SPACE IS THE PLACE

Evoking Walter Benjamin's famous image of history as an angel who is at once looking backward at the past as she is flying forward toward the future, John Akomfrah's latest film essay is a similarly non-linear flight through a history of science fiction art and its relation to the Pan-African experience. As Akomfrah himself has said: these issues are not simply related, "the Black experience is science fiction."

The Last Angel of History (1996) looks at tropes of the science fiction genre with its images of spaceships, time travel and hyper-technological futures as they appear in Pan-African culture. In his film, Akomfrah claims science fiction as an integral part of some of the most innovative elements of African Diaspora culture. He sees sci-fi as the expression of a metaphor for both "otherness" in relation to the white world, and certain discourses of black liberation in black cultural production. These are large claims, but they are made uniquely if not quite convincingly in the film.

The Last Angel of History is produced by Akomfrah as part of the London-based Black Audio Film Collective, one of the seminal black media groups to emerge out of the British media workshop movement of the 1980s. Since 1985 they have produced a series of innovative film essays including Handsworth Songs (1986) and Seven Songs for Malcolm X (1993), each providing a unique exploration of the politics of representation and national identity within the African Diaspora.

Working across the history of black music, literature and contemporary post-colonial and post-humanist cultural theory, the film connects ancient African folklore and popular culture with post-colonial pop cultures to create what Akomfrah calls a "digi-sacred" filmic experience. My one reservation about the "digital" in relation to "sacred" memory comes from digital hyper-media models that emphasize interactivity through the interactive, non-linear linking of images and narratives across disparate moments in time, geographical sites, breasts, images and people. It is from working across such disparate elements that one can begin to define what might constitute a digital narrative of black history.

The film begins with the figure of early twentieth-century immigrant bluesman Robert Johnson, who, as legend has it, made a pact with the Devil so that he might become the world's greatest bluesman. This otherworldly connection explains for many the source and innovation of his music. Johnson becomes part of a lineage of innovative artists including futurist composers Sun Ra and George Clinton, Sun Ra's interest in space travel and his desire, in his various projects and adaptations of his band, the Arkestra, to weave together images of space-time travel and exploration in an attempt to shape an "other" mythic future. This kind of "future-past" evocation is also a metaphor for his unique musical hybrid of traditional jazz and Afrobeat rhythms. In addition, African American and European music. Clin-

ton, an inventor of electronic funk music, also fosters a person of an extraterrestrial in his Mothership to expose the human race to the cosmic mind/body expanding music of Funkadelic. Like Sun Ra in Jazz, Clinton uses intergalactic travel in a metaphor for a kind of hybrid exploration of popular music forms from R & B, to psychedelic rock, to purely electronic music. This linkage placed in relation to contemporary popular forms such as Techno, Dub, Jungle and R&B music and their pre-occupation with new technologies as a way to create new sounds never heard before.

In the film's non-linear fashion, we see an array of archival photographs and film footage of these artists in performance along with interviews with Clinton and various contemporary musicians and critics including Greg Tate, Lee Perry and DJ Spooky. This History is intercut with images of early Egyptian culture and African folklore about man's relation to the cosmos. The interviewer speaks of the interconnectedness of certain African traditions of science and space travel, and the contemporary space-shipping image. They see this current image as a metaphor for a future of liberation through creative exploration and experimentation. Perhaps the most moving interview in the piece is with one of the first astronauts of African descent to travel in space. He speaks about taking the flag of Africa with him, to connect the ancient African tradition of African astronomer to current space travel. He also speaks of how science fiction genres sparked his interest in space travel, citing the character of Lt. Uhura in the TV show Star Trek as a pivotal image. Woven into these images and interviews is a character called the Data Thief, who, from 200 years in the future, uses the "Information superhighway" to explore the past, present and future of the black diaspora. We find him at different moments of the film hacking at a PC station or gazing out over post-apocalyptic American landscapes. While he muses over African history we see images of African paintings, sculpture and community and religious rituals. At other moments he is inside the computer as if the lines between the human body and the digital body have become indistinct.

The relationship between the human body and the cyborg body are commented upon by black science fiction writers Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany. Through interviews, their notions of the black experience as science fiction is explicitly related to one another in relation to a history of cultural and physical dislocation of the African Diaspora. Butler and Delany speak of how the relocation of populations to previously unknown parts of the world leads to sci-fi metaphors such as the "New World" as "Other World." They also comment on the relation between post-apocalyptic imagery and current post-colonial notions of "mutant" social and cultural hybrids that can no longer claim to be purely European or African.

The final and perhaps most challenging issue that The Last Angel of History raises is the relationship between current theoretical writings on the "cyborg" and the black experience. With the rise of mechanical replacements and extensions of the human body through robotics, genetic cloning, artificial intelligence and prosthetics, the question of what exactly is a human being is, an issue. While questions such as this may result from technological developments, The Last Angel of History convincingly implies that the relationship of the African Diaspora to the black world is an age old issue. (Was it a slave or a man or a machine that was "manlike"?) Was it this man/machine dichotomy that allowed humanistic and enlightenment notions of Law to apply to the black man/woman?) Issues concerning legal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the right to vote, education and the rights of a national subject have all been subjected to public debate as it applies to the African, ultimately questioning black human-nos. As these questions are raised in relation to new technologies, the black experience is placed at the forefront of current ethical questions in interesting and contradictory ways.

Formally, Akomfrah's film is closer to Ornette Coleman's entropic concept of "Harmolodics"—where multiple melodic and rhythmic themes become interchangeable and are voiced simultaneously—than the steady backbone of Clinton's Funkadelic.

The Last Angel of History's visual style has an affinity with channel on Web surfing in its melange of interview, archival footage, photographs, dance, musical performance, religious ritual, painting and animation, as well as dramatic sequences using Hi-tech special effects. This form also can be seen in relation to the rock video in its frantic fast cutting, heavy reliance on hi-end production values, use of digital image processing and non-stop musical backbeat. For Akomfrah this is not empty pyrotechnics, rather, he is using this form to show the interconnectedness of many different ideas represented from the point of view of different periods in history and cultural discourses. Akomfrah has deliberately constructed this film as a fragmented series of ideas, images and sounds that are temporally non-linear and incomplete in order to convey a sense of ideas as pure velocity and as a unique and problematic environment that the digitized information age presents to us. By necessity he wants to blur the lines of the traditional cinematic genres of dramatic, documentary and journalism. The work contains fragments of each genre, signifying different modes of making meaning while undermining them at the same time. What Akomfrah is trying to show is that cinematic form is also in question, and that to create new formal cinematic structures is also to keep with the futurism traditions of African culture and art making.

Clearly, 45 minutes is hardly enough time to address, in their full detail or complexity, such a wide range of issues. Perhaps this is where the film speaks itself for the most criticism. While this criticism can be valid, the playfulness and intellectual virtuosity of the film transcends its surface gloss, to become a kaleidoscopic celebration of the richness of Pan-African culture.

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JEFFREY SKOLLER is a filmmaker who writes frequently on contemporary media and is currently teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.