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Cosmotechnics of Fashion: Remixology in Global African Cinema

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Abstract

In this paper I will look at several contemporary African films to address the ways in which fashion can be considered as a cosmotechnics for decolonization. Therefore I will extend Yuk Hui's concept of cosmotechnics to a broader ecological understanding of mental, social and environmental issues between the Global North and the Global South. To address these issues concretely, I will look at the cosmotechnics that operate in films such as *Omen* (2023), *Zombies* (2019), *To Catch a Dream* (2005) and *Neptune Frost* (2021). I will argue that through a unique mixing of cultural codes, or "remixology", unbounded creative agency is reclaimed. Fashion that is brought to life in these films

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through fabulation and imagination is thereby a tool to foster resilience and to offer new perspectives on our mediated and interconnected globalized world and possible futures.

KEYWORDS: decolonization, fabulation, Afrofuturism, *Omen*, *Zombies*, *To Catch A Dream*, *Neptune Frost*

Introduction

In an interview for his film *Omen* (2023) the Congolese-Belgian musician/costume designer/filmmaker Baloji indicates that the script of his film got rejected repeatedly by various European film commissions who wanted him to tell his story following Western narrative expectations: as the story of a man named Koffi, born in Congo and raised in Europe, who returns with his Belgian girlfriend to his homeland and enters into conflict with the traditions of his African family and roots.¹ Baloji refused to comply to these dramaturgical demands of conflict and focus on the European perspective. It would have been the story of the privileged, he explains, as Koffi has a passport and is building a family (his girlfriend is pregnant with twins); he wanted to focus on the people who stayed behind, especially the mother figure. It would also have been a story built around the fight between winners and losers; it would have been a colonial narration. Baloji did not want to repeat this same old narrative and created with *Omen* his own unique story, respecting the traditions of his Congolese roots while also addressing them in their current context of social assignment and prejudice. The film could be seen as a decolonial tale that combines a multiplicity of styles in affective and creative self-making.

Besides an “unconventional” narrative structure that does not follow the two travelers from Europe but presents four different characters in a fabulated Congolese city, what is very striking in *Omen* is the mise-en-scene, especially the use of costumes and colors. Baloji presents a fashionable contemporary Africa that shows a blend of negotiations between the Global North and Global South that indicates how decolonization is an ongoing process in the present (Cheang, Rabine, Sandhu 2022). In this sense Baloji could be compared to other filmmakers of the Congolese new wave of the first two decades of the 2000s, who rather than addressing the traumas of the past, focus on the present or, rather, on the traces of the past in the present (see De Groof and Jedlowsky 2019). In *Omen*, just like in many other contemporary African films, an important place of negotiation between Global North and Global South is fashion, costumes and outfits of the characters. Also technology, especially media technology such as mobile phones and social media, is a remarkable element in contemporary Global African cinema.

In the following I will propose to consider both fashion and technology as “cosmotechnics,” a concept proposed by Yuk Hui (2016) by looking at several contemporary African films. I will not present an overview of the vast field of new African cinema which has been presented by others. (See for instance, Prabhu 2014; Barlet 2016; Irobi 2021) Rather, by focusing on a selected number of films, I will contribute to the study of fashion and cinema that has focused on the meaning of clothing in respect to identity and as part of a broader cultural analysis (Bruzzi 1997; Lavery 2016; D’Aloia et al. 2017; Pisters 2017; Baronian 2020). Here I will zoom in on the entangled, decolonizing ecologies of fashion in film. Besides the work of Baloji with roots in Congo, also the Kenyan film *To Catch a Dream* (2015) and the Rwandese *Neptune Frost* (SWAN 2023), situate their stories in a modern contemporary Africa, connecting multiple Global Souths in various ways to the Global North. So the films have been selected for their salient fashionable mise-en-scene, and for the ways they “animate” fashion, wrapping the cloths in stories that address Global North-South issues marked by an idiosyncratic mixing of cultural codes, or “remixology”. Being from the Global North myself, I will certainly not claim to be able to understand all cultural codes involved, but I do hope to testify to a critical and productive encounter and the diversification of Global Africa as a method of decolonizing fashion through a cinematographic lens.

Cosmotechnics and three entangled ecologies

Before moving more concretely to the questions of fashion in contemporary African cinema, I want to raise two preliminary conceptual points, concerning first the diversification of global technology (as a broader concept of “technics”) and second, concerning the multiplicities of contexts or ecologies in which these developments take place. First, the diversification of technics. In his book *The Question Concerning Technology in China* Yuk Hui argues that technology, while a global phenomenon, is not universally seen in the same way. Hui argues for a diversification across different cultures. He understands technology, as a philosophical concept as “technics”, an ontological category that tells us something about who human beings are – always already implied in, and enhanced by technology (including fashion). Hui argues that technology “must be interrogated in relation to a larger configuration ‘cosmology’ proper to the culture from which it emerges” (Hui 2016, 10). Technics in Western traditions has become aligned with the myth of Prometheus who steals the fire from the gods and thus is in conflict with the divine: technology in a western understanding is based on a model of fight and competition. Which often leaves the Western technological world disenchanted in a narrative of growth and progress through competition, winners and losers of capitalism.

However, Hui points out “the misconception that technics can be considered as some kind of universal remains a huge obstacle to understanding the global technological condition in general, and in particular the challenge it poses to non-European cultures” (12). Unlike Greek mythology where Prometheus revolts against the Gods and places the human on top of the ecological chain, “in Chinese mythology there was no such rebellion and no such transcendence granted; this endowment is seen instead as owing to the benevolence of the ancient sages” (16). As opposed to Greek mythology and Western rationalism, in China the separation between the world of the gods and the world of men was not that strong. And so Hui proposed to introduce the word “cosmotecnics” to account for cultural diversity in relation to technology:

Scientific and technical thinking emerges under cosmological conditions that are expressed in the relations between humans and their milieus, which are never static. For this reason I would like to call this conception of technics *cosmotecnics*. One of the most characteristic examples of Chinese medicine, which uses the same principles and terms found in cosmology, such as Yin-Yang, Wu Xing, harmony and so on, to describe the body. (18)

While Hui refers mainly to technology proper, and specifically modern communication technology, in this paper I want to pick up this idea of cosmotecnics as always emerging under specific (cosmological) conditions. I will propose to elaborate this concept in terms of (neo-colonial) conditions of Global Africa and in particular to consider fashion as a cosmotecnic in itself, that always operates in particular ways in different contexts (and often in connection to other cosmotecnics, such as media technology).

The second preliminary thought concerning fashion as cosmotecnics, has to do with these different contexts, or milieus. This context involves ecological thinking that does not only relates to the material environment (such as all the materials necessary to produce cloths), but also addresses mental (the way we think about fashion) and social environments (such as the politics of the fashion industry). This layered conception of ecological thinking was developed by Félix Guattari in the 1980s in his essay and later book *The Three Ecologies* (Guattari 2008). It was first introduced by anthropologist Gregory Bateson in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Bateson 1972) where he argues that that “the man who believes that the resources of the world are infinite, or that if something is good for you then the more of it the better, will not be able to see his errors, because he will not look for evidence of them” (vi). Without saying so directly, Bateson refers here to a Western capitalist cosmotecnics. For Bateson we have to address our knowledge and belief systems first in order to understand that maybe things are (or can be) different than we might think, whether this concerns our

environmental-material ecologies, our socio-political environment or our mental-perceptual systems.

Guattari developed this layered ecological thinking further as three entangled ecologies. Material-environmental issues, he claims, are indeed environmental questions such as climate change, pollution, waste, sustainability and the machines and technologies that are implied. Socio-political ecologies concern labor conditions, communities, power relations such as colonial or neo-colonial relations between the Global North and the Global South and changing dynamics between different Global Souths (such as the influence of China on the African continent). And mental-perceptual ecologies are involved in our esthetics and ethics, our affects, and ideas about art, beauty, fashion, storytelling and myth. These three ecologies are always intertwining, co-emerging and co-developing and hard to disentangle. I would like to bring this entangled perspective to the idea of cosmotechnics and propose it as one of the elements of “Global Africa as method.” The films I will address operate in the first instance on the mental-perceptual ecology through the esthetics they present, and the ethics they imply. The socio-political and material-environmental ecologies, however, are immediately present in (or behind) every image and sound as well. A close analysis of the fashion in these films will unpack these layers and suggest how the past, present and future can be remixed into new constellations.

Zombie cosmotechnics of fashion across three ecological levels

Zombies (Baloji 2019) is a short film that accompanies two songs from Baloji’s album *137 Avenu Kaniama*.² The film offers a rich and condensed case study of fashion as cosmotechnic and remixology across the entangled ecologies between the Global North and South. *Zombies* starts in a barber shop where a song is being rehearsed that will become more musical when a character in a striking yellow coat steps outside and walks in the streets of Kinshasa. His coat highlights the color yellow that now seems to be abundantly present in the city scape full of yellow cars and cabs (Figure 1). This has immediately a sort of fabulating effect, it turns the city into an almost supernatural yet very real, esthetic place. It thus immediately works on a mental-perceptual level, enhancing and accentuating certain elements in the mise-en-scene, and combined with the musical rhythms, it gives the city a very modern-day Africa-vibration that affects the viewer instantly. This could be seen as an “affect of fashion” (Van Tienhoven and Smelik 2021) whereby the big fluffy yellow coat does the embodied affective work of rendering the viewing experience as an esthetic transformation of the urban environment.

After his stroll through the city, night falls and our character in yellow takes off his coat and walks into a night club – where the music



Figure 1

Screenshot from *Zombies* (Baloji 2019).

turns into the full fledged song “Spotlight” that in the previous sequences we heard building up. In the nightclub everybody dances with their mobile phone and other screen devices, sometimes literally glued to their faces. Here we recognize our global techno-environment, rendered in energetic dance moves, the rhythm of the music and bodies combined with biting verbal commentaries on our obsession with screens, selfies and likes. The catchy music and electrifying dancing bodies, as well as the critical lyrics, operate again on a mental-perceptual, affective level. What is striking is the mixing of cultural codes in a new blend: the lyrics are sung in English, French and Swahili, the music mixes Afro-American rap with more traditional African beats and the setting recalls a New York 1970s disco dance floor, except for the mobile screens. The costumes are extravagant, again mixing cultural codes: some dancers wear colorful patterned blouses, there is again a figure in a yellow straw dress and matching motor helmet, and Baloji himself wears a sort of colonial military uniform with yellow frays on the shoulders, sometimes we see him with a big yellow hat.

But the main colors in the night club are blue and red. And at the end of the song, the camera leaves the nightclub again, following another character. This time a girl in a red dress walks into the streets when daylight breaks. We see again the “magical” yellow cabs everywhere, now combined with the red of the dress, a huge red robot in the middle of a busy crossing and here and there a red car. While walking

the girl changes her dress for a yellow T-shirt with the inscription “Has Left the Group” and we follow her into a beauty parlor that involves another mocking selfie-commentary. To move then to another performative moment in the streets of Kinshasa, where a new song, “Zombie: Glossine”, sets in. In the first part of song dancers in smart and trendy clothes in idiosyncratically mixed styles, freely perform their dance moves (sometimes with selfie sticks) while the lyrics compare people on social media as stung by the tsetse fly that causes sleeping disease and turns us into zombies. The tsetse fly, or glossina fly, is a metaphor for the cell phone.

The dancers move through the slums on stilts, which renders the mise-en-scene of the actual environment again fabulated and realistic at the same time, and dancers now wear costumes made from debris and waste materials (condoms, plastic bottle caps, screws & bolts, mechanical motorcar parts). We have “our eyes wide open asleep” the lyrics convey while waste is transformed into fashion. So also in the second part of the film, we see that *Zombies* first addresses the mental-perceptual ecologies of its global spectators, presenting a modern-day Africa through music and fashion, while at the same time involving a present-day critique on our global obsessions with technology *and* addressing one of the largest material-environmental problems of global fashion trade: omnipresent toxic waste that arrives from the Global North and China to Africa. (Besser 2021; Oloo 2024) Which implies in turn the socio-political ecology that entails different levels in itself: ramping and continuing after-effects and continuations of colonial power relations, as well new power relations to China that involve also waste and product exchange (Quashi-Idun 2024).

In this short music film, Baloji presents his own cosmotechnical blend of fashion, music and social critique. While the mental-perceptual ecology is addressed through colors, music and dance, environmental and social critique is implied in the fabulated world he creates, though not in an oppositional conflicting way. With *Zombies* Baloji is “dancing to dream with eyes wide open” (Loewenson 2019), neither ignoring the past and its nefarious influences in the present, nor simply surrendering into victimhood. Rather, I would say, this is a critique through resilience and creativity that proposes a mixing of cultural codes and social relationality from a Global African cosmotechnics, governed by new self-selfie and self-other relationalities.

Fabulating the past, remixing the future in fashion film

In the podcast *Cloth Cultures with Amber Butchart*³ Sunny Dolat, representing the Kenyan multidisciplinary collective The Nest discusses the Collective’s works, and the fashion-related problematics they entail. Dolat addresses different ecological levels of accountability that should improve: governments, brands and individuals all have different

responsibilities in addressing respectively more honest and proper investments in waste management for governments, the choice for better quality materials and volume reduction of production for brands, and for individuals the care for and treatment of clothes, re-appreciating the real value of clothes that is often forgotten because of the cheap prices. The re-valuing of clothes thereby provides a starting point for decolonizing practices. In the podcast fashion designer Cheika Sigil is quoted, who argues that the wardrobe is the most intimate space of colonization. To the question “How do you colonize a person?” Sigil replied:

Empty their wardrobe, throw all their clothes in the trash, all tradition, all culture, all meaning and replace it with your clothes, but your cast-off clothes, your handed-downs so that they look like you, but like a cheap version of you. When the body is wrapped in subordination, it sees itself as subordinated. (Cloth Cultures podcast)

The focus on fashion as a cosmotechnics that addresses all three intertwined ecologies is therefore an important starting point for revaluing not only clothes in themselves but also its mental, social and environmental implications inviting a new ethics of care, respect and sustainability (Willett et al. 2022)

Sunny Dolat explains that The Nest Collective has a DIY approach to storytelling and aims at deconstructing existing structures. They want to reach social change through film and fashion to open up existing ecologies. Their fashion film *To Catch a Dream* (Chuchu, 2015), for instance, is made to showcase fashion beyond the Western Fashion Shows that are difficult to get into (Hughes 2022). By “animating” clothes through fabulating and filming they offer new perceptions on African fashion and African culture more broadly. What is most particular for the film’s style is its mixing of cultural codes in which Global culture is integrated in and part of an Kenyan-African cosmology. Rather than a pure African style, there is an ambiguity in this mixing of cultural codes and styles that testifies precisely to the diversification of cosmotechnics.⁴ Let me specify this a bit further.

To Catch a Dream is a short film that features Kenyan iconic top model Ajuma Nasenyana. She embodies a woman who is grieving her husband, living in a beautiful and stylish modern urban apartment. In her dreams her deceased husband walks into her room while she feels paralyzed, unable to move. When pills don’t help to chase her nightmares, she decides to perform a magic spell to catch the dream. A friend tells her the instructions: “First draw a circle on the floor near your bed. Then fold a large piece of black cotton and place it into the circle. Finally place a long loop of sisal string on the cloth. If your nightmare steps into the circle it will get caught in the black cotton sack.” Ajuma (also called Ajuma in the film) then wakes up in Dream Country. There



Figure 2

Screenshot from *To Catch a Dream* (Chuchu & The Nest Collective, 2015).

she is led by different guides who take her through the different elements (air, water and earth) to the Dream catcher Tawaret. Tawaret tells her to leave the black cotton bag, step into a new circle that she draws in the sand, and instructs her to never look back. But when Ajuma hears her husband's voice calling her name, luring her to look at him and stay with him in Dream country, she turns around. The circle disappears, and the camera then brings us back now to the empty apartment, assuming she no longer returns from Dream Country.

This magical storytelling is combined with a stunning mise-en-scene that combines global urban environments (in this case an international looking apartment that could be situated in any contemporary global metropole) with dreamlike Kenyan landscapes: the sublime desert where Ajuma meets the wind guide (see [Figure 2](#)); the eerily inundated landscapes that reveal the crowns of sunken trees, which she crosses by boat steered by the water guide; the impressive curvy rock formations that she passes through, led by the earth guide. In all these landscapes, the characters wear “striking costumes whose sculptural elegance and simplicity lends all the characters a regal presence” (Leblond [2015](#), np). The outfits are designed by eight fashion houses and designers in Kenya, and in a way the film can be seen as an enchanted, alternative catwalk.⁵ As Mathilde Leblond argues, the film “embraces the African ancestral oral tradition but modernizes it with a grace and a surrealism reminiscent of Paradjanov's ([1969](#)) chef d'oeuvre *Sayat-Nova*”, also known as *The Color of Pomgrenades* (Leblond [2015](#), np). And more generally, I

think that we see in *To Catch a Dream* a mixing of cultural codes that do not confine to either Kenyan tradition, nor to a refusal of elements of Western traditions or Global modernity. This mixing of cultural codes is part and parcel of Global Africa as method in general and for fashion as cosmotechnics in particular. There is a freedom to creating and fabulating a past that allows to breath in the present and to move into the future. The dream catching fable in the film was created by writer and director of the film Jim Chuchu, who found that people started to ask from which tribe this myth originated. He states:

I was surprised that it is possible to construct fables that are seemingly indistinguishable from the untouchable canon of Kenyan/African mythology. This has reaffirmed my interest in the idea of remixed pasts. I suppose people who have had their pasts erased can make up their own pasts. (Jim Chuchu in Leblond 2015)

The colonial erasure of the pasts is counter-actualized in these new art forms, storytelling and fashion by combining facts and fictions in novel ways. And this makes *To Catch a Dream* also a modern political film in the sense that Gilles Deleuze described in his cinema books. In *The Time-Image*, Deleuze describes how the modern political film differs from the classical revolution films such as the Russian revolution films of Sergei Eisenstein, and the early films of decolonization and wars of independence, such as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo 1966) where there is always a people who knows who it is and what it wants (Pisters 2016). In the later post- and neocolonial situation, this has become more difficult for a variety of reasons that has made the idea of the people dispersed, fragmented, and in search of new formations. Deleuze gives several characteristics of the modern political film, the last one which is particular relevant for the films that I am discussing here. In *The Time-Image* he argues that the filmmaker (whether an individual or a collective)

finds himself before a people which, from the point of view of culture, is doubly colonized: colonized by stories that have come from elsewhere, but also by their own myths that have become impersonal entities at the service of the colonizer. The author must not, then, make himself into the ethnologist of his people, nor himself invent a fiction which would be one more private story: for every personal fiction, like every impersonal myth, is on the side of the "masters". (Deleuze 1989, 222)

Thus Deleuze argues that fabulating real characters into mythical and magical stories is the alternative way for the modern political film. And he adds that "story-telling is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is a word in act, a speech-act" (222). The modern

political film is a speech-act that produces and operates as a collective utterance which then contributes to the (re) invention of a people: “Not the myth of a past people, but the story-telling of a people to come” (223). The speech-act, Deleuze argues can be seen as an assemblage of different languages and cultural codes to create a new “free indirect discourse”: “The speech-act has several heads, and little by little, plants the elements of a people to come as the free indirect discourse of Africa about itself, about America or about Paris.” (223-224)

In this light it is possible to see *To Catch a Dream* as an assemblage, a speech-act that freely combines elements from cultures from the Global Norths and the Global Souths, including regional ones, creating a unique blend that can function as collective utterances to create a new people. *To Catch a Dream* combines a global urban interior design with Kenyan natural environments; it presents contemporary designer clothes that incorporates local traditional styles and elements in a modern style; the story-telling combines (invented) African oral traditions with references to Greek mythology; and we can trace inspirations from World cinema. In her book *The Politics of Adaptation* Astrid Weyenberg demonstrates how a non-essentialist cultural exchange between African and Greek myths form the basis of a more general framework of exchange in contemporary African literature. She looks for instance at African Antigone’s that translocate and feature this classical Greek heroine “wherever the call for freedom is heard” (Van Weyenberg 2013, 2), or points out how Dionysus and the Bacchantes, inspired by Yoruba mythology and cosmology, become revolutionary leaders to free enslaved people. In a similar way *To Catch a Dream* recalls the tragic love story of Orpheus and Eurydice combined with African story-telling.⁶ Weyenberg indicates that the politics of adaptation has three important dimensions: first, by claiming ownership of these texts the past is brought to the present and new and sometimes hidden perspectives are added; second, it proposes a “non-hierarchical constellation of different yet interrelated texts and traditions” (180) where the Greek classics are not seen as the only authoritative origin “but one of many aligned traditions” that can be used as different sources of knowledge and unbounded inspiration (180); and third, it is beyond an oppositional counter-discourse that would deny colonial cultural influences that now have entered local traditions (180).

Weyenberg’s analysis provides important principles for Global cultural exchanges as “remixology” that recognize the mutual influences of the various asymmetrical histories and the mixing of cultural codes in new assemblages that can be empowering and liberating. A similar thing can be said about drawing inspiration from world cinema and global film history. *To Catch a Dream* was inspired by Sergei Paradjanov’s surreal and mystical Armenian film *The Color of Pomegranates* (Paradjanov 1969). Especially the attention to costume and mise-en-scene, as well as colors and the touches of magic can be traced back to

this source of inspiration. Some of the costumes also recall modern classics from African cinema, Djibril Diop's Senegalese *Touki Bouki* (1973) comes to mind. In *To Catch a Dream* the Dream catcher Tawaret wears a crown made of a cow horn that recalls the Zebu skull on the steering wheel of *Touki Bouki*'s main character Mory's motor cycle, that has become one of the iconic images of Mambety's film.⁷ In short, *To Catch a Dream* proposes a Global African story, whereby the entire world is taken as a resource to create a unique speech-act and where the costumes offer an important cosmotechnical diversification of fashion, bringing a fabulated past to the present and thus creating history by enlivening fashion through story-telling.

Lo-fi Afrofuturist fashion as cosmotechnic

When speaking about African cosmologies and remixing the past, present and future, Afrofuturism is an important legacy in popular culture that cannot be missed. Originally coined as a term to refer to a specific futuristic esthetic that mixes speculative fiction, technoculture and magic realism in the works of writers, musicians, artists and filmmakers of the African Diaspora, especially in the USA and Britain (Dery 1993; Nelson 2002), Afrofuturism can be found everywhere on the African continent and across the globe. There is a distinct role for fashion and design as important dimension of its futuristic esthetics (Womack 2013; Anderson and Jones 2015; Eismann 2019).⁸

Tiva Nyong'o argues that all Afrofuturism can be considered as "black counter-speculation" where rebellion takes place through imagination and fabulation. (Nyong'o 2025). We see, for instance, a redefinition of fashion that is imbued with a very different ethics of waste that goes beyond the Western technics of casting away and replacement for every newer-bigger-better gadgets and machines. As Tina Kendall (2012) argues in an article about waste films, we can see and feel in these recycled scrap costumes immediately the ethical import of transforming waste into "a vibrant and affectively charged medium through which we might rethink the relationship between people and things." (45) Kendall refers to Jane Bennet's take on vital materialism as starting point of this new ethics: "the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality. (...) The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern non-human vitality, to become perceptually open to it." (Bennet 2010, 3; see also Rocamora and Smelik 2015) One of the ways of perceptually opening toward that vitality is through Afrofuturist remixed esthetics in film. John Akomfrah's Afrofuturist video essay *The Last Angel of History* (Akomfrah 1996) is perhaps the prime example of remixology (Samatar 2017). In Akomfrah's film an Afronaut from the future is presented as a data thief who remixes and rewrites history, traveling through all layers of time, past, present and future. The data thief collects information, traveling gracefully between science fiction

and social reality (Clark 2021, np). He professes the art of bricolage that expresses “the desire to willfully misuse the products of a dominant technoculture [in which] Afrofuturistic bricolage asserts black people’s right to use whatever is at hand, to enter the technologically enhanced future through whatever door is closest and to do so without assimilation into a global monoculture” (Samatar 2017, 178).

A more contemporary and engaging case of remixology of Afrofuturism and its cosmotechnical fashion and design esthetics is the lo-fi Afrofuturist fantasy-musical *Neptune Frost* (2021). Filmed in Rwanda but set in Burundi, the story was developed and directed by US musician Saul Williams and Rwandese Anisia Uzeyman who brought together an incredible cast and crew from Rwanda and Burundi, many of whom were refugees from Burundi who crossed the border with their drums and their music to look for shelter in the continuing border conflicts (Chang 2022). An important role is for the set and costumes designed by Rwandese fashion designer Cedric Mizero.⁹ The story follows the transgender fugitive Neptune Frost (performed first by Elvis Ngabo, then by Cheryl Isheja) who flees to the Burundi hills, and joins a collective of computer hackers challenging the local authoritarian regime. Neptune’s fate will in weird and magical ways connect to that of grieving and exploited coltan miner Matalusa (Bertrand Ninteretse). This short plot description, however, does no justice to the way the film addresses the three ecological layers of mental-perceptual esthetics, socio-political realities and material-environmental issues that it addresses: the intricate and elusive ways the story is a told, the colorful esthetics of the costumes and machines, its layered references to time (past, present, and future), and its implicit references social realities of contemporary Africa, ranging from the omnipresence of modern technology to traditional drum beats; and from the harsh reality of miners and to e-waste camps and imported anti-gay laws from American Evangelist ideas into the African continent.¹⁰ Afrofuturism as a cosmotechnics is often described as a technology of survival. As Neptune, the coltan miners and hackers seek shelter in the mountains and create their own community of resistance, they demonstrate this point: “Situating the Afronaut in contemporary art and Afrofuturism is very much about finding safe spaces for black life. It is about exploring and protecting and preparing the body for hostile environments.” (Hamilton 2017, 18) The main strategy, already indicated before, is the mixing of all kinds of cultural codes into a unique assemblage. *Neptune Frost* is full of data thieves that profess the art of remixing as an important cosmotechnic of resilience and survival.

This remixology can be found on many levels and layers of the film, operating at the levels of mental-perceptual, socio-political and material-environmental ecologies. While watching the film, one can intuitively and affectively grasp all these layers. But tearing them apart and analyzing them, will necessarily be incomplete, if only because of the difficulty



Figure 3

Neptune Frost in first and last images of the film. Screenshot from *Neptune Frost* (Uzeyman & Williams 2021).

of describing what we see and hear and feel. The first sequences of the film, before the title appears, immediately brings us into a cyclic logic of the story: we see Neptune Frost's face, fluorescent eye paint, looking at us in close-up, and wearing a sort of knitted antenna headpiece and an open steel face mask that looks like a fenced antenna (see Figure 3). On the sound track we hear undefined sounds that the mask/antenna seems to pick up, perhaps from an unknown cosmological frequency, endowing the headpiece and the character looking at us with special powers. At the end of the film we will realize that this is Neptune Frost in their female embodiment when we see the same image re-appear, so in a sense this indicates a cyclic narration, where the beginning is the end, vice versa.

In voice-over we hear Neptune's voice that adds to this cyclic dimension of the story: "I was born in my 23rd year. My first breath, just before the war, led to 22 years of what my aunt called our "afterlife". And she thanked God for every single day. And me... I was a good boy." We then cut from the female Neptune to clouds in the sky, observed by Neptune in masculine embodiment during the funeral ceremony of their aunt. "After this life there is another life," we hear the priest saying. There are already many things to see, hear, sense and think about: how to be born in your own age, through "rebirth" perhaps? Is the war a reference to the Rwandan civil war of 1994, or the neo-colonial continuation of slavery and exploitation that feed ongoing wars? We are also still confused about the identity of Neptune, we don't know yet that the person in the first images and the "good boy" of the following scenes are one and the same person. Then the images

cut to workers mining coltan, while the voice-over continues: “But my life was never quite mine. What is mine? Will I recognize it when I feel it? Will it claim my life or set it free?” when one of the mine workers holds a big bluish piece of rock in the air and seems to be electrocuted by its power (or perhaps is he hit by the one of the overmen). His brother catches him, calling him by his name: Tekno, which can only be seen as a reference to the all-consuming obsession with technology that is rampant on a global scale; a technology that is fed by the bodily forces of the mine workers who source the essential minerals. While Tekno is carried away, the mine workers start to sing, drum and dance with shovels, sticks and pickaxes. Neptune’s voice-over comments: “Death surrounds us. The worker pays the price, it seems. Metal precious currency. Third and First world currency. Black market currency. That old black-bodied currency. Every martyr currency. All that you pay not to see.” At the end of the opening sequence the camera zooms out, the bodies of the mine-workers wrapped in blue, pink and yellow scarfs blend into the landscapes, the rhythmic sounds of their tools has turned into music. Esthetically the colorful bodies become elemental, vibrantly enfolded in the three ecologies that are about to be changed by the film’s layered cosmotechnics, expressed mostly in its characters costumes and the imaginative redesigned lo-fi machines that seem to have dropped from the future by re-fashioning the past.

The opening scene just described is only the beginning of a critical and at the same time mesmerizing journey that defies any standard Western narrations and conceptions of technology. After this opening, Neptune flees from his village after being sexually harassed by the priest, while Matalusa leaves the mine after the death of his brother. They make a similar journey, though their paths do not cross but later. But they do seem to share a dream. When Neptune falls asleep he is transported into a technofuturistic world, fluorescent spinning wheels render the scene mesmerizing; an alien character with a knitted antenna-like headpiece invites Neptune and Matalusa to connect and to hack: “There is energy in pairing,” a voice tells them. “Hack into land rights and ownership ... into the history of the bank and question the business of slavery, of free labor, its relation to today’s world, into ambition and greed ... (...)” Mother and father are sung to as binary stars, extending consciousness beyond death. And then it’s day again. But our senses have been awoken to the dream logic of the night and to the power of fabulation, performance and Afrofuturistic design.

Before Neptune and Matalusa will meet, Neptune has to transform into their female embodiment. This happens in another dreamy sequence, which this time is more like a shamanic ritual where Neptune is recognized as The Motherboard, and several figures guide the transformation into their female form. The ritual involves a white/orange pigeon that returns at several other moments in the film as a sort of spirit guide, but also libations and songs that induce the rebirth: “The



Figure 4

Metalusa in *Digitaria*. Note that Metalusa's jacket consists of computer keyboards. In the background a 'cloud of cobalt' that refers to his brother Tekno who just died while mining. Screenshot from *Neptune Frost* (Uzeyman & Williams 2021).

power of the subconscious is honed through guidance” we hear as one of the formulas. When Neptune wakes up she wears a shiny red satin dress that because of its slick futuristic simplicity and bright color stands out in the green landscape they walk through. In the meantime Matalusa¹¹ has arrived in a secret community, *Digitaria*, where hackers invent wonderfully looking machines from vintage and scrap materials (see Figure 4).

He is soon joined by the other mine workers who followed him. Characters have allegorical names such as Deo, Memory, Psychology, and Innocent. Their code word is Unanimous Goldmine, and they all wear costumes futuristically recycled in new ways, some wear steel face jewelry, or hair pieces that invite cosmic connection. They all testify to the transforming power of fashion. The home-made machines that they make, however, do not yet have the power to connect to the rest of the world. But then Neptune enters the hackers hide out and literally brings energy. Neptune is the Motherboard.

Neptune and Matalusa meet in another hallucinating, techno-trippy and hard to describe scene. They are literally electrified by one other and the moment they notice each other they connect (see Figure 5). Through the connection with the bodies of the coltan miner, Neptune understands new dimensions of the “elevated vibrations of metallic



Figure 5

Neptune and Matalusa connect. Screenshot *Neptune Frost* (Uzeyman & Williams 2021).

injustice” in the code word Unanimous Goldmine. As Globally connected Motherboard, Neptune feels millions of conversations streaming through her. They feel like Mozes on the mountain and the burning bush is a firewall. A firewall of global security systems that is breached and hacked globally, arguing that technology needs to communicate with the spirits of past, present and future in order to sustain. The global authorities (we learn through all kinds of global news flashes) are not amused and attack Digitaria. When at the very end a drone in the sky reports that the target is destroyed, we see Neptune still standing, the mine workers behind her beating the drums. They are still there, the drums emulating heart beat and resilience, “Thinking beyond disaster,” beyond the worst that has already happened.” (Yaszek 2006).

With their film Saul Willams and Anisia Uzeyman have shown how they are true Afroturist data thieves, DIY esthetics, and cosmotechnic Afronauts. They are masters of fashion and design remixology. Along the way different languages are spoken and sung: Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, as well as English and French words and phrases. This mixing of languages is also a social reality on the African continent and marks one of the legacies of colonialism. Esthetically they have been inspired by filmmakers from world cinema, regardless of their country of origin.¹² And in terms of costume, hair do, make-up and set design, everything at hand is re-purposed and turned into a magical futuristic world

where resistance is possible. In an interview the filmmakers argue furthermore that the story of *Neptune Frost*, especially where it deals with the exploitation of the workers and the role of (corrupted, local) authority “belongs to the workers of the world,” wherever they are, in mines in Europe, Asia and Africa. “Africa is a wonderful place for our story to be told, but for all the other places, there’s a need to see and connect with those groups of humanity and resources so we can share them. Yes, so at the same time, the story belongs to many, many people.” (Chang 2022, np).

Conclusion

Let me return to *Omen* to bring these points home. While less Afrofuturistic, Baloji’s *Omen* presents a similar DIY esthetics where costumes tell a large part of the story that mixes “cultural codes from all over the world,” as the artist indicates in interviews.¹³ The word omen, or the French title of the film *Augure*, derives from Greek mythology where it designates the practice of fortune telling and premonition; these are mixed with local beliefs in sorcerers and witches. In the scenes with street parades the music performers wear masks from New Orleans that are not part of local African costumes. There is a scene that is derived from the European folktale Hans and Gretel. Furthermore, even though much of the esthetics looks realistic, the places we see do not exist, the city that Koffi returns to is a combination of locations in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, two very different cities at 3000 kilometers distance. The mine that Koffi visits to look for his father is modeled on a Belgian coal mine. And the costumes, especially of the two rivaling street gangs, are remarkable: bright pink ballet dresses and princess crowns for one gang, and leopard clothes and headgear (referencing the president Mobutu, known for his collaboration with ex-colonizer Belgium and the CIA to kill Patrice Lumumba) for a rivaling gang (see Figure 6). Fashion as a cosmotechnics is part and parcel of this global African ecology, a world where fact and fiction are fabulated into new worlds. Through this first layer of esthetics of mixed codes, the mental-perceptual level, other eco-sophical issues are also addressed.

The film presents four characters (Koffi, the pink gang’s leader Paco, Koffi’s sister Tsalha, and his mother Mujila) that are all socially designated as witches or sorcerers and therefore outcasts. Both Koffi and his sister undergo an exorcism or purification ritual imposed by their family, and decide not to counter it, even if both decide to leave. Instead we get to hear the mother’s story (who after the death of her husband is kicked out of her house) and understand how the position of women, many women in the world, is still socially defined by patriarchy. In respect to the social ecology, like in *Neptune Frost*, gender fluidity is also addressed and embodied in the non-binary character of Paco, who is a tough gang leader but whose signature color and clothes is pink.



Figure 6
Paco's gang in *Omen* (Balaji, 2023).

The environmental ecology is mainly referred to via the mine workers that Koffi encounters in search of his father. He is declared dead, even if his body is never found, and he officially cannot be buried. However, Koffi and Paco, who mourns the loss of his sister, close a pact and help each other to bury their loved ones nevertheless, perhaps as modern day African Antigones. In sum, *Omen* presents another case in point of fashion as a cosmotechnics that remixes cultural codes from the entire Globe into new fabulations that offer resisting and resilient stories that can help change our perceptive, material and socio-political ecologies.

The films that I have discussed all stand out for their colorful, idiosyncratic and highly fashionable clothing and costumes that refuse any kind of stereotypical designation. They all mix codes from the global cultural sphere, and in doing so they address via the senses, the esthetics that operates on a mental-perceptual level, and deeply connect to global socio-political and material-environmental issues. With a focus on these films I proposed an approach in understanding Global Africa as method through fashion mediated in cinematic forms. Fashion as Afrofuturist cosmotechnics in art and film re-orient our understanding of its decolonizing powers. It offers a remixology beyond cultural and geographical boundaries, ethnic traditions, and the specters of the (neo-)colonizers. The cosmotechnics of Global African fashion has its own specific signature, presents its own diverse cosmology that does not define itself in

opposition to the Global North and its different Souths, but presents itself critically through art as resilient fabulations of “self-fashioning” and to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) in love and rage, looking for resistance, resilience, beauty and community in creation and in opening paths to the future.

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Notes

1. Baloji on *Omen*, Q&A at Lincoln Center in 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBiSY8vLrn4>. When I refer to interviews in this article, these are interviews from online sources such as Youtube or Podcasts. I consider these interviews as meta-commentaries about the works that offer additional insights when analyzing the films themselves.
2. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJuZ7qhcKho>.
3. <https://www.thisisthenest.com/news/2023/10/5/cloth-cultures-sunny-dolat-jeremy-hutchison-and-amber-butchart-in-conversation>
4. In a more historical framework in colonized India the male sherwani-topi dressing style in Hyderabad State saw a similar ambiguous mixing of styles from British, Ottoman and regional contexts (Bamber 2022).
5. The fashion credits go to Namnyak Odupoy, Ami Doshi Shah, Kepha Maina, Jamil Walji, Katungulu Mwendwa, Azra Walji, Anne McCreath, and Adèle Dejak.
6. Other African authors have done this also in various ways. See Assiba d’Almeida 1994.
7. *Touki Bouki* is in itself also a splendid point in case of free indirect remixing. The melancholic love story of Mory and Anta in *Touki Bouki* is often compared to *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn 1967). The musical score assembles indigenous music, American guitar funk, and the voice of Josephine Baker, reclaiming her thus for the African continent (Porton 2013); Mory and Anta’s clothes radiate 1970s Western fashion with flared pants and colorful jackets and hats.
8. Teresa Lubano, for instance, showcases the Afrofuturism in the glowing design and art works of several contemporary Kenyan artists, such as the spectacular costumes and settings in the works of photographer Osborn Machaira, or in the “space cowboy” designs of fashion stylist Kevo Abbra’s Kibera Ghost Rider (Lubano and Maina 2022). Also many of the outfits created for the Kibera Fashion Week, initiated by David Avido and grown

into a thriving community project in Nairobi's Kibera shanty town, have a vibrant Afrofuturist flare. Pius Ochieng, announced as apocalypse style designer for Kibera's Fashion week, for instance, makes his futuristic looking costumes from recycled waste, used fabrics and scrap metals, and turns them into something "out of this world, something cool" as he says in his presentation video (<https://kiberafashionweek.com/designers/>).

9. <https://www.cedricmizero.com/>.
10. See Williams and Uzeyman in a Q&A at the Lincoln Centre <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpcbmqTFJu>.
11. It is pointed out several time that Matalusa (or the Kingdom of Matalusa as Digitaria is also referred to) sounds like Martyr Looser, which again sounds like Martin Luther (King). It is also a reference to MartyrLoserKing, Soul Williams' fifth solo album from 2016. See <https://saulwilliams.com/projects/martyr-loser-king/>.
12. In a Criteron Picks episode, where filmmakers pick and choose their favorite films, their enthusiasm about world cinema and sources of inspiration includes Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, Tarkovski's *The Mirror*, Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for love* (and all his other films), Mambety's *Touki Bouki*, and *Time*, a documentary by Garrett Bradley. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wn1Yh3N0zjA&t=342s>
13. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMJAK1cDCbM>

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