

HORROR VACUI
THE POETICS OF AFROFUTURISM AND THE MISSING COSMOS
OF THE AMERICAN CINEMASCAPE

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Outer space is not based upon highness. Space is not only high, it's low. It's the
bottomless pit. There's no end to it.

(*Space is the Place*, Sun Ra)

What are the conditions under which the meanings attached to the idea of "going
up" might become confused with those attached to the process of "going down"?
How do notions of upward mobility become associated with physical orientations
to the sky, to the stars, to the reaches of outer space? What might it mean to find
oneself at the bottom - economically, socially, physically - just at the moment one
appears to be traveling up, up, and away? Does it involve the process of
crashing down from on high, or might highness itself be a "bottomless pit"?

(Fawaz, Ramzi. "*Space, That Bottomless Pit*", *Callaloo* Vol. 25, No. 4) ¹

¹ Fawaz, Ramzi, "Space, that Bottomless Pit: Planetary Exile and Metaphors of Belonging in American Afrofuturist Cinema," in *Callaloo*, ed. (Johns Hopkins University / Johns Hopkins University Press, November 2012), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cal/summary/v035/35.4.fawaz.html>, 35, 4, 1103-1122.

Introduction

In Martine Syms' 2013 "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," she lists 14 promises that the collection of "Mundane Afrofuturist literature" will follow.² All 14 begin in the space of negation, with many refusing fundamental elements of what we've come to consider as Afrofuturism: no alternative universes, no magic or supernatural elements, no interstellar travel. We quickly recognize Syms' rules are in response to a separate model of Afrofuturism, one that has seen a renaissance in recent years with films like *Black Panther*, the literature of Sheree Renée Thomas, Janelle Monae's third studio album *Dirty Computer*. The rules of the manifesto is a refusal not of the this renaissance but of the acceptance of Afrofuturism—a "genre-forming" effect of the white, Hollywood, dominant gaze that solidifies what Afrofuturism was, is, should be. Syms is attempting to reclaim and interiority for the movement. Number 2 reads: "No inexplicable end to racism—dismantling white supremacy would be complex, violent, and have global impact." Number 3 reads: "No aliens unless the connection is distant, difficult, tenuous, and expensive—and they have no interstellar travel either." The only rule that does not begin in repudiation is number 14: "To burn this manifesto as soon as it gets boring." With the last rule, Syms wrests a level of power and authority away from the dominant gaze, the white man's hand and racism's lens—who can do this burning? She asks, as she anticipates who might take on the mantle.

Afrofuturism's resurgence is not all flawed. It has created chasms in otherwise impenetrable paradigms: Janelle Monae's third studio album *Beyond*, *Black Panther*'s position in the Marvel Universe. This resurgence, however productive, has major shortcomings that are due for a reconsideration. As part of the 2020-21 Research Fellowship at the Harvard Film Archive, I've selected a list of films, media, and texts—both original and referenced—that attempt to re-expand the method and philosophy of Afrofuturism as an approach in and of itself, not just as a strain of Science Fiction. The difficulty in defining Afrofuturism begins in the impossibility of attributing it to a label—movement, method, approach, genre all feel lacking. For the purpose of my program, I

² Syms, Martine., "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," *Third Rail Quarterly*, 2014, http://thirdrailquarterly.org/wp-content/uploads/thirdrail_spring2014_final_msyms.pdf

will refer to Afrofuturism as a distinct kind of poetry. I focus on three aspects of our the contemporary considerations of Afrofuturism that feel particularly lacking: the question of gaze, the problem of the fantastic (read: nonexistent, superior) in relation to the other and forms of acceptance, and the issue of timeline and the inaccurate tracing of the relevance of this poetic.

The Society of the Spectacle

Arthur Jafa, in his essay “My Black Death,” posed this response to the modern art movement cubism, specifically as it relates to Picasso’s handling of African sculptural artifacts: “This is a radical alternative to the Western paradigm in which the subject has agency while.”³ His response is due in part to the critique that Picasso looked onwards at his objects, whereas the artifacts were made for “dynamic” vantages. The Western Renaissance perspective, however, betrays this, offering only a fixed, limited vantage. This is evident in the media acceptance and praise for Afrofuturism’s resurgence, which more aptly could be considered the genre of Black Panther, as it remains within the confines of a dominant, oppressive hierarchy—the acceptance of Black Panther into the Marvel Universe is not the acceptance of the black universe, or the allowance of the imagination of a black universe, either. It is perhaps, the dangerous opposite, merely an illusion of expansion while reserving the power to choose for the dominant power (in this case, the Marvel franchise, whose official statement on diversity released in 2016 in response to critiques of their casting for *Doctor Strange*, actively excludes people of color).⁴

The rhetoric through which we understand Afrofuturism, as it exists as a poetics, still feels jarringly lacking, and that is due in part to the material on which the poetry is made is missing, stolen, unknown, or suppressed. The only approach to the a true poetics of Afrofuturism is no distinct approach at all. Through Saidiya Hartman’s process of “critical fabulation,” through making sense of nothing, of emptiness, is where

³ Jafa, Arthur., “My Black Death” *On the Blackness of BLACKNUSS*, 2015, Moor’s Head Press, Publication Studio Hudson. <http://louisedany.no/onewebmedia/My%20Black%20Death%20by%20Arthur%20Jafa.pdf>

⁴ Richardson, Ashley S., “Fandom, Racism, and the Myth of Diversity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe” (2017). Undergraduate Honors Theses. Paper 1019. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1019>

the real forms of Afrofuturism should remain, perhaps as a poetics (the art of *writing*) and never poetry. Afrofuturism's insertion into the mainstream, its recently ability to be palatable, understandable, "relevant" to a general audience should therefore be seen as an assault to the art form, as it has disenfranchised its individuality. Until moviegoers break with the forms of existing rhetoric to consider, analyze, and critique Afrofuturism can the alternate vocabulary, one that has been in the making for years by many of the filmmakers selected in this program, arrive at the forefront of dialogue. To claim that Afrofuturism lacks the necessity of an audience might seem a tyrannical assertion, but it is a consideration that is essential for its preservation.

Planetary Exile and the Quotidian Black Superhero

I trace the implications and influence of Afrofuturist poetics to as early as 1905 as the early animations of Disney and Paramount contributed to the racial economy of that era, often depicting "black" characters as non-human, non-verbal. In the series *Betty Boop with Koko and Bimbo* produced by Fleischer Studios in the 1930's, Koko is presented as a literal clown, dressed in a black suit, often put to the task of rescuing the white, attractive female and moniker of the show. The voice actor behind KoKo and the soundtrack that congealed most of the Fleischer productions were by Cab Calloway, and African American jazz singer from Harlem popular in the swing era and for his scat singing. "Minnie the Moocher," first written for and performed in three Betty Boop cartoon series, was the first single song by an African American to sell a million records.⁵ Although Calloway gained prolific recognition for his personal achievements as a jazz musician, the physical embodiment of his voice and song in the Fleischman productions placed him still at the service to and ridicule of the white man's hand. His voice, though a crucial part of what secured the iconic Betty Boop series of the early 20th century, was overshadowed, in service to another, more powerful canon. It begs the reconsideration, as all modernist artwork does, of the conceptual origins and

⁵ "Snow-White." Paramount Productions, 1933, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKOSI5AAwfc>.

parameters of American modernism, or “modernism as a sub-strand of black aesthetics,” as Arthur Jafa claims.⁶

The first half of the 20th century also saw the popularity of the now infamous Amos ‘n’ Andy radio show. A comic serial in which two white actors Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll portray two black men. The Amos n’ Andy show presented catch 22 as structurally, it remained nothing more than a heap of racist clichés, but it’s reception, relevance, and entertainment was not just reserved to white audiences. For the purpose of this program, I don’t consider the arguments made in defense of the breadth of characteristics present in Amos ‘n’ Andy, although I don’t disagree. I focus, instead, on its ability to gain popularity, both within the white and black communities, as an illusion of acceptance lodged onto blacks by the dominant white power.⁷ The portrayals of Amos Jones and Andy H. Brown were not solely stereotypes, as it wasn’t just a widely held idea imposed by one group onto another, but it was something the black community in America had been subjected to believe. A black man’s relevance in white American archetypal media culture is only possible at the expense of their humanity. Their acceptance made indivisible from their humiliation.

The Will Smith Dilemma

There is a different, if more parasitic representation present in the contemporary Black Panther subgenre of Science Fiction, a conflict I am terming the “Will Smith dilemma.” In other words, it is the dilemma of the quotidian black superhero, or the common black man elevated to the status of superhero. This elevation is a phantasm that is rooted in erasure—the guise of the black man as superhero conceals the inhumanity placed onto the black subject. It is, as it were, a mirroring of the racial stereotyping of Amos ‘n’ Andy, but cloaked in the guise of superiority, of excellence, and ability.

Will Smith first rose to prominence as the “Fresh Prince of Bel-air” referred to often, by black youth, as the cornerstone for their first forays into understanding black

⁶ Jafa, Arthur., “My Black Death” *On the Blackness of BLACKNUSS*, 2015, Moor’s Head Press, Publication Studio Hudson. <http://louisedany.no/onewebmedia/My%20Black%20Death%20by%20Arthur%20Jafa.pdf> p.246

⁷ Watkins, Mel. “What Was It About 'Amos 'n' Andy'?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 July 1991, www.nytimes.com/1991/07/07/books/what-was-it-about-amos-n-andy.html.

identity in a place, often a white-dominated neighborhood.⁸ The show was made as a pseudo-biopic of Smith's life up until then, as his blooming rap career was met with tax debt, and launched his prolific acting career. *Fresh Prince*, as it aired in many households around the U.S., was seen as the first All-American "digestible black character." it redefined the "boy next door," focusing on young black youth, rap culture, and the clash of upper-class white prestige. Relishing in the success of *Fresh Prince*, Smith claimed he wanted to be "the biggest movie star in the world." In many ways, he accomplished those goal. But potentially at the expensive of his own humanity, presenting a commodifiable "black excellence" at the hands of the white "producer," laid bare for the consumption of Hollywood. Smith has gone on to embrace a Hollywood status as that of Tom Cruise. In many of his blockbuster sell-outs (read: *I Am Legend*, *Men in black*, *Gemini Man*) he is cast in the role of superhuman, or of nonhuman, of an utopian individual that is always at service to a white globalized world.

Perhaps the robust representation of this dilemma is in *I Am Legend*, a 2007 film directed by Francis Lawrence which grossed 583.3 million in box office revenue. Smith plays the part of Neville, an U.S. Army virologist who lives in the aftermath of a measles outbreak, as the only man among the deserted ruins of Manhattan. Neville's only companions are his dog, and a fake mannequin. He ultimately finds that a promising treatment can be derived from his own blood. He is forced to sacrifice his companion in hopes of achieving the right adjustment for his treatment. Ultimately, he cures Anna a white woman, and they arrive at a survivors camp in hopes of rebuilding a new, inhabitable world. It bears a sedulous similarity to the plot of "The Comet," a short story by W.E.B. DuBois written in 1920 that discusses the relationship between Jim Davis (a black man) and Julia (a wealth white woman) after comet hits New York. In "The Comet," however, the expanse of the dark cosmos was ultimately reclaimed by Jim and a new humanity was underway—one with black existence at the core, reframing the Western colonial origin story. The difference between Lawrence's depiction of a rebuilding lies in the destination—with DuBois this rebuilding begins in the cosmos, in

⁸ Giwa-Osagie, Saidat. "Finding My Identity Via 'The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air'." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 25 May 2016, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/the-enduring-freshness-of-the-fresh-prince-of-bel-air/484082/.

the ethereal and boundless ether. *I Am Legend* is written with fear of this cosmos, and instead subjects the black man to saving humanity, and rebuilding what is a flawed structure—he has brought others back to life, found a cure for the rest of humanity to once again thrive, but done so at the expense of what? He returns to his place as a black subject in society, new or otherwise. His ultimate destination brings him not outwards to the DuBoisian cosmos but stationary in Vermont. Smith is not a comet, but a surrogate.

“Origin Story” of Afrofuturist Poetics

In advance of the contemporary resurgence of Afrofuturism in the lexicon of Hollywood, there was a collective understanding of its place as a subset of the larger, Western dominated genre of Sci-Fi and Fantasy. It is understood as an expression of African thought and aesthetics through the lens of science fiction, or, as an intersection between African thought and technology and/or fantasy. I refuse this collaboration in my project, as my reframing of Afrofuturism allows for its complete autonomy and singularity. A poetics (a making) that is not filtered through the lens of various, hyper-dominant Western archetypes. It remains clear that the Afrofuturism genre belies genrefiction. Octavia E. Butler, whose early short stories were said to have coined or inspired the term, resisted being confined by one genre, stating in her Nebula Awards speech that her audience was “black readers and feminists.” To correctly consider the strain of poetics that bloomed out of the Afrofuturism tradition, one must place its origins in the accurate place. For the purpose of my project, I refer to the placement put forth by scholar Laura U. Marks in her study of the Black Audio Film Collective and filmmaker John Akomfrah (both the collective and Akomfrah are featured in this program):

The Last Angel of History gives a sketch of the artistic and intellectual movements that have come to be called Afrofuturism, in which Black musicians, writers, and artists argue that since the great rupture of the Middle Passage, African diaspora people have been doing science fiction.⁹

⁹ Marks, Laura U. “Monad, Database, Remix: Manners of Unfolding in *The Last Angel of History*.” *Black Camera*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2015, pp. 112–134. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/blackcamera.6.2.112. Accessed 15 May 2020.

EDITOR'S NOTE

I began this project as a research fellow at the Harvard Film Archive in Cambridge. This program and list of selections grew out of my frustration with their lack of an Afrofuturist-specific collection in their database. While they have held events honoring individual filmmakers like John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective, there has never been an in-depth reconsideration of the subgenre of Afrofuturism. My goal was to reframe the context in which Afrofuturism is considered today, in hopes of preserving its distinct poetics and its denial of genrefication. I have separated my selected media ephemera into A SIDES, B SIDES, SHORTS, and text-based references.

The film comprising A SIDES are feature films, some of which have gained wide critical attention, but most have gained this attention within the independent cinema world. B SIDES includes works that are in between feature films and shorts with regards to length, as well as other artforms that exist in relation to Afrofuturist poetics. The text currently listed besides these films has been gathered from multiple sources, and act merely as a summary. It is my intention, in the coming months, to reform the description to these movies so that they expand on topics introduced in my text above. Most of my time has been spent combing through the archives, which has resulted in my ability to only zoom through some of these films. I would only feel confident in reframing the descriptions in the context of my project when I have gone through this entire list in depth as a viewer. I have decided to preserve the "genre" with which each film has been branded, to offer a further push for a denial of genrefication.

A SIDES



Figure 1

Touki Bouki [*The Journey of the Hyena*], 1973, Djibril Diop Mambéty

Drama/Narrative

With a stunning mix of the surreal and the naturalistic, Djibril Diop Mambéty paints a vivid, fractured portrait of Senegal in the early 1970s. In this French New Wave–influenced fantasy-drama, two young lovers long to leave

Dakar for the glamour and comforts of France, but their escape plan is beset by complications both concrete and mystical. Characterized by dazzling imagery and music, the alternately manic and meditative *Touki bouki* is widely considered one of the most important African films ever made. With a stunning mix of the surreal and the naturalistic, Djibril Diop Mambéty paints a vivid, fractured portrait of Senegal in the early 1970s. In this French New Wave–influenced fantasy-drama, two young lovers long to leave Dakar for the glamour and comforts of France, but their escape plan is beset by complications both concrete and mystical. Characterized by dazzling imagery and music, the alternately manic and meditative *Touki bouki* is widely considered one of the most important African films ever made. [Criterion Collection]



Figure 2

Space Is the Place, 1972, dir. John Coney, Sun Ra, Joshua Smith

Sci-Fi/Blaxploitation

Sun Ra, who has been reported lost since his European tour in June 1969, lands on a new planet in outer space with his crew, known as "the Arkestra", and decides to settle [African Americans](#) on this planet. The medium of transportation he

chooses for this resettlement is [music](#). He travels back in time and returns to the [Chicago](#) strip club where he used to play piano with the name "Sonny Ray" in 1943,

where he confronts the Overseer (Ray Johnson), a [pimp](#)-overlord, and they agree on a game of [cards](#) for the fate of the Black race.

In present time (the early 1970s), Ra disembarks from his spaceship in [Oakland](#) and tries to spread word of his plans. He meets with young African Americans at an Oakland youth centre and opens an "Outer Space Employment Agency" to recruit people eager to move to the planet. He also agrees with Jimmy Fey (Christopher Brooks)—an employee of the Overseer—to arrange radio interviews, a record album, and eventually a concert that will help him dictate his message.

As the card game between Ra and the Overseer is played, and it becomes clear that the Overseer is winning, Ra's plans to recruit local black youth for his new utopian [space colony](#) suffer setbacks. Many of them are suspicious of Ra, accusing him of faking his outer-spatial origin as a [gimmick](#) to boost his record sales. He is kidnapped by a team of white [NASA](#) scientists who threaten him with violence, desperate to learn the secrets to his space-travel technology. As Ra's concert rapidly approaches, he is saved by three local teenagers, who escort him to the music hall just in time.

[IMDb/Criterion Collection]

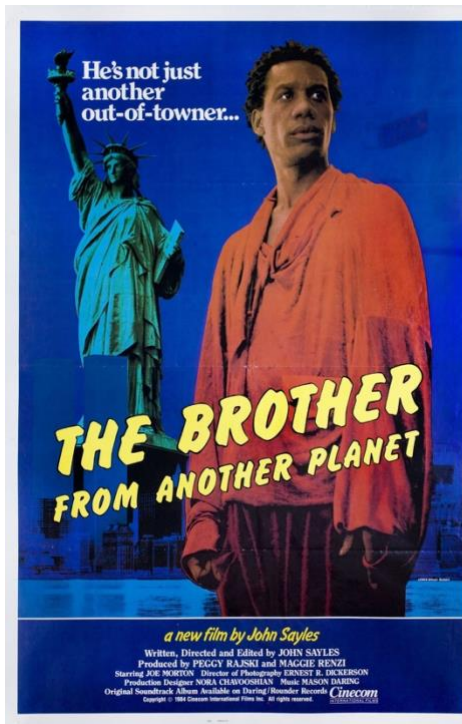


Figure 3

The Brother from Another Planet, 1984, dir. John Sayles

Comedy, Sci-Fi

A slave from outer space escapes to earth. Except for his three-toed feet, he looks like an ordinary young black man. He crash-lands on Ellis Island, appropriately enough, and ends up in Harlem. There he makes friends with the owner and the regulars of a bar. Because he can fix any machine (by simply touching it), he's able to make money. He's mute, which proves more of an advantage than a disadvantage. And he can heal himself and others with nothing but his hands. His real troubles begin when two extraterrestrial bounty hunters attempt to recapture him and bring him back to where he came from.

The Brother is an alien who has crash-landed on Earth, in New York City. While mute, strongly empathic, and able to fix things, he resembles a Black man with strange feet. His attempt to make a place for himself in Harlem is an allegory for the immigrant experience in the United States. Meanwhile, two bounty hunters from the Brother's home planet arrive and try to capture him. [IMDb]



Figure 4

Yeelen, 1989, dir.
Souleymane Cissé

Fantasy/Drama

Nianankoro's father Soma is a part of the order of Komo, who practice magic, but he uses his powers for self-gain. He becomes determined to kill his son after receiving a vision that his son will cause his death. Aided

by his mother, Nianankoro steals several of his father's sacred [fetishes](#) and leaves his village to seek out his uncle for help. Soma pursues him with the aid of an enchanted pylon that tracks his son's location and breaks all barriers that deter it.

As he travels, Nianankoro encounters a hyena who tells him his destiny is to be great. Passing through the territory of the [Fulas](#), he is thought to be a thief and captured. Their king Rouma Boli orders him killed, but Nianankoro creates magic that freezes his guards and declares they cannot kill him. Impressed, King Rouma offers Nianankoro his freedom in exchange for aid against a rival tribe. When the tribe attacks, Nianankoro summons a swarm of bees and a fire that drives their attackers away. The king thanks Nianankoro and asks him to cure his wife Attou's infertility. Nianankoro creates an enchantment, but he and Attou are overcome by lust and sleep together. That night they return to Rouma to confess their crime, and the king reluctantly orders them married and to leave. [IMDb]



Figure 5 *Ganja & Hess*

Ganja & Hess, 1973, dir. Bill Gunn,

Da Sweet Blood of Jesus, 2014, dir.
Spike Lee [2014 remake of *Ganja & Hess*]

Thriller/Romance

The film opens with an unnamed dancer (Charles "Lil Buck" Riley) dancing in various locations around [Brooklyn](#) during the credit sequence. From there, the plot follows Dr. Hess Green ([Stephen Tyrone Williams](#)), a wealthy African-American [anthropologist](#) and art collector who acquires a dagger originating in the ancient [Ashanti Empire](#), a highly advanced civilization that, Green claims, became addicted to blood transfusions. That night, Lafayette Hightower ([Elvis Nolasco](#)), an emotionally unstable colleague from the museum which acquired the dagger, pays a visit to Green's impressive, African-art covered [Martha's Vineyard](#) mansion. The two cordially discuss history and philosophy, but once Green has retired for the evening, Hightower becomes drunk and climbs a tree



Figure 6 *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus*, dir. Spike Lee

with a noose, claiming he wants to commit [suicide](#). Green successfully talks him down, but later that night Hightower attacks and stabs Green with the Ashanti ceremonial dagger, killing him. An undetermined amount of time later, Green is shocked to awaken--unscathed. He hears a gunshot and, upon discovering that Hightower has killed himself, he instinctively drinks Hightower's blood. He discovers that

he is invulnerable to physical harm, can no longer tolerate normal food and drink, and has an insatiable need for more blood. Though he steals several bags of blood from a doctor's office, he quickly finds that he needs fresh victims. The first is a [prostitute](#) ([Felicia Pearson](#)) who, shockingly, reawakens--only after he has discovered that her blood is [HIV-positive](#). After a period of tension, it is determined that he has not contracted the virus. [IMDb]



Figure 7

Candyman, 1992, dir. Bernard Rose

Horror/Slasher

Helen Lyle is a [semiotics](#) graduate student in [Chicago](#) who is researching the [urban legends](#). She hears a local story about [the Candyman](#) who can be summoned by saying his name five times to a mirror, causing him to appear and kill the summoner with a hook that was attached to the bloody stump of

his right arm. Helen meets the two cleaning ladies who claim that it was the Candyman who killed Ruthie Jean, a resident in the notorious [Cabrini-Green housing project](#). Helen looks into the case and also learns about another twenty-five murders like that of Ruthie Jean's. Skeptical about the legend, Helen and her friend Bernadette Walsh repeat the Candyman's name to Helen's bathroom mirror, but nothing happens. Helen decides to write a thesis on how the residents of Cabrini-Green used the Candyman legend to cope with the hardships. She and Bernadette enter the housing project and visit the scene of Ruthie Jean's murder. There, they meet Anne-Marie McCoy and her infant son named Anthony who told her more about the night of the murder. Helen learns more about the Candyman from Professor Philip Purcell. According to Purcell, the Candyman was the son of a slave who became prosperous by mass-producing shoes during the [Civil War](#). At an early age, he was accepted by white society. As a well known artist, he was sought after to paint portraits of the wealthy landowners and their children. After falling in love with a white woman that he was hired to paint and fathering a child with her, the Candyman was set upon by a [lynch mob](#) that was hired by his lover's father. They cut his right hand off and smeared him with the honey stolen from an [apiary](#) which attracted the bees that stung him to death. His corpse was burned and his ashes were scattered across the land on which Cabrini-Green was later built. [IMDb.] A remake directed by Jordan Peele is set to be released in September 2020.



Figure 8

The Meteor Man, 1993, dir. Robert Townsend / *Up, Up and Away*, 2000, dir. Robert Townsend

Family/Comedy/Superhero

An unassuming teacher, Jefferson Reed (Robert Townsend) lives and works in an urban area plagued by a tough gang. When a falling meteor hits Jefferson, he discovers that he has gained numerous superpowers. Encouraged by his father (Robert Guillaume) and mother (Marla Gibbs), Jefferson sets out, somewhat awkwardly, to become a crime-fighting hero. While he manages to improve his community, he finds out that his powers aren't limitless, making his efforts more challenging. An unassuming teacher,



Figure 9 *Up Up and Away*, dir. Robert Townsend

Jefferson Reed (Robert Townsend) lives and works in an urban area plagued by a tough gang. When a falling meteor hits Jefferson, he discovers that he has gained numerous superpowers. Encouraged by his father (Robert Guillaume) and mother (Marla Gibbs), Jefferson sets out, somewhat awkwardly, to become a crime-fighting hero. While he manages to improve his community, he finds out that his powers aren't limitless, making his efforts more challenging. [IMDb]



Figure 10

Moolaadé, 2004, dir. Ousmane Sembène

Drama

For fear of enduring

genital mutilation, a group of girls flee their own "purification" ceremony and take refuge with Collé (Fatoumata Coulibaly), a woman who had spared her daughter from the same fate. Collé casts a spell to protect the girls, which causes much consternation among the village elders. In retaliation, they confiscate all radios from the women villagers and demand that the spell be broken, but Collé nevertheless holds fast. [IMDb]



Betí and Amare,
2014, dir. Andy Siege

Betí, a young Ethiopian woman, escapes from Mussolini's troops and finds refuge in southern Ethiopia. She is forced to fight off the sexual advances of the local militia until a spaceship arrives with a cargo of love. Betí, a young

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Figure 11

spaceship
arrives with a

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Atlantics, 2019, dir. Mati Diop

Romance/Drama

A soon-to-be-inaugurated futuristic tower looms over a suburb of Dakar. Ada, 17, is in love with Souleimane, a young construction worker. But she has been promised to another man. One night,

Souleimane and his co-workers disappear at sea. Soon after, they come back to haunt their old neighbourhood by taking possession of the girlfriends they left behind. Some of the workers have come claiming revenge and threaten to burn the tower down if the developer does not pay their wages. [IMDb]



Random Acts of Flyness, 2018, dir. Terence Nance, late-night series on HBO

Sketch Comedy

A "show about the beauty and ugliness of contemporary American life," Terence Nance says. Using a fluid, stream-of-conscience approach, Nance explores cultural idioms such as patriarchy, white supremacy and

sensuality via numerous interconnected vignettes, all of which showcase an ensemble cast -- including Nance -- of emerging and established talent. Nance and his collaborators weave together such themes as ancestral trauma, history, death, romance and more, creating a television show like nothing seen before. [HBO]

B SIDES

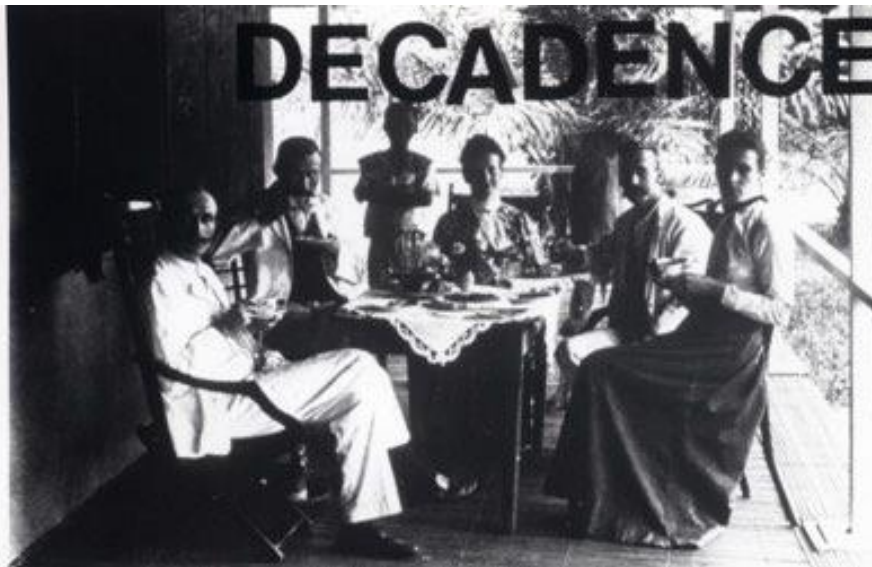


The Last Angel of History,
1996, dir. John Akomfrah

Documentary/Short

A 45-minute documentary, directed in 1996 by [John Akomfrah](#) and written and researched by Edward George of the [Black Audio Film Collective](#), that deals with concepts of [Afrofuturism](#) as a metaphor for the displacement of black culture and roots. The film is a hybrid documentary and

fictional narrative. Documentary segments include traditional talking-head clips from musicians, writers, and social critics, as well as archival video footage and photographs. Described as "A truly masterful film essay about Black aesthetics that traces the deployments of science fiction within pan-African culture",^[1] it has also been called "one of the most influential video-essays of the 1990s, influencing filmmakers and inspiring conferences, novels and exhibitions". [IMDb/Wikipedia]



Memory Room 451,
1997, prod. Black Audio
Film Collective (Lina
Gopaul), dir. John
Akomfrah

Figure 12 Black Audio Film Collective



Figure 13 Memory Room 451

Memory Room 451 is the most extreme vision of the Neo-Expressionist aesthetic the Black Audio Film Collective pursued throughout the 1990s. Set in a dystopian world, the film is a “fake” documentary from the future. A time traveller interviews “old earth people” on hair, desire and memory as dreams become the new media platform of the 23rd century and time travel is no more than poorly paid shiftwork. Memory Room 451 is the most extreme vision of the Neo-Expressionist aesthetic the

Black Audio Film Collective pursued throughout the 1990s. Set in a dystopian world, the film is a “fake” documentary from the future. A time traveller interviews “old earth people” on hair, desire and memory as dreams become the new media platform of the 23rd century and time travel is no more than poorly paid shiftwork. Memory Room 451 is the most extreme vision of the Neo-Expressionist aesthetic the Black Audio Film Collective pursued throughout the 1990s. Set in a dystopian world, the film is a “fake” documentary from the future. A time traveller interviews “old earth people” on hair, desire and memory as dreams become the new media platform of the 23rd century and time travel is no more than poorly paid shiftwork.



Figure 14

[The Watermelon Patch \(1905\), Wallace McCutcheon, Edwin S. Porter \(35mm, Item #:9776, 11 minutes\)](#)

An early era “chase” film. Two black men raid a watermelon patch and the corresponding two scarecrows become skeletons and chase them. The racist implications were typical of the early 20th century media representation of black subjects.



"Many Moons" Official
Short Film as part of
Beyond, produced by
Atlantic Records, dir.
Janelle Monae

Figure 15



Figure 16

Cosmic Slop, 1994,
dir. Reginald Hudlin,
Warrington Hudlin,
Kevin Rodney
Sullivan

A science fiction anthology series that aired on HBO featuring alien slave trade, Santeria, and phantom rifles. It was hosted by Parliament lead singer George Clinton. It also starred Nicholas Turturro,

Robert Guillaume, Paula Jai Parker, Chi McBride, and John Witherspoon. Hosted by George Clinton, starred Casey Kasem, Robert Guillame, Anthony Anderson. [IMDb] Hailed a “multi-cultural Twilight Zone.” In 2019, Jordan Peele premiered the first season of his remake of “The Twilight Zone.”

SHORTS



"Pumzi," 2009, dir. Wanuri Kahiu

Sci-Fi

Pumzi, Kenya's first science fiction film, imagines a dystopian future 35 years after water wars have torn the world apart. East African survivors of the ecological devastation remain

locked away in contained communities, but a young woman in possession of a germinating seed struggles against the governing council to bring the plant to Earth's ruined surface. [Wired/Sundance]



"Afronauts," 2014, dir. Frances Bodombo

Sci-Fi

In 1964, amid the Cold War and on the eve of Zambia's independence from Britain, schoolteacher and activist Edward Mukuka Nkoloso told an

Associated Press reporter, "Some people think I'm crazy, but I'll be laughing the day I plant Zambia's flag on the moon." Five years before the US would launch Apollo 11, Nkoloso was busy running Zambia's National Academy of Science, Space Research and Philosophy. His goal: Land 16-year-old Matha Mwamba, an astronaut-in-training, on the moon. [Hyperallergic]



"Twaaga" 2013, and
"Hasaki Ya Suda" 2011
dir. Cedric Ido

Drama/History/Animated
Short

Manu, a young boy who loves comics, tags along with his big brother Albert. When Albert decides to undergo a magic ritual, Manu realizes there are real powers that rival even those of super heroes. [



["The Golden Chain"](#)
2014, animation,
[Adebukola Bodunrin and](#)
[Ezra Clayton Daniels](#)

Animation/Sci-Fi

The distant future. A Nigerian space station in a remote corner of the galaxy orbits an artificial pinpoint of matter so dense it cannot exist in our solar system. It is a

recreation of the birth of the universe itself, contained for the purpose of study, and overseen by Yetunde, sole crew member on the space station Eko. The Golden Chain is a first time collaboration between experimental filmmaker Adebukola Bodunrin and graphic novelist Ezra Clayton Daniels. Fluent in very different disciplines, the two artists found common ground in their passion for Afrofuturism. Bodunrin has thrived exploring the loose structures and formal play of experimental cinema, while Daniels has met acclaim with rigid, cerebral science fiction graphic novels. The Golden Chain finds the two artists intertwining their contrasting aesthetics to revisit the themes of the Yoruba creation tale. Obatala's descent from the heavens to create the earth and mankind becomes an astronaut traveling to the edge of the galaxy to create a new Heaven.

Blending traditional motifs with hard science fiction, Bodunrin and Daniels create a world at once fantastical, yet almost plausible, in order to ask the question: "Where will we go, given where we came from?" [adebukolabodunrin.com]



"They Charge for the Sun" 2017, and "Swimming in Your Skin Again" 2015 dir. Terence Nance

Sci-Fi

A sombre future in which sunlight has become rare. The sun's rays are so damaging that the government only allows citizens a limited amount of daylight every day.

Even outside, there are strict rules with which people must comply. A naughty little black girl ignores the rules and that's how she discovers the truth.



"Monsoons Over The Moon" 2015, dir. Dan Muchina

Sci-Fi

The film tells the story of a street gang known as **The Monsoons** who have escaped an oppressive dictatorship set in

post-apocalyptic Nairobi. The gang seeks to awaken young people in order to liberate them from the system within which the masses have been placed. The story is told from the perspective of those most oppressed by a dictatorial system that has shut down the internet, making the written world exponentially more important. Shot in black-and-white, the film stands outside of a perceivable time, yet touches on political themes relevant to Kenya today, including surveillance, mass incarceration, and the effects of capitalism. [okayafrica.com]



"Kwaku Ananse" 2013, Akosua Adoma Owusu

Fable/History/Drama

Kwaku Ananse is a traditional West African fable of a creature, part man, part spider, who spends years collecting all wisdom of the world in a wooden pot. As he tries to hide the pot in a tree he can't find a way to place it high up in its branches. When his

little son, Ntikuma shows him the way, Kwaku Ananse becomes so angry that he throws the pot down onto the ground. It bursts and the wisdom seeps away. Everyone rushes over, hoping to salvage what they can. Nyan Koronhwea returns to her father Kwaku Ananse's native Ghana for his funeral. They had long lost contact with each other. She has mixed feelings about her father's double life with one family in Ghana and another in the United States. Overwhelmed by the funeral, she retreats to the spirit world in search for Kwaku Ananse. She carries her ambivalence with her into the forest, where she learns the ultimate truth about all human relationships. [akosuaadoma.com]

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