

Hollywood and the Advent of Afrofuturism: A Critical Study of Black Power and Cultural Aesthetics in Black Panther

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Abstract

The article entitled "Hollywood and the Advent of Afrofuturism: A Critical Study of Black Power and Cultural Aesthetics in Black Panther" depicts the importance of blacks in Hollywood from an Afrofuturistic point of view through the film. Afrofuturism in films seeks to restore black identity through art, culture and political resistance. The worlds imagined in this cultural form go beyond simple science fiction stories created by Blacks: these stories, art, and philosophies center Black Diasporic life and allow for a way of viewing black culture in a fantastical, creative and hopeful manner. This genre triumphed in mainstream American theatre with the enormous success of the film *Black Panther*.

The article is divided into three chapters. The first chapter gives general introduction to the theory of Afrofuturism. The second chapter entitled "Envisaging the *Black Panther*" analyses the film *Black Panther* where there is the reconstruction of black life and elucidates the black history which is steeped primarily in Western categorization and also deals with the Afrofuturistic reimagining of black womanhood. And the third chapter concludes the article by deconstructing the misconception about the stereotypical roles that blacks hold by proving that they not only carry the roles of slaves or maids but they can also hold the roles of superheroes and superwomen.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Black Panther, Black Power, Cultural aesthetics

1.1 Introduction

"In the future, as in the present, as in the past, black people will build many new worlds." (Jemisin 3) Science fiction and fantasy often serve as way to examine and cope with societal issues, past or present. Given how prevalent the idea of "otherness" is within genre (from monsters to aliens), it's no surprise that writers of color would choose to use Science Fantasy Fiction as a vehicle to access their own thoughts about race and feelings of otherness in predominantly white societies – and so spawned the sub-genre called Afrofuturism. The genre primarily critiques past and present dilemmas faced by people of color, while also imagining futures for those groups that stem from the experiences of cultures formed as a result of the historical African diaspora.

Afrofuturism is the reimagining of a future loaded up with science, expressions and innovation seen through a black lens. The term was devised twenty-five years ago by the white author Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future", which takes a gander at theoretical fiction inside the African diaspora. What makes Afrofuturism altogether unique in relation to standard science-fiction is its antiquated African

conventions and black identity. Afrofuturism is not something that simply features a black character in a futuristic world, but it is a narrative that establishes in and proudly commend the uniqueness and development of the dark culture. It looks to find the nearness of dark culture inside the contemporary technological world, challenging any cases of a fundamental connection between nature and human, furthermore an innovation in the arrangement of racial character.

At the point when cyberculture theorist Mark Dery authored the expression ‘Afrofuturism’ in 1993, he was endeavoring to figure out how to portray the social conversion of conventional African themes with the growing web culture. Dery’s definition of the philosophy is as follows:

“Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno-culture and, more generally African- American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might for want of a better term be called “Afrofuturism”. (Dery 136)

Dery’s definition of Afrofuturism not just spotlights on the techno-tasteful practices of current black culture, but implies that the African American diaspora was a significant source of futuristic imagination.

As people group battle to envision their contemporary spot inside the bigger social structure, Afrofuturism fills two needs: firstly, it allows for a group to project itself into the future, despite how uncertain the present may seem; secondly, it allows for the past to be reframed in a way that examines it through present day points of view may add to the breakdown of history, yet it is this very breakdown that into account the development of Afrofuturism. Futuristic imaginations have been part of African-American literature in the sense that, in its own speculative tradition, it has ruminated on the undiscovered space in which black bodies have been sub-humanized as a primitive site of fear. Black American culture, as Mayer asserts, has constantly reenacted its racialized experience in the fantasy space in between. As rhetorical tradition represented in such story telling forms as African folklore, hoodo magic, and conjuring, it has served as an important source of aesthetic expression for racial experience. Afrofuturism challenges the Western generalization of African backwardness and the idea of Africa as an oppressed world. The habitual exclusion of people of African descent from discourses regarding technology and the future is the result of intimidating and pessimistic predictions of the African social reality in the decades to come held by a part of the Western white establishment. Hence Afrofuturism still glances back to the past so as to reexamine it, but it primarily seeks to overcome this demoralizing future scenario by showing a positive outlook on the potential of Africa and of the people of the African diaspora in the world.

1.2 Envisaging The Black Panther

Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic that looks at literature, arts, music, music videos, fashion design, films and television programmes through a black lens. It aesthetically records black struggles; black identity; and black aspirations, as well as identifying or referring to black (collective and individual) historical traumas. By using Afrocentricity; African magic realism; African mythologies; African aesthetics and tradition; all of which are combined with technology, science and social awareness, Afrofuturism narrates a parallel or distant reality that is dominant and effervescent.

The Afrofuturistic cinematic text grants black agency the opportunity to tell /retell/reimagine their futures and revisit or reimagine their past. The film has come in the wake of discourses on blackness representations that are steeped in normative Western categorizations more often than not. In that regard, there is significant black relationship that has elevated works on counter-hegemonic manifestations of

racial identity, throughout particular those that re-imagine racial advancement and racial identity in new and challenging ways as portrayed Afrofuturism often asks questions like, Who defines what is human? and Who decides which groups have rights?. The world of 'what is' can be supplanted by the support of the world, 'What ifs.' The worlds imagined in this cultural form go beyond simple science-fiction stories created by blacks; these stories, art and philosophies center Black diasporic life and allow for a way of viewing Black culture in a fantastical, creative, hopeful manner. Art like Black Panther overturns stereotypes to reclaim the past and reimagine the future, and Marvel's latest superhero flick is the perfect example of the genre and the movement known as Afrofuturism and shows the replacement of white heroes by black heroes. This film shows blacks can also be heroes and society accepts it.

In February 2018 the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) released its first film featuring a superhero of African descent. Black Panther took the world and black audiences across the world, by storm. Not just had MCU at last made a tremendous blockbuster movie focused on a black superhero character, it had created a superhero film with a majority black cast and a black director, featuring music by black artistes and incorporating African culture. By all means, the film was a celebration of black culture and heritage. In fact, there was a noticeable lack of positive representation of blacks in film in general. We find black people stereotypes roles in a significant number of films. For example, the title role of a loud, obnoxious black woman is in the popular Medea movies. In other successful films featuring black people, we often find them portraying slaves, maids, gangsters, single parents, poverty stricken etc.,. So Black Panther was a film against such negative light. This film has broken all the barriers that the world has tangled around the blacks. The African-American community and more so the worldwide African community viewed this movie as a debut into African history, culture and entertainment. The Black Panther film was an outstanding talk point used to demonstrate a lack of strong positive black characters present in the film. Through a lot of interviews with cast members, there was a considerable conversation about the film and what it meant for black community members. According to the World Press article written by Ramin Setoodeh, Black Panther, directed by Ryan Coogler, is a movie that doubles as a campaign, or at least a moment that feels revolutionary in the same way as the runaway hit of 2018, motivated millions of women by Wonder Woman.

Black Panther was written and directed by author Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole, and released in 2018. The film was widely praised by audiences and critics alike with its virtually all-black cast, its largely positive portrayal of blackness, and its visually stunning Afrofuturist style and Afrofuturist plot. Besides the predominantly black cast filled with stars and starlets from Hollywood, Black Panther also had a black production team spearheading the shaping of this story. African-American writer, filmmaker, and executive producer, Hannah Beachler, a production designer inspired by Afrofuturist architecture and Afropunk aesthetics, helped lay the groundwork for this world. The African regalia and elaborate costumes by famous wardrobe designer Ruth E Carter created a Wakandan couture that would give New York fashion week a run for its money-just look at her use of Kimoyo beads as both a fashion accessory and a communication device. Black Panther, as encapsulated by Andre Cassington, was historic in that it addressed the black audience 'by name, not in the guise of blackness itself.' Therefore, considering its inclusivity and its technical production and representational 'blackness', as well as its transnationalism, the film should indeed be lauded. Notwithstanding, the film has not been without its detractors. For instance, scholars have criticized the film for its capitalist cultural production and transparent marketing; its neoliberalism; its portrayal of Africa as a reductionist, homogenized object as well as its inherent imperialist stereotypes and lenses. Despite its critics, the film was a phenomenal feat and box-office

success; not least for its Afrofuturist themes, the aesthetic itself which is principally positive/utopian. The film has even inspired a hastag movement #Wakandaforever.

History shows that most films featuring black characters in lead roles portray them in negative light. They were drug addicts, villains, unfit parents, gangsters or rappers with troubled backgrounds. The black man/woman has hardly ever been shown to be deranged, depressed or weak. Black men were not depicted as positive role models, or men of class, nor were they presented as leaders and rulers. Therefore, for a film like this to portray a black man who was the king of a great nation, an African untouched by conquest and slavery, it was a great deal for the black community. Black culture and its importance are said to be dying for those of the African community, this film has helped to highlight this cultural subject, setting the stage for major discussion. Due to slavery many in the black community don't know what their true history or ancestry is. They were taught the history and heritage of another nation, and had little knowledge of their own. The film was also used to express the need for black cultures to be seen, carried on and taught to black people. This film also shows us how authentically blacks pursue their tradition and culture. The best example to show this is that Wakandan were not ready to drop-out their culture for outsiders; mainly for Americans. Wakandans stand together to fight against Killmonger, the villain in the movie, in order to save the future of Wakanda. The film was an answer to all the mainstream people who think that Africa doesn't have a culture of their own. Proving Africans were not anymore a colonized people but people who have their own perspectives on their own kind of living.

Black Panther raises awareness of these concerns and thus fulfills a need within the black community. In addition, there is much connection to a number of African tribes throughout the film's course. The characters are dressed in grab from many different tribes from their headdresses to their gowns jewelry and makeup. For instance, headdress, jewelry, robes and masks were copied from tribes like the Surma and Mursi tribes in Ethiopia, the Zulu tribe of Africa, the Maasai people of East Africa and the South Ndebele peoples of Zimbabwe/South Africa just to name a few. All in all, the Black community welcomed the use of African music, the vibrant clothing and the representation of influential African leaders on the Google developer Sani Yusuf tweeted: "Black Panther started with a scene in Nigeria, from an area, I am closely from, and where they spoke a language I understood. A Marvel movie had a language I understood. I felt like flying". (Hedges-Stocks, 2018). The Black Panther movie depicts the African tribes' traditions and values. The film meets the need for people of African descent to reflect anything predominantly black on the screen. Some of the aerial shots seen are actualshots of places like South Africa, Zambia, and Uganda this aided in creating a film, which was as close to reality as possible.

Black Panther's characters were very diverse in culture and heritage, since many of them came from different Caribbean islands and even those like Lupita Nyong'o who had African descent. Characters hailed from Grenada, Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica. This gave the movie some authenticity as each character brought some of their own personal heritage from their home countries. Thus the cast and the amount of money invested in making the film was the main. Black Panther, as co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler and starring a deep bunch of actors of colour, is an against-the-grain one hundred-million-epic so intensely personal that when the usual Marvel touchstones appear, they feel out of place. This movie is more than just a glorious film-it's the expression of a movement.

'Black Panther is a superhero who is for us by us-We can claim him'.

Africans and African-Americans have full autonomy as Afrofuturists. A community of people can take from a song, a piece of visual arts or notes and create a whole world and say, "This is ours". And

that's what this movie portrays for so many excited fans. Black Panther is a superhero who is for us by us. We can claim him.

The music in Black Panther was also used as a sign to convey a particular message. At the beginning of almost every scene during Wakanda, African drums and signing were heard. But, rap music was played for scenes in America, or featuring American-born villain Killmonger.

Humanity has been living with a Westernized narrative. But the black people and culture we see in Black Panther are quite different from the traditional depictions. The history of Wakanda is free from colonization and enslavement. They gave value to their culture and traditions. Wakanda is free from the sight of whites and therefore free from colonization. As we see Wakanda is a place of high technology and they utilize the power of vibranium for the upliftment of Wakanda and their people; most importantly they use it for only good purpose. As Black Panther is inspiring everyone, especially black youth, as they can also become superheroes washing away all the stereotype notions about blacks. This film is truly a representation of black culture, history and heritage. The present-day Wakandans are active citizens with control over the resources of their country. And they combine their main weapon, vibranium, with their knowledge and ingenuity to develop futuristic technology outstripping the rest of the world.

1.3 Conclusion

The film, *Black Panther*, with its aesthetic and thematic emphasis on Afrofuturism, as well as spectacular technical production, makes a unique contribution to cinematic history in several significant ways. With its almost all-black cast, it is predominantly positive depiction of blackness, and its visually stunning Afrofuturist aesthetic and Afrofuturist plot, the film was immediately celebrated by audiences and critics. This film is strongly related to Afrofuturism theory, which is a theory that challenges traditional representations of the future world, setting it in conjunction with African and black culture. In many respects, Black Panther offers a realistic alternative to colonialism, proposing an Afrofuturistic narrative of a country that had never been colonized and oppressed. . Afrofuturism has long used techno-culture and science fiction as a medium to explain the black experience. It discusses the black experience around the African diaspora, articulated through art, music, philosophy and various forms of media. It places the imagination at the core by offering an alternate explanation for interpreting black encounters, mostly by chronicling stories of alien abductions, time travel and communities of future. The worlds envisioned in this cultural form go beyond simplistic science fiction stories produced by blacks; these stories, art and ideologies focus black diasporic life and require a beautiful, imaginative, and optimistic way of understanding black culture.

Although breaking records and becoming one of the highest grossing films for 2018, the *Black Panther* film was able to conjure up messages both directly and indirectly to its various publics. Hollywood, the movie and cinema capital of the world have had decades of producing blockbuster films but with conventional 'white' leading actors and with whites holding major contributing roles. However, Black Panther's production and appeal was different. The decision to go with an almost all black-cast from around the world based on the futuristic African nation Wakanda, which was filled with positive messages, was almost unheard of, and somewhat risky. Although the Black Panther film was intended for the AfricanAmericans audience, keeping an interest in the films was an ongoing endeavor since the release date was announced, and it was in these efforts that the film targeted its various demographics.

In concluding this analysis, we can say that *Black Panther* makes several contributions to cinematic history and uplifting the role of Blacks and making sure that Blacks can also handle the hero and heroine

of a film. This film erases the concept of characters that blacks go through like villains or all grey shade characters. The film portrays the African culture, their history and the people at its peak. This film gave a strength to the African people and reminding them that they have a good past and a future ahead with their own culture and tradition. It encourages discourse about blackness, identity and Afrofuturism (black's history). It serves as an archive or memory repository for the collective, cultural and historical history/ies and traumata, of blacks. From an Afrofuturistic perspective, it is essential that black men and women as subjects of colonial history should maintain harmonious relations so as to enable the realization of sustainable futures for Africa. More over by representing the future, Black Panther has tapped into big science, big business and global media thereby strategically positioning Africa within mainstream discourses of power and knowledge production in the future industry.

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