Afrofuturism

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Science fiction prototyping is strengthened by the diverse voices that inform the process. One science fiction genre exploring fascinating, engaging, and often challenging visions of tomorrow is Afrofuturism.

Part of science fiction prototyping’s (SFP’s) power is the diversity of voices informing the process. Sciences such as economics and biology have taught us that the more diversity we engineer into a system, the stronger and more resilient that system is likely to be. But there’s no perfect state of diversity—we must constantly seek new ideas, perspectives, and collaborators. In the US, Afrofuturism offers a new voice and a valuable perspective to the SFP process.

Describing new plausible social arrangements, political structures, and technological systems, Afrofuturism estranges its viewership from the belief that life must be as it currently is. The best of Afrofuturism is vibrantly rich, deeply evocative, and intensely polyvocal and multimodal. Perhaps most important, it’s capable of rescuing its viewership from idolatrous commitments to false necessities.

Critics, theorists, artists, and commentators who self-identify as Afrofuturists have generated several intriguing, overlapping definitions of Afrofuturism:

- Artistic and critical works that combine “science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentrism, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs,” to use Ytasha Womack’s language.¹
- Works expressive of “African-American voices … with other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come,” according to Alondra Nelson,² or “African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future,” as Mark Dery describes it.³
- Civil Rights–era consciousness raising was blended with science fiction conscious razing.

Although these and numerous other attempts to capture Afrofuturism’s essence highlight dimensions of it, they also constrain it. Its complexity, vigor, dynamism, globalized flows, and possible future trajectories suggest that it and we are better served by descriptive models, or what Samuel R. Delany calls “functional descriptions.”

Many Afrofuturist works do certain things in common. Understood as devices, they function in certain ways. For example, they often focus on appropriating and redeploying technological devices or scientific knowledge and on both raising and raising the consciousness of people from the African diaspora.

American jazz composer, bandleader, poet, and philosopher Sun Ra, a creator known for his experimental cosmic philosophy music, is a good example. Sun Ra appropriated technological artifacts and scientific symbols to fabricate a utopian posthuman, postracial, and postracist society.⁴
naturalistic notions of humanity, and blindness to the plasticity of the built world were ridiculed or simply ignored.

We find the same raising and razing tendencies in artist Jean-Michel Basquiat’s robots, performance artist Nick Cave’s sound suits, and hip hop pioneer Grand Master Flash’s turn tablism. The double-consciousness that sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois diagnosed as fundamental to modern black psyches is remixed and recomplicated in Afrofuturism—its byproduct is nth-order consciousness.

Afrofuturism also regularly traffics in temporal incursions. Theorist Kodwo Eshun describes such events as gestures and acts that generate “temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress” and warp “the temporal logics that condemn … black subjects to prehistory.”

Martin Delaney’s Blake or the Huts of America, a 19th century alternate history describing a successful slave revolt, is a typical representation of this type of chronopolitical work.

Modern preprogramming effected by science fiction films like Deep Impact and television shows like 24, which depicted then-fictional African American presidents and imaginarily paved the way for President Barack Obama’s actual election, can also be understood as chronopolitical acts. But the ultimate instance is arguably Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s imploring of actress Nichelle Nichols to continue acting in the original Star Trek series, noting how important portraying African Americans as part of a hopeful future vision was to the Civil Rights Movement.

Finally, Afrofuturist works reinterpret the histories of black subjectivity. They often refigure the Atlantic slave trade as an alien abduction or the conversion of humans into technology, quintessential elements of science fiction. As novelist Toni Morrison argues, the literal, social, psychological, and material homelessness experienced by those abductees, many of them the original African Americans, situates modern slavery at the heart of modernism itself. But Afrofuturism tends to make a broader, more general, postmodernist claim: slavery’s effects on the enslaved is akin to that of the classic science fiction concept of apocalypse, viscerally describing what it feels like to live through catastrophe. The hopeful, or tragically visionary, among us might follow writer Mark Sinker, who argued that Afrofuturism ultimately suggests that postapocalyptic life is possible, even desirable.

But the grim might wonder whether reality for the Afrodiapora is better symbolized by the racially antagonistic monster-deity of H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos.

Afrofuturism’s cultural richness, imaginative intensity, and political audacity necessarily make us wonder about its potential. How might Afrofuturism affect the strategies of activist movements, such as Black Lives Matter, which focus on African Americans striving under postapocalyptic conditions? What information or guidance can Afrofuturism offer budding African American technologists and scientists? What might an Afrofuturist approach to synthetic biology research entail? Can Afrofuturist chronopolitics work effectively in the past, even prehistorically?

With the modern world sometimes resembling a Lovecraftian Cthulhuocene, perhaps Afrofuturism, like so many other black cultural art forms, is a precursor of things to come, a harbinger at once traumatized and joyous.

REFERENCES


