

Afrofuturism

by Silvia Bombardini



Grace Wales Bonner, Ashish, FW16

Mark Dery may have christened the movement in 1994, with his seminal essay *Black to the Future*, but Afrofuturism had already been around since at least the mid-50s, when jazz poet Sun Ra allegedly walked the streets of Chicago in his ancient Egyptian spacesuit and crown. Purposefully literal and elusive at once, Afrofuturism as a school of thought seeks to liberate the present from the past, by crafting astral visions of alternate black futures. In these, slavery and the diaspora may be reimagined through the lens of extraterrestriality, as filmmaker and theorist Kodwo Eshun most notably puts it, "*to explore the historical terms, the everyday implications of forcibly imposed dislocation, and the constitution of Black Atlantic subjectivities*", with the artists and authors often recasting themselves as the alien – outlandish and wise, abducted, yet regal. As an aesthetic, Afrofuturism embraces the visual codes of the cosmos, mysticism, tribalism and technoculture, and out of iconography, builds worlds. Such as Drexciya's Black Atlantis: according to the legend in the sleeve notes of their album *The Quest*, a sunken realm populated by the progeny of pregnant African women thrown overboard during the Middle Passage, who learnt to breathe underwater from the inside of their mothers' wombs.

On days when we're no longer willing to turn a blind eye on racial inequality, and can be both vocal and influential with our outrage, the worldbuilding of Afrofuturism, half escapism and half accusation, resonates once more with young generations. Ours is the age of migrations – come 2045, less than 50 percent of Americans will be white. We're uprooted and decentralised, drawn to dream up parallel universes: newfangled Afrofuturist disciples may once again be found from literature and academia to videogames and comics, across all creative fields. To begin with music, where its influence never really went away, and unfazed by the passing of time, trends or any claim of genre specificity, Afrofuturism lives on as a fil rouge to link the work of selected performers through the decades, from jazz to reggae, hip-hop and soul to the birth of techno, that Dery considers altogether "*a quintessential example of Afrofuturism*". Grace Jones to Flying Lotus to now Janelle Monáe, whose alter-ego is a self-aware android who calls itself Cindi Mayweather, and fights against class divide and prejudice against cyborgs in the *Metropolis* of the future. In cinema, the current relevance of Afrofuturism is felt just as keenly, with recent releases like Adirley Queiros' favela sci-fi *White Out, Black In* and the dystopic *Crumbs*, a surreal low-budget set in post-apocalyptic Ethiopia. More lighthearted and self-indulgent is Terence Nance's *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty*, in which the navel-gazing main character attempts at some point to reason if his chronic inability to arrive on time might not be due to an Afrocentric perception of it, given that he comes "*from a long line of ancestors who operate time based on celestial happening still undiscovered by the western world*". This new wave of attention, however, is not always of the positive kind: a 2014 experiment at Northwestern University showed that the fear to end up a minority might cause white Americans to become more socially conservative, and current news would seem to prove it right on a national scale. Keeping to cinema, just think of the shameful controversy that sparked over the casting of black actor John Boyega for a leading role in the latest instalment of the Star Wars space saga, with some so-called fans going as far as to boycott the movie that they view as a piece of "*#antiwhite propaganda*", whatever that means. This certainly feels like a step back when we recall, for example, Star Trek's lieutenant Nyota Uhura, incidentally named after the Swahili word for *freedom*, who gave Captain Kirk the first interracial kiss on United States television, all the way back in 1968. It's also because of this, surely, that Afrofuturism is all the more necessary today.

All considered, fashion has been surprisingly late to catch up, especially if we take into account the pivotal role that garments have had from the beginning in the performance of Afrofuturist narratives, and the conception, representation and celebration of the hybrid or mutant identities of their otherworldly protagonists. Perhaps not so surprisingly however, if we bear in mind that according to The New York Times, only 12 out of 470 members of the Council of Fashion Designers of America were African-Americans last year. Despite all criticisms, international runways as well remain as whitewashed as ever: record lows on the diversity scale were reached this season at Junya Watanabe, Comme des Garçons and Balenciaga, reports The Fashion Spot, whereas black models in the fall 2016 shows have still been only the 9.22% – and truth to be told, most of them were Yeezy's. Still, baby steps towards a more inclusive industry are admittedly taken season after season, and the percentage, though incongruously slowly, does tend to improve ever so slightly. Take the street-style sensation of Ashley B. Chew's *Black Models Matter* bag, well-meaning if a bit simplistic, effective in its intent for people to talk about it. Though the praise was unanimous, it could come off as slightly over the top – there's offensive casting and

there's tragedy, is all I'm saying. A more divisive, but by far more thoughtful approach is that of Pyer Moss' Kerby Jean-Raymond, who opened his spring 2016 show with a self-produced video essay on systematic racism and police brutality, featuring a compilation of disturbingly familiar footage and newly filmed interviews. The conflict there, is clear: there's a reason why fashion so seldom touches on themes of such magnitude, and callousness can't always be blamed. Fashion is a business known to benefit from media attention, and what Vanessa Friedman describes as a "*retail-ization of cause*" is bound to arise suspicion and criticism over the most selfless of designers' endeavours. On the other hand, with the great reach of fashion should come great responsibility, and if Haitian-American Kerby Jean-Raymond doesn't do what's in his power to raise awareness, who will? Certainly not older white designers fond of cautious flowery prints. Both Ashley and Kerby are in their twenties: there might be an element of youthful impulsiveness in what they do, they might be less willing to compromise, somewhat more sensitive to matters related to the formation and safeguard of one's own cultural and racial identity. In an article about Pyer Moss' for The Washington Post, Robin Givhan writes about fashion as "*an industry that, in its finest moments, provides people with the tools to define themselves so that others cannot*", the Afrofuturist deed par excellence, if you will. The brand's SS16 collection itself is based on captivity – titled *Ota Meet Saartjie* after the memory of Saartjie Baartman and Ota Benga, a Khoikhoi woman and Congolese man who were exhibited, respectively, in London in 1810 and at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. Though the number of black designers remains low, they seem more and more keen, more or less subtly, to celebrate and at times romanticise their heritage, by knowingly combine historical references with just the right amount of speculative fiction to make a point. 25-year-old Grace Wales Bonner for one was directly inspired by the Afrofuturists and Sun Ra, among many other references lifted out of their time, for her fall 2016 *Spirituals* collection. And Ikiré Jones, to keep with the brand's consistent storytelling approach, feature visuals of their spring collection on the website alongside a short text about young children being "*spirited away*" from their motherland. "*We are the children of migration*", it reads "*but we are here. And from beyond the skies, our voices will guide you, if you listen*". Ikiré Jones is the brainchild of Nigeria-born American designer Walé Oyéjidé and head tailor Sam Hubler, whose each collection is followed by a second *chapter* of silk scarves and pocket squares printed with images of early Western fine art, each subtly altered to include people of colour in positions of power or wealth, as heirs, angels or heroes.

This narrative element is by no means exclusive, on the contrary, it's such a prominent aspect of fashion as we intend it today that many young designers of different racial backgrounds have started to address their seasonal shows largely as vehicles to deliver a message, or tell a story, with the clothes themselves almost as an excuse. Classic Afrofuturist tropes, if maybe not as consciously, inform many of these tales – the idea of an imaginary homeland, for instance: like Drexciya's submerged kingdom, Gypsy Sport has Haturu, a mythical place representing their "*don't-give-a-fuck attitude*", as quoted in Dazed magazine, and Gosha Rubchinskiy has Arktida, the hypothetical continent under the Polar Star that existed, according to the legend, thousands of years before our time. Meanwhile, ancestral and cosmic spiritualities, largely explored by Afrofuturism, fascinate for fall established designers the likes Rick Owens, Riccardo Tisci, or Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood. Even on a purely aesthetic level, the futuristic undertones of many one collection have become over the past

few seasons less streamlined, more grainy – with lamé, metallics and glittery or holographic finishes found as much on the high street as on the runway, hinting back to the old-school DIY ensembles of the original Afrofuturist crew. For fall, powder puff afro wigs, sprinkled with sequins, topped in matching shades each look at Ashish, while Tata Naka, inspired by the final days of the disco movement, hand-painted their garments with portraits of black icons like Donna Summer, Diana Ross and of course Grace Jones alongside cartoony UFO spaceships, also realised as beaded appliques.

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