**A Thousand Sons: Traversing the Archive and**

**Transforming Documentary in Mati Diop’s *Mille Soleils***

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Over the last twenty-five years or so, documentary, a relatively recent tradition within Sub-Saharan African cinema due to the contested legacies of colonial ethnographic film and its pretensions of absolute knowledge and truth (i.e. of the black Other), has established itself as one of the most vibrant and dynamic strands of filmmaking there. Although it doesn’t yet enjoy the type of internal support system found in South Africa with national bodies like the Documentary Filmmakers Association, the documentary form in Western and Central Africa is a rapidly evolving and expanding field.[[1]](#endnote-1) An inherently hybrid form of non-fiction encompassing a range of genres, tendencies and emerging strands, it now includes historical documentary addressing civil war and trauma, direct political documentary, the personal journey or quest documentary, the portrait or tribute (of person, community, or place), the crime or social investigation documentary, even mockumentary**.**

**The most** influential exponent, both nationally and internationally, has been the Cameroonian director, Jean-Marie Teno, whose politically engaged, first-person documentary work exposes the continuities between the colonial past and the postcolonial history and present, in particular State violence and neocolonial corruption in contemporary African societies.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yet African documentary is increasingly **dominated by women filmmakers who** have a particular incentive to raise crucial questions about their societies and tell stories that otherwise wouldn’t get told.[[3]](#endnote-3) A notable example is the Togalese director Anne Laure Folly’s *Femmes aux yeux ouverts* (Women with eyes open, 1994), winner of the Prix Unesco, which records women from [Benin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin), [Burkina Faso](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burkina_Faso), [Mali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mali), and [Senegal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senegal) freely discussing the daily issues that affect them such as female excision (FGM), HIV/AIDS, and forced marriage. Other important filmmakers include the Franco-Cameroonian Osvalde Lewat, who adopts an interventionist approach in investigative works like *Black Business* (*Une Affaire de nègres*, 2008), about the sudden “disappearance” of people in Douala by the State, the Senegalese filmmaker Aïcha Thiam who focuses on both national and local concerns such as the street children of Dakar in her 2003 short *Fi Fabililahi*; and Katy Lena Ndiaye, also Senegalese, whose elegant and contemplative *Waiting for Men* (*En attendant les hommes,* 2007) gives a voice to the women who daub patterned murals on the walls of the desert town of Oualata in Mauritania. Art documentary is, in fact, a preeminently fluid and capacious form for African practitioners who are always open to the possibilities of fiction to enhance the telling of real stories, in contrast with African documentaries made by European or North American directors who usually aim for a more standard objective style. In the case of the Senegalese writer and director Khady Sylla, for example, her award-winning *Une Fenêtre ouverte* (An open window, 2005) offers an intimate and self-reflexive video portrait of a self-declared “mad woman” in Dakar, while her earlier film *Colobane Express* (1999), a study of passengers using a bus service in Dakar over the course of one day, unfolds as a docu-drama with reconstructed events.

It is within this diverse and progressive context that *Mille Soleils* (A Thousand Suns, 2013), a remarkable forty-five minute short by the young Franco-Senegalese director Mati Diop, must be viewed.[[4]](#endnote-4) Diop previously made a number of acclaimed short and medium-length films, notably *Atlantiques* (2009), which she directed and shot herself, Snow Canon (2011), and *Big in Vietnam* (2012), all distinct and unorthodox in context, style and theme.[[5]](#endnote-5) Plugging now directly into the imaginary of cinema, *Mille Soleils* is her most assured and ambitious work yet, for she is poised here uniquely between multiple worlds: not only documentary and fiction but also her own generation and that of her forebears – she is a French filmmaker based in Paris and heir to a particular African filmmaking inheritance. Pursuing familiar African documentary concerns with cultural transmission and heritage, as well as with spectatorship as a form of complicity, *Mille Soleils* opens up and encourages interrelated processes of memory and desire in fresh and inventive ways by reconceiving the very nature of the archive in African cinema. Rather than newsreels, photographs or television footage presented and interrogated as historical evidence (the pedagogical model perfected by Teno), it is now African narrative fiction film itself that bursts open live on screen in an expression of pure cinema. In the process, *Mille Soleils* generates new types of aesthetic and political dialogue and textual exchange, shaping an urgent, sensuous form of documentary fiction that draws on, and extends, the historical *impurity* of African documentary.

***Mille Soleils*: A Film In-between**

The official status of *Mille Soleils* is documentary, as the hypnotic power created by its use of found footage, hand-held camera effects, and long takes in real time -- images that seem to speak for themselves -- seduces the viewer into believing. Yet *Mille Soleils* certainly does not perform like a conventional documentary, African or otherwise. There is no formal introduction, no commanding authorial voice-over, and no explicit articulation of an overarching critical discourse. Instead, the film proceeds as if instinctively in a trance by means of impressionist touches, suggestions and evocations. Indeed, the stories, acts and gestures presented as factual start very soon to appear more like legendary fables or parables whose significance will only become clear as the film’s personal, cultural and historical contexts expand. Already in the continuous long takes of the opening urban frieze – a threshold image in the process of being constructed in the present where what seems momentous is framed by the ritual of the daily commute from Dakar’s suburbs to the downtown area ofLe Plateau – Diop appears to be exploring the very conditions and limits of fabulation. A herd of zebus emerge from the distance in a dusty haze and drifting slowly across the asphalt of a multilane highway in daytime Dakar, shepherded by a tall, elderly man dressed in a star-studded denim shirt and cowboy boots wielding a stick. As the camera records this African urban cowboy scene in a series of long takes that range from an initial, gentle, high-angle, panning shot in extreme long-shot to a set of medium long-shots at ground level, the soundtrack fills with the theme tune from Fred Zinnemann’s western *High Noon* (1952) and Tex Ritter warbles in a moody baritone about love, duty, longing, destiny and vengeance: “Do not forsake me, oh my darling/ On this our wedding day […] I do not know what fate awaits me/ I only know I must be brave/ For I must face a man who hates me […] Or die a coward in my grave.” Despite this tough and bruising language, the heavy, plaintive undertow of the ballad matches the slow, horizontal movement of cattle from right to left across the screen, blocking any movement by the cars now stalled vertically in both directions.

Like the ballad, the way the camera intersects directly with, and intrudes into, the brute, day to day reality of Dakar creates a set of startling juxtapositions: between documentary-style footage of the new Afropolis of Dakar and the arcane sentiments of a classic Hollywood western; between ambient street noise, urban grit, and the mute vulnerability of the cattle blocking the traffic; and above all between the generic everyday (the Dakar commute, the herding of cattle) and the special and unique (the city reborn in the sunlit glow as the high sierra). The sheer heft and heave of this panorama of the Senegalese capital is thrown into heightened relief by the arrival on screen of the explosive, poetic French phrase “Mille Soleils” emblazoned in large, ultramarine lettering over a setting red sun, superseded provocatively by the crisp, African female name of its creator, “Mati Diop.”

This magnetic opening credit sequence is like a controlled rush: a highly charged, giddy, liminal moment of inter-crossing where the screen becomes a generative site of flows and contraflows, the cattle seemingly cast adrift yet moving loosely together against the flow of the traffic, presumably on their way to the slaughterhouse. Director of Photography Hélène Louvart’s camerawork harnesses, steadily and unflinchingly, the physical forces of reality. Contingent on the shifting fabric of Dakar’s everyday, and framed literally by it, this exemplary frontier image dares the viewer to ask how much of what s/he is witnessing is “natural” (i.e. recorded footage of a chance event in Dakar) and how much is staged and composed for the camera. It also conveys an irresistible sense of promise – of opening up new elemental spaces in African cinema somewhere beyond the labile frame and verging potentially on the mythical -- just as the stark, documentary-like beginning of *High Noon*, with its voiceless actors moving in what appeared to be real time, once announced a new form of the western smuggled inside an archetypal Hollywood genre.

Before the narrative regions of *Mille Soleils* are even broached, therefore, these potent images of motion across the shimmering surface of reality appear loaded with the freight of cinematic memory, as if carrying in their wake the sweep of modern Senegalese cinema -- a cinema founded precisely on the tensions between tradition and modernity, rural life and the industrializing city, nationalism and pan-Africanism. Indeed, as a bold cinematic gesture and dazzling conceit, they recall inevitably the late Djibril Diop Mambety’s legendary debut feature *Touki-Bouki* (The Hyena’s Journey, 1973). The sight of a solitary, aging, urban cowherd lost in the Dakar traffic evokes Mory, the rebellious young protagonist of *Touki-Bouki*, roaming the streets of Dakar alone after deciding at the last minute not to embark on the boat bound for France with his girlfriend Anta. Moreover, *Touki-Bouki* concluded with the same *cinéma-vérité*-style images with which Mambety began his film: a boy herder (possibly a retrospective shot of Mory in his youth) leading his cattle from the *sahel* to the abattoir, where in one shocking scene, they suddenly meet their fate.

And wait a moment: look again at the opening sequence in *Mille Soleils* -- it’s the same man! Or at least the same actor, Magaye Niang, now forty years on, as if, like the character he played in *Touki-Bouki*, he had never left Dakar. And it’s a fact – he didn’t. Like Mory, Niang remained in Dakar, working as a musician and photographer as well as a semi-professional actor, notably as the possessive spurned lover Lamine Diop in Joseph Gaï Ramaka’s musical reworking of the Carmen story, *Karmen Ge****ï*** (2001). The twists of fate don’t stop there, however, for Diop reveals that Magaye’s co-star in *Touki-Bouki*, Marème Niang did as her character did and left Dakar.[[6]](#endnote-6) Before leaving, though, she starred as the progressive feminist student and defiant daughter Rama in Ousmane Sembene’s *The Curse* (*Xala*, 1974), a film that also features Magaye in a bit part as a pickpocket who charms his way into the corrupt Chamber of Commerce with a dapper, freshly-acquired suit and cowboy hat to match.

Such a fabulous coincidence of destinies would surely have to be made up, yet truth in the cinema is stranger than fiction. In an escalating vertigo of floating identities, Magaye and Marème in *Mille Soleils* are actors who are playing both themselves and the reincarnation of their fictional characters Mory and Anta, although in the case of Marème her voice must stand in for her physical presence. But watch out: Magaye may or may not currently own a farm, yet he is certainly not a professional herder, as *Mille Soleils* leads the audience to believe. Hence, the two striking portrayals of Magaye as Dakar cowboy and Marème as security guard on an oil rig in Alaska, which are all the more seductive because they are so oddly contrasting and extravagant, are pure narrative constructions.

*Mille Soleils* manifests itself into being on this tightly compressed note of reversible movements and intersecting destinies -- and crucially the fantasy that Mory then and Magaye now are one and the same. For this is a film that consciously works the borders between truth and fiction, the real and the constructed, by expanding the formal and thematic implications of its opening images of urban/rural transit and staging a series of stunning reversals. And it does so precisely because it taps into the lure of the everyday for cinema, namely the spectatorial temptation to believe that what one sees and hears unfolding before one is for real.

**A Family Affair**

At the core of *Mille Soleils* is the extended scene of a night-time, open-air screening of *Touki-Bouki* in a square in downtown Dakar to celebrate the film’s fortieth anniversary. Magaye arrives late and inebriated to the event after drinking in a nearby bar, as if reluctant to attend his second appointment with cinematic destiny. Pictured in close-up sporting the same shirt and boots, gray-haired and rail-thin but still ruggedly handsome, he retains the outlaw cool and hip of his original incarnation in *Touki-Bouki*. The viewer watches from behind the audience as Mambety’s film is projected on a large screen amidst the everyday bustle of Dakar. Following the screening, Magaye is asked how his life has changed since making it. Awash in the translucent blue glow of the projector and standing in front of a magnified image of his younger self – the moment when Mory heads out of the port in his millionaire suit, now deflated and confused -- he remains silent and sullen, his lanky frame casting a narrow black shadow on the screen. In apparent denial and delusion about his current unrecognized status, he tries in Wolof to convince a group of young boys that he’s the same man they behold in the film, yet they protest: “You’re in a dream, that’s not you!”

Later, Magaye’s old friends -- the artist “Joe Wakam” (real name Issa Samb), the screenwriter and filmmaker Ben Diogaye Bèye (assistant director on *Touki-Bouki*), and Diop’s own father, the celebrated jazz musician Wasis Diop (Mambety’s younger brother) – tease and chastize him: “‘*Touki*’means to travel and you are stuck! You should have traveled!” Scrounging for money and insisting grumpily “I’m the star!” while his female partner or assistant berates him, just as Mory’s onscreen aunt Oumy (Aminata Fall) did forty years before, there seems little to separate the nervously shifting and rather louche older man now from the young hustler he once played. Mory/Magaye has once again flunked his moment of destiny and the chance to be famous the second time around. Hence, if the beginning of Mille Soleils reimagines Magaye as a Western hero on the urban prairie, he is no Will Kane who in *High Noon*, after a grand and bloody shoot-out with his rival, triumphantly left town. Instead, a pale avatar of his fictional character, he seems visibly haunted by the consequences of never having left Dakar. Exiled in his legendary screen role, he appears doomed to keep paying the price for once being Mory.

It is precisely the way *Mille Soleils* shuttles between -- and potentially synthesizes – instants of raw and found footage, constructed and possibly reconstructed images, memory and fantasy, keeping one always in a state of creative and interpretive suspense, that interests me most. What makes this metapoetic process even more complex and enthralling is the biographical fact of Diop’s own relationship to the director of *Touki-Bouki*, for this is personal history interacting directly with the “grand history” of cinema. *Mille Soleils* is implicitly the story of Diop’s own return to Africa during her search for *Touki-Bouki*. Born in 1982 and brought up as a *métisse* in Paris by her French mother while her father Wasis toured the world as a jazz musician, she revealed in one interview that she never knew her uncle. It was only through her later discovery of his films, and subsequent dialogue about them with her father – who played a small role in Mambety’s second short *Badou Boy* (1970) and always remained close to his sibling – that she made links with her own Senegalese origins.

Dedicated to Mambety and clearly intended as a personal tribute, *Mille Soleils* mounts a series of individual reflections on the cinematic legacy of *Touki-Bouki* viewed against the backdrop of a country’s troubled past, even though Diop herself is never directly seen or heard. Indeed, in a veritable case study of film genealogy and cinematic succession, she uses the story of Magaye Niang to reengage with her family history and negotiate the miraculous event and enigma of *Touki-Bouki*, which she considers the film where Mambety most revealed himself.[[7]](#endnote-7) The freeze-frame that ends *Touki-Bouki*, where the young cowherd is suddenly suspended as he moves out of frame, is effectively reanimated by Diop when she releases Mory/Magaye back into the spectacle of real time in *Mille Soleils* with his herd of zebus intact and re-entering the visual field. (Note that “The Ballad of High Noon” which bookends *Mille Soleils* was one of Mambety’s own favorites.) Magaye is arguably a stand-in for her solitary and mysterious uncle, the infamous “poet-dandy” and vagabond of Dakar, particularly in the hand-held camera sequences (many filmed by Diop herself with a digital camera) that follow him drunk in the streets and forever roaming. Diop’s underlying challenge of ensuring the transmission of a shared cultural legacy while also moving decisively out of Mambety’s all-encompassing creative shadow and influence is daunting, given that he was a unique visionary filmmaker who regarded himself as both a *griot* for his times and an agent of African futurity.

The dense, intricate network of filiations and influences activated by *Mille Soleils* extends further with the knowledge that Diop is herself a screen actor who, in her first major role, played the *métisse* daughter Jo (Joséphine) in Claire Denis’s *35 Shots of Rum* (*35 Rhums*, 2008), a story of personal choices and destiny set in an Antillean quarter of northern Paris where her character plots to leave the one-parent family nest lovingly tended by her father Lionel (Alex Descas). *35 Shots of Rum* was such a formative cinematic experience for Diop precisely because Jo engineers her own family solution by marrying the boy next door, literally, thus ensuring an enduring close proximity with her father. Moreover, its affectionate illustration of blood ties and the stages of life is rooted directly in the daily rituals and networks of meaning in a particular community, emphasizing the sustained benefits of immersing oneself in the patterns of the everyday (the shared rituals of cooking rice, driving a taxi, taking the metro to campus). On a formal level, too, Denis’s own intertextual play with the themes and images of Yasujir**ō** Ozu’s *Late Spring* (1949) performs a synthesis of traditions and styles similar to Wasis Diop’s pioneering fusions of Senegalese folk music with modern pop and jazz.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Diop has suggested that *35 Shots of Rum*, made around the tenth anniversary of her uncle’s death, lay at the very origin of *Mille Soleils*: “This is when I discovered the thousand stories hiding behind Touki-Bouki […] After having found and affirmed my own cinematographic language, I was ready to make *Mille Soleils* and look *Touki-Bouki* straight in the eye.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Certainly Denis’s film offers a conceptual model: by deregulating and romancing the paternal instance at pivotal moments, it successfully renegotiates familial structures and social prohibitions. Yet is it enough to say that its harmonious reconfiguring and reconsolidation of father/daughter relations inspired in Diop a wish to reclaim and redeem her uncle’s seminal work, and in the process establish herself as an *auteur* in her own right? What exactly is she doing by incorporating extracts from *Touki-Bouki* directly into the structuring fiction of *Mille Soleils*, using sequences that appear to function as found or archival footage, standard markers of authenticity in documentary cinema? What, in short, is taking place aesthetically when inherited images of narrative fiction are presented as the found and real?

**The Art of the Everyday**

*Touki-Bouki*, it should be recalled, was a film literally lost by powerful institutional forces within African cinema.[[10]](#endnote-10) Mambety’s utterly original and idiosyncratic style, his maverick status and perceived dissidence, clashed with the social realist cinema and overtly political, allegorical narratives advancing national change produced by Sembene and others and actively promoted during the first decades after Senegal’s independence by the African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI). *Touki-Bouki* was all but ignored in Senegal on its release and not distributed in France for another ten years. Like Mory arriving at the port in *Touki-Bouki* with his dreams of future wealth and fame in Paris (ironically romanticized by the repeated refrain from Josephine Baker’s jaunty “Paris, Paris, Paris” heralding paradise on earth), Mambety had been set to embark on a glorious Senegalese New Wave of African modernism, co-founding with Joe Wakam in 1974 the radical, multidisciplinary art collective “Laboratoire Agit’Art.” Ideologically out of favor, however, he could not secure major funding for his own films and tragically was only able to make one additional feature many years later, *Hyenas* (*Hyènes*, 1992), with a celebrated soundtrack by his brother Wasis, followed by a handful of brilliant shorts including [*Le Franc*](http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0096)(1994), and [*La Petite vendeuse de Soleil*](http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0068) (1999).

*Touki-Bouki* thus represents the stupendous promise of something that never quite materialized. What if Mory had taken the ferry with Anta – and what if Magaye had followed the example of his co-actor and left Dakar? The same question applies to Mambety, hailed locally as a “trader of dreams.” What if he had been able to pursue his natural destiny as an exceptional, trailblazing artist? Mambety later often talked of his sense of loneliness and exile after eventually leaving Senegal to seek success and solace in Europe, only to find, as his dream quickly disintegrated, that he would never be able to return home.

*Touki-Bouki* may be read therefore as a film signaling proleptically the impending fate of its director. The restrained melancholy of the opening image of urban drift in *Mille Soleils* conveys this shared story of abortive destinies -- the regret of dreams deferred and potential unfulfilled – with an existential ache and pull. It also gestures toward the forlorn history of Senegalese cinema, in steady decline since the golden age of innovation and experimentation in the 1960s and 1970s due to the almost total withdrawal of State support (only a few feature films are made annually now and Dakar has effectively fallen dark with the closure or demolition of virtually all its great movie palaces).

Like all first-generation African filmmakers, Mambety had wished to avoid anything that approximated colonial documentary realism, with its descriptive visual reportage and voice-over commentary. Naturalism, like the documentary mode itself, was necessarily a matter of suspicion and had to be discarded or else subverted.[[11]](#endnote-11) Formal experimentation afforded a means to avoid being tied down to the enormity of a present which raw documentary-style footage ran the risk of merely reproducing. Key to Mambety’s strategy was his *détournement* of cinéma-vérité images, such as the scene in *Touki-Bouki* where he intercuts historical footage of a presidential procession with a tracking shot of Mory and Anta in their newly stolen gear waving to the crowd from a Citroën decked in the American flag. Yet if *Touki-Bouki* eschewed clear meaning, either overt or allegorical, it did so in favor of an associative, poetic logic sustained by a collage of cross-fertilizing rhythms with breathless ellipses, unaccounted flash-forwards, abrupt, often absurd collisions and acerbic juxtapositions, recurring, lurid images of animals being slaughtered and symbolic shots of the ocean suggesting freedom and becoming progressively more abstract. But it also featured damning, dialectical contrasts between poverty and wealth, rural existence and the city, the baroque architecture of Le Plateau and the sprawling shanty towns (Mambety's first film, a parody short of the official tourist documentary, was called appropriately *Contras’city* (1968). Indeed, Mambety took care to show the small daily acts of survival, encounter and community, particularly of socially excluded habitants eking out a fragile existence on the margins. Such incursions into objective reality privileged the long take and the slow pace of lingering, probing pans, allowing the viewer to become immersed, if only intermittently, in the duration of everyday reality. The force of this brute reality was further underlined by being ritualistically repeated through montage. The end result of Mambety’s stylistic manoeuvres was a new and radical reconfiguration of documentary and narrative, experience and spectacle, in resistance to the prevailing system and its means of knowledge, power and control.

Propelled by the same fierce, experimental drive as *Touki-Bouki*, Diop’s *Mille Soleils* is at once similar to, and fundamentally different from, Mambety’s practice of honoring and (re)making reality. For while Diop trades equally in symbolic images and is a naturally self-reflexive storyteller, she responds more freely to the reverberations of lived reality. In clear emulation of Mambety’s sensory deployment of pulsating sound and color, *Mille Soleils* has the Technicolor feel of a kaleidoscope, full of a distilled, poetic caress of reds and blues as well as combinations of green, pink and white, flashes of purple and magenta lights (in the discotheque scenes), and the continual flooding of the image with a single, saturated digital color like blue ultramarine to isolate characters from their settings. By plunging her audience into fully synchronous real time and tracing voluptuously the rhythms of the day, Diop also stays true to Mambety’s luminous vision of the everyday of Dakar as a site of glaring and surreal juxtapositions -- a restless, sometimes volatile, zone of savage beauty. She, too, enters an abattoir, although withholds the gruesome moment captured by Mambety of the animals’ sudden realization of their fate, preferring instead to focus on the routine of slaughter. The cascading collage of images and sounds directly embedded in the heat of the everyday reveals the city as a uniquely rich palimpsest of interconnecting social, personal and cultural memories. However, whilst Mambety’s sharp delineations of image ensured that his viewer always understood more or less the limits and parameters of his method of contrast and incongruity, between what is “real” diegesis (found documentary or archive footage) and what is fantasy (dream sequence or poetic motif), Diop effectively blurs and confounds all such binaries. Multiple realities merge together in the same frame on equal terms, to the point that the status of each sound and image becomes a matter of positive doubt and speculation. What might seem authentic, reportage-style footage could either be a remake of previous footage (the abattoir sequence), or the incorporation of classic narrative cinema as found footage (the celluloid “reel time” of *Touki-Bouki*), or even staged episodes. In the extended taxi-ride sequence through Dakar, Magaye encounters the well-rehearsed voice of a new generation of political protest in Senegal: the driver is the real Djily Baghdad, chief rapper of the group “5kiem Underground” and a politically committed activist of the *Y’en a marre* (We’re fed up) movement of artists, journalists and students during the 2012 Presidential elections.

Hence, where Mambety foregrounded difference and opposition, Diop works in reverse and foregrounds equivalence: everyday images are treated in the same fashion as both found and constructed images. *Mille Soleils* may initially coax the viewer into thinking there is a difference between what is reconstructed reality and what is recorded directly from the convulsions of daily life, due to the eminently sequential order of episodes such as Magaye preparing for the event, his taxi ride to attend, the screening followed by Q&A, etc. However, the fictional and documentary become uncertain poles and highly elastic concepts, and *Mille Soleils* resides ambiguously between the two. One soon suspects, in fact, that the entire film may be an elaborate fiction, and not just the obviously invented sequence that begins when Magaye speaks in a public phone-shop to a female voice on the end of the line identified as Marème, vowing he will never let her depart again, and is then abruptly transported into a frozen landscape across which he strides in vague pursuit, still clad in his denim shirt but now in bare feet that leave footprints in the snow. From out of the mist of a waterfall a nude white woman momentarily appears – or is she an apparition? – and walks past him. The question whether Magaye, attracted like all Diop’s protagonists by the nebulous promise of an *ailleurs*, did indeed travel to Alaska to find Marème, or whether, as seems more likely, this is Magaye’s wholly subjective vision of his failure to do so (even though subjective POV shots are rigorously denied by Diop), is left deliberately opaque.[[12]](#endnote-12)

*Mille Soleils* thus increasingly appears to be a fabrication that invokes and repurposes documentary reality in order to underscore and embellish its own facticity, reveling in artifice to guard even more assiduously its own secrets and mysteries. Is it a follow-up to *Touki-Bouki* with its characters now older and wiser? Or is it a remake that replays certain documentary-like scenes with notable points of difference? Here is Diop’s authorial warning about the episode of the phone call:

It bears reminding that *Mille Soleils* is a fiction. The sole element of reality that I kept in my film is that Magaye Niang stayed in Dakar and Marème Niang left for Alaska. From there I took fictional liberties, but the phone conversation that is heard in the film remains *quite faithful* to the real conversation that I recorded between the two actors. Nothing is true and nothing is false in my film.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The ambivalent nature of the reconstructed phone call is further highlighted by the knowledge that Diop recorded the original conversation in 2008 by stealth, for which Marème later reproached her (it would take another five years for Diop to regain her trust).[[14]](#endnote-14)

At every level, therefore, *Mille Soleils* may be regarded as akin to an African trickster tale. Enmeshing different types of the real (documentary, biographical, historical, familial), casually distorting the lines and boundaries of genre, forgoing the formal comforts of obsessive repetition, the film ultimately enforces a disregard for the particular status and source of the diegetic sounds and images on screen. One comes to realize how profoundly filmic reality is always in the act of being found, and that the found is never just found but always already refound, remade and reimagined. It’s not just that found reality, variously defined, serves as a defining figure and vehicle for new cinematographic forms; rather, the very distinction between the found (the real) and the made (the artwork) evaporates in Diop’s hands. Each image in her cinema, however “natural,” is always in the act of being disclosed as constructed and “impure.” As in the film’s inaugural encounter in which Dakar slowly bodies forth in real time, the everyday has time to unfold out of itself poetically. The act of cinematic poiesis reveals, in fact, that these two instances, the made and the found, are always already intertwined and part of an ongoing continuum.

What this means is that the everyday real is not some pristine, immaculate experience that can be seized upon intact by the camera, but always multiply generated and composed, and always something *else*, even imaginary, by the time one gets to see and hear it – whether a replication or reconstruction or reimagining of something anterior, source unknown. Anchored in the real world yet always attuned to its imaginary realms, *Mille Soleils* at once indexes and transmutes recorded reality. Indeed, Diop recycles the found narrative images of *Touki-Bouki* as a formal springboard from which to spin off into the loose, free-floating regions of fable with romantic fantasies of reunion. The simultaneous impulse towards fiction and the everyday appears unstoppable: the image of the everyday real is already personal or metaphorical or mythical or iconic or legendary, or flush with all things at once. By working the rich seams of the everyday and its live archives -- its intersubjective ebbs and flows, its peak times and troughs – *Mille Soleils* is thus able to foster and sustain the riveting fictions and compulsive fantasies it sets in motion. Moreover, the extended act of collapsing the real and the staged or constructed into single images creates a wholly original and expressive cinematic space, and with it a new form of passionately detached engagement.[[15]](#endnote-15)

**New Projections, New Transfusions**

The abundant deposits and concentrates of everyday collective fable are thus revealed by Diop as at the very core of aesthetic experience and a prime site for cinematic invention, transporting the viewer back inexorably to the film’s opening image and its poetic collapsing of extremes in a rolling crisscrossing of reality and fiction that emphasizes continuity through mutability and rupture. This chiastic movement is encapsulated in Diop’s statement of her intentions for *Mille Soleils*: “I discovered the unbelievable destiny of the actors of *Touki-Bouki* who had pursued the same trajectory as their fictional characters. It’s a *fiction that had become reality*.I wanted to transform this *reality into a fable*” (my emphasis).[[16]](#endnote-16) If *Mille Soleils* is a brooding work, etched in the agonies of a nation and its cinema, its dynamic force derives precisely from reprojecting into the light the burnish of Mambety’s forgotten masterpiece, suddenly visible again on the very streets which engendered it. The glimpsed sequences of *Touki-Bouki* have the electroshock force of early primitive cinema – a sudden bolt of energy and sensation released from the vaults *as if for the first time* to recharge Senegalese cinema. Indeed, *Mille Soleils*, where *soleils* (“suns”) must also be understood in the sense of “icons,” throbs and vibrates with the surge of affect of rough-hewn, visceral, ravishing images redeployed in experimental compositions and vistas combining 35mm and video. Diop speaks of the different temporalities of *Mille Soleils* revealed by the very fact of combining different formats and image systems, and describes herself as wishing to stand at the intersection of different types of motion.[[17]](#endnote-17) The film is thus a paean to cinema’s capacities for projection, both real and imaginary, as Diop allows her audience to take her fictions seriously by projecting freely onto the characters on screen. Indeed, her declared artistic project is to restore to Africa its right to fiction and the imagination in the face of the tired, miserabilist clichés of an ailing continent.

What Diop prizes perhaps above all, however, are the numinous poetic fusions and reversals made possible in montage, such as the bone-dry dailiness of Dakar seguing magically into Alaskan ice floes. The more bright and white the screen appears, the more allusive and enshrouded in mystery it suddenly becomes. Vertiginous and phosphorescent in its hallucinatory drive, her fluid, molten mix of sounds and images proclaims cinematic freedom and a genuinely organic way of accessing and projecting the truth of an always-constructed “reality” (familial, historical, cinematic, biographical) which she deforms and reforms at will. Impossible to demarcate and fix as separate instances, increasingly porous, the made and the found intersect, collide, and occasionally combust in *Mille Soleils* in an alchemical process of poetic fission and fizzle: the real *is* the found *is* the (re)enacted *is* the narrative *is* the poetic *is* the biographical *is* the fantasmatic. In this live, incandescent, smouldering crucible of miscegenation and transformation, every image is a compound alloy, freshly minted and equal in status, glowing in a continuous state of (re)apparition. Paradoxically, it is this very poetic operation that makes Diop’s naturally oneiric and rhapsodic cinema so intensively alive to embodied experience and the material skin of the real, as well as to the persistence of the lived past in the immediate present. Magaye then and now is a face and figure breathing in the polluted fumes and dense particles of the heady Dakar atmosphere.

Diop’s fundamental trust in the aesthetic wellsprings of both the everyday and the trans-cinematic imaginary allows her beautifully to surrender her preordained engagement with *Touki-Bouki* to the inexorable figurability of cinema in *Mille Soleils*, thereby avoiding a spectacular and lethal showdown of the kind glorified in *High Noon* or graphically witnessed in the slaughterhouse. Indeed, through a proliferation of micro-events -- *a thousand suns* -- that radiate out centrifugally, the film offers a continuous defusing of the Big Event, letting it stray and dissolve in the creative and intoxicating borderlands of the everyday. Further, by reinvesting and reimagining different instances of reality -- the communal everyday of Dakar, the unique event of *Touki-Bouki* – Diop is able to extend the legacy of her benign uncle with a certain Mambetian irreverence and transgression in kind, generously replaying and regrafting *Touki-Bouki* to claim filiations of style and forge new lines of aesthetic dialogue in an ongoing poetic transfer of forms. Such affirmative double movement across the generations is amplified by the presence in “real time” of Djily Baghdad, who once helped mobilize massive street rallies to prevent the unconstitutional passing of power from then-president Abdoulaye Wade to his son, in the process ensuring the relatively peaceful continuity of Senegal’s precious democratic heritage. Thus can Baghdad admonish Magaye and his fellow elders: “What have you achieved with your struggles? What have you left us as a legacy?”

In a branch of world cinema where all is naturally syncretic, a mixture of imported cultural traditions and influences, cross-linguistic exchanges and inter-generational dialogues, the full implications of Diop’s *métissage* of forms via Mambety will need to be considered. For in the multiple condensations and displacements of motifs and echoes generated by her regrafting of a cinematic imaginary (defined, like that in Denis’s work, in primarily masculine terms), her attention to the male figure in the frame, both visual and conceptual, is intense and obsessive. Mambety spoke about himself in *Touki-Bouki* through the character of Mory evoking Will Kane, yet characteristically Diop aims instead for something both more multifarious and more universal: “In *Mille Soleils* I film *all these men at once* through Magaye. The theme of *High Noon* represents in my eyes their interior melody and the invisible thread connecting them” (my emphasis).[[18]](#endnote-18) At the same time, she undermines the certainties of masculinity in distinctly intertextual terms. I am referring not simply to the opening sequence of *High Noon* invoked by her use of the Ritter song, where three outlaw cowboys meet together ritualistically one by one on the high sierra in a kind of secret tryst, but also to the random moment in *Mille Soleils* when, on the phone with Marème, Magaye spots a young masked man in the street outside on a motorcycle identical to the one he rode in *Touki-Bouki* complete with horns (a subtle nod to Cocteau’s male doubles and homoerotic gaze). During the same episode Magaye also evokes the unremitting pain of exile with the statement: “You don’t have a home until you leave it and then, when you have left it, you never can go back”-- a direct quote from James Baldwin’s 1956 landmark gay novel, Giovanni’s Room.

No final personal or aesthetic reckoning could possibly round off the interminable play of forms, rhythms and figures in *Mille Soleils*. Just as there is no ultimate disclosure of the everyday nor final revelation of hidden secrets, so there is no simple closure or happy end: Mory/Magaye and Anta/Marème will never be reunited *for real*, and a graphic lifting of the regret felt by Magaye will always be denied. In the closing sequence of *Mille Soleils*, where a final extreme close-up of Magaye staring blankly out into the distance is immediately followed by a reverse-field shot of zebus dribbling across the verdant landscape (a shot into which he gradually enters stage-right, viewed from behind and heading towards the horizon), the Ritter ballad returns. But it is now crucially reset to the uptempo beats and rhythms of contemporary rock in a final riff on Diop’s consummate play of the found as made, and once again in homage to *Touki-Bouki* which repeated its opening shot of a boy herder not with a light kora flute but sheets of pounding ’70s jazz funk. In this consciously indeterminate yet quietly moving ending,Diop is taking her leave respectfully from both Mambety and Magaye who is now returned to the sanctuary of everyday rural life. *Mille Soleils* remains as opaque and mysterious as Magaye’s inscrutable, wizened face in the bright sunshine.

It is perhaps too early to speak of Diop’s cinematic poetry in terms of a project, and information about her planned coming-of-age tale set among the disenchanted youth of Dakar -- a feature film entitled *Fire, Next Time* -- remains for the moment sketchy. Yet her rapturous aesthetic commitment in *Mille Soleils* to creating an inclusive wide frame open to the simultaneous flows and counterflows of the personal and historical, social and political, together with her absolute refusal to attempt to cleanse cinematic form of its natural impurities and so redeem it, will surely inspire new, impassioned experimentation with the archives and their radical diffusion.

1. A large, free, documentary film festival takes place every November in Saint-Louis in Senegal under the umbrella of “Africadoc,” a program founded in 2002 by the Ardèche Images association in Lussas in France (home of the *États Généraux du Film Documentaire*), which now has roots in a number of West African countries, all with the express aim of encouraging documentary production in Africa. In the month prior to the festival there is an annual meeting and training program for scriptwriters, the *Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire Africain* (or *Rencontres Tënk*), an impressive screening platform where young African documentary filmmakers can present their projects to potential partners from France, Morocco and Belgium; up to twenty films are now produced per year. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Teno’s essay-cum-memoir, *Africa, I Will Fleece You* (*Afrique, je te plumerai*, 1992) is, for example, a typically rich and complex collage of different types of image and modes of address (archival newsreels, contemporary footage, photographs, past and present interviews, as well of reconstructions of colonial footage), which critiques press censorship and government-controlled publishing in Cameroon in the context of colonial policies of assimilation. Teno’s work has been widely exhibited and written about in the UK, Europe, and the United States. See, for example, Anjali Prabhu’s fine overview in *Contemporary Cinema of Africa and the Diaspora* (Chichester UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 187-215. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Beti Ellerson, “Cinémas documentaires en Afrique au féminin”, in François Fronty and Delphe Kifouani (eds), *La diversité du documentaire de création en Afrique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015), 115-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It won the grand prize at the 2013 Marseille Documentary Film Festival and has been widely screened internationally. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Her first film *Atlantiques* (2009) which she directed and shot herself, won the Best Short Award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival that year. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The two are not related: Niang is a common last name in Senegal. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In Georgia Korossi, “Disappearing act”: interview with Mati Diop. BFI news online, 19 May 2015, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/disappearing-act-interview-mati-diop>). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See my detailed study of Denis’s personal correction and *shifting* of Ozu: “Romancing the Father in Claire Denis’s *35 Shots of Rum*,” *Film Quarterly* 63.2 (2009-10): 44-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Andréa Picard, “Art/Film: In the Realm of the Senses: Mati Diop on *Mille Soleils*”(includes interview with Diop),[*Cinemascope* 57](http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/cs57/) (December 2013). <http://cinema-scope.com/columns/filmart-realm-senses-mati-diop-mille-soleils/> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For more on this claim, see: Sada Niang, “*Badou Boy* (Mambéty 1970): Intertextuality, Gangster Movies, and the Language of African Film,” *Africa’s Lost Classics: New Histories of African Cinema,* eds. Lizzie Bisschoff and David Murphy (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2014), 126-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This is not to say, of course, that documentaries were not produced in the first decades following independence. It is a little-known fact that Ousmane Sembene’s first film was *L’Empire Songhay* (1962), a 16 mm short produced by the government of the Republic of Mali, though it’s not actually clear whether the film was actually completed. This uncertainty exemplifies the fact that Sembene and his contemporaries viewed documentary as a minor form, even though almost all practised it during the course of their careers – something to cut one’s teeth on in advance of the real business of politically engaged narrative cinema. Commissioned by the State and relatively cheap to produce, such documentaries aimed to foreground sociocultural realities for the citizens of the new nation, yet they were aesthetically compromised by the official discourse of “development,” resulting in formulaic exercises in ideological self-congratulation (long-takes alternating with close-ups of interviewees and voice-over commentaries providing the requisite information for reading the images). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In Diop’s searing fifteen-minute short, *Atlantiques*, a collection of sensual, elliptical fragments set to the sound of crashing waves, young African migrants gather around the sputtering embers of a fire to relate their perilous experiences on an overcrowded *pirogue*. Europe remains a dream for these men just as it was for Magaye Niang. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Picard 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Jacques Mandelbaum, “La tendresse explosive de Mati Diop,” *Le Monde*, 12 July, 2013. <http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/07/12/la-tendresse-explosive-de-matidiop_3446680_3246.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. One is reminded here of Chantal Akerman who, by means of the long take, duration and extreme slowness, employed time passing on-screen as a way to transform everyday experience while remaining fully receptive and loyal to it. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See “Entretien avec Mati Diop,” *Comme au cinéma* (2014).

    <http://www.commeaucinema.com/interviews/mille-soleils,305873-note-115565> (para 1 of 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Picard 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. (para 3 of 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)