SPECULATIVE REALMS OF THE AFRODIASPORA

A response to John Akomfrah’s *The Last Angel of History*
written by Bendrix
Hello World!

I have a confession! I am a techno-culture junkie with a serious addiction to sci-fi and fantasy (sci-fantasy) — particularly in music and film. Like other fangirls/boys of popular culture, I know that “Han shot first” (a hotly debated Star Wars reference) and that Thanos can exterminate all life in the universe with a snap (Avengers: Infinity War). I have dipped deeply (and happily) into what the dominant Western (and Caucasian) culture has dished up for global consumption — but what about the fantastical, utopian, dystopian, sci-fi, horror, folklore and superhero stories that feature and populate people who look like me? Where can I see myself and other black folk within the broader speculative fiction context?

This summer, the PLATFORM centre showcased, The Last Angel of History, an Afrofuturist hybrid of documentary and fictional filmmaking heavily focused on music. Sun-Ra (Jazz), Parliament-Funkadelic (Funk) and Lee Perry (Reggae) — all of whom appear in the film — were before my formative years. Fast forward to the 80s and onwards, Afrofuturism within hip hop culture impacted me directly through vibrant and bold soundscapes, movements, lyricism and visuals. I’m thinking of artists, such as Herbie Hancock, Digable Planets, Canibus, Super Nat, Company Flow, Busta Rhymes and Missy Elliott. Hip-hop is part of my DNA, but my overall futurist anthem is Electronica, namely Trip Hop, Drum & Bass, Downtempo and House. Artists like Frankie Knuckles, Lil Louis, Goldie (who appears in the film), Grooverider, LJT Bukem and Tricky are pioneers on a much longer list extending all the way to current eclectic faves: Flying Lotus, Kendrick, Twigs, Gambino, and Monâé.

Afrofuturism draws upon the multi-faceted experiences of black people throughout the AfroDiaspora. This aesthetic crosses the full cultural spectrum, embracing literature, film, music, the performing and visual arts and even fashion. It envisions multiversant realities, including (but not limited to) dimensions of time and space and the multiverse; consciousness and all real-and-virtual combined environments; and other scientific, fantastical and speculative realms.

A central feature of Last Angel are interviews with black writers and musicians who discuss and reflect on the universal themes of displacement, dislocation and alienation within the landscape of Afrofuturism. In the film, British-Ghanian artist Kwodo Eshun illuminates the parallels between sci-fi as a genre and the AfroDiaspora experience: “Science fiction writers, time and again speak about alien abductions and alien space ships taking mass populations from one planet to another, genetically transforming people...” He goes on to talk about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and asks: “How much more alien do you think it gets than slavery?”

In researching Afrofuturism, I’ve found that some of its definitions limit the depiction of blackness to our existing reality, recorded history, nature or the present universe — rather than a boundless reality transcending our current socio-historical context. Make no mistake: past and present are vital to modern black art, but by no means should limit the exploration of a multiversant reality beyond our experience. To put this point bluntly, there is a problem with the expectation that black artists will only create works that address black oppression or work within the current earthbound timeline and awareness that we know. This same point applies to Indigenous and other non-white artists, and to women and non-binary artists of all ancestries.
Numerous films going back decades laid the foundation for varied Afrofuturist perspectives, challenging the limited and distorted portrayal of black people in film and other mediums and the very definition of “blackness”. Will Smith and Lawrence Fishburn, our champions, co/starrered in a bunch of films in the sci-fantasy genre, but let’s be real, that’s two black men pretty much getting all the cool roles. Let’s take them out of the equation for a moment and see what we have?


In 1998, *Blade*, a dark, gritty action-packed vampire slayer (R-rated) horror flick, starring Wesley Snipes, became the first, successful black-led superhero film in cinema history. Up until that point the only films in the superhero genre were from Marvel rival, DC Comics which include the Batman and Superman trilogies in the 80s and 90s. Blade is credited for being the first superhero film packaged and licensed by Marvel Studios. The film’s world-building and character development became a cinematic blueprint for the Marvel Universe as we know it today. 20 years later, *Black Panther* (2018) has many noteworthy achievements, but, most importantly, it’s a globally celebrated, award winning film featuring an all black cast and director. Long live the memory of our King, the beloved and deeply missed Chadwick Boseman, who gave flesh and blood to the *Black Panther*, and left us an iconic film with a giant Afrofuturist footprint in the speculative fiction canon.


Until recently, such films and series were impossibilities, because those stories “couldn’t possibly sell” and generate a lucrative fanbase. Who would fund such projects? And if funded at all, what would be the quality given the massive disparity of tools, resources, networks and marketing/funding bodies available to black creators and black characters?

We are witnessing a new day where Afrodiasporic creators and characters are taking the global stage in greater numbers. Fasten your seatbelts, and get ready to explore new and refreshing multi-realms that challenge current conventions, concepts and ideas on “blackness” and the human condition. I’m hopeful of a future where I see more BIPOC folk from all genders in the rich genre of speculative fiction. We can all benefit from an expanded lens.

So here I am, back in 2021, basking in full techno-culture and sci-fantasy glory. Many thanks to PLATFORM for bringing *The Last Angel of History* to new audiences (including myself) — and for inviting me to write down a few thoughts.

— Bendrix
John Akomfrah is a British artist and filmmaker. He co-founded the Black Audio Film Collective with friends while studying at Portsmouth Polytechnic in 1982, and since then has continued his exploration of film through montage, archival materials, and documentary. Centering on themes of migration, diaspora, and identity, Akomfrah’s work brings narratives of black British history into pop culture.

Bendrix (Ben Williams) is the Founder and Executive Director for the The 48 Film Festival. He serves as a member of the Board of Directors for Afro Prairie and On Screen Manitoba (OSM) – he also currently serves as the Vice-Chair for the Membership and Programs Committee for OSM. For six years he worked for the Winnipeg Film Group as one of the artistic, development and operational leaders. Ben has a BA with Magna Cum Laude and national scholars honours in Graphic Design from Central State University in Ohio with a minor focus on fine art. He also studied digital filmmaking at the New York Film Academy in Manhattan. Prior to Canada, Bendrix worked for over 15 years in digital media studios in NYC, Chicago and Shanghai and has freelanced as a video editor in the U.S. and Canada. Most notably, he worked for JWT/New York in the broadcast and entertainment division and for Wieden+Kennedy in Shanghai on an award winning, groundbreaking Nike campaign featuring NBA superstar, the late, Kobe Bryant. Bendrix is among the first generation of vLoggers, You tubers and Podcast pioneers to emerge in the mid-2000s.

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**IMAGE** | John Akomfrah, from *The Last Angel of History*