

FILM REVIEW

Mati Diop, director. *A Thousand Suns*. Original title: *Mille Soleils*. 45 minutes. French and Wolof, with English subtitles. Criterion Channel. 2013. No price reported.

Mille Soleils, directed by Mati Diop, tells the story of Magaye Niang, who played Mory in Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973). Forty years after *Touki Bouki* appeared, Diop's niece Mati, daughter of his brother Wasis who composed the music for *Touki Bouki*, made a film about Magaye Niang as a celebratory reshooting of the film occurred in Dakar. Originally thought to be a weird outlier to African cinema, where Sembène's mode of social realism came to prevail as the norm, with time *Touki Bouki* has come to be recognized as a major work of creative genius. It deals with two "marginiaux," characters very much on the outside of conventional Senegalese society, Anta and Mory, who dream up a scheme to steal enough dough to buy tickets on an ocean liner and make their way to France, where fortune awaits them. Djibril Diop marked a generation of beat artists and unconventional thinkers who rebelled against the Senghorian norms of Negritude and even "African socialism." Now his niece has returned to his original work with this film that gazes back on the world of *Touki Bouki*.

Mati Diop poses the question, what has happened in the intervening forty years? What does Niang see when he looks back at *Touki Bouki*? What do we see in watching him answer? (The one I am calling "Magaye" appears as a character in this film; "Niang" as the real actor whom he plays as himself.)

The film's apparent first answer is that the figure of Magaye has become a failure, a drunk, still living in the past. (This answer leaves out the fact that the actor Niang actually played a major role in an important film, *Karmen Gëi* [2001]). To take this answer literally is to assume *Mille Soleils* is somehow an accurate reflection of reality, not a film with its own shadows cast on the wall. To get at the "truth," we should go back to the beginning. Djibril Diop's Mory was the original outsider in *Touki Bouki*. When he returns in the guise of Magaye forty years later, it is with the same look, the same voice, but no longer with the excitement of '68, of a beat generation, that Djibril Diop's early work embodied.

In *Touki Bouki*, Mory originally comes to us as a child, riding a steer. The second time he appears in the film it is as a grown young man with a

motorcycle. With his trademark cattle horns on his handlebars, he rides his Easy Rider cycle into Dakar. But when the cattle arrive in town in *Touki Bouki*, and now again in this new version, the opening scenes of both films reveal a gory spectacle at the slaughterhouse: the floor slippery with blood, the cows' carcasses stripped of their hides, the butchers speckled with blood sweat and grime. From the outset of both films, the death of the cattle haunts the action that follows. The zombies of Mati Diop's later work *Atlantique* (2019) are the reiterations of all these figures of death. Just as the cattle were not the first to enter the abattoir, Mory and Anta were not the first to dream of going off to "Paris, Paris," to get on the ocean liner and find a new life, money, and glamor—or to die.


Every dream of escape that the young couple Anta and Mory projected in *Touki Bouki* appears in ironic repetition in *Mille Soleils*. "Mory" has lost his role as movie star, and now is simply Magaye Niang, the actor who didn't do anything with his life since he blew his original chances for fame and fortune. He is portrayed as a drunk who badgers his wife into giving him small change so he can grab a taxi into town and buy beer. He appears in the opening and closing shots as a cowherd, herding cattle to an abattoir, dressed in cowboy boots and shirt, while we hear Tex Ritter singing the theme song to *High Noon*, "Do Not Forget Me Oh My Darling." We see the same ironic fallen universe that Djibril Diop had recreated with *Hyènes* (1992), an Africa reduced to a sad joke by globalization.

As Magaye comes into town to participate in the celebratory re-screening of *Touki Bouki*, we the spectators have no way of knowing how much is staged, how much of the dialogue is invented—who is actually "real." In short, we are led to conflate Mory from the original *Touki Bouki* of 1973 with Magaye in the documentary-like replay in 2013. Magaye approximates that indeterminate relationship to Mory when he says, "I was afraid to go" (with Anta, to France), as if that choice for the character had been his own personal one. As such, Magaye plays his part, reincarnates Mory, and calls "Anta" (his girlfriend in the original version), asking her, where have you been all these years, why haven't you come home? (Again, with Tex Ritter's lyrics playing in the background.) Anta, who is now working as a guard on a rig in Alaska, asks the question that is posed to him repeatedly in the film: what have you done since then? His answer is very striking. As when he was on stage, after the projection, when asked directly, he turns aside. He cannot give a response to the question.

Here the shadow of the past falls on Magaye. Not simply after his great role in *Touki Bouki*, but also as framed by the fuller scope of past postcolonial hopes, when "Afrique" had become free, when Senghor had carried the dreams of Negritude and Black Culture to the World Festival of Black Arts, when it was possible for the black man to dream of capturing world renown in Paris or New York, or Hollywood.

In Djibril Diop's *Hyènes*, Ramatou returns to Africa "richer than the World Bank." Her former lover Draman stayed home, a failure, his dreams long since drowned in poverty. In *Mille Soleils*, Mati Diop casts a long look at

this generation encompassing her father and uncle, Wasis and Djibril Diop, their fellow artists and musicians, and the actors and writers who forged a new world of Senegalese culture, and brilliantly creates simultaneously a gentle, loving portrait, while nonetheless seeing them ensconced in a world of failure and loss.

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