

Afrofuturism

"Black into the Future"

Afrofuturism is an aesthetic and political form of expression by contemporary black people that has found favour in popular and academic discourse since its introduction in the early 1990s. Using different examples from the theory and thought movement of Afrofuturism, this paper attempts to introduce various manifestations and historical influences and science fiction, speculative movements, and technologies of the present.

The Roots of Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism dates back to the time of enslavement. Being excluded from society as an enslaved person was alienating and the work robotic. Black people transported during enslavement to those living in the Civil War era were marginalised through enslavement. Yet mentally escaping enslavement fired the imagination and must have felt at times like a "magical realism" or out-of-body experience. The countries of the Global North (Europe, the U.S.A, Canada, Australia, etc.) and the free Caribbean islands seemed like another world and science fiction-like. Their escapism was also a resistance against alien technologies, unknown to little known letters and words, against a formidable opponent who used modernity as his tool.

Thus, they envisioned spaces to renew, unfold and reactivate the repressed cultural power of the Afro-diasporic and African continent. The first utopian ideas and visions of Black people were future-oriented and freedom-oriented aspirations. Afrofuturism is a way of looking at the future and alternative realities from a Black cultural lens (cf. Womack, 2015). It can be seen as a reaction to centuries of oppression towards Black people. What might the future look like in 2044 when Black people are the majority in numbers or when they hold the majority of political and economic power in years to come?

¹ By capitalising the adjective "black," it is made clear that "being black" is a constructed pattern of attribution and not a real characteristic that can be attributed to the colour of the skin. Thus, "being black" in this context means the existence of shared experiences of racism.

The change in perspective of the black cultural lens includes a centre starting from people of the African continent and the Afro-diaspora.

Mythologies and Timelessness

Afrofuturist theories and imaginaries challenge Eurocentric motifs and ask critical questions about colonialism, racism, sexism and the plethora of exploitation. Consequently, Afrofuturism acts as a rupture of the status quo, challenging canonised, white-dominated worlds of science fiction and liberating Black people from their marginalisation (Dery, 1994, 188; James, 2019; Lavender, 2011). The history of Black people is also a history of resistance. Since African liberationists anticipated the future that would change the lives of African people, there have been many political, social and technological changes. The knowledge of the deepest past of Homo Sapiens lies in the bosom of the African continent. Countless mythologies carry the burden of our future on their imaginary shoulders (cf. Asante, 2020, p. 48).

So let's start here and now and look to yesterday and tomorrow.

"One thing that defines Afrofuturism is timelessness. Afrofuturism has always existed; it has only changed how it is used and perceived. There were already Black science fiction writers in the late 19th century. And even many African cultures told themselves stories of science and mysticism in a style that can be called Afrofuturist today. It's just a matter of perception, in this whole space-time continuum (Ytasha Womack 2013)."

Black Speculative Tradition in the Blues

Stories of a "New World" told by enslaved Africans about the time after enslavement are similar to jazz artist Sun Ra's tales of being teleported to Saturn, or Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam describing the extraterrestrial "mother plane" consisting of spheres within spheres (Kelley, 2003; Mayer 2000). Blues songs, such as the "Sorrow Songs", were born out of necessity and are peppered with messages that reflect the psychedelic funk developed in the 1960s and 1970s, when space was conceived as a possible escape from the social and political hypocrisy on Earth (Washington, 1901, 8). The song "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", for example, which was re-imagined by George Clinton and Parliament, Funkadelic's "Mothership" was a call to liberate Black people from oppression (Harriston, 2017).

"White" and "whiteness," like "blackness," do not denote a biological characteristic or a real skin colour but a political and social construction. Whiteness refers to the dominant and privileged position within the power relationship of racism, which otherwise remains mostly unspoken and unnamed (<https://www.amnesty.de/2017/3/1/glossar-fuer-diskriminierungssensible-sprache>).

Nation of Islam is an African American movement and organisation founded in 1930 and

known for its teachings that combine elements of traditional Islam with Black nationalist ideas. The strict disciplinary code of the members of the Nation of Islam is strongly crystallised. (Cf. <https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/lexika/islam-lexikon/21579/nation-of-islam>).

The Black Panther

Like Harriet Tubman's liberation movement, in the film Black Panther, Wakanda is protected by a special forces unit made up entirely of women (Spencer, 2018). Harriet Tubman stands as a prime example of Afrofuturism because she embodies the "radical imagination" of what is possible beyond our current conditions and how we can use imagination, Black cultures and Black histories to shape the future itself.

Black Speculative Thought

The intellectual roots of Afrofuturism go back to Black Studies. What we call Afrocentrism today is, in fact, the Black Speculative Tradition. Literature by Black literary figures, including Martin Delany, who use Black speculative thought, articulate visions of a liberated world.

Afrocentrism

Afrofuturism is transdisciplinary. There are different localisations, as well as other expressions. The philosophical approach within Afrofuturism goes back to Afrocentrism. The significant difference to linear, Eurocentric approaches is that time is seen circularly in Afrocentrism. Accordingly, there is no beginning and no end.

The past determines the present and the future. Consequently, we move in a circle. Circular processes are characteristic of an Afrocentric perspective. The philosophical professor Molefi Kete Asante is convinced that,

"(...) Africa, with its visions of Black futures anchored in a speculative future based on the virtues of maat and capable of producing liberation, has awakened." (Asante 2020, p.46).

Afrofuturism as Practice: "Space is the Place"

Indeed, speculative literature, i.e. science fiction, fantasy and the likes, do not seem at first glance to fit Africa. Africa has long been regarded as a historyless continent without a future and whose population is regularly ravaged by genocides, humanitarian catastrophes, civil wars and famine. The American-Nigerian writer Nnedi Okorafor nevertheless dares to do so: in "Bintu"(2015), "Zahrah the Windseeker"(2005), "The Shadow Speaker"(2009), "Who Fears Death" (2015), eleven other literary stories, as well as five comics, she combines concepts of speculative fiction with African and postcolonial themes.

The narrative in "The Shadow Speaker", for example, is about fifteen-year-old Ejii who witnesses the beheading of her father, which causes her world to come apart at the seams. In an era of mind-blowing technology and seductive magic, Ejii embarks on a mystical journey to track down her father's killer. With a newfound friend by her side, Ejii comes face to face with earth turned inside out—and with her own magical powers. But Ejii soon discovers that her travels across the sands of the Sahara have a greater purpose. Her people need to be protected from a force seeking to eradicate them. And Ejii may be just the heroine to do it. (cf. Nnedi Okorafor, 2009).

Afrocentric Visions

Afrofuturism gives space to utopias, of a world liberated from white supremacy, where Black people are at the centre. Afrofuturism and decolonisation occupy a prominent position in the present and should be thought of in combination. What makes the concept of Afrofuturism radical is that it is undoubtedly centring on Blackness and Black imagination. It is "a way of looking at the world, but also a practice," says Ytasha Womack,

"It is an intersection of Black culture, imagination, liberation, technology and mysticism".

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