

# Institute of Contemporary Arts

## Flightpaths: Mati Diop's *Big in Vietnam*

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Telepathy is a feeling across distance, a form of relation that generates a friction as a remote sensation of touch. It requires a medium – a spatial, technological or occult connective tissue – in and through which the self dissolves. Telepathy involves risk, as well as reward: individual consciousness merges with that of another or becomes subsumed in a vast ocean of messages, voices, thoughts. Lisa Blackman calls this ‘the supraliminal self’: in the telepathic moment, we are confronted with ‘forms of communication which happened at a distance and which challenged separation and unification of selves, human and non-human, and even dead and alive.’<sup>1</sup>

Like all of Mati Diop's films, *Big in Vietnam* (2012) is an experience of feeling across distance, a collapse of geographical and historical expanses into the intimacy of 29 minutes. It traces several forms of communication – incomplete, circular, erotic – and movements of people away and towards each other, out of the frame, or into new images and storylines.

Henriette, a French-Vietnamese director, is shooting an adaptation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by Laclos. The novel employs the medium of the letter, and its meaning is transmitted entirely through the characters' epistolary exchange – messages carried from hand to hand, hidden, then revealed. It is a story of dissimulation and deceit, but it is also – as we learn, eavesdropping on Henriette's pre-production meeting with the actors – about the liberation of the female body, specifically that of its protagonist, the Marquise de Merteuil. ‘It is the idea of emancipation, in relation to her body, of how she wants to use it and live her love life.’ Sao, the Vietnamese actor Henriette has cast to play Valmont, smokes and listens distractedly, shot in densely pixellated half-light.

These first moments condense two ideas into a single image: first, transmission through correspondence; second, the relationship of the body to agency and identity – in terms of a woman's self-identification as well as that of an actor. The persistent tension of Diop's films emerges here: in the desire to reach across a distance, but also in resistance to this communication and the leakage it might entail. What do we lose when we transmit a message; transmit ourselves? What kinds of transformation do we risk?

Gazing into a mirror, Sao examines himself in costume. The image rhymes with another from *Mille soleils* (2013), in which Magaye Niang – lead actor in *Touki Bouki* (1972) by Diop's uncle Djibril Diop Mambety – stands in the video-blue light of a projector and speaks of the eerie proximity between his character in Mambety's film and his life since. Diop on *Mille soleils*: ‘Nothing is true and nothing is false in my film. The friction and two-

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (London: Sage Publications, 2012), 181.

way shuttling between reality and myth is the main subject of my film.’<sup>2</sup> In *Mille soleils*, there is a merging of reality and myth, cinema and memory: the actors’ lives mirror those of their characters. In *Big in Vietnam*, something like the opposite happens. Reality resists mythology – or, reality at least resists subsumption into a certain kind of cinema, the mid-budget costume drama with producers and PAs and shot lists and schedules. It is this sort of production that Sao, minutes into the film, walks out of, and soon Henriette does too, leaving her assistant-director Mike (also her son) to finish the production.

‘My characters rarely find themselves where they want to be in the world: there is always somewhere to escape from, to return to, or to conquer by means of the imagination.’<sup>3</sup> In Diop’s films, the relation of bodies to places is always unstable, migratory. Figures are always in some way in exile – perhaps even when they are at home. Magaye Niang has stayed in Dakar and, in a sense, in the cinema. The young men of *Atlantiques* (2009), Diop’s first film, are never at home in Senegal, but always at its edge, where land meets the sea. Sao leaves Henriette’s film and thereafter appears only as a ghost, receding into the woods around Marseille, a figure lost in thick textures of a forest shot in pointillist standard-definition video.

Places and objects and bodies become fluid. In *Big in Vietnam*, Sao’s body loses definition. In *Snow Canon* (2011), the Alps quiver in the frame. In *Atlantiques*, we are told: waves become buildings; the sea becomes a flowered meadow; humans transform into fish, then into dust; heat, flame, smoke bend the light, blurring the black and gold image of a body in the dark. What passes for stability is instead the point of relation between bodies, the medium that joins them across distances: the telephone in *Mille soleils*; instant messaging in *Snow Canon*; in all Diop’s films, the cinema.

Perhaps *Big in Vietnam* differs from the rest of Diop’s work by explicitly demarcating one cinema from another. We see this most clearly in the intercutting that occurs during the film’s erotic climax. On the film set, Mike directs a sex scene, shot with the glassy perfection of a tableau in a befogged, mirrored, and silken boudoir. Meanwhile, across town, in a cluttered and overly bright bar, Henriette engages in a wonderfully tuneless karaoke duet with a nameless stranger, another Vietnamese wanderer. Suddenly, there is a charge, a locking of eyes, a telepathic liaison rather more dangerous than anything found on a film set. She follows him out of the bar and into the streets of Marseille.

Diop oscillates between these two cinemas, these two images of the world and even of Vietnam. On the film set, actors gaze at Marseille and read lines of dialogue that project towards Vietnam, or a Vietnam as it might look in pictures. Mike stands with his crew, the camera locked down, getting the shot. Back in Marseille’s streets, on the coastal

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<sup>2</sup> Andréa Picard, ‘In the Realm of the Senses: Mati Diop on *Mille soleils*’, *Cinema Scope* 57 (Winter 2014), <http://cinema-scope.com/columns/filmart-realm-senses-mati-diop-mille-soleils/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

fairground of Bistingo Beach, Henriette and the stranger speak of the Vietnam he left in his former life. 'The life far away from home' – a message tattooed into his very skin – speaks of a body in transit, a body moving into and out of the frame. Diop's camera shoots the actors, first, in a tight two-shot, their bodies collapsed into one, and then, curiously, handheld and from afar – from the vaulting position of a Ferris wheel, horizons constantly undulating like waves.

It is a critical commonplace to note the affinity between Diop's films and those of Claire Denis, owing to the intimacy with which they portray the human body. This is, of course, because of Diop's appearance, as an actor, in the latter's *35 Shots of Rum* (2008) – a film whose climax comes, similarly, in a piercing, telepathic lightning flash. In *Big in Vietnam*, what is more important is how Diop's camera varies its perspective, approaching and moving further away, tracking characters at the level of the body and from somewhere in the heavens. Diop situates these bodies not in place, but in motion. In a film that is structured around leaving, migrating, and following unexpected lines of flight, Diop's camera seeks a point of relation between bodies, a medium that not only traverses space but also creates it.