

Afrofuturism and the Archive: *Robots of Brixton and Crumbs*

to get out of here, to get out of the time and space of now
Kodwo Eshun in *The Last Angel of History*

At the All-African People's Congress in Accra in December 1958, Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah called for a federation of African states. In honour of this, a century later, on 8 December 2058, the United States of Africa was born. As part of this unification, the continent's various national space agencies joined to form the pan-African Space Agency. By the end of the 21st century, regional collaborations and shared missions were common. In 2170, the Space Agency set about establishing a permanent human presence off world, launching three thousand Afronauts in the first starship, the *Black Star*, and its fleet of auxiliary vessels.

Six months into the voyage, the *Immamou* left the *Black Star* on a routine mission. Three days later, she lost all contact with the mothership and with mission control in Kenya. The crew of the small vessel elected to continue on into the depths of space, returning every seven years to the point of 'last contact' to commemorate 'The Great Separation'. Realising that they are cut off from the technological and cultural knowledge stored in the *Black Star*'s vast library, they recorded what each of them could remember, even though they knew they were incapable of producing any detailed, coherent or systematic record of their civilisation and its history. That is, they institute an archive.

This is the story told in *Afrogalactica: A Short History of the Future*, a five-minute excerpt from Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga's 40-minute spoken piece with video projection first performed in 2011.¹ The last two minutes of this extract are composed of a series of still images without any soundtrack or explanation. They show, though not in this order:

- three busts from pre-colonial West Africa
- three record covers: Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 'The Message' (1982); Ras G and the Afrikan Space Program's *Ghetto Sci-Fi* (2008); Janelle Monáe's *The ArchAndroid* (2010)
- two paperback covers: Samuel R. Delany's *The Ballad of Beta-2* (1965); Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980)
- seven more or less iconic photographs: Louis Armstrong playing the trumpet to his wife in front of the Sphinx in 1961; a trio of African-American soldiers demonstrating their radio equipment at Fort Benning in 1941; a Jean-Paul Gaude image of Grace Jones; a publicity shot of *Star Trek*'s Lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols); portraits of W.E.B. Dubois, Mae Jemison and Nina Simone
- a six-panel page from Bernard Krigstein's *Slave Ship* comic²
- a picture of what looks like a customised early twentieth-century leather pilot's helmet but which the internet insists is either a Russian Mind Control Helmet or a Radio Helmet from the 1950s, although the image is clearly older than that

¹ *Afrogalactica* can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/41449171>. My first couple of sentences are derived not from the film but from Kiwanga's script, a paragraph of which is available at <http://festival.exodosljubljana.si/en/program/kapwani-kiwanga-afrogalactica-a-brief-history-of-the-future/>. I have been unable to see a full performance of the piece.

² The full comic can be found here: <http://seqarts.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/slave-ship-by-bernard-krigstein.html>. Krigstein produced it for a 3-D comic in 1953 or 1954 but it was never published. The story is by Al Feldstein, and the original version, drawn by George Roussos, appeared in EC's *Weird Fantasy* 8 (1951) as 'The Slave Ship'.

- the diagrams that show how 454 African slaves could be stowed on board the Brooks slave ship

Accounts of the full-length live performance suggest that Kiwanga herself poses as an anthropologist from the future, drawing together histories and memories of anti-colonial struggle in an Afrofuturist project to imagine potential science fiction futures, but it remains unclear from the extract how the lost Afronauts – or indeed viewers – are to make sense of these memory-images.

Kiwanga's complex mixing of past, present and future is related to the postmodern playfulness about matters of truth and fiction found in some of the novels sprawled in one corner of Bruce Sterling's 'slipstream', in the sort of fiction Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction' and Brian McHale describes as 'apocryphal history' or 'historical fantasy'. This is most obvious in the opening minute of the film, in which images of three actually-existing African structures are displayed but ascribed fictional identities. The Space Application building at Nigeria's National Space Research and Development Agency is captioned as the United States of Africa Space Agency's West African Ground Control. Within Kiwanga's projected future history, it is more or less plausible that the former becomes the latter. This is very clearly not the case, however, with Nairobi's Kenyatta International Conference Centre and Algiers's Maqam Ecahid monument, built to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Algerian independence, which are captioned, respectively, as the USASA's East African Ground Control building and the Black Star Mission Administrative Headquarters. Viewers who do not recognise these real-world structures, or might otherwise not be in on the joke, are given a very broad hint by the shot Kiwanga interpolates between the latter pair. It shows an apartment building, densely packed with rusty television satellite dishes reaching out from concrete balconies – part of, her voiceover claims, a 'continent-wide civilian remote-sensing program'.³

Does Kiwanga here provide a model of how the *Immamou* crew should think about their recollections? Left with no coherent historical frame to aid them, should they be content to arrange and rearrange the images – drawing on what little they can recall or half-recall, what they remember, which includes what they misremember – into narratives that serve their individual, social and political needs? Isn't that what historiography – with more or less self-awareness – consists of anyway? Isn't that an archive?

This article is concerned with questions of history, memory and meaning, and with the construction of Afrofuturism as both an archive and a living tradition. It will begin by

³ A similar technique is employed in the Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda's installation *Icarus 13* (2008), which recounts the story of the first African space mission – to the sun, undertaken at night so as to avoid the deadly heat. In addition to the 600-word tall tale and a tabletop architect's model of the Icarus launch-site, eight large photographs chart the mission, each of them misleadingly labelled. The first is a shot of Icarus 13, rising in the centre of the frame, viewed from Luanda, with a thin strip of land visible at its base, a vast open sky above and beyond it. The rocket, though, is actually the mausoleum of António Agostinho Neto, Angola's first president after independence from Portugal; its base resembles the flared rockets of a Soyuz or Molniya launch vehicle, while its jagged pinnacle looks like a prototype for London's The Shard. Other striking buildings are repurposed in the next pair of photos: a domed structure is captioned 'Astronomy Observatory, Namibe Desert', despite its obvious lack of astronomical equipment, and low, flat building whose obliquely angled walls might suggest, from above, a star shape, is described as the 'Centre of astronomy and astronaut training, Namibe Desert', although in reality it is a cinema. Next are pictures of five hard-hatted labourers leaning on a girder, supposedly 'Building the spaceship Icarus 13', and a yellow torus against a dark background is the 'First picture of the Sun's photosphere from Icarus 13 in orbit'. The photo sequence ends with a high-angle shot of construction work in a city square, lined by parked cars, past which a couple walk. In the distance more cars and pedestrians are visible. Labelled 'The return of the astronauts', it not only shows us no such thing but also prises open the gap between image and caption – there is nothing in the picture to which the description could actually apply. It is a gap that frustrates, and which calls for the viewer to inflate it with story – just as Kia Henda fills the frustrating gap between the dream of independence and the nightmares of civil war and dependence, between socialist aspiration and neo-liberal hegemony, with myth, tall tale, humour and hope.

outlining the origins of the term, and consider how its naming and initial explication in a popular article by Mark Sinker, interviews by Mark Dery and a film by John Akomfrah functioned as a preliminary archiving which in turn became parts of the archive they inaugurated. It will then turn to two recent afrofuturist films which deal with history, temporality, semiosis and transformation in intriguing ways: Kibwe Tavares's six-minute short, *Robots of Brixton* (UK 2011),⁴ and Miguel Llansó's short feature, *Crumbs* (Ethiopia/Spain/Finland 2015).

Afrofuturism and the archive

In 1925, Arthur A. Schomburg opened his essay 'The Negro Digs Up His Past' with these words:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. ... History must restore what slavery took away ... So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and apt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all. (231)⁵

Eighty years later, Kodwo Eshun described the history of not only African-American cultural production but also of the wider Black Atlantic as having been dominated by 'an ethical commitment to history, the dead, and the forgotten' (288). Consequently, it prioritised the construction of 'countermemories', the uncovering and restoration of the histories and cultures destroyed by imperialism, slavery and their still unfolding consequences (and practices) in order to contradict and correct them. In the face of such necessity, imagining futures rather than recovering pasts might seem like 'an unethical dereliction of duty' (288). However, there has long been a marginalised current within Afrodiasporic culture that is just as interested in the 'proleptic ... as the retrospective' (289). Eshun describes this current as afrofuturist.

In a 1992 issue of *The Wire*, Mark Sinker concocted a pantheon of black sf that made explicit how the range of its creators and media forms reached far beyond the focus on prose fiction typical of science fiction studies. Delany and Butler were included, along with Ishmael Reed, but Sinker was more concerned with a musical tradition, from be-bop to hip-hop, that included Sun Ra, Public Enemy, John Coltrane, Anthony Braxton, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, Jimi Hendrix, Afrika Bambaataa and Earth, Wind & Fire.

A year later, in a group of interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Tricia Rose and Greg Tate, Mark Dery coined the term 'afrofuturism' to describe

speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future. (736)

This definition accomplished at least five important things. It cast the afrofuturist net wider than just sf, so the handful of African-American genre writers (Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Steven Barnes, Charles Saunders – and the unmentioned and largely forgotten John M. Faucette) and others writing in speculative modes (Dery's interviews refer to Reed,

⁴ *Robots of Brixton* can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/25092596>.

⁵ The essay originally appeared in the March 1925 special issue of *Survey Graphic* devoted to the Harlem Renaissance, guest-edited by Alain Locke, who later that year reprinted it in his groundbreaking anthology *The New Negro*.

Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Clarence Major, John A. Williams and Amos Tutuola) were recontextualised in relation to each other, to sf and to literary fiction. It constructed a field that reached far beyond the prose fiction emphasis then typical of sf studies – it was about signification, about sounds and images as much writing. It articulated marginality (and a moral high ground) in terms of appropriating – poaching, hacking, détournant – white culture. It laid claim to the future for peoples of African descent; and it focused very specifically on African Americans.⁶

However, despite mentioning an array of authors, Dery's interviewees were, like Sinker, more concerned with media other than prose fiction that had been, at least until then, largely neglected by most sf scholars. In addition to reiterating the importance of Sun Ra, Hendrix and Bambaataa, they expand Sinker's list to include other musicians (George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, Herbie Hancock, Bernie Worrell, Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Darren Robinson, Public Enemy, X Clan, Arthur Baker), graffitists and other artists (Jean-Michel Basquiat, Rammellzee, Phase 2, Kase, Blade) and comics creators (Brian Stalfreeze, Denys Cowan, Kyle Baker, Malcolm Jones, Mark Bright, Mike Sargent, Derek Dingle, Trever van Eeden, David Williams, Ron Wilson, Paris Cullens, Malcolm Davis, Bill Morimon, Milestone Comics). The name-checks and shout-outs to all these creators, and the works for which their creators' names are metonyms, herald the afrofuturist archive.

Jacques Derrida notes that 'archive' originally meant the home of the archon, or chief magistrate, the guardian of the laws who also possesses the right to interpret and speak the law (2). The archon both houses the archive and lives within it. Arguably, then, the full inauguration of the Afrofuturist archive occurs with John Akomfrah's 1995 documentary *The Last Angel of History*, the first piece to irrefutably catalogue *and* belong inside it, to which I will return below.⁷

Derrida's discussion of the archive begins with etymology, noting that the word's Greek root signals both a 'commencement' and a 'commandment' (1). That is, according to Derrida, the archive not only institutes a collection but does so with authority. It establishes its own limits by determining what is outside of it. It gathers together, unifies, identifies, classifies and houses material. In organising this material, the archive tears it from history and reorders it according to some other principle, and in doing so reorganises our understanding of the world outside the archive. In pursuing these functions, the archive institutes *and* conserves; it is both 'revolutionary and traditional' (7). That is, it overturns existing knowledge and relations even as it recalls, contains and displays things that might otherwise have been lost or forgotten. However, at the same time as the archive remembers, it also forgets. By identifying and classifying, it violently dislocates materials, wrenching them from contexts and fitting them into organisational schemes – systems, processes, narratives and other patterns – that erase the past even as they attempt to make it accessible, retrievable, storyable. The archive tends to conceal such knowledge of its own artifice from itself.

Like the crew of the lost *Immamou* and Schomburg's enthusiastic antiquarians, Sinker, Dery, Delany, Rose and Tate demonstrate the retrospective impulse to identify, claim and catalogue (primarily) African-American culture that might otherwise have remained disconnected, risking diffusion and loss, and orientate our understanding of it. But such archival acts are neither neutral nor innocent: 'The first archivist institutes the archive as it should be ... He reads it, interprets it, classes it' (Derrida 55). Such anatomising and critical

⁶ More recently, Afrofuturism has been understood, as in Eshun's essay, in terms of the broader diaspora, and there is currently a lot of discussion as to whether African sf, which is currently flourishing, should be understood in terms of Afrofuturism. At the same time, the Afrofuturist canon has become rather less masculinist, not least because of the recent pre-eminence of sf by such African-American women as Andrea Hairston, Nalo Hopkinson, NK Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor and Nisi Shawl.

⁷ *The Last Angel of History* can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/80634679>.

processes are central to establishing the archive but, at the same time as gathering in cultural texts, artefacts and practices, it distorts and erases the ways in which they were originally produced and the various ways in which their creators and their many diverse audiences might have understood them. Furthermore, just as establishing the archive involves rearticulating those texts, artefacts and practices so that they form part of a more or less coherent tradition, so it also involves the construction and formulation of that tradition.

Such complexities seem to have a particular resonance with Afrofuturism itself. Those first archivists recollected past futures which themselves recollect lost and imaginary pasts and anticipate possible and impossible futures so as to sensitise us to the proleptic potentials of cultural production and thus to inspire future Afrofuturisms.

This sense of the archive as an active, non-linear canon, full of chaotic agency, is evident in *The Last Angel of History*. The film begins with a historical divergence, with past and future framing an oddly liminal space-time. In the midst of what looks like a flat and flooded dustbowl after the waters have mostly receded – where long low deserted buildings, derelict trailers and other detritus, less than half-submerged now, hang on, all bathed in an orange light that almost renders the view sepia – the narrator, whose onscreen location shifts several times without interrupting or affecting the continuous sound of his narration, tells us of two men. The first is Robert Johnson, a Depression-era bluesman who went down to the crossroads and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the black secret technology known as the blues, the source code for jazz, soul, hip-hop, r'n'b and other African-American musical forms. The second comes from two hundred years in the future. He is ‘another hoodlum, another badboy scavenger-poet’, a data-thief who is told that if he can find the crossroads and conduct an archaeological dig there, he will find ‘fragments, techno-fossils’ which, when combined, will reveal a code; deciphered, it will provide ‘the keys to your future’.⁸ He is given a single clue: the phrase ‘Mothership Connection’.

The ensuing film flickers between this fictional frame and rather more conventional documentary materials – talking heads, stock footage, photographs – in order to record something of the proleptic or afrofuturist tendency in Black Atlantic culture, with a particular emphasis on music and sf. It gathers together figures whose names have already served as metonymic substitutes for archived material – Butler, Clinton, Delany, Reed – and invites their commentary on the archive. They are joined by Nichelle Nicholls (i.e., not Lt. Uhura) to discuss her post-*Star Trek* work helping NASA to recruit a more diverse group of astronauts. Similarly confounding Dery’s definition of afrofuturism as speculative *fiction*, African American shuttle astronaut Bernard Harris also appears, commenting on Clinton’s album *The Mothership Connection*. Others outside-the-archive-looking-in include critics Greg Tate and Kodwo Eshun, both of whom are now, in some ways, also inside the archive – courtesy, respectively, of the former’s Dery interview and the latter’s *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998), as well as their appearance in *Last Angel*. There are discussions of musicians who only appear in stock footage (Sun Ra, Lee Perry), while an array of musicians – Derrick May, Juan Atkins, Mike Banks, Carl Craig, Goldie, A Guy

⁸ It is unclear if the narrator means Johnson’s specific crossroads or whether the crossroads might be not a physical location but an idea immanent in the universe. In a recent interview, Akomfrah says that the crossroads represent the ‘contact zones’ between ‘different worlds’ (Bâ and Higbee 268). He notes that for him, in his early years as a filmmaker, the relative absence or obscurity of a tradition enabled something new to be ‘formed out of residues, elements of the old, i.e. non-Afro diasporic sensibilities and approaches’ (268). At this point in the interview, he is talking specifically about Afro-diasporic cinema, but his words might also hold true for Afrofuturism – at least when he first set out to archive it.

Called Gerald, DJ Spooky aka That Subliminal Kid⁹ – are interviewed so as to sketch in some of the relationships among slavery, diaspora, black bodies, technology and music.

The *Immamou* crew and Schomburg's enthusiastic antiquarian, both faced with disconnected fragments and the desire to narrativise them, resonate very clearly with Akomfrah's aesthetic commitment to taking non-cinematic material – 'artifacts, photographs, writings, accounts that are not the traditional forms of cinema or that cinema is supposed to use' – and 'forcing them into that space in which they begin to acquire the resonance of the cinematic' (Bâ and Higbee 268). In this, his films become archival, wresting materials from history (or at least from various other archives) and wrestling them into place, organising them, establishing relationships among them, decontextualising and deterritorialising them so as to recontextualise and reterritorialise them, forgetting so as to remember.

While *Last Angel* 'document[s] contemporary black musics and their relationship to technology', it also attempts to find a 'cinematic language' that matches 'those musics in content and form' (Walcott 168). Jeffrey Skoller's review of the film, ripe with the kind of delirious hyperbole that infested cultural criticism in the decade after it discovered cyberpunk, attests to the film's formal novelty and affective impact two decades ago. He compares

its melange of interview, archival footage, photographs, dance, musical performance, religious ritual, painting and animation, ... dramatic sequences ... hi-tech special effects ... frantic fast cutting ... hi-end production values ... digital image processing and non-stop musical backbeat

to channel-surfing and rock video. Although it is difficult now to see the film with Skoller's euphoric eyes, his more substantial point is about the way in which Akomfrah 'deliberately construct[s]' the 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.

In a similar vein, Rinaldo Walcott moves provocatively from describing the film to considering the world wide web as a metaphor for the black diaspora – 'in its dispersal and yet its apparent coherence, ... its knowability and uncertainty' (161). It is networks all the way down. Uncertainty bounded, at least temporarily. Provisional, reversible interconnections fleetingly held firm. It is archive.

Taken together, Sinker's essay, Dery's interviews and Akomfrah's film did not merely exhibit afrofuturism. They also nominated and established it. They collated and curated. And very quickly, they went from being archives to being archived, from offering us metonymic tours of the archive to joining the artefacts within it. At the same time, they continue to circulate, marking the unstable boundary of the archive. They are liminal hesitations, never quite completing the transition from outside to inside; they are hauntings, constant reminders of the archive's foundational violence; they are the first drafts beneath the palimpsestic accruals.

Robots of Brixton

It was August 2011, and the time was ripe for dancing in the streets.

On Thursday 4 August, in Tottenham, North London, a young black man, the 29-year-

⁹ A year later, DJ Spooky, under his real name Paul D. Miller and fellow academic Alondra Nelson instigated a major expansion and first sustained attempt at a coherent mapping of the archive by launching the Afrofuturist listserv.

old Mark Duggan, was shot and killed by CO19 police officers. Early reports implying that there had been a shoot-out were soon retracted. There is no evidence that Duggan fired a gun, and only some extremely implausible police claims that he even had a gun in his possession. Police did not notify his family of his death until a day and a half later. At 5.30pm on Saturday 6 August, Duggan's family and others marched peacefully to the Tottenham Police Station to protest the death and demand information. Around 8.00pm, police attacked a sixteen-year-old woman with batons and riot shields, alleging she had thrown a missile at them. Twenty minutes later, two police cars were ablaze and the first of five days of rioting had begun. It spread through 22 of London's 33 boroughs, and to other cities, including Birmingham, Bristol, Gillingham, Gloucester, Leicester, Lincoln, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Salford, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton.

Despite the fact that Duggan came from Broadwater Farm, the scene of another riot on 6 October 1985, after the Afro-Caribbean Cynthia Jarrett died of a heart attack during a police search of her home,¹⁰ media coverage tended instead to draw comparisons with the Brixton Rising (10-12 April 1981). In 1980-81, civil unrest against the police broke out on two other major occasions,¹¹ but the Brixton Rising – or, in the words of Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Jamaican-born and Brixton resident dub poet, 'Di Great Insohreckshan' – is the instance that has retained the greatest cultural resonance. Indeed, on 2 April 2011, on the eve of the Rising's thirtieth anniversary, *The Guardian* even published an article called 'Brixton: could it happen again? 30 years after the riots' (Walker). Four months later, journalistic coverage of the 2011 riots were almost inevitably framed in relation to the Rising. Evan Smith identifies some key trends. Over thirty years, the Rising has largely come to be understood as a legitimate, political response to racist police harassment of the community.¹² In contrast, the 2011 riots were treated as radically different – neither legitimate nor political, just plain criminal. There were some more sympathetic commentators, but they tended to treat the contemporary events as a more or less straightforward repetition of the historical ones. Obviously, both approaches fail to address, for more or less overtly ideological reasons, the complex overdetermination of the 2011 uprisings and the ways in which they involved both repetition and difference.

In early 2011, by coincidence, Kibwe Tavares, Brixton born and bred, completed a short film, *Robots of Brixton*, for the final design project of his Masters degree from the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London. It won a Silver Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects, and a Special Jury Award for Animation Direction at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival.

A more-or-less humanoid robot – skinny and dully metallic, with kinky wire hair and, we will later see, Terminator feet – rides the bus through Brixton. Someone has written with their finger in the dirt on the window 'I ♥ BRIXTON', and someone else, 'Robots go home'. Outside, there are glimpses of familiar buildings and, teetering into the sky, precarious towers of shipping containers converted into flats. Beneath an ad hoc web of cables, hijacking power and connectivity, stands a robocop, its helmet visor raised, the lower half of its face protected by a shield; next to him is a black man, whose skin looks oddly artificial. The streets are full of robots, milling around and going about their business, walking past the shops on Electric

¹⁰ In the preceding weeks there had been riots in: Toxteth, Liverpool in response to heavy-handed arrests and the Merseyside Police's aggressive Operational Support Division (3-6, 27-28 July); Moss Side, Manchester in response to racially abusive police using excessive force; Handsworth (9-11 September), following a police raid on a pub; and Brixton (28-30 September) and Peckham (30 September), following the police shooting of Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce during a raid on her home in search of her son, which left her paralysed.

¹¹ In St Pauls, Bristol (2 April 1980), and in Toxteth, Handsworth and various parts of London, including Brixton and Southall (July 1981).

¹² In just five days in early April 1981, police invoked nineteenth-century 'Sus laws' to stop and search 943 people in Brixton, the vast majority of them black, 'on suspicion'.

Avenue¹³ and into the adjoining arcades of the Brixton market. In a shoe shop, children's sneakers are displayed alongside bulkier, wheeled, more machinic shoes, presumably for robot children. A robot sits back on one of the benches by the Plane tree in Windrush Square; behind him, smaller robots kick around a football on a patch of grass littered with empty lager cans.

In a massive, derelict structure, populated by small groups of robots, two sit together in old armchairs and take the robot equivalent of weed. Through their eyes, the world transforms into a forest of evanescent leaves, layered over the built environment through which they walk. Spectral screens appear, floating in the air, and on them the sounds and images of media coverage of the Brixton Rising play. Equally ghostly robocops in riot gear emerge, wielding batons, charging. They are visions, or hauntings, from both the past and the future.

The screen flares white, and is replaced by black and white footage of a young black man hurling a stone at, presumably, the police. The screen flares white again, and then we see a robot hurling a stereo through a shop window. In this hopeless future world of immiserated robots of colour, demeaning, tension-filled urban collisions with the mechanisms of institutional racism and the droids of repressive state power lead once more to Insohreckshan.

Robots rise in the future streets of Brixton, overlaid by the sounds of the Rising. The film cuts back and forth between footage from 1981 and footage from this imagined future. Riot robocops charge around the corner of Railton Road, the 'front line' that was held against the police in 1981 (see Wheattle). In this disorientating cacophony, as robocops assault fleeing robots, time becomes distended. DJ Hiatus's 'Insurrection', which extensively samples and remixes Johnson's recording of 'Di Great Insohreckshan', begins to dominate the soundtrack. Out on the streets, the robocops charge – in black-and-white slow-motion – to form up in clusters behind riot shields, and then the image, now static, dissolves into a photograph taken from behind police lines in 1981, men replacing machines. Cut to the face of a robot lying on the ground, his eye slowly closing as if in death. Cut to a photo of a vehicle overturned and torched in the middle of the street in the Rising. Somehow, in its scattered wreckage, lies the robot corpse.

Robots of Brixton begins with digitally-manipulated and enhanced images of the Barrier Block, the brutalist Southwyck House, coming slowly into focus. Designed by Magda Borowiecka in the late 1960s and built 1972-81, it was intended to act as a sound baffle for the Somerleyton housing estate behind it when the proposed South Cross Route, a six-lane dual carriageway that would carve through South London, was built. In Brixton, the SCR would have taken the form of a flyover running above Coldharbour Lane and parallel to the railway line; much of the surrounding housing would have been demolished and replaced by fourteen fifty-storey blocks of flats. The SCR was part of Ringway One, itself the innermost of a network of London Ringways, four proposed high-speed roads to circle London. Following protests, primarily co-ordinated by Homes Before Roads, the whole scheme was cancelled in 1973, with just three short sections completed. The Barrier Block, on which construction had already begun, is the only remaining trace of this cancelled redevelopment of the Borough that would have torn apart the heart of the community in favour of central London businesses and suburban commuters.¹⁴

In Tavares's film, the Barrier Block looks rather different than in reality. Following the example of *Blade Runner*'s production designer Lawrence G. Paull, art director David L. Snyder and visual futurist Syd Mead, it gives us a retrofitted built environment. Instead of

¹³ In the 1880s, it was the first shopping street to be lit by electricity. It is celebrated in Eddie Grant's 1983 hit single, 'Electric Avenue', which also alludes to the Brixton Rising.

¹⁴ Architectural models of the planned redevelopment can be seen at: <http://www.urban75.org/brixton/features/barrier1.html>

demolishing the once-modern(ist) and now outdated structure, Tavares imagines it accruing new layers – additions, patches, fixes, ad hoc extensions, repurposed shipping containers, dense knots and loops of not exactly licit cables. This is the way the future will be, he argues:

When people imagine cities in the future, they think of flying cars and brand new everything. But if you look around London, old is meshed with new and buildings which are hundreds of years old sit alongside buildings which are 50 years old, which sit alongside contemporary stuff. In fifty years time, most of the fabric of Brixton will remain the same, which is why I concentrated on additions.¹⁵

His future Brixton takes on a distinctly Third World appearance, right there, just a few miles south of the centre of a former empire and of one of the key financial centres of neoliberal Empire.

This aesthetic dominates the film, digitally accumulating over familiar locations a future history of continued overcrowding, impoverishment, unemployment and discrimination.¹⁶ It is an aesthetic that speaks to the issues of memory, archive and history. In 1976, Edoard Glissant argued that the ‘brutal dislocation’ of the slave trade, the first of numerous ‘ruptures’ (61), gave its victims and their descendants a distinct experience of history. Unlike the European culture of enslavement and colonisation that imposed – to its own advantage – a linear, hierarchical and totalising history on the world, the ‘historical consciousness’ of the enslaved and colonised ‘could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment’ but ‘came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces’ (61–62). Some have argued that this particular experience of historical space-time produced an afrodiasporic aesthetic that can be understood in terms of scratching, dubbing, breaking, mixing and remixing. It is certainly the case that in *Robots of Brixton*, Tavares layers proleptic computer-generated imagery over retrospective archival material and contemporary footage shot specifically for the film. Press photography, degraded television footage and digital imagery merge together yet remain distinct. They show us many of the same things, but at the same time their look and texture insist upon on the difference of these media forms. They are like layers of sediment, but there is nothing gradual and continuous about their deposition. It is uneven, the resulting strata always evident, materialising both continuity and rupture. Ambiguous resonant space open up between 1981 and 2011 and a potential future, and between the grim realities of modern urban life, dystopian intensification and utopian possibility, but they never attempt to enforce identity and teleology or difference and disjuncture. The shifting, knotted, coiled combination of temporalities in the film’s layerings ‘relieves us’, to borrow an expression from Glissant, ‘of the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History’ (66).

Crumbs

Robots of Brixton produces a resonating, rhizomatic, non-linear situatedness that simultaneously figures the archive and defies any claims it may have to objectivity. The authoritativeness to which the archive pretends is merely an exercise of power, a more-or-less persuasive masquerade of certainty. *Crumbs* begins after the end of history – or, rather, of History. Genesis has ceased its unfurling. The wavefront, utterly collapsed, is frozen on the terminal beach of maximal entropy. From such a perspective, when it is all over and done

¹⁵ <http://weburbanist.com/2012/03/20/robots-of-brixton-a-short-dystopian-film-by-factory-fifteen/>

¹⁶ In one respect at least, this might be a hugely improbable future. The destruction of council housing and housing associations, the sky-rocketing price of buying or renting houses and flats, and new apartment developments are already visibly taking their toll, as gentrification performs its typical ethnic cleansing. On the other hand, there can only be so many artificially maintained and inevitably collapsing property bubbles.

with, one might think it is possible, finally, to look back and assuredly *know*. But as *Crumbs* demonstrates through its obsession with specific artefacts, there is an unending tension between materiality and semiosis, between meaningfulness and meaning.

Llansó's film starts with expository text. The war, it tells us, ultimately became unnecessary. Whether because of some physical mutation or a profound ideological shift, humans just gave up on survival, on perpetuating the species. Those who remained

slowly started to decrease, wane and languish like the dying flame of a candle that barely resists extinguishing itself. ... The elderly passed on and the young became elderly. The news of the sporadic birth of a child, probably conceived out of neglect, was received with condescending smiles the same as in those who mock ignorant people who with pride show off their out of style garments.

There is no spectacular denouement to humankind, no apocalyptic consummation, no dull dutiful image of rupture; instead of a bang, there was a whimper, an exhalation, an expiration.¹⁷

Crumbs begins with a series of gently floating shots, starting with a broad view of peculiar mineral structures in a volcanic landscape before moving in to detail their folded textures and colours. Water washes over their convoluted surfaces, as if they have come from a Tarkovskiy film. A desert wind blows, accompanied by Atomizador's throbbing alien score. There are mountains in the distance. A lone figure in a light shirt and darker trousers, with a satchel slung over his shoulder, makes his way through this alien yet terrestrial landscape. He is dwarfish, hunchbacked, deformed in some way. We will learn he is called Candy (Daniel Tardesse), and that he is an alien, or at least thinks he is.

In the ruins of a salt-block building, among rusting vehicle carcasses, abandoned oil pipes and other detritus, he finds an artificial Christmas tree, its spindly green plastic branches still closely furled to its metal trunk. In the distance, he spots a man (Quino Piñero) in a military uniform, sporting a swastika armband. The grey ears of a rat mask – or perhaps it is Mickey Mouse – protrude above the gas mask hiding his face. Candy, understandably, flees. Distortion fills the soundtrack. Above the salt flats across which he runs floats a spaceship, an immense citadel hovering in these post-apocalyptic skies.

The tree is a gift for Candy's lover, a young woman called Sayat or Birdy (Selam Tesfayie) who makes sculptures from salvaged metal. In the run-down, fetish-adorned bowling alley in which they live, the ball-return mechanism has started to activate itself. She thinks that the spaceship, which has been 'rusting in the sky since the beginning of the big war', is trying to send them a message. When Candy investigates the mechanism, he finds something unexpected inside: a voice, that will later be revealed as that of a skinny black Santa Claus (Tsegaye Abegaz) who might be very small or just a long way away – or, somehow, both. Candy undertakes a quest to find out what is going on. It takes him through stunning highlands to visit a witch, who advises him to follow the railway lines, which bring him through an abandoned rail depot to the old city, to a derelict lakeside zoo and a violent encounter with Santa.

Crumbs is a film full of echoes, allusions and potential intertexts: *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980), *Zardoz* (Boorman 1974), *The Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner 1968), *The Texas*

¹⁷ I have elsewhere described colonialism as the apocalypse (see Bould, 'If Colonialism'), not least because, as Amílcar Cabral said in 1965, 'The colonialists usually say that it was they who brought us into history ... They made us leave history, our history, to follow them, right at the back, to follow the progress of their history' (Cabral). The film, then, starts with the second apocalypse, the end of the coloniser's world and of totalising historical schema. All that remains is detritus and salvage – and the small acts of human interaction that constitute living history rather than the totalising History to which Glissant referred.

Chain Saw Massacre (Hooper 1974), *Eraserhead* (Lynch 1977), *Space is the Place* (Coney 1974), *Save the Green Planet!* (Joon-Hwan Jang 2003), China Miéville's *Railsea* (2012) ... the list could go on. Sayat, perhaps awaking from a dream, perhaps masturbating, intones a fervent prayer to a string of deities: 'Einstein IV, San Pablo Picasso, Stephen Hawking III, Justin Bieber VI, Paul McCartney XI, Carrefour!'. There is a landscape littered with abandoned trains, rusting wheel-less cadavers, somehow both modern and prehistoric – like the rotting symbols of earlier, failed waves of colonial expansion described in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). There is a cinema that has screened *Süpermen Dönüyor*, Kunt Tulgar's 1979 Turkish *Superman* knock-off, every day for forty years, and there is some footage liberated from it for the viewer to enjoy. There are also children's superhero costumes, a lot of plastic dinosaurs and a plastic lion.

Four very specific objects are brought into particular focus: a plastic figure of Donatello from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; a short plastic Max Steel 'Force Sword', still attached to its original colourful cardboard backing; a pristine copy of Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* LP that is supposed to finance Candy's wedding and with which he instead pays the witch for her help; and a plastic figurine of an 'Andromeda baby', curled up on a mattress.¹⁸ Each of these items is introduced in the story world and reappears as someone tries to sell it to a shop-owner (Mengistu Bermanu), who only ever pays a fraction of what they ask; and each item also appears outside of the primary diegesis, floating slowly end over end in cislunar space above a glowing Earth – like Kubrick's spacecraft, immaculate, graceful, almost stately – as the shop-owner describes each piece and its history:

It's a Samurai Turtle figurine made in the third century and worn by Molegon warriors as a lucky amulet. Industrially made from a rubber mold with acrylic paint, it is believed that the inspiration dates back to pre-apocalypse years. ... The 'Max Steel' sword. Highly regarded back in its heyday as only 490,000 units were produced. It was used by Molegon warriors. Its maker was not the Second Carrefour but Mattelo.¹⁹ The design is believed to date back the pre-apocalypse. ... Michael Jackson's Vinyl. Third Century. Popular among the Molegon warriors to instill courage in the battlefield. It is believed that there was another Michael Jackson before the apocalypse. Perhaps he was a farmer in the former United States. His music was electrifying. ... Here's an Andromeda baby figurine. In the late third century, during the brief period of peace, he was adored by Molegon Warriors. Soon after he was forgotten. It is believed that, before the apocalypse, inside the pyramid of Cheops, there was another Andromeda Baby living there.

Such doubly abstracted artefacts – torn from their familiar contexts and from the primary diegesis, and placed into new ones – draw attention to their specificity even as, paradoxically, each of them is also a mass-produced commodity. The doubling continues. On Earth, they are given meaning as they move through networks of human relations, but are also reduced to commodities, their use-value subjected to exchange-value. In cislunar space, they stand apart, inviolable, removed from both society and economics, and yet they remain subject to the Earth's gravity, separate but connected (like the non-biodegradable, oil-based materials from

¹⁸ Initially, I wondered whether this was an allusion to Andromeda Shun in the long-running *Seinto Seiya* manga/anime series, but in personal correspondence Miguel Llansó informed me 'It's just a cheap plastic figurine of Jesus Christ taken from my nativity scene...I don't know why my family keeps it'.

¹⁹ Earlier, Sayat presented the sword to Candy, telling him it 'was manufactured by Carrefour. The last total artist. It will protect you during your trip'.

which they are made).²⁰ Significantly, the shop-owner's description of each object coincides with the image of it floating in space, his words a net with which to embroil and implicate them.²¹

In *Crumbs*'s dream of common objects – of their liberation from the everyday and their subordination to it, of their power as fetishes and the power of commodity fetishism – we are brought face to face with both stubborn materiality and ecstatic polysemy. In that moment of confrontation and contradiction, we become like the *Immamou* crew and the enthusiastic antiquarians, like Tavares contemplating the spaces and structures of Brixton and Llansó exploring unfamiliar Ethiopian landscapes. That is, negotiating between the fullness of potential meanings and the fixing of specific meanings, we become archivists, perpetually at the crossroads – what Akomfrah describes as the 'contact zones' and 'liminal spaces between different worlds' (Bâ and Higbee 268).

Alongside the concept of the crossroads, Akomfrah talks about the importance of 'magic', more specifically the moment of alchemical transmutation known as the '*negredo* or the moment of blackening, when something turns from base material to something valuable' (268). Elsewhere, I have described Sinker, Dery, Akomfrah in the mid-1990s as concocting

a mutagenic virus called 'afrofuturism'. It spread like wildfire and changed everything. It made the invisible visible, and taught us to see differently. It rewired our synapses, encoding a counter-history in our minds. Where previously there had been the work of disparate authors, artists and musicians of colour, it fabricated a tradition – a living one, altering our reality and creating new futures. ('From Afrofuturism')

In fact, they were working magic, blackening the pallid thing we had into something valuable – and as Tavares's and Llansó's films demonstrate, that is what Afrofuturism continues to do.

Works cited

²⁰ These four objects highlight the reality of all the others in the film which are not shown floating in space (though being on Earth that is, of course, exactly what they are all doing). The most notable of these is Sayat and Candy's altar to an unresponsive deity whose icon is a photograph of Michael Jordan. While this conceit is undoubtedly amusing to a writer-director from Catholic Spain it might also, as Andrew Hageman and Ashenafi Beyene note in an article emphasising the cultural specificities of semiosis, prove troubling for an Ethiopian viewer since 'the culture of religious, in particular that of Christian, practice in Ethiopia disallows the prospect of idol worship'.

²¹ I have argued elsewhere ('Afrofuturism, Archive, Anthropocene', 'Things Above, and Beyond) that the display of these objects in a secondary diegesis, clearly distinct from the primary diegesis, foregrounds them as manifestations of the anthropocene unconscious. Jason W. Moore argues that capitalism is neither an economic nor a social system but '*a way of organizing nature*', but that 'the manifold projects of capital, empire and science' constantly formulate 'Nature with a capital "N"' as something that is 'external, controllable, reducible' (2–3). He argues that there is no ontological rift between Nature and Society, but that the binary opposition between them that governs so much of our thinking is the product of 'a historical project that aimed at rendering nature external ... the better that it could be subordinated and rationalized, its bounty extracted, in service of capital and empire' (18). In addition to imagining Nature as something from which we stand distinct in order to make the extraction of wealth from the planet and its myriad lifeforms and processes somehow normal, natural, unquestionable, this also creates 'nature as a waste frontier' (84) – a place to dump all those products of the commodity system that it treats as externalities: pollution, environmental degradation, the disposal of things that have been used up or merely fallen out of favour.

Llansó's four non-biodegradable, oil-based artefacts floating in space neatly capture the fantasy underpinning Nature/Society dualism and capitalist modernity. They show us an outside, where things can be dumped. But that no such outside can exist for the primary diegesis – that we have to shift to another ontic realm to admire the plastic relics, still pristine, of a dead civilization – shows us at the same time that there is no outside. There is just nature, which includes humans and our modes of sociality, and we are inside it, and it is inside us.

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