

The Secessionist Manifestos of Certain Received Wisdoms

JOHN AKOMFRAH AND KODWO ESHUN

In the winter sun in early 2016, 21 years after the first transmission of *The Last Angel of History* on ZDF in 1995, John Akomfrah and Kodwo Eshun were invited by the two editors, kara lynch and Henriette Gunkel, to discuss the film's interventions into critical debates around black popular culture in the mid-1990s, its epistemological enquiry into modes of becoming, its analysis of the foreclosure of African political utopias, and its role in the evolution of Afrofuturism and African futures during the last two decades. The conversation between Kodwo Eshun and John Akomfrah took place on Tuesday March 15, 2016 from 7-9pm at Radio Extra Terrestrial at Galerie KIT. It was produced and presented by Miss Despoina during the exhibition *We Hold This Myth to Be Potential: Investigations into Afrofuturism* at Trondheim Academy of Fine Arts, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. *We Hold this Myth to be Potential* was curated by Annett Busch and Florian Schneider for Meta.Morf 2016: Nice to be in Orbit! The Trondheim International Biennale for Art & Technology from March 10 to May 8, 2016.

Kodwo Eshun: What we wanted to do today is to analyze three moments. The first would be the moment of 1995 when *The Last Angel of History* was broadcast in September on ZDF in Germany and Channel 4 in the UK under the name *The Mothership Connection*. The second would be the efflorescence of Afrofuturism in which we can observe its continuing popularity in the US and in Europe especially in the art worlds. The third moment would be the recent critiques of Afrofuturism developed from within the continent, South Africa largely, but also Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana. These critiques question the term for its exclusions of practices formulated from within the continent, now and in the past, that are overshadowed by the attention paid to canonical African-American artistic practices. John, could you out-

(1) – (3) *gaze in the mirror, invisible man*, 2015.

line some of the impulses and imperatives that were informing *The Last Angel of History* in 1995?

John Akomfrah: Trying to remember the detail of that moment is going to be difficult. But I will have a go. There are certain pointers that are still legible for me, even now. Some were intellectual, some were musical, some were cultural and political. Let's look at the intellectual one, to start with. It was clear from about the early 1990s that a disparate range of writings on what one could call the Afrofuture was beginning to take shape. A number of essays about what could be an Afrofuturist narrative were beginning to be published in critical journals. It was increasingly clear that a certain cultural studies take-up of black cultural production was beginning to reach its ascendancy and that a number of genres and practitioners would not be part of that canon forming moment. The black popular culture moment seemed to suggest that the unpopular elements of what one could call black popular culture were not going to be addressed.

A number of us were beginning to become aware that a set of musicians, composers, and producers could form the basis of a discussion. Not all of them necessarily made it into *The Last Angel of History*, but certainly the ones who did suggested what that field could be: Lee 'Scratch' Perry, George Clinton, and Sun Ra were exemplars. They were by no means the sole representatives, but they seemed like emblematic figures. By the early 1990s you could see the emergence of musical genres that seemed to hint at the presence of these figures. Whether it was drum 'n' bass or Detroit techno or what was beginning to happen in Germany with the beginnings of Basic Channel, these emergent sonic practices seemed to be borrowing heavily from this range of writers and thinkers. So all of that seemed to make sense for a research project like *The Last Angel*, which like all the Black Audio Film projects started essentially as research.

KE: Gina Dent's edited volume *Black Popular Culture* was an important reference for an American adaptation of British cultural studies that attempted to survey the entire scope of American popular culture. The *popular* in popular culture ensured an overwhelming emphasis on certain kinds of hip-hop at the expense of others. Detroit techno was written out of the grand narrative of popular culture that inherited the imperatives of gospel and R&B. The *black* in black popular culture did not stretch towards what was happening in Britain. The fact that Chicago acid house and Detroit techno were received better in Manchester, in London, in Berlin than in the USA indicated that a process of technopoetic creolization was underway. Acid house hybridized with British reggae sound system culture to form the hardcore continuum that would generate jungle techno, jungle, and drum 'n' bass and then speed garage, 2 step, and grime, all of which were sustained by a pirate ecology of radio stations, independent record labels, and independent record stores. None of that would ever show up in a volume like *Black Popular Culture* which did not

have a theoretical or critical vocabulary capable of accounting for that sonic and social process on its own terms.

Given these multiple exclusions and elisions, it was not so difficult to pose the question of what a black *impopular* culture would sound like. In the polemic spirit of the time, it was possible to speculate upon the existence of an *incultured, unpopular, imblack inculture* that would pressurize the inherited terms by which blackness was recognized, identified, and secured as identity. Listening to jungle and drum 'n' bass confronted you with situations in which you could not reliably identify the identity of a producer. The music was straining the certainties that you brought to it: the recognition effects or the reality effects that previous generations had. The mutational capacity of certain dance music to pressurize expectations of what black dance music could be opened up a vector of mutation that could be folded into a taste for alienation, a demand for artificiality, and a demand for synthesis. This will to artificiality could be heard as a popular avant-garde produced by young people across Britain. The sonic and social implications invited a new theoretical vocabulary that drew upon terms from science, technology, and informatics. What was missing was the public acknowledgment and affirmation of this experiment with life.

The Last Angel of History inherited these impulses and created a continuum of mutational imperatives between multiple American and British contexts. On a first encounter, one is struck by the alliance of musical producers with great science fiction novelists such as Samuel R. Delany, Octavia E. Butler, and Ishmael Reed alongside critics such as myself, Greg Tate, and Paul D. Miller. This transdisciplinary imperative is personified in the figure of the Data Thief who embodies a desire to connect different types of thought, each of which is conducting its own enquiry.

JA: I have not seen enough written about the idea of *The Last Angel of History* as an epistemological project invested in the formulation of knowledge. It was very clear from the beginning that that is what we were going to do. We were going to hand over much of the space to listening to the epistemological productions of a disparate range of black performers and cultural practitioners. The project would need some problem space in which a figure or an emblem attempts to summarize or listen to or ingest this information that was coming at you without synthesizing it. It was never a Hegelian project in that sense. We never envisioned it being a totalizing project. It was clear that what you said was not necessarily going to tie in with what Octavia Butler was saying which would not necessarily tie in with what Paul D. Miller, for instance, was saying. But that was never the aim. The aim was to point to the range of voices who could speak to this question of an Afrofuture from the different vantage points from which they come from.

What always gets forgotten, especially when people talk about the film these days, is not even the Data Thief's presence but what we as the 'authors' of the work are then saying about what the Data Thief is doing. He is in the land of African

memory. He is breaking into the vaults. Those are our statements about the activities of the Data Thief which suggested that we were interested in something much more discursive than African-American production. We go back again and again and again to this question of what constitutes *Africanity* and how it might be talked about through and in the present. I regret that that part of the film has disappeared in a way, but I know some of the reasons why.

Looking back now, what is clear to me is that we are the children of dub. I came from dub to free jazz and then to jazz. I knew more dub than I knew jazz. Dub made me receptive to certain kinds of sounds; sounds which were voiceless. It became clear to us that a certain canon forming moment was about to take place in which certain forms of black musical productions were going to be valorized as the key emblematic forms. And all of those seemed to have, at the center of them, the voice. The academy could talk about voices because that is much easier than to talk about the effects the sonic has on the body or how one works with the sonic. So the role played by the dub of Lee Perry, the Detroit Techno of Derrick May and Juan Atkins and the free jazz of Sun Ra was not accidental. We were interested in them precisely because of their alterity, for the very fact that they were not 12-bar blues with voices that narrated their becoming for you. It was important that these were immersive sonic spaces which called upon you to be formed by the sonic.

KE: When you say there are reasons why the film's reflections on the return to the land of African memory are not recalled, now, could you say more about those reasons?

JA: This is the weirdest thing for me; you put out a project called *The Last Angel of History* that announces itself in explicitly Benjaminian terms. It says that we are going to be reflecting on the question of the historical and on how bodies are named and made in history. We are engaging in a Lukacsian, Benjaminian, Duboisian project. It is clear from the beginning that the Data Thief is roaming across the internet of black culture and that some of the major spaces he was going to get into were banks of African memory. All of that the work says in advance, simply by the way it names itself.

But it is also clear that the anxiety that informed this production, in a way, won out. One of the reasons we were doing it was because we felt that we were at this moment of rupture, when certain diasporic activities that had in the past been on the margins of certain institutional frameworks and knowledges were about to enter. You just sensed that something was going to happen – a door of representation was going to open, certain things would go through, and some would be left out. One of the things you wanted to see going in is that unfinished conversation about the African utopian project. You see very clearly in the film people waving banners, which are announcing the end of something. It just so happens that the end they were announcing was the closure of the post-war utopian futurist project of the Nkrumah government in 1966. None of this was hidden but in order for that to register you

have to be not only interested in the sonic or the literary but also in the historical ambitions of the work. And I do not think that that translated sufficiently. I think people understood the literary ambitions and I am not sure that it is only because they are Americans. Because you could teach the literature. They almost certainly understood the sonic aspects because they seemed viable as a diasporic project. The historical mediation seemed to fall by the way side in these discussions. I think a lot of that had to do with the unworkability of it. What do you do with an Afrofuturist manifesto which says that we will spend our time unearthing futurist projects from the continent, most of which by then, had failed. An Afrofuturist manifesto had to be made up of things which were shiny and bright and new. Not fossils of failed and discarded projects. I think if I were pushed I would say that the aversion to touch on that material was not just to do with the fact that it is continental but that these were failed projects in a way. Now I dispute that distinction, but I have a feeling that is what it has to do with.

KE: I think you are right. The figure of the Data Thief is a personification of the desire to navigate the internet of black histories. The Data Thief was the means to navigate the space of possibility opened up by sampling which Greg Tate articulates when he says that the advent of sampling allows all the cras of black music to be collapsed onto a chip and then freely accessed. The methodology of sampling as an implied aesthetic of time traveling through sound seemed at the time to prefigure one's relation to the internet. The Data Thief is the figure that personifies the experiments with sampling in musics that foregrounded their deliberately posthuman dimension that drew on Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. Those aspects announced the futurity that brought a cultural energy that converged with the melancholia of Pan-Africanisms and the ending of Nkrumahist Futurisms to produce a complex geography of times that are collapsing, closing and opening in ways that are more legible to audiences now than at the time of the film's release.

Moving forward twenty years, we can see the impact of Afrofuturism in contemporary art. Artists such as Ellen Gallagher and Wangcehi Mutu have emerged in the United States working a vocabulary of the extraterrestrial, the mythological, the alien and the synthetic that is familiar in its novelty. That artistic linkage can be seen in the projects of artists such as Kapwani Kiwanga and Kiluanji Kia Henda that work in and between continents.

At the same time, there is an increasing critique that is directed at the term of Afrofuturism itself. Especially within South Africa, critics and artists distance themselves from its Americocentricity. One increasingly hears the argument that the term fails to capture the actual interest in inventing future-oriented practices within the continent. It is not a question of defending the term but of registering people's impatience with it. More and more people sense a desire to clear a space from which to account for contemporary African future-oriented practices that are

overshadowed by an Afrofuturism that sucks the air out of discussion and serves to obscure as much as enable thought.

JA: As you were speaking one thing struck me: one of the major reasons for embarking on what became a prophetic project has to do with the need to try and emerge from an earlier moment of debate around essentialism and anti-essentialism. Once you have participated in this discussion from an anti-essentialist position, it then becomes incumbent upon you, the anti-essentialist, to try and give some indication of the becomings of these ontologies. For me, what was always interesting about the Afrofuturist project was the sense in which it comes at this question of identity via becomings, via constructions, via the notion of performance and so on. The fact that people were naming themselves in alien forms as extra-terrestrial attested to this question of becoming as self-realization. At the heart of this was the philosophical question that interested me: how do we get outside this cul-de-sac of anti-essentialism and suggest ways in which it might connect to the actual workings of identity? That was critical. Now to the extent that the project can be named as an Afrofuturist one – I am not that heavily invested in the term itself. But what I would say is this: what I *do not* think is interesting is to hold up another bloc of unchanging, untheorized identity called the African as articulated in the critique that comes from inside the continent and then use that as some sort of ideal type against which the diasporic valuation of itself as another solid unchanging bloc could be measured. I am not interested, in other words, in a counter-narrative that just says ‘Well, since we have had the African-American or the Afro-diasporic take on futures, actually all we need is to add more African and everything will be cool.’ Because that is missing the point of the whole project. The point of the project is to question that totalizing impulse. If you understand things as constructed and those constructions include questions of identity, it is then incumbent on everyone to specify the ways in which those formations come into being. If the critique of Afrofuturism is about pointing to that, I am all for it. If it is just offering up another bloc as I have heard sometimes in the past that states ‘Oh well, you speak about Lee Perry, but we have the Dogon cosmology’, as if every African has some access to Dogon cosmology, then I am not interested. Because that would, for me, undercut the profoundly philosophical dimension of the project itself.

KE: I agree. The term itself acts as a strange attractor that seduces and compels envy, admiration. A discourse of becoming narrates means and methods of mutation that entail recognizing the degree to which one is already alienated and carries out a project of alienation as a self-conscious project. The focus on the term is almost beside the point. In *The Last Angel of History* Afrofuturism is barely mentioned, actually. *More Brilliant than the Sun* mentions it sparingly. The operative term is sonic fiction, not Afrofuturism. The project is to produce fictions from sound that foreground their fictionality.

JA: There is a section going towards the end of *The Last Angel of History* where the Data Thief spills out an array of terms that are sonic and digital. A list of terms that piles up in front of you in this almost Benjaminian way.

KE: Which does not privilege any single term.

JA: No, it does not.

KE: The Data Thief invokes them in order to move on. He is encountering them.

JA: I think people are aware that the term has a certain purchase, a certain brand efficiency that if you could own it, you could do some work with it. At the very least, it invites you into a very exclusive club without even having to have done anything cosmopolitan. So everybody wants the term. But it cannot be at the expense of something that you mention in the film: at one point you talk about the question of secession. The extent to which the voices you are hearing in the film are secessionist manifestos in themselves of a certain received wisdom about ‘black culture’ or ‘African identity’. The sense in which these secessionist manifestos undercut what one would call the oratorical ‘we’, these binaries of we versus them that seem to always know what the ‘we’ means and almost certainly what the ‘they’ means. All of that work of undercutting which was part of the project of *The Last Angel of History* seems attractive to reject if you could just hang on to this notion of an Afrofuturism. Because, in a way, the term itself suggests that there is a ‘we’ and ‘them’. The term just feels like a credit card or something. And that is why people struggle over it. That is why no one fights over any of the other terms that we have talked about. Because the terms coming from *The Last Angel of History* or the ones that an array of people, including yourself, formulated are not credit cards at all. They are really difficult ways and means for picking your way through the morass of identity, which is still the case, despite what anyone might say.

The series is edited by Ulrike Bergemann.

HENRIETTE GUNKEL, KARA LYNCH (EDS.)

We Travel the Space Ways

Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgement | 9

0. Constellation

Black Astrophysics: A Homemade Field of Love

Alexis Pauline Gumbs | 15

Lift Off... an Introduction

kara Lynch and Henriette Gunkel | 21

I.

City of Mirage

Kiluanji Kia Henda | 47

Reach, Robot: AfroFuturist Technologies

GriSha Coleman and Thomas F. DePrantz | 53

Glitches Running Trains Out In Negrizonia, A Gynocidal Western

Greg Tate | 69

To Win the War, You Fought It Sideways:

Kojo Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*

Kodwo Eshun | 83

Black Atlantis

Ayesha Hanneed | 107

II.

The Palace of the Quilombos

Prohawk Two Feathers | 129

The Sound of Afrofuturism

Stelanie Alisch and Carla J. Maier | 133

The Revolutionist

Milumbe Hambe | 151

The Crypt of Blackness: or Assotto Saint with Gilles Deleuze

Tavia Nyong'o | 175

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Rise of the Astro Blacks

Greg Tate | 199

III.

The Archivist's Vault :: Door Of No Return
kara lynch | 205

**An Afrofuturist Time Capsule – One Point in Space-Time
in the Collective Consciousness of Black Speculation**

M. Asif Dukan with Wildseeds, sorryyoufeeluncomfortable,
and AfroFuturist Affair | 211

**Organize Your Own Temporality: Notes on Self-Determined
Temporalities and Radical Futures**
Rashedah Phillips | 237

**"I Feel Love": Race, Gender, Technē,
and the (Im)Proper Sonic Habitus**
Kara Keeling | 245

**Afrofuturism On My Mind:
Imagining Black Lives in a Post-Obama World**
Anna Everett | 251

IV.

Brother Kyot
Daniel Kojo Schrade | 281

**Intervening into the Future Script: A Conversation about Fiction,
Magic, and the Speculative Power of Images**
Kiluanji Kia Henda and Nadine Sievert | 287

Dismantle Imperia
Robyn Smith | 303

**Textures of Time – Abstraction, Afronauts,
and the Archive in the Artwork of Daniel Kojo Schrade**
Tobias Nagl | 321

There Are Storytellers Everywhere
Rainni Gbadamosi | 343

V.

Prophetika
Abigail DeVille | 357

The Secessionist Manifestos of Certain Received Wisdoms
John Akomfah and Kodwo Eshun | 363

They Sent You?
Jim ChuChu | 371

Alienation and Queer Discontent
Henriette Gunkel | 387

FAR SPACE-WISE – Without Edges a Center Cannot Exist in Stasis
Jannika Ayalon | 405

VI. FINAL ORBIT
Future
Rashedah Phillips | 433

Authors | 441