 seconds. It is night, and dark waves move slowly under the pale sky. Moonlight gives texture to the water and the undulating movement highlights the ocean's materiality. While the sombre image has a documentary feel to it, a dreamlike voice-over narration puts it in the realm of mythical time. From off-screen, Ada tells a tale of local fishermen who return from sea with a catch so large it excites the whole community. 'But as they approach the net', Ada continues, 'it's not a fish they see there, but Suleiman's lifeless body.' What used to be a source of livelihood has turned into a tomb for the dead. Nets that once brought fish from the ocean are now carrying dead bodies. The violence of neo-colonial exploitation and doomed migration playing out on the ocean is translated into myth.

The long shot of the ocean that accompanies the narration is part of a series of images where the ocean appears at the same time as mental image and physical

space; full-frame shots of the ocean, they embody its elemental force and mystical potency. In the first, the rippled surface of the water glistens in shades of grey (Fig. 6). In the diegesis of the film, it is a point-of-view shot of Suleiman who could not bear to say goodbye to Ada after their meeting at the beach. The slight movement of the handheld camera has changed to a static view. Compared to the mundane atmosphere at the beginning of the scene, the ocean now has an otherworldly air. While the sound of the waves carries over from the previous shot, the water is almost still; time is suspended. White light pools on the silvery surface, which looks like mercury. Both compelling and ominous, the ocean seems to exist outside of human time. The perspective has shifted: it is not Suleiman looking at the ocean, rather the ocean is seizing him with its deadly allure. Endowed with agency, it participates in the ontological unrest mounted in the film. On a formal level, the intermittent images of the ocean encompass the spectrum of the film's digital aesthetics, ranging from documentary realism to pure artifice. A haunting image later in the film represents the unspeakable when it shows the departed's bags and belongings drifting in the water. Here, the realist depiction of the ocean bordering the community has turned into a mystical image, an abysmal space bathed in glaring, digitally enhanced red. Haunted by the colonial slave trade, divided by invisible borders, and subject to environmental exploitation, the ocean remains indifferent, refusing to sustain them.



Fig. 6: The ocean as 'inhuman planet', courtesy of Les Films du Bal.

The city at night: Digital aesthetics and post-colonial politics

Given his primary concern with the epistemological stakes of post-photographic realism, Elsaesser pays little attention to the aesthetic qualities and sensory experience of digital photography. In fact, Elsaesser thinks about the post-photographic as a paradigm rather than a technological category. Even though he states that ‘the current generation of world cinema directors use digital video by choice as much as by necessity, and their films manifest the inherent specifics of digital media, as well as thematise the challenges to photographic realism’, what interests him is not the use of digital video, but the epistemological questions of reference, evidence, and presence brought about by the digital age. Indeed, Elsaesser’s exemplary analysis of Kim Ki-Duk’s *3 Iron* – shot, no less, on 35mm – mainly refers to the presence of cell phone cameras or monitors in the world of the film, not the unique properties of the digital image itself. In contrast, *Atlantics* provides an example of realist world cinema that embraces the aesthetic possibilities of digital cinema.

During the shoot, cinematographer Claire Mathon used two digital cameras with different dynamic range and light sensitivity, one designated for shooting during the day and one for filming at night. The large colour spectrum achieved by the wide dynamic range of the RED Epic enhances the film’s documentary quality while also capturing the dreamy atmosphere of a city coated in dust. In contrast, the extreme light sensitivity of the VariCam 35 enabled Mathon to extract the different hues of light from the city at night.[34] The camera also excels at capturing the tactile presence of the elements, such as sea spray and humidity, in a city, as the cinematographer puts it, ‘where even the cars are sweating’.[35] By allowing her to move freely at night and depend only on lighting sources available on location, Mathon states, the camera ‘provided us with a particular acuity and the possibility of making a land and faces that are seldom filmed visible’.[36]

This documentary veracity and perceptual sensitivity creates both the film’s heightened realism and its expressive colour scheme. The quality of the light in a city cloaked in darkness became an important element of the film. The colour palette developed from the natural and artificial light found in Dakar. Orange hues

derive from streetlights, sunset, and fire while the electric blue stems from moonlight, neon, and the glow of screens emanating from the buildings.[37] Shots of the city at night animated by different hues of orange and blue punctuate the film (Fig. 7). We learn to associate the orange and blue shades with Dakar and its inhabitants, for the light not only illuminates streets but also envelops people and reflects off their skin. On the night of Ada's wedding, her friends comfort her on the balcony. Engulfed in the familiar lights of the nightly Dakar, they weigh Ada's prospects matter-of-factly. The shine of oranges and blues bouncing off their skin modulates their faces in front of the matte black sky. Here, light becomes a means to 'sublimate bodies and faces'.[38] Bodies of women, that is, determined to negotiate their space in a compromised world. After a fire mysteriously erupts in the master bedroom – allegedly started by Suleiman – the colours intensify, as does the uncanny atmosphere. Icy blue highlights Ada's observant friend Mariam's disdainful look; toxic red smoke billows into the night. The wedding sequence ends on the street in front of the building where it began. Excitement has given way to unease as the disturbed wedding guests huddle outside. The flashing lights of the police cars hitting Ada's face underline her agony. The moon shines over the horizon, the ocean hidden yet palpable behind Dakar's silhouette.



Fig. 7: Hues of orange and blue light in the nightly Dakar night, courtesy of Les Films du Bal.

Mathon credits the versatility of digital photography in assisting both the conceptual and aesthetic goals of the film. 'The rather matte texture, the importance of flares, the quality of the blacks and the brilliances, especially on skin at night,' are but some of the elements that 'add to the fantastic dimension of the film but still keep the soul of the Senegalese capital present.' The importance of digital aesthetics for Diop's political project is most pronounced in the representation of the nocturnal Dakar. She names Michael Mann's digital night filmmaking as an influence for her film. 'The idea of a nocturnal clairvoyance: that one can see better at night than during the day,' Diop says about Mann's films *Collateral* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2006), 'left a huge impression on me'.[39] Mann has explained his choice to use high definition cameras in *Collateral* because of the spontaneity afforded by filming with available light as well as the ability to capture a vast range of hues of light and color of the night in Los Angeles. High-definition video's extreme depth of focus and the vast colour range of light create a sense of hyperreality, juxtaposing detailed shiny reflections with aerial views of a city bathed in light. Traffic pulsing under grey and purple shades of the sky and lights reflected in the foggy atmosphere turn the city into 'an organism' of its own, Simon Rothöhler observes about the non-human presence captured by the digital camera's perceptual acuity. Mann's high-definition aesthetics, he argues, exemplifies that 'visual analyses need to be geared toward the specific medium in question and can no longer tacitly assign the role of the privileged image to projected 35mm (thus implying that all other identities of the image are derivative)'.[40] Similarly, film critic A.O. Scott points out that Mann treats high-definition digital video not as 'substitute for film but as a medium with its own aesthetic properties and visual possibilities,' which allows him 'to create a look that is both vividly naturalistic and almost dream-like'.[41]

This tension between realism and fantasy captured by the digital camera stands out in *Atlantics* as well. Indeed, Scott's words resonate in Mathon's descriptions of the RED Epic's range spanning from documentary acuity to dreamlike impression. However, more than creating a look for the film, the tension embodies what Diop calls the clairvoyance of Dakar's night; textures of physical things – fabrics, walls, sandy streets – that are clearly visible in the dark. Green dots from a laser light dance across bodies and faces, heightening their presence. Moonlight contours the

movement of the water, bringing the ocean's materiality to the fore. Silver light renders tangible the invisible presences residing in the city. The film's blurring of realism and fantasy has frequently been noted. For Bruce Bennett and Katarzyna Marciniak the film's fantastic quality emerges from the many scenes capturing the mist and haze of Dakar at night. 'Rather than a source of terror for the viewer', they write, 'haunting is treated by the film in a matter-of-fact way as a spectral long-distance communication technology.' [42] In a place where the fantastic is embedded in the materiality of the city, digital night filmmaking takes on a clairvoyant quality itself, allowing Diop to record things beyond normal sensory contact.

In *Atlantics*, Dakar's clairvoyant nights are captured in the luminous quality of digital photography. Considering the unique aesthetic qualities of digital night filmmaking, where a heightened realism sustains an intensified perception of invisible presences, I want to revisit Elsaesser's proposal for a post-photographic realist ontology. Re-invented for the digital age, the new realism, Elsaesser suggests, is concerned with a 'new distribution of the visible and the invisible, which no longer coincides with presence and absence'. [43] Diop's goal to represent a non-Western culture that does not differentiate between 'the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead' clearly resonates with new realism's challenge to the Cartesian world picture, which entails 're-orienting an entire episteme of representation of knowing as seeing'. [44] Davide Panagia, in his analysis of Mann's use of high-definition video, addresses the ontological significance of digital video's luminosity. 'The event of luminosity' in Mann's depiction of urban space, he argues, 'is an attempt to re-imagine the conventional value structures that create a link between film and indexicality.' The luminous nightscapes make 'the city feel at once vivid and unlike any object that might exist in the world', resulting in 'a permanence [that] is at once ephemeral and intangible'. [45] High definition thus allows the filmmaker 'to move away from the conventions of celluloid in order to invent a new instance of cinema', where 'luminosity as a medium of film is pictured as the reinvention of the crisis of reference and artifice of aesthetic representation as such'. [46] This crisis of reference, of course, is at the core of Elsaesser's conception of a post-photographic realist cinema as well. However, in addition to addressing its ontological significance, the analysis of Mann's digital night filmmaking brings to the fore the unique aesthetic quality of the digital medium that is left

unattended by Elsaesser. Panagia's interest in digital night filmmaking stems from Mann's exploration of light as a medium of film, where light, more than means of illuminating places, people, and things, becomes a luminous event that 'defeats the illuminatory and transcriptual demands of a filmic iconography that relies on the power of light to tether a representation to a thing in the world'.[47]

In *Atlantics*, the reimagining of the crisis of reference and artifice that manifests in the film's digital aesthetics is mobilised for the narrative's supernatural elements and, by extension, its politics. Diop has spoken about her desire to capture the ghostly atmosphere she felt in Dakar, and the idea that the fantastical should emerge from the documentary immersion into the city was formed early on.[48] The representation of Dakar's elemental qualities plays a significant role within the fantastic element of the film's narrative. Indeed, the fantastical is drawn out of the city when, mid-way through, sweat and sunlight become a portal into a supernatural realm. As the setting sun signals the transition from day to night, casting the city in soft orange and blue shades, a mysterious sweat befalls the women and initiates their transmutation (Fig. 9). Marked by white-coloured eyes, their bodies are possessed by the spirits of the boys who are returning to claim their dues. In contrast to accounts focusing on the plight of those who left, *Atlantics* pays tribute to the ones who are left behind. The film captures the ghostly atmosphere of a city where 'the living were carrying the dead within them'.[49] For Diop, the determination of the possessed women marching through the night evokes the image of the protesters who descended on the streets of Dakar during the Senegalese Spring as part of a youth movement gathering under the motto 'Y'en a Marre' or 'Fed Up', which helped to oust then-president Adoulaye Wade in 2012. Silhouetted against bright saturated orange light suffusing the street, the women stride forward as if energised by the electric charge of the night (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: The possessed women march through the nocturnal Dakar, courtesy of Les Films du Bal.

Realism and fantasy converge, as the naturalist depiction of the orange and blue hues so carefully registered by the camera gives way to a fiery look. Desperate to speak to Ada, Suleiman, too, returns in the body of Isaac, a police detective investigating the mysterious fire at Ada's wedding. In its mobilisation of fire and sunsets, the film's ghost story taps into local folklore and the Muslim mythology of Djinn spirits: invisible beings that can control fire and possess a person's body and mind. Though invisible, these mystical beings have a strong presence in contemporary life in Dakar. In fact, many families forbid their children to leave home around sunset, as Djinn are thought to roam the streets at this hour.[50] In terror, Isaac traces his loss of control over his body back to the intensifying light of the setting sun. The expressive colour scheme that accentuates these ghostly visitations culminates in two images of the ocean, featuring digitally enhanced sunsets in glaring orange and blue – 'fake sunsets' as Mathon calls them.[51] Combining realist depiction with numeric manipulation, the digital captures what Diop calls the 'fantastic dimension inherent in the reality'.[52] The index of the profilmic event is not based on a photographic imprint but on post-photographic apprehension. Trace-making becomes sensing, allowing the documentary to turn into the fantastic without losing its realist commitment. In this post-photographic on-

tology that recalibrates the relationship between reference and artifice, ‘analogical *transcription*’, to use Fay’s words, gives way to ‘digital fabulation and prophesy’.[53]

If Elsaesser and Panagia stop at the epistemological and aesthetic ramifications of the new post-photographic ontology, Diop’s exploration of digital photography’s unique properties as well as her use of CGI to depict Diamniadio’s virtual imaginary lets us go one step further. The film’s digital aesthetic, I argue, is inextricably linked to the film’s post-colonial politics. As I have shown earlier, the digital tower in *Atlantics* is not only an emblem of capitalist exploitation, as a computer-generated image it also uses the tools of transnational neoliberal urbanism – where flashy architectural renderings become instruments of spatial injustice – as a medium of critique. The use of digital night filmmaking to render tangible the invisible presence of neo-colonial violence further contributes to the reparative dynamic of the film. In *Atlantics*, then, place and belonging are located within Dakar’s elemental properties as much as its virtual and spiritual imaginaries. Attentive to the physicality and agency of things, Diop offers a realist digital aesthetic that captures the city’s materiality and its absent ghosts. Furthermore, as seen in the lucid depiction of Dakar’s clairvoyant nights, the ontological unrest of the film’s post-photographic realism also happens at the level of image aesthetics. The film rallies human and non-human actors, things real and virtual, to honour Dakar’s lost generation and pay tribute to those who make their lives in a city that is haunted by colonialism and under siege by rampant capitalism.

Author

Katrin Pesch received her PhD in Art History, Theory, and Criticism with a Concentration in Art Practice from the University of California San Diego. An alumna of the Whitney Museum of Art Independent Study Program, she has exhibited internationally in film festivals, art spaces, and museums. Her writing has been published in *Studies in French Cinema and Anthropology and Humanism*, and several edited collections. She is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of Southern Mississippi.

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Notes

- [1] Elsaesser, 2009; de Luca 2013; Nagib, 2020.
- [2] Elsaesser 2009, p. 5.
- [3] Ibid., pp. 9-10.
- [4] Ibid., p. 10.

- [5] Nagib 2020, p. 30.
- [6] Willemen 2002, p. 20 and Vaughan 1999, p. 182, both quoted in Doane 2007, pp. 132-133; Rodowick 2007, p. 117.
- [7] Nagib 2020, p. 26.
- [8] Fay 2018, p. 131.
- [9] Doane 2007, p. 143.
- [10] Ibid., p. 146.
- [11] Ibid., p. 143.
- [12] de Luca 2013, p. 2.
- [13] Diop in Black 2019.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Dima 2022, p. 51.
- [16] Atlantics Press Kit 2019, p. 6.
- [17] Watson 2020, p. 31.
- [18] Degen & Melhuish & Rose 2017, quoted in Watson 2020, p. 40 (emphasis in the original).
- [19] Massey 1994, p. 169.
- [20] Diop in Black.
- [21] Diop in Black.
- [22] Ibid.
- [23] Bakri in Keraudren 2020.
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] Diop in Aguilar 2019.
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] Bakri in Keraudren 2020.
- [28] Watson 2020, p. 35.
- [29] Elsaesser 2009, p. 19
- [30] To give a sense of the economic imbalance, already the iPhone's resale value is about twice the average salary of a worker in Dakar.
- [31] Mathon 2019.
- [32] Gatlin 2021.
- [33] The Advocacy Project 2021.
- [34] Mathon 2019.
- [35] Ibid. *Atlantics* visceral depiction of the elements has been central to analyses of the film's postcolonial critique. For Dima, the presence of dust and mist symbolises unrest and alienation in post-colonial Senegal (p. 50). In a compelling reading of the film's tangible rendering of dust, smog, sea haze, and mist, Lindsay Turner links the relationship between air and water in *Atlantics* to the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary economic conditions. She argues that 'Diop's air is haunted by the particles of those lost at sea' as well as the pollution caused by transnational corporations (2019, p. 191).
- [36] Mathon 2019.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Diop in Lê 2019 (my translation).
- [40] Rothöhler 2012, p. 143.
- [41] Scott 2006, quoted in Panagia 2015, p. 42.
- [42] Bennett & Marciniak 2022, p. 12.
- [43] Elsaesser 2009, pp. 16-17.

- [44] Diop in Lê 2019 (my translation); Elsaesser 2009, p. 9.
- [45] Panagia 2015, p. 52.
- [46] Ibid., p. 43.
- [47] Ibid., p. 52.
- [48] Mathon 2019.
- [49] *Atlantics* Press Kit, p. 4.
- [50] Harding 2019.
- [51] Mathon 2019.
- [52] *Atlantics* Press Kit, p. 4.
- [53] Fay 2018, p.154 (emphasis in the original). Fay refers to the use of digital cinematography and computer-generated images in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006).