

Postcolonial Spectres of Migration in Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019)

Mati Diop's feature film *Atlantique* (in english: *Atlantics*¹) caused quite a stir at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival for at least two reasons: Firstly, the Grand Prix du Jury was awarded to a Francophone film which is set in Dakar and directed and co-written by Franco-Senegalese Mati Diop, the first African woman who has ever won this competition.² Secondly, *Atlantique* is quite difficult to categorize because it's a genre-mixture of social drama, love story, ghost film, docufiction and mystery genre, "unconventional storytelling" as "lyrical migrant drama",³ "a straightforward romance" that comes to "a supernatural turn" and "moves into an eerie new register", as Ryan Gilbey puts it.⁴ In terms of the present edited volume, we might call it a 'fantastic film': both in the theoretical and in the enthusiastic sense of the word.

In my article, I would like to examine the fantastic dimension of Diop's *Atlantique* and problematize the notion of fantastic coined by Todorov when confronting it with postcolonial Francophone cinema. For this purpose, I would like to proceed in three steps: After a short summary of the film, I would like to analyze in a first step the fantastic dimensions of this film in the sense of Todorov by focusing the emergence of specters and uncertainty. In a second step, I would like to contrast Todorov's definition of the genre and the reading instructions this structuralist definition entails with political and culturalizing interpretations of the film. In a third step, I would then finally like to discuss to what extent Todorov's notion of the fantastic might have to be revised and reframed for postcolonial

1 Mati Diop: *Atlantique*, France/Senegal 2009.

2 Cf. Olivier Joyard: "Mati Diop, the first black woman selected in Cannes Film Festival", in: *Numéro Magazine*, 08.10.2019, www.numero.com/en/cinema/mati-diop-cannes-film-festival-atlantique-senegal-grand-prix-dakar-director (20.02.2023).

3 Rüdiger Suchsland seconds this lyrical dimension by calling the film a "bildgewaltiges Filmpoem zwischen Neorealismus und Mystery-Anklängen", Rüdiger Suchsland: "Atlantique", in: *Filmdienst*, www.filmdienst.de/film/details/573168/atlantique#kritik (20.02.2023).

4 Ryan Gilbey: „The unconventional storytelling of Mati Diop's *Atlantics*“, in: *The New Statesman*, 14.09.2021. www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2012/06/atlantics-mati-diop-film-cannes-review (20.02.2023).

purposes and vice versa to what extent postcolonial issues change by giving them a kind of a fantastic index. In short: How can fantastic theory be decolonized and how can postcolonial francophone film benefit from fantastic theory?

1. Atlantique/Atlantics – a fantastic film?

In her first feature film, Mati Diop contrasts the social misery of unpaid construction workers with a megalomaniac (if not to say phallic) construction project of the Muejiza Tower in Dakar. This tower represents simultaneously the contrast between plans and reality (this architectural project of Senegal's ex-president Wade and Ghadafi has been envisioned but finally never been implemented) and between the very poor and incredible luxury, as Diop underlines it by putting it as a disastrous situation and as a strange symbol for death:

Quand je suis tombée sur l'image du projet architectural, j'ai ressenti un mélange d'indignation et de fascination. Comment pouvait-on dépenser des millions dans une tour de luxe dans une situation sociale et économique aussi désastreuse ? Ce qui m'a dans le même temps fascinée est que cette tour, en forme de pyramide noire, avait pour moi l'allure d'un monument aux morts. Finalement ce projet n'a jamais vu le jour mais je m'en suis inspirée dans *Atlantique*.⁵

When I came across the pattern of the architectural project, I felt a mixture of indignation and fascination. How could one spend millions on a luxury tower in such a disastrous social and economic situation? What fascinated me over time was that this tower, in the shape of a black pyramid, looked to me like a monument to the dead. In the end, this project never saw the light of day, but I was inspired by it in *Atlantique*. (my translation)

The film's opening scene is about struggling construction workers in Dakar (the scenes were shot on the construction sites of *Diamniadio* near Dakar⁶), a group of young men who have been working for three months without pay. Ada, a young woman, is in love with one of these workers: Souleiman. But her parents have already arranged her marriage with Omar, whose family lives in Italy and who seems to be quite rich. One day, Ada and her friends want to meet their boyfriends at a Beach Club when they get to know that "all the boys" were gone, having taken a boat

5 Serge Kaganski/Mati Diop: „Entretien avec Mati Diop“, in: *Dossier de presse du film “Atlantique”*, www.cineart.be/fr/download/file/id/6251 (20.02.2023).

6 Ibid.

to flee to Spain. The young women left in Africa mourn their fled lovers. When Ada dreams one night that Souleiman's dead body has become entangled in a fishing net, the film takes its first fantastic shift.



Figure 1: *ATLANTIQUE* (2019): Ada got a text message from Souleiman.

From this moment on, there are increasing signs that Souleiman has returned: he is seen by guests at Ada's and Omar's wedding party; their luxury marital bed burns down although according to the police investigation there was no source of the fire. The young detective in charge of the investigation feels increasingly unwell. So do nearly all the young women left behind who suffer from diffuse physical symptoms. These uncertainties or doubts about the ontological character of these experiences lead to different explanations trying to dissolve the fantastic hesitation: the girls try to identify them as physical and allegeable malaise, the explanation comes up that a spirit has entered their bodies through their navels. And finally, there seems to be digital evidence of Souleiman's return: Ada receives a text message supposedly from Souleiman (Fig. 1).

But then, one night – and this is a genuine fantastic turn from the strange to the marvelous in the film – the young women (except for Ada) walk through the streets with kind of robotic movements or as if by remote control to go to the boss' house (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: ATLANTIQUE (2019): Young women walking through the streets.

They look at him out of milky, dead eyes (Fig. 3) and speak to him as the returned dead men, claiming the unpaid wages for their deaths at the bottom of the sea. These nocturnal encounters are repeated until one night the boss hands over the money to the girls and digs a grave for each dead young man.



Figure 3: ATLANTIQUE (2019): Her boyfriend's spirit entered the girl's body.

Eventually, Ada truly meets Souleiman, who enters one night in her bedroom in the body of the young detective and drives her to flee. But then he meets her again in the beach bar where all the possessed girls are peacefully sitting around. In the women's reflections of the mirrors, the film audience can see the young men and especially Souleiman.

At the end, Ada speaks confidently, directly looking into the camera and by doing so, she questions, maybe even reverses and decolonizes⁷ colonial power relations.



Figure 4: *ATLANTIQUE* (2019): Confident Ada looking directly into the camera.

In *Atlantique* there are a few classic elements of fantastic films: Besides the motif of the mirror, there are specters and revenants who enter the bodies of the living and thereby act, communicate, and restore justice. These specters are cinematically staged and closely linked to the gaze and the

7 There are lots of studies and research about the colonial gaze for instance in colonial photography and postcolonial perspectives on how photos where people look directly in the camera and reverse the colonial gaze might decolonize colonial power relations. By looking back, they don't reverse hierarchies but they question them and address directly the spectator. Adas way to look into the camera might be read as a simple sign of selfconfidence and of questioning the spectator if he/she accepts the fantastic pact the film offers. But it might also be seen as deeply coined by the pictorial tradition of the colonial gaze in photos and in film; cf. Olivier Barlet: *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze*, London/New York 2000.

eyes: There are view axes of view from above-below, the opening of space onto the seemingly horizonless expanse of the sea, we look out of the bar onto the sea (but never from the sea onto the land), there are close-ups of the characters suffering from strange feelings.



Figure 5: ATLANTIQUE (2019): The girl's gaze and milky eyes as a sign of the spirit.

The gaze and the eyes (Fig. 5) play a key role, because the milky eyes of the young women are the sign of the dead being in the bodies of the living women. They demand justice and possibly even revenge from the realm of the dead, but also indicate the gaze back of the marginalized. This is a rather classical aesthetic strategy in postcolonial art like Bhabha explains it in relation to the splitted colonial subject⁸ or decolonization of the gaze.

But still: To what extent does this film exhibit a fantastic structure in the sense of Todorov?⁹ Following Todorov, the fantastic isn't related to

8 Homi K. Bhabha: "Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative", in: id.: *The Location Of Culture*, London/New York 1994, pp. 40–65; here: p. 47; cf. also Susanne Stemmler: "Homi K. Bhabha: *the displacing gaze*", in: id.: *Topografien des Blicks. Eine Phänomenologie literarischer Orientalismen des 19. Jahrhunderts in Frankreich*, Bielefeld 2004, pp. 35–38, doi.org/10.1515/9783839402818.

9 Todorov's theory has been developed for literary analyses. In the following, I adapt it for cinematographic use by being aware of the semiotic specificities of the film. For further reflections on films in terms of the fantastic cf. Georg Seesslen: „Film“, in:

the simple appearance of ghosts or witches but it rather relies on three conditions:

D'abord, il faut que le texte oblige le lecteur à considérer le monde des personnages comme un monde de personnes vivantes et à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication surnaturelle des événements évoqués. Ensuite, cette hésitation peut être ressentie également par un personnage ; ainsi le rôle de lecteur est pour ainsi dire confié à un personnage et dans le même temps l'hésitation se trouve représentée, elle devient un des thèmes de l'œuvre ; dans le cas d'une lecture naïve, le lecteur réel s'identifie avec le personnage. Enfin il importe que le lecteur adopte une certaine attitude à l'égard du texte : il refusera aussi bien l'interprétation allégorique que l'interprétation « poétique ». Ces trois exigences n'ont pas une valeur égale. La première et la troisième constituent véritablement le genre ; la seconde peut ne pas être satisfaite. Toutefois, la plupart des exemples remplissent les trois conditions.¹⁰

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. These three conditions are not of equal value. The first and the third really constitute the genre; the second may not be satisfied. However, most examples meet all three conditions.¹¹

Firstly, it appears where the reader or in our case: the viewer cannot decide between a natural explication and a supernatural explication of what happens to characters in a film. Secondly, this uncertainty or hesitation can also be felt by a character. And thirdly, and this is for my analysis the most important condition of the fantastic, the reader or viewer adopts a certain reading attitude towards the film, because he or she accepts the uncertainty in the film and refuses at the same time an allegorical and a poetic interpretation. As a result, the fantastic is only the ephemeral state between a natural *explication* (*l'étrange*, the uncanny) and a supernatural *acceptation* (the marvelous, *le merveilleux*). So, what about the fantastic elements in *Atlantique*?

Hans Richard Brittnacher/Markus May (eds.): *Phantastik. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart 2013, pp. 239–249.

10 Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970, pp. 37ff.

11 Tzvetan Todorov: *The fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre*, Ithaca/New York 1973, p. 33.

The fantastic dimension of the film seems to be quite obvious: In a realistic setting in the streets and on the beach of Dakar, amidst construction projects and the simultaneity of marabouts and traditions on the one hand, and cutting-edge iPhone technology on the other, there is an intrusion or – to speak with Castex: the rupture¹² – of the inexplicable after the disappearance and escape of the men across the sea, leaving both film audience and the characters in uncertainty about the status of Souleiman and the other fled men. And in some parts of the film, this hesitation could be understood as part of a genre, being embedded in a setting of love story and police investigation. Even after Ada's dream of finding Souleiman's body, which is staged only as a voice-over with a view of the sea, the young women are still stuck in the reality of their lives between arranged marriage, text messages, their rooms in their parents' apartments and the beach bar. Only when the young women walk through the nightly Dakar as if remote-controlled, when they appear with milky eyes in the villa of the boss of the construction company, when the ghosts of the young men speak out of them, when the characters as well as viewers recognize the missing young men in the reflections of the mirrors, the film inevitably tips over into – to speak with Todorov – the marvelous. And in this sense, the turning point in the film is not Castex's rupture or Todorov's intrusion of the fantastic. Instead, the hesitation is gone and gives room to the reception of the film as a fantasy or horror film and to an allegoric interpretation.

We could conclude that this film shifts from realistic to the hesitant fantastic to the accepted marvelous (*merveilleux*). The specters are classic liminal beings as they shift from dead to life, from dead bodies at the bottom of the sea the women's bodies walking in the streets. They blur the borders between men and women, past and present, day and night. And they come back in order to balance justice and injustice, poor and rich. They are morally speaking 'good revenants'. Needless to say, that the true love between Ada and Souleiman transcends death and separation and leads to justice and empowerment of the Senegalese women in the film.

12 „Le fantastique crée une rupture, une déchirure dans la trame de la réalité quotidienne“. Pierre-Georges Castex: *La Littérature fantastique en France*, Paris 1951, p. 8. (“The fantastic creates a rupture, a tear in the frame of everyday reality”, my translation).

2. Interpretations of *Atlantique*: Leaving the fantastic

Many film critics have construed this film as a remarkable reflection on contemporary situations: They've interpreted the film: as reflection on neo-colonial connections between Europe (and the US) and Africa¹³ or as a commentary on the refugee dramas in the Mediterranean and on the Spanish coasts.¹⁴ The film could be seen as a contribution to postcolonial (Black) Atlantic discourses (referring for example to Paul Gilroy or Fatou Diome¹⁵), as the expression of a postmodern version of Senegalese voodoo and djinn tradition, or as a self-confident voice of African women both on the level of film production, and on the level of the characters where Afro-capitalist neo-feminism is enacted¹⁶, as Christian von Tschiltschke recently convincingly demonstrated,¹⁷ thus drawing my attention to this film in the first place. In the terms of the present edited volume, we could even state that the fantastic charges the film with social symbolism and the film might even be called in Jameson's terms a "socially symbolic act".¹⁸

These interpretations are all plausible – but how do they relate to the 'fantastic pact' that Todorov demands from his readership as a necessary condition for fantastic literature? Are not such symbolic interpretations of the postcolonial spectres in the film veritably antithetical or even contradictory to the fantastic? In the following, I would like to confront two interpretations or receptions of the film with Todorov's notion of fantastic.

13 Suzanne Enzerink: "Black Atlantic Currents. Mati Diop's *Atlantique* and the Field of Transnational American Studies", in: *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 12 (2021), pp. 53–81, here: p. 56.

14 Bilal Qureshi: "'Atlantics' Is A Haunting Refugee Story — Of The Women Left Behind In Senegal", in: www.npr.org/2019/11/23/780847003/atlantics-is-a-haunting-refugee-story-of-the-women-left-behind-in-senegal (17.03.2023).

15 Paul Gilroy: *The black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*, London 1999; Fatou Diome: *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, Versailles 2004.

16 Diop underlines this by stating: "I wanted to tell the story from a feminine point of view". Wendy Ide/Kathryn Bromwich/Hans Simran: "Meet the new directors who lit up the film festivals", in: *The Guardian*, 20.10.2019, www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/20/meet-the-new-directors-who-lit-up-the-film-festivals (20.02.2023).

17 Christian von Tschiltschke: "Migration als Phantasma: Mati Diops *Atlantique* (2019)", in: Beatrice Schuchardt/Karen Struve/Juliane Tauchnitz (eds.): *Achsen und Spektren der Migration*, (2023, forthcoming).

18 Fredric Jameson: "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act", in: id.: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London 2002 [1981], pp. 1–88.

2.1. The allegorical-political interpretation

Interpreting the film as an allegory could lead into different directions, as the polysemic character of the film might link it to an allegory of the social unconscious of global capitalism in Africa, of economic labor migration in the form of flight across the sea and into illegality in Europe or Spain, or as a discursive reformulation of gender relations as female empowerment. In this sense, the film is perceived as “a supernatural fable of resistance and revenge” as the New York Times journalist A.O. Scott puts it in his film review.¹⁹ But: According to Todorov’s definition we now leave the notion of the fantastic, because the interpretation of the film being a political allegory for the global crisis might be true and justified, but does not consider the film in its fantastic dimensions anymore.

2.2. The culturalist-mythical interpretation

A more culturalist reading of the film understands it as an actualization of the specific Senegalese tradition of ghosts: a culturalist interpretation of the film grasps the specters as a kind of postmodern djinns who travel into the bodies of young women and communicate through them and who can only be gotten rid of through a spiritual marabout or paid justice. In this interpretation of the film, critics like Peter Bradshaw called it a “voodoo-realist drama”²⁰ and German Spiegel journalist Hannah Pilarczyk labbeled it slightly thetically as “erstaunlichen Spuk” (“stunning spook”), too simplistically as pure “Fluchtursachenforschung” (“investigation of causes of migration”) and a bit too enthusiastically as follows: “Einen solchen Film über das Phantasmagorische an Migration hat man noch nicht gesehen” (“such a film about the phantasmagoric dimension of migration has never been seen before”).²¹

19 A.O. Scott: “Atlantics’ Review: Haunted by Ghosts and Injustice in Senegal”, in: *The Guardian*, 14.11.2019. www.nytimes.com/2019/11/14/movies/atlantics-review.html (20.02.2023).

20 Peter Bradshaw: “Atlantique review – African oppression meets supernatural mystery“, in: *The Guardian*, 16.05.2019, www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/16/atlantique-revie-w-cannes-mati-diop-senegal-mystery (20.02.2023).

21 Hannah Pilarczyk: “Der neue Horror“, in: *Der Spiegel*, 19.05.2019, www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/cannes-neue-filme-von-ken-loach-und-mati-diop-a-1268144.html (20.02.2023).

Thus, according to Todorov, we again are leaving the fantastic sphere: Accepting (or even othering!) specters as part of a Senegalese culture could run risk to what Todorov calls the “exotic marvelous” (“merveilleux exotique”) even though in the film there is no exoticizing narrator showing djinns from the outside of African culture. But still, the film locations, the use of Wolof language or the fact that djinns are mentioned leads into the direction of cultural(istic) interpretations of the film. As to the fantastic aspects of the film, it goes beyond African cultures, but questions a more fundamental dimension of the fantastic itself. Suzanne Enzerink argues and Diop underlines that “in African cinema, ‘fantasy is part of reality.’”²² Moreover, she states that Diop wants to avoid stereotypes coined by media of the typical African immigrant and refugee who is leaving his and her homeland by showing different realities and above all by focussing on those who were left behind.²³

In other words, can this postcolonial film be not understood as fantastic in the sense of Todorov because it leads either to allegorical or to culturalist interpretations? Is this film simply too postcolonial to fit into Todorov's eurocentric theory of fantastic literature dedicated to narratives of the 19th century? Or could it rather help to critically illuminate Todorov's concept? And couldn't there be a chance of an epistemic surplus for postcolonial films underlining their special fantastic dimensions?

3. Decolonizing the fantastic, ‘fantastizing’ the postcolonial. Postcolonial and fantastic interferences

When the postcolonial is analyzed in its fantastic dimensions, on the one hand, this perspective might connect it to a general, anthropological narrative of spectres, ancestors and voices from the past, which works transculturally and which cannot easily be pigeonholed in the sense that the film simply repeats African exotic myths or simply fulfills magic realism. In this sense, the hesitation does not refer to exotic spectres somewhere in the distance. It rather confronts European or Western viewers with the entangled histories and realities in times of globalization. If Lachmann states that “in the fantastic, the encounter of culture with its oblivion is

22 Diop by Enzerink 2001, p. 60.

23 Ibid. This is also the central idea in the novel “La saison de l'ombre“ of Léonora Miano (Léonora Miano: *La saison de l'ombre*, Paris 2013).

narrated” (my translation) (“in der Phantastik wird die Begegnung der Kultur mit ihrem Vergessen erzählt”²⁴), that is even more true in postcolonial contexts.

The focus on the fantastic dimensions of postcolonial films might also provoke the deconstruction of classical colonial dichotomies by staging liminal beings as well as uncertainty. In this sense, Todorov’s hesitation as a reading mode is not so much interesting because it vacillates between the uncanny and the marvelous and erases the fantastic in any reception decision. The evanescence underlined in Todorov’s theory could rather be seen as a fundamental experience in postcolonial settings that could lead to the critical questioning of power hierarchies and exploitation, of gender roles and the oppression of women, of phallic hypermodern glocalization and the intrusion of the supernatural – whatever that might be. This, of course, only works, when films do not stage spectres as a pale cipher for explicit political messages but as ambiguous beings. In other words, if the fantastic comes across as too didactic (and Diop comes close to that in my point of view), then it misses the mark for a postcolonial deconstructivist thrust.

If – at the flipside of the coin – the fantastic gets a postcolonial index – when we decolonize it –, then the film depicts Todorov’s blind spots as for example the structuralist narrowness of the fantastic or its Eurocentric frame and offers a new way of understanding postcolonial cinema.

A fantastic reading of a postcolonial film in the sense of Todorov might lead to the experience that on the one hand a structuralist reading by ignoring cultural and discursive conditions is not satisfactory at all. On the other hand, it becomes clear that Todorov’s fundamental categories of natural and supernatural are not so clearly distinguishable from one another, especially in a global perspective where natural and supernatural might not be based on the same knowledge system and experienced as mutually exclusive categories. In *Atlantique*, it is especially the characters’ gaze, their view of the world and thus their perception of the natural and the supernatural that is impressive. Here, postcolonial cinema performs as, at its best, another perspective not on the real world, but on the realness of the world. As Diop herself states it, in African cinema, “fantasy is part of reality.” Or as Heather Snell puts it in her paper on the postcolonial fantastic: “the fantastic [...] offers a powerful means of disrupting the

24 Renate Lachmann: *Erzählte Phantastik: zu Phantasiegeschichte und Semantik phantastischer Texte*, Frankfurt am Main: 2002, p. 11.

seeming transparency of received realities.”²⁵ And that again leads me to the point that the innovative approach to the postcolonial fantastic is not putting it in the other, colonial world outside western or European categories, but to acknowledge that the haunting – to speak in a mixture of Derrida²⁶ and Rushdie²⁷ – is global and has its very specific space in film, series, literature, music or arts.

In this perspective – and I would like to conclude with this – the postcolonial francophone film is not only a commentary and a reaction to global crises, but as a fantastic film it also might bring theory into a productive crisis.

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25 Heather Snell: “The Postcolonial Fantastic as New Ground of Invention: Reading Carole McDonnell's „Lingua Franca“, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 20 (2009), H.77, pp. 350–362.

26 Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, New York [1993] 2006.

27 “Now I know what a ghost is, [...]. Unfinished business, that's what.” Salman Rushdie: *The Satanic Verses*, New York [1988] 1989, p. 129.

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