



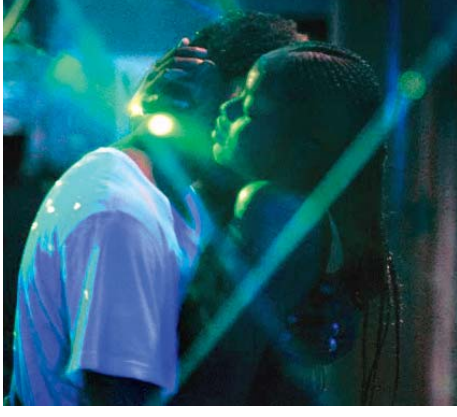
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Senegal at sea

Who knew disco lasers could be mournful? They are in French-African filmmaker Mati Diop's *Atlantics*. A waterside bar is where the young boys and girls of Dakar meet to dance, we are told, but when it makes an appearance in the film there is no dancing. The girls have just learnt the news that most of the town's boys have secretly set off towards Spain by sea in search of work. Shot by cinematographer Claire Mathon, neon green dots linger on their faces and retreat swiftly, just like the waves outside ebb and flow.

The protagonist is Ada (Mama Sane), young and strong-willed but caught between the desires of her own heart and those of her conservative family. She pursues Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), the love of her life who is full of sincere compliments, and is engaged to Omar (Babacar Sylla), the wealthy man her parents have picked who just wants a wife. When Souleiman is believed to have died at sea, she reluctantly marries the latter. Supernatural events grip the town as soon as the wedding concludes, bringing to light just as much truth about the town as about the two lovers.

Diop sets the film against the backdrop of the long-running, perilous migrations of fishermen on makeshift boats from Senegal to Spain. Depleting fish stocks are putting them out of work. The builders of sky-kissing towers in Dakar seemingly haven't paid workers for months together. Several blame the times of strife on a casual lifestyle, and turn to a more conservative practice of religion. Women do the work of dealing with the loss of men to globalisation, and with the loss of personal freedoms.



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The sea, at once life-giving and life-taking, is front and centre in the film. Even when it isn't in view, it becomes an inescapable fact in the offscreen sounds, in the billowing curtains, in the salty sweat which the characters talk of.

The film's excellent mise en scène sets out differences in class. The bedroom in Omar's mansion is so ostentatious it wouldn't be out of place in a Trump property. In the room Souleiman leaves behind forever, there is nothing but a neat mattress, a bottle of cologne, some speakers.

A limited comparison can be drawn to 2016's *Under the Shadow*, in which Babak Anvari laced the real horrors of political turmoil and individual suffering with the mystical legend of *Djinns*. The *Djinn* steals things people cherish like a young girl's doll and her mother's medical textbook — an allegory for how war stole childhoods and ambitions. Here, the Senegalese myth of *faru rab*, that is "boyfriend spirits" which are believed to sometimes possess their girlfriends' bodies, is applied.

Instead of simply harbouring the pain of losing friends, family and lovers, the women are haunted by a passion for justice. In this lyrical revenge drama, the poetry comes from images rather than words. But one line, spoken at the time of confronting the corrupt builder who had failed to pay wages, is particularly powerful: "Every time you look at the top of the tower, you'll think of the unburied bodies at the bottom of the sea."

Diop, who acknowledges her own privileges, has important roots in Senegal. Her father was the renowned musician Wasis Diop, and her uncle Djibril Diop Mambety was the country's foremost filmmaker of titles including *Touki Bouki*, sometimes called the greatest African film.

Atlantics is her first full-length feature, and it follows a small number of documentaries and shorts. Over the years, one has learnt to expect very little from the Academy Awards but this film was robbed of a place in the nominations this year. When it released on Netflix last November too, it was overshadowed by Martin Scorsese's *Irishman*. The film calls itself "A Ghost Love Story". Safely skip the total letdown that is the Netflix India original *Ghost Stories*, and watch Diop's richly imagined African masterpiece instead.