



IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC

In the Black Fantastic introduction + Touki Bouki

In the Black Fantastic: a conversation with Ekow Eshun

In the Black Fantastic is curator Ekow Eshun's two-pronged exploration of Black speculative arts and fiction, with an exhibition at Hayward Gallery and a film season at BFI Southbank. In the exhibition, contemporary Black artists from the African continent and the diaspora mobilise fantasy as a site of critique and possible emancipation from a dystopic present. The accompanying film season offers a tapestry of wildly imaginative moving image works in which the fantastic, far from an escapist impulse, allows the articulation of other modes of being.

Yet, while future or alternate universes are some of the terrains of choice of the Black fantastic, works such as Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973), Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou* (1997) and Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019) also celebrate the innate surrealism of Black existence, insistence and survival in an anti-Black world.

To get us started, can you maybe speak to what the Black fantastic is, and what about our current moment gives it a sense of timeliness or urgency?

With the Black fantastic I'm interested in how artists from a range of different mediums (visual art, film, music) deal with the idea of race in general, as a social construct that retains a determining presence in all of our lives, through myth and speculative fiction.

This is about the fantasy of race and the lived reality of race, but it is also about interrogating that condition and looking beyond it. So I'm interested in how artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, have looked to the past, to outer space, and to their own psychological interiority as a way to describe new encounters, new ways of being and seeing.

These works create moments of possibility, moments of utopia, moments of otherness that go beyond othering. If you look at music with Solange or *Lemonade*, or a film like *Black Panther* (2018), a show like *Lovecraft Country* (2020), the fictions of N.K. Jemisin, etc, you recognise that there are a lot of people talking this language right now, exploring this territory. I wanted to make visible what I think is already present.

On a political level, you could really take your pick in terms of a general retrenchment and rise of reactionary politics, and ethno nationalisms, internationally. All of this is predicated on an intolerance of Black presence. The urgency of these works is precisely how they cultivate a language predicated on possibility in the midst of all of this. The fantastic is not a territory of escape. It's a way of riposte and a method of reply to a racialised everyday, but it's also an assertion of freedom. Black people nevertheless create and sustain spaces of rebellious imagination, of artistic flourishing.

There's something particularly subversive in mobilising the terrains of imagination for Black people, especially when one thinks of the ethnographic gaze, and other attempts to fix specific images of the continent, of Blackness,

but also the realist imperative that is made of Black culture workers to be perpetual native informants, to make works of sociological or ethnographic value. Somehow, the intervention you are making with the Black fantastic seems in direct response to these histories and racist mandates.

I completely agree with your analysis there. Especially with film, you know the historical relationship of people of African descent and the camera is that of a method of tyranny, of imposition – in short, a weapon. This has fossilised a specifically western imaginary around Blackness as otherness, as dangerous, as deviant, as alien... Black filmmakers invested in the notion of the fantastic yield the camera as a refusal to work on the basis of naturalism and realism. If the camera has traditionally been used to fix and constrain the Black body, the Black fantastic then is about redefining the possibilities of who we are.

What's fascinating about your selection of films is that it is about refusing this injunction to realism on one hand, but also about seeing the real in fantastic ways. For a population who has been so brutally severed from its history, there is a way these lost worlds are apprehended with a sense of wonder and amazement. I'm thinking of Souleymane Cissé's Yeelen (1987), for instance, and its exploration of medieval Mali.

Exactly. It is about gazing at pasts and presents which have often been rendered illegitimate beyond a kind of racialised imagination, for which Africa is a place of backwardness, lack, savagery etc. Part of the embrace of the fantastic, then, is to look at vilified pasts as wonderful, beguiling, compelling, strange, because we're so unused to seeing them as anything other than a prelude to western sophistication and development. One of the things about *Yeelen* is that it shows a world on its own terms, a world that has its own sophistication, miraculous powers. All of that, without the assumption that it is lesser, or lacking in any way. The fantastic is also about structures of feeling and affects: pleasure, anticipation, wonder...

So how is the Black fantastic conversing with similar notions, such as Afrosurrealism, Afrofuturism or even the more general idea of magical realism?

Of course there are crossovers between all these notions, but what I wanted to do, specifically, with the Black fantastic is to avoid some of the limitations of a term like Afrofuturism, for instance. It is burdened with linkages between Africanness and the future, technology, newness, as if these don't already exist, but also as if these are the only things worth striving for. I feel like as a concept, maybe it has run its course. With the Black fantastic, I wanted to gesture at a much broader territory, which isn't about rehearsing western binaries such as backward versus future-oriented, but rather collective memories, cultural and spiritual practices that artists and cultural figures are drawing on in expansive and generative ways, reaching back in time, as well as into the future, reaching towards myth, spiritual belief.

It's a much more capacious understanding of time somehow.

Exactly. It's basically breaking out these dichotomies: past and present, natural and supernatural, scientific and spiritual, etc. Part of the cultural practices explored in a number of these works have to do with cultures, beliefs or heritages, which dissolve those distinctions. See Mati Diop's *Atlantics*: it starts in a quite naturalistic tone. One might think it's going to be this portrayal of the lives of immigrant workers going to Europe, and then you have this strange set of turns. She makes the decision as a filmmaker not to make this divide between the everyday and the supernatural; it is all part of a world of experience, a legacy that she draws on in this film. That's the kind of

relationship I'm interested in, instead of the literal or linear reaching back to a wholesale past.

Yes, these works somehow critique western binaries but seem to be invested in so much more than the perpetual posture of the reply or denegation. They produce worlds that also exist on their own terms...

Yes. So many of these works begin from a complex understanding of Africa, rather than trying to argue for it. They begin from an assumption of cosmopolitanism, hybridity, complex bodies of history, a fundamentally hybrid existence, which do not hold on to an authentic self necessarily. The true self is always one that exists in more than one place, more than one state of being, more than one positionality. This is true for Black people in the diaspora and Black people on the continent as well.

Part of what is considered 'supernatural' in films such as Yeelen, Daughters of the Dust, Atlantics or even Haile Gerima's Sankofa (1993) is that they are very much invested in a commons that includes the dead as well as the living. It is about cultivating and sustaining a set of relations and debts that are radicalised by death instead of dissolved by it. To what extent is death – happened or yet to happen – a central element of the Black fantastic?

I'm paraphrasing, but the poet Claudia Rankine says that the condition of Black life is a condition of mourning. We live in the shadow of forced migration, the Middle Passage, and we remain in conversation with it, because our lives – and our presence in the west and the extensions of empire – are still regarded as an unsettled position. Slavery, forced migration, imperialism are one of the defining aspects of our collective presence in the world. And I think, in one form or another, much of Black cultural work references these pasts, because they inform the groundwork of our present existence.

Yet, our relationship to these pasts isn't simply an act of mourning. The question is: if this is part of what has made us, has brought us into being here, how then do we live? How do we live in the shadow of these paths? If anything, the task to imagine ourselves in our own terms is made even more urgent by these conditions. It is about death. It is also about life. All of these filmmakers and artists have been doing this work for a long time, but putting them together in conversation makes a quite incredible constellation emerge. *Daughters of the Dust*, for instance, is an extraordinary evocation of being as a site of dreaming, as a site of possibility. You could look at these works separately, but looking at them together, suddenly you're in a territory, which is the Black fantastic.

This is the meaning of 'sankofa' to some extent – it's not necessarily a reactionary reaching back to the past, but a gesture that conserves a kind of creative freedom in relation to mainstream history. This speaks to a relation to time-oriented towards recycling, regeneration, repurposing in ways that differ from the linear time of western modernity. How do you see time operating in these films?

For me, it all goes back to the Enlightenment, Hegel, Kant or in America, Thomas Jefferson as one of the founding fathers, who writes that all men are created equal. The Enlightenment and western, liberal democratic ideals are being formulated at the same time as the slave trade, at the same time that Thomas Jefferson owned slaves himself, at the same time that Black people and African people are considered less than human [and] outside the course of progress that's imagined to follow from that period onwards. The

Enlightenment imagines a continued course of development, ultimately, that begins in Greek civilisation, goes through modern western society and continues. These works suggest there are other ways to look at time. It's not about asserting 'Black people can be in the future too'; it's not about just defensiveness but a much more expansive, sophisticated relation to time that bypasses narrow ways of seeing and thinking.

It's very beautifully encapsulated in Touki Bouki, with its intentionally perplexing nonlinear narration...

Exactly. I'm saying all of these things, but actually, these films put them into practice. One thing I find interesting is that there is a certain crossover between the films and the visual works in the exhibition in terms of a relationship to collage, an unstructured playing with time. Again, what these artists are trying to do is break out linearity. A lot of Black cultural practices embrace collage, discontinuities of time. It speaks to broken junctures of existence, which has to do with histories of forced migration and slavery. You have these giant interruptions in terms of erasing of pasts, names, languages, rupturing any sense of chronological time. Breaking up with normative understandings of time is a reflection of fragmented selves, double consciousness... In both *Sankofa* and *Eve's Bayou*, you see that reaching back is actually more of a never-ending back and forth movement. There is no way you can tell stories in the same way coming from these histories. That legacy creates works that are rich and imaginative.

The films in your selection deal with spaces that are landmarks of the Black cultural imagination. I'm thinking of the urban metropolis, of course, and the paradigmatic sites of economic exploitation such as the mine in Blitz Bazawule's The Burial of Kojo (2018). But you also have these more unruly landscapes of Black possibility, such as the lush maroon spaces of Daughters of the Dust, the savannahs of Yeelen. Can you speak a bit more about the concrete, place-based terrains that inform the imagination of the Black fantastic?

This is a super interesting question. The Black condition is often articulated as an urban condition. And we see that in some of the films, such as John Sayles' *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), with this alien figure which arrives in the city, as a strange and disorienting place. But in many of these films, there is also an interrogation of the relationship between Black people and non-urban landscapes. As a consequence of slavery, Black people have been seen as alien in non-urban landscapes, alien in relationship to the land, partly because they were brought to places like the Caribbean or South America or the US south, not to enjoy the land but to work the land. They're brought there as objects of labour. So, in a way, one of the things that I think you picked up on is an interesting reclamation of these non-urban spaces. These Black ecologies are such a fertile site for Black artists, because they are spaces of wonder, strangeness and pleasure; spaces where a relationship to the environment is being reimagined.

Many of the films in the programme somehow are invested in pleasure and beauty as things that hold purchase for liberation, which is not necessarily self-evident as beauty is often framed as superfluous. But Black art in general, and the Black fantastic in particular, suggests a very different kind of articulation between aesthetics and revolution or liberation...

The question, truly, is what do spaces of liberation look like, taste like, feel like? They're not necessarily finished spaces, but part of articulating these

spaces is an insistence and assertion on our right towards beauty. Beauty isn't dichotomous to political intent. It's not dichotomous to a liberation struggle. In some ways it helps us formulate what actually matters, to hold on to the fragility and the wonder of our existence.

Ekow Eshun in conversation with Chrystel Oloukoï, bfi.org.uk, 5 July 2022

Ekow Eshun is a writer, curator, journalist and broadcaster based in London, whose writing has appeared in publications including *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *Vogue*. Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, from 2005 to 2010, and a frequent contributor to BBC radio and television programmes, his previous books include *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in England and Africa*, published in 2005.

TOUKI BOUKI

Director: Djibril Diop Mambéty *
Production Company: Cinegrit
Production Managers: Lamine Ba Carlos, Ousmane Sow
Collaboration on Exteriors: Fenouil, Manuel De Kset
Production Assistant: Medoune Faye
1st Assistant Director: Momar Thiam
2nd Assistant Director: Ben Diogaye Beye
Screenplay: Djibril Diop Mambéty *
Director of Photography: Pap Samba Sow
Director of Photography: Georges Bracher *
Grip: Alioune N'Diaye
Stills Photography: Aziz Diop Mambéty
Editors: Siro Asteni, Emma Mennenti *
Art Director: Aziz Diop Mambéty
Costumes: Aziz Diop Mambéty
Music: Josephine Baker, Mado Robin, Aminata Fall *
Sound Recording: El Hadji Mbow
Sound Assistant: Mawa Gaye
Assistant: Sy Abdoulaye

Contains a scene of animal slaughter which some viewers will find distressing

Cast

Magaye Niang (*Mory*)
Mareme Niang (*Anta*)
Christophe Colomb
Moustapha Toure
Aminata Fall (*Aunt Oume*)
Ousseynou Diop (*Charlie*)
Fernand Dalfin, Al Demba, Dieynaba Dieng, Assane Faye, Robbie Lawson, Aliou N'Diaye, Omar Seck, Colette Simon Langouste
With the voices of: Josephine Baker, Mado Robin, Aminata Fall

Senegal 1973
88 mins (Total running time 125 mins)

* Uncredited

Restored in 2008 by The World Cinema Foundation at Cineteca di Bologna/L'Immagine Ritrovata in association with the family of Djibril Diop Mambéty. Restoration funding provided by Armani, Cartier, Qatar Airways and Qatar Museum Authority.



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The Brother from Another Planet
Fri 1 Jul 18:05; Wed 6 Jul 20:45
Sankofa
Sat 2 Jul 14:00 (+ intro by June Givanni, June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive); Wed 20 Jul 20:35
Daughters of the Dust
Sat 2 Jul 20:30; Wed 13 Jul 20:40
Yeelen Brightness
Sun 3 Jul 15:50; Thu 14 Jul 20:40
Top of the Heap
Mon 4 Jul 18:10; Sat 30 Jul 20:45
In the Afrofuture
Tue 5 Jul 18:20; Sun 17 Jul 16:00

Atlantics (Atlantique)
Thu 7 Jul 20:50; Sun 31 Jul 15:40
Kuso
Sat 9 Jul 20:50; Fri 22 Jul 18:10
Touki Bouki
Wed 13 Jul 17:50 (+ season introduction); Wed 27 Jul 20:50
The Burial of Kojo
Fri 15 Jul 18:30; Thu 28 Jul 20:40
The Black Atlantic
Mon 18 Jul 18:15 (+ Q&A); Sat 30 Jul 12:00
Eve's Bayou
Tue 19 Jul 20:45; Thu 28 Jul 18:00

In the Black Fantastic is an exhibition, curated by Ekow Eshun, of contemporary artists from the African diaspora who draw on science fiction, myth and Afrofuturism.
Runs **29 Jun to 18 Sep** at **Hayward Gallery**.

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