

Emotions of a Fading Generation: Mise-en-Scène and Narrative in *Atlantics*

¹“More than 10,000 migrants died in 2024 trying to reach Spain by sea.”

²“Senegalese families mourning the deaths of hundreds of young men trying to reach Europe.”

Communities dictated by unpaid wages, young workers' lives determined by the sea, women abandoned in a system of struggle. Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019) intimately renders a world filled with similar stories of economic immobility and immigration. The film is set in a softly yellow-tinted visualization of Dakar on the Atlantic coast. In this film, I will analyze two sequences from the final 30 minutes of the film. Both sequences (Sequence One & Sequence Two) take place in the same setting and with parallel characters—Ada's friend, Dior. However, different narratives are explored through the manipulation of mise-en-scène.

Leading up to the resolution of the story, we are introduced to Ada, a young Senegalese woman, betrothed to a wealthy man. However, she is in love with Souleiman, a construction worker who dies at sea after an immigration attempt, catalyzed by the denial of months' worth of wages. As Ada navigates her marriage and the loss of her soulmate, the filmic elements provide an evocative description of the complex relationships she holds: with her religious best friend, her wealthy husband, and her parents, who worry about a future where she isn't wived.

Right before the two sequences, we witness the unraveling of an arch-plot that climaxes as the dead men take the bodies of their women—as ghosts—and exact revenge on the building manager who theifed them of their money. This leads to Ada and Dior speaking to the ghost

head-on for the first time in Sequence One, followed by Sequence Two, with Ada and Dior communicating after the ghosts' departure.

Atlantics is shaped very personally by the French director. She first shot the short film from which the feature film originated. Then, after a summer of observing Dakar, her visualization of Dakar's economic hardships crystallized, becoming a core theme in the feature film. ⁴In an interview with media outlet NFS, Diop states, "I feel that the feature is really a continuation of my visual language [from the short]. It's that, with more means," and this visualization is unique. Diop's formation of mise-en-scène is vitally important to her and helps express her narratives in many folds. ⁴When talking with NFS, she explains her relationship with *Atlantics*' cinematographer, Claire Mathon: "For me, in hiring a DP, it's more about their relationship with the story and with the place. That translates into how they want to shoot it. And Claire cares more about understanding the story than making a beautiful image." The dynamic relationship between mise-en-scène and the story underlines the film as a whole. With intricate detail, the intertwining of these elements adds to the weight of emotion felt as an audience member. I argue that *Atlantics* is primarily about visualizing the survival of economic oppression and how the underlying emotions are exemplified through the relationship between mise-en-scène and narrative.

Understanding the economic and cultural background of the time is crucial to understanding how Mati Diop's visualizations add to the discussion. The film is established along the sun-drenched coast of Dakar, Senegal, with early scenes showing busy construction sites. Like the film, the current climate surrounding these labor workers is bleak.

In particular, the manufacturing sector in Dakar has been scrutinized for labor rights abuses. ⁵For instance, at Medis Dakar, a pharmaceutical company, allegations have surfaced

regarding wage discrimination and corrupt practices. Workers have reported unfair wage disparities and unethical management behaviors, prompting union interventions to address these grievances. This labor market is filled with men like Souleiman. The Senegalese labor market is marked by a high prevalence of informal employment, especially among youth. Approximately 90% of young workers are engaged in informal jobs, which typically lack social security, benefits, and stable incomes. This situation leaves many young people underemployed and earning wages insufficient to support themselves and their families, often causing them to migrate.

Diop resonates deeply with this situation. In an interview with ⁶NPR, Diop says, “And [*Atlantics*], it’s also about a youth who disappeared in the ocean, which can be felt like a ghost generation — you know, a whole group of young people who disappeared in the ocean.” For her, expressing this feeling of living in a society where young people die, where soulmates die, was multi-layered. Diop states, “But talking about it [economic oppression and migration] as a subject wasn’t enough. Because, to me, it’s not a subject — it’s way more than that. It’s really existential. It’s internal. So it took me a while to decide how I was going to approach that. I landed on approaching it from the perspective of the people who stayed in their country.”

Diop’s existential approach toward the film really shines through the *mise-en-scène*. It is the lighting and the formation of bodies that accentuate the narrative of economic struggle. Audience members are granted breaks from dialogue, with long, personal shots of characters pulsating with emotion. This is her form of communicating the rich and convoluted community of Dakar. She continues in an interview at the ⁷New York Film Festival: “How the essence of the situation has been miscommunicated... For me, whether in my short *Atlantiques* or in this one, the moment of the shipwreck is very important because I really want to try to convey the essence

of the tragedy... so that the audience can create their own images, and that makes them active and in a relationship with what happens.” We clearly see how Diop connects mise-en-scène and the narrative she is trying to express.

One particular moment where Diop’s communication style comes across is the seventh shot of the first sequence I will analyze, which occurs with 26:30 left in the film. It takes place in the moon lit, open-spaced nightclub that Dior operates. This shot is two before the one where Ada discovers what happened to Souleiman. However, more importantly, it’s the first representation we have of the men since they left for sea at the start of the film.

The shot lasts six seconds and is entered through an eye match on Ada. For the entire duration, the camera remains still, fixated at about chest height, framing the six women—still in their garments—who are possessed by the dead men. We see the women from a slight angle, because they are seated below chest height. Their bodies appear almost diminished as they sit longingly and exhaustively. All are placed in the middle ground: three sit by small tables, while the other two are directly behind them—one leaning against a pillar, and one facing towards the sea.

The bodies are depicted in a medium long shot. However, since they are sitting and slouching, while still occupying a majority of the screen, the shot forms the intimacy of a medium shot. The entire frame is tinted blue, lit by the moonlight, with slight white reflections at the corners of objects and bodies. There is only diegetic sound, of the waves crashing in the background, and the overlay of Ada’s heavy breathing originating from the shot before. The shot then cuts back to Ada.

The mise-en-scène of this shot is very detailed. Two filmic elements of mise-en-scène that stood out to me were the lighting and color. The room is dimly lit with greenish blue hues

throughout the whole sequence. The aquatic colors give a solemn feeling, cold. In the background of shot seven, we see the waves crashing, the blue tint on the frame almost feels as the ocean is absorbing the middle and foreground, as if the men who are now in the body's of the women, are still consumed by the sea; a continuing symbol of the dangers of migration and result of economic struggle. The dim lighting plus the blue colors allow the body's to slightly fade into the environment. In this way the film is able to speak on the longevity of the affects the men faced. The blurred elements create the narrative that the men are one with the sea, a victim of oppression. Diop's choice to maintain this narrative, instead of opposingly allowing them to come back in a contrasting tone of freedom, allows the weight of the hardships that caused their deaths to be heavier, it's existentially and literally permanent.

Along this line, another filmic element of *mise-en-scène* is the composition and blocking of characters in shot seven. The ghosted men are all visible, with very little overlap, which causes them to take up most of the frame. The layout creates a feeling of presentation, as if we, the audience, are seeing these men on display—a display of emotion, of a group of people chewed up, killed, and now reflecting on the system that oppressed them. They are all slouching, sluggish, with slow movements when taking a sip of beer or blowing out cigarette smoke, each action highlighted by the stillness of the camera. The micromovements presented accentuate a feeling of dread. Diop's choice to depict the men as almost lifeless—rather than as an energetic-filled group of zombies—speaks to the emotional exhaustion inflicted by the system. They are tireless, absorbing, reflecting, as one of them watches the sea. They have been disenfranchised, torn apart. They don't even receive the privilege of being a conglomerate force in this shot; each body is looking or facing a different direction, fragmenting them into their own isolated dread; a rich narrative that can only be uniquely told through bodies.

Lastly, the costume and set design stood out in this shot. The women—possessed by the spirits of the drowned men—are still in their everyday garments, but these clothes appear torn and worn down. Some of the garments, once pink or warm in color, are now muted by the pervasive blue tint of the sequence, while others are already shades of blue, blending seamlessly into the surrounding environment. This muted color palette, combined with the dim moonlit setting, reinforces the sense that these bodies are fading—both physically into the background and metaphorically into memory. The objects in the space, from the small tables to the pillar the woman leans on, also share these cool blue tones, further blurring the line between the figures and their environment. This careful attention to costume and set design amplifies the narrative of the characters' erasure: they are no longer distinct individuals but part of a larger, ongoing tragedy tied to the sea and economic oppression. Diop's choice to visually blend the bodies into their surroundings adds to the sense that they are forever absorbed by the ocean—victims not only of migration but of a system that left them with no other choice.

In Sequence One, the film represents the hardship and heaviness of economic struggle, but in the subsequent sequence, the narrative pivots. Sequence Two takes place in the same setting but uses different elements of *mise-en-scène* to convey a shift. While the relationship between narrative and *mise-en-scène* remains strong—the story continues to be shaped by the visual composition—Sequence Two presents a different emotional perspective on economic struggle. Through these changes, the narrative moves toward its conclusion, offering a new emotional resolution to the themes introduced earlier.

An important shot in Sequence Two which starts with 5:53 left in the film, is shot six . The shot is cut from a shot of Ada, and now faces away towards the sea like Sequence One. The shot tracks dior, as she cleans the tables on the other side of the pillars. She moves in a routine

fashion going left then right, with the camera steadily following. She is pictured in a full shot, in the middle ground. The shot shows a level of depth as the deeper focus reveals the crests of the furthest back waves, in the ocean that consumes the background with similar color as the sky right above. The lighting is a warm white with hues of yellow. The sun is glaring down reflecting on the furniture which also takes whitened colors. The warm colored wood is lit up while the cooler colored furniture is in shadow. There are three different types of sound that occur in this shot. The diegetic sound of the waves breaking, the non-diegetic sound of calm and soothing music and the internal diegetic sound of Ada's thoughts. Ada thinks "Some memories are omens. Last night stay with me. To remind me who I am. Then the shot cuts back to Ada. ".

This *mise-en-scène* in this shot is thick with intricacies. One filmic element that stands out is the color and lighting. This shot—and the entirety of Sequence Two—is presented with a sense of freshness. It is bright, and sunlight peers in from every angle to the point where it is difficult to determine the direction of the light source. Bodies and furniture are highlighted; the scenery curates a feeling of optimism, as though it is the entrance into a new season. The warm tone of the shot adds to this feeling, one that was absent from Sequence One. Even the ocean is a bright shade of blue, seamlessly matching the sky. Unlike earlier in the film, the ocean is no longer absorbing the characters. This shift in *mise-en-scène* reflects a change in emotion: there is no longer a sense of dread being projected toward the audience. The environment feels new and hopeful.

Directly adding to this change in emotion is the composition and blocking of the characters—in this case, Dior. Dior moves freely from one end of the frame to the other, smoothly tracked by the camera. Her arms sway, her hips shift from side to side; she is given a dynamism that the ghosts in Sequence One were not. Dior, along with Ada, still lives under an

oppressive economic system. They are not wealthier by any means; Ada will continue working at the nightclub with Dior for the foreseeable future. However, they do not carry the visible weight of struggle. The emotions being represented here shift the narrative from a community devastated by hardship to one that honors the resilience of survivors. Ada and Dior have survived their situations up to this point. They have processed the emotions that come with losing soulmates and family members at sea.

To finalize this idea, the sound design influences our perception of the shot in many ways. The non-diegetic music adds to this sense of optimism and renewal. The sound of the waves crashing is the same as in Sequence One, but in this context and environment, it sifts from carrying a violent undertone to becoming a calm, almost soothing background noise. Most importantly, we hear Ada's internal monologue: "Some memories are omens. Last night stays with me. To remind me who I am." In this moment, Ada reflects on her experience—losing her virginity to Souleiman while he was possessing the body of the story's "ghost detective," Issa. Verbally, she clarifies to the audience that she has not forgotten, nor will she forget, the tragedies that stemmed from economic immobility. But instead of being haunted by the past, she uses her experiences as a source of agency and growth. Ada has already undergone significant internal change, and now she is using her past traumas as a foundation to move forward, fully aware that more economic struggle is inevitable. The narrative of Ada and Dior changes drastically here, as they are no longer just victims of their circumstances—they are survivors charting their own paths.

The *mise-en-scène* affects the narrative in profound ways, even when similar settings are used. The emotions are clearly laid out, and the film visualizes economic oppression from two different perspectives. It shows the hardships—the terror—and renders the experience of the

young generation in Senegal, who are forced to coexist with an unforgiving economic system. But the film also depicts another emotional reality of economic struggle: survival. Women like Ada—wives, sisters, and family members—are often abandoned as their male counterparts leave in search of a better life across the sea. Women, and specifically Ada in this film, carry both emotions: they live with the weight of an economic system that holds them back as workers, and they embody the strength of survival.

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