Introduction

*Last Angel of History*, hereafter *Last Angel*, was a television documentary commissioned in 1993 by Channel Four and ZDF and produced by Black Audio Film Collective. The film, directed by John Akomfrah and produced by Black Audio Film Collective, was broadcast in October 1995 and comprises interviews with musicians Derrick May, Goldie, A Guy Called Gerald, Carl Craig, Juan Atkins, DJ Spooky and George Clinton, cultural theorists Greg Tate, Kodwo Eshun, and John Corbett, writers Samuel R Delany, Octavia Butler and Ishmael Reed, astronaut Bernard Harris and actor Nichelle Nichols; and archival film made up of cinematic, newsreel, photographic and phonographic archival material, and a location-based science fictional narrative. I was the film’s writer, researcher and presenter. I also performed the role of the titular protagonist, its ‘last angel of history’.

The intent of the film was to affirm and cohere the ideas, practices, practitioners, technologies, artefacts and historical resonances of black cultural and political esoterica, which constitute the marginalia of black cultural expression, while also being a disquisition on futurity, loss and the aftermath of the Ghana revolution. Central to the film is a science fictional narrative of a time-
travelling artefact collector from the year 2195, the data thief, whom I describe as a science fiction correlate of Robert Johnson (a ‘bad boy scavenger poet-figure’).¹

Johnson, a 1930s blues musician, is cited in popular music historiography as the protagonist of a supernatural narrative on the gaining of musical knowledge:² the data thief has come to the past, the twentieth century, to gain knowledge of the future, the twenty-second century. His sole clue is a phrase, ‘Mothership Connection’.³

_Last Angel’s_ narrative involves the data thief’s attempts at finding the meaning of the phrase through a series of interviews gathered by travelling through time: his quest begins at a crossroads,⁴ the location in popular music historiography of Johnson’s acquisition of musical knowledge.

My body, doubly performative as _Last Angel’s_ presenter and actor, and my voice, present as the film’s narrator, both of which are figurations of my screenwriting, constitute the medium through which the film’s themes were articulated and rendered in collaboration with the film’s director, John Akomfrah. In my writing, the body is a body of citational writing, in which I mix genres and produce bodies that are effects of ‘a linguistic corpus’.⁵

**Pre-production:**

**Three Orders of Research – Gathering Materials**

_Last Angel_ was informed by a range of material gathered by myself, Akomfrah and a research team of Floyd Webb and Kodwo Eshun, and included the music of Sun Ra (_Astro Black_, 1972) and George Clinton (_Mothership Connection_, 1975); texts by Manuel De Landa (_War in the Age of Intelligent Machines_, 1991), John Corbett (_Extended Play: Sounding off from John Cage to Dr._)

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¹ Edward George, _Last Angel of History_ (1995), 00:46–:47
³ George, _Last Angel_, op cit, 00:56–01:28
⁴ Ibid, 00:55–01:06
⁵ Gilles Deleuze, _Spinoza: Practical Philosophy_, Robert Hurley, trans, City Lights, San Francisco, 1988
Funkenstein, 1994), Mark Dery (Flame Wars, 1994) and Samuel R Delany (The Madman, 1994); and filmic (Space is the Place, John Coney, 1972) and textual work on Ra (Omniverse Sun Ra, Harmut Geerken and Chris Trent, 1994).

To this corpus I added texts by Ivan Van Sertima (Egypt Revisited, 1983; Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern, 1983); Valerie Wilmer (As Serious As Your Life, 1977); Samuel R Delany (The Motion of Light In Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957–1965, 1988; Tales of Nêvrëyon, 1979); Octavia Butler (Parable of the Sower, 1993; Kindred, 1979); Graham Lock (Forces in Motion, 1988), and Ishmael Reed (The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 1974; Reckless Eyeballing, 1986; Japanese By Spring, 1993).

I also contributed music by Reed (Conjure – Music for the Texts of Ishmael Reed, 1984); Keith Hudson (The Black Morphologist of Reggae, 1983); Burning Spear (Resting Place, 1975); Carl Craig (Throw (Basic Reshape); 1994), John and Alice Coltrane (Cosmic Music, 1968); John Coltrane (Infinity, 1972; Live in Seattle, 1971); Ultramagnetic MCs (The Four Horsemen, 1993); Dr. Octagon (Dr. Octagonecologist, 1996); Model 500 (Deep Space, 1995); Lee Perry (The Millionaire Liquidator/The Battle of Armagideon, 1985; Time Boom X De Devil Dead, 1987); Derrick May (Music for the Tenth Planet, 1987; Kaotic Harmony, 1996; Icon, 1996); Ra (Strange Celestial Road, 1979; Sunrise in Different Dimensions, 1980); Kraftwerk (The Man Machine, 1978), and 4 Hero (Parallel Universe, 1994); and a plethora of texts, journals, magazines and pamphlets on African cosmology, Ethiopianism and black Diasporic history, and Robert Johnson’s album King of the Delta Blues Singers (1961; volume II, released 1970).

The value of this material was its potential for a series of treatments and preliminary and final scripts, which led to a final version based on citations. In Derrida, citationality, the capacity for all forms of communication to be quoted, is the means through which both the iterability of writing takes place and the production of new meaning present to iterability is registered.6 The term iteration describes the repeatable nature of writing, which takes place in the absence of a stable

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referent, be it that of the person speaking, his or her intended meaning, or a designated listener.\textsuperscript{7}

Through iteration, new contexts are produced, old contexts are broken with, and new writing becomes possible.\textsuperscript{8} In \textit{Last Angel} I engaged with citationality by producing writing comprising citations from critical theory.

I used \textit{Last Angel’s} research material to script the questions and potential answers that formed the film’s interview texts. I read, watched, listened to and, in collaboration with Akomfrah, used this material as the basis, first of a preliminary document of citations and historical, literary, technological, photographic and phonographic connections between and across the margins of black culture, and then as source material for a number of script outlines, the version closest to the film being the one I am referencing in this text.

\textbf{The Uses of Citationality}

Here are some key examples of citationality in \textit{Last Angel} and the ways in which citationality functioned in my writing for the film.

\textbf{I The ‘Crossroads’}

The crossroads of which Robert Johnson sings in \textit{Crossroads Blues},\textsuperscript{9} is the location of the data thief’s ‘archaeological dig’\textsuperscript{10}. In relocating the motif of Johnson’s autobiographical blues fiction from its pre-World War II, pre-black electronic music, rural location to a technologically troped science fictional future I was also following Derrida’s idea of the citation as that which can be the

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, p 7
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, p 10
\textsuperscript{10} George, \textit{Last Angel}, op cit
object of a fracturing with its context of production and thereby serve to open and operate in new contexts,\(^{11}\) which in \textit{Last Angel} is one of genre.

Marcus’s citation\(^{12}\) of Welding\(^{13}\) on Johnson, and my use of Palmer\(^{14}\) to engage with Johnson, is unmediated, as Barthes prescribes, by a commentary that would explain and thus have a critical privilege, ‘an edge’, over the commentary it describes, and whose function would therefore be that of a metalanguage.\(^{15}\)

Here is the quotation with which began a citational chain of music criticism that I brought to the film. It is a paragraph from ‘Hellhound on his Trail: Robert Johnson’, by Pete Welding, published in the jazz journal \textit{Downbeat}’s year-book, \textit{Music ‘66} (p 76):

> Johnson was at this time about 21 or 22, House said. The older blues man recalled that when Johnson came to the dance near Banks, his guitar style was fully shaped, revealing the same mastery as is evident on his recordings a few years later. House suggested in all seriousness that Johnson, in his months away from home, had ‘sold his soul to the devil in exchange for learning to play like that’.

Marcus’s citation of Welding’s attribution of a quotation to Son House, and Palmer’s account of Johnson’s deal with the devil at the crossroads, itself a citation of ‘Johnson’s relatives and blues researcher Mack McCormick’,\(^{16}\) form the narrative of the association of Johnson with the supernatural. Marcus’s text is the link in the chain of citations of Johnson that comprised my research for \textit{Last Angel}. Pearson and McCulloch cite the evaluation in Gayle Dean Wardlow’s \textit{Chasin that Devil Music} (1998) of this narrative chain as the work of ‘leaps of faith, speculation,

\(^{11}\) Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, op cit, p 12
\(^{12}\) Marcus, \textit{Mystery Train}, op cit, pp 31–32
\(^{13}\) Welding, ‘Hellhound on His Trail: Robert Johnson’, op cit
\(^{16}\) Palmer, \textit{Deep Blues}, op cit, p 113
insinuation… or pure fiction’. I condensed this citational chain in my first presentation: it comprises the story whose discovery I describe at the beginning of Last Angel; the Robert Johnson I introduce is the textual figure of this chain of citations.

Half way into the film, when I turn to Palmer’s story, the ‘rumour [which] has it…’, I follow the method with which I started: by presenting this story with that of the data thief, without conferring a claim to historical truth on either science fictional or supernatural narrative.

In presenting, without any prefatory remarks, both stories as stories, whose generic conventions designate them as works of fiction, I was aware that I was using fiction (albeit not in the pejorative sense in which it is used in Pearson and McCulloch) as the narrative means by which Last Angel would conform to the founding definition of documentary filmmaking, which Hardy attributes to the description in Grierson (1926) of ‘the creative treatment of actuality’; actuality in this instance being no more than a chain of fictions, reconstituted, as Derrida suggests in his reading of Mallarmé’s Mimique, as a reading which, in Last Angel, is that of music journalism presented as supernatural fiction.

This use of fictional genre has a precedent in my collaborative writing with BAFC. I used fictional autobiography to engage with themes of race and migration and also as a means of bringing to these themes questions of affect, of belonging and dispossession in Handsworth Songs (1986) and, in Twilight City (1989), black lesbian and gay sexuality. I wanted to return to this approach to write a documentary whose framing narratives reflected its core subject matter, that is, fiction, science fiction, space exploration, and the fictions of science, whose claim to a basis in actuality remained unresolved, and whose irresolution I sustained. My use in Last Angel of tropes of

18 George, Last Angel, op cit, 00:00–00:31
19 Ibid, 26:10–26:54
20 Forsyth Hardy, ‘Introduction’, in Forsyth Hardy, ed, Grierson on Documentary, Faber and Faber, London and Boston, 1979, p 11
science fiction and music criticism as narratives that cohere and compel the film’s discursive components, presents a work that both takes place through the narrative form of its subject and produces new knowledge of the relation between Africa, its diaspora, memory and futurology.

The Fragment

Benjamin’s writing on the fragment informed a discursive relation of textual interweaving between Akomfrah and myself. The film’s title emerged from our reading of Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1950, 1979), which I further integrated into my script and presentation. The data thief’s task of restoring meaning to the phrase ‘Mothership Connection’ makes the restorative function Benjamin gives to the book collector and the angel of history, of making new, in the present, an old world, and making whole in the present what has been broken, one of acquiring knowledge of the future by making whole the fragments of the past. In Last Angel, the fragment is constituted by the photographic and cinematographic image. A phonographic fragment, of Johnson’s Me and the Devil Blues, at 00:00–00:41, sets my narrative on music and stellar migration in motion.

II The ‘Crossroads’

The crossroads, in Benjamin’s ‘The Destructive Character’ describes a multiperspectival point of departure for violence. In Last Angel the term designates a concern with the body that was informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking on the concept of the line. During the production of the film, I

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22 George, Last Angel, op cit, 01:02–01:29
24 Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in Illuminations, op cit, p 259
26 George, Last Angel, op cit, 00:00–00:41
used Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the segmented line of becoming\(^{28}\) as a point of departure to think of Johnson’s use, in *Crossroads Blues*,\(^{29}\) of the blues metaphor of the crossroads as an intersection of lines along which more than one line of desire, of becoming – that of Johnson and the data thief, for example – takes place.

In Deleuze and Guattari, the segmented line of becoming marks the movement of affective states (‘“highs” or periods of depression’)\(^{30}\) characteristic of the blues, a music of ‘a deep concern with love and all that is touched by love’\(^{31}\) which ‘came out of a depression… the mood of that music was blue’.\(^{32}\) The segmented line of becoming thus suggested a chromatic relation of affect between the rural music of pre-war African America, postwar French philosophy and speculative fiction. The line of segmentarity, constituent of the crossroads of archaeological exploration and figurative, poetic becoming, at which I stand and which I narrativise in *Last Angel*’s opening sequence,\(^{33}\) is a blue(s) line of becomings that is textual, and which takes place by figuration in writing, as song-writing.

**Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto**

When Akomfrah and I encountered Haraway’s phrase, ‘The line between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion,’\(^{34}\) it was already the subject of a reinscription in Corbett.\(^{35}\) In *Last Angel*, I used it as a narrative device for a convergence, through the body of the data thief, of the

\(^{28}\) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *On The Line*, John Johnson, trans, Semiotext(e), New York, 1983


\(^{30}\) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *On The Line*, op cit, p 70


\(^{32}\) Goldie, in *Last Angel*, op cit, 29:30–29:44

\(^{33}\) George, *Last Angel*, op cit, 00:05–01:07


spatial and the virtual. Bergson describes the virtual as a visual effect produced when light is caught between two surfaces that reflect its luminosity, by which an increase of luminosity is perceived as the reflection of light repeated by the two refractive surfaces.36

The virtual in Bergson is therefore descriptive of an optical illusion, understood as an effect on perception of the refraction of light. In my commentary script the virtual is descriptive of an Africa visually and sonically present to the data thief as light experienced through virtual media as space.37

I repeated Corbett’s quotation of Haraway through the three stages of my writing, in my pre-production script,38 my presentation during the film’s production, and my commentary script in post-production. In my presentation I weave into Haraway’s phrase a quote from Arendt,39 in which Arendt cites Benjamin’s ‘delight that two grains of wheat could contain the entire Shema Israel, the very essence of Judaism, the tiniest essence appearing on the tiniest entity’:40

The data thief wanders through the ruins, the detritus, the wastelands, of our late twentieth century, and he comes across a little piece of stone, a fragment. Written on it is a strange phrase: ‘the line between social reality and science fiction is an optical illusion’.41

In this example I inscribed the narrative of the data thief into a Benjaminian preoccupation with the fragment, which Arendt names as Benjamin’s object with a capacity for citation, which, in the cessation of the transmission of knowledge through traditional forms, is the means through which the present is rendered unstable.42 In my commentary script I used Haraway’s phrase, at

37 George, *Last Angel*, op cit, 04:54–05:34
40 Ibid
41 George, *Last Angel*, op cit, 14:21–14:42
42 Arendt, op cit, p 11
Akomfrah’s suggestion, to name the location of the data thief’s permanent exile:43 we thus used Haraway’s phrase to present an unstable, virtual future.

Freud’s Death Instinct Read through

Garon’s *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, in

Relation to *Me and the Devil Blues*

The death instinct describes an urge44 that the body conveys to the mind,45 whose function is to counter the body’s urge to self preservation, its ‘life instinct’,46 and to guide the body in its movement towards life’s cessation. Freud suggests that inanimacy may be the primordial condition from which life begins.47 48 The death instinct thereby returns the body to this founding state. Freud also suggests that the death instinct’s manifestations include instincts of destruction and aggression.49

Freud observed a correlate between the unconscious and language, in which the unconscious has a commonality with language in the sense that like language, its workings can be detected through linguistic processes of interpretation and translation.50 Garon draws a connection between the

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45 Ibid, p 34

46 Ibid, p 53

47 Ibid, p 38


language of the blues and the unconscious\textsuperscript{51} with reference to Johnson’s ‘Me and the Devil Blues’,\textsuperscript{52} and thus informed my use of Johnson’s song. Akomfrah’s placing of the song before my presentation in the film’s pre-title sequence makes my citation of Johnson a collaboratively authored citation in which is present an opening on to an unconscious knowledge of the African diasporic condition of slavery.\textsuperscript{53}

25:13–25:49 \textsuperscript{54} is the moment in \textit{Last Angel} in which Johnson’s song could be said to articulate this unconscious. Here, Akomfrah repeats, beneath my interview with DJ Spooky, the phonographic fragment with which we begin the film, ‘Me and the Devil Blues’,\textsuperscript{55} and excises Johnson’s phrase, ‘I’m going to beat my woman’,\textsuperscript{56} as Spooky describes, in response to the script of my interview, Africa’s first ‘touch’ with science fiction via the use of drums to create proximity from dislocation, ‘over the distance’, after which ‘slave owners [and] slave masters’ prohibited slaves from playing ‘certain rhythms’ and speaking in their indigenous languages. This overlay and excision of phonographic archive beneath A-roll interview footage aims to have three effects.\textsuperscript{57}

Firstly, in the absence of the song’s narrative of sexual violence, the slave owner’s silencing of the music of the enslaved suggests a convergence with the silence of death, ‘the quiescence of the inorganic world’, which Freud describes as the goal of the death instinct,\textsuperscript{58} and which operates in contrast with the sonorous nature of desire from which the death instinct is inseparable.\textsuperscript{59} The slave

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Garon, \textit{Blues and the Poetic Spirit}, op cit, p 162
  \item \textsuperscript{53} George, op cit, 00:00–00:40
  \item \textsuperscript{54} John Akomfrah, \textit{Last Angel of History}, 1995, 00:00–00:40
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Johnson, \textit{Robert Johnson – King Of The Delta Blues Singers}, op cit
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid
  \item \textsuperscript{57} The term ‘A-roll’ (derived from early analogue practice) refers to the story being ‘told’, a narrator talking to camera; conversely, ‘B-roll’ refers to footage which illustrates the story; originally there were actually two separate reels of film.
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Freud, \textit{Civilisation and its Discontents}, op cit, p 61
\end{itemize}
owner’s silencing of music also meets the function Derrida and witz detect in the silence Freud attributes to the death instinct’s capacity for destruction, an ‘incitement to amnesia’, through the destruction of the archive, by which forgetting takes place.\textsuperscript{60}

Secondly, the slave owner, understood as the agent of this incitement, is thus rendered the figuration of the Devil with which Freud embodies the death instinct’s ‘principle of evil’.\textsuperscript{61} The slave master, embodiment of destruction through whose silencing historical forgetting is instituted, is thus synonymous with the asonorous presence of the Devil in Johnson’s song. In \textit{Last Angel} the memory of slavery, absent from Garon’s registration of themes that might constitute the repressed content of the unconscious in the blues, is thus made present to the blues through Akomfrah’s direction of my citational screenwriting and presentation, and is given voice through our engagement with DJ Spooky.\textsuperscript{62}

The interview with DJ Spooky gives this moment in the film its third significance. DJ Spooky’s phrase, ‘the first touch with science fiction’, echoes its earlier presence in the film, where it is present as a line in my first commentary,\textsuperscript{63} itself a citation of my interview script, and my interpretative, citational reading and writing of Van Sertima’s citation of an anthropological text on Africa, the voice, communication and the condensation of distance in \textit{Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern}.\textsuperscript{64} I thus inscribed in the film an origin of a science-fictionalised Africa through the work of research and writing informed by citational reading and listening.

\textbf{The Uses of Cultural Studies}


\textsuperscript{61} Freud, ‘Civilisation and its Discontents’, op cit, p 120

\textsuperscript{62} Garon, \textit{Blues and the Poetic Spirit}, op cit, pp 163–168

\textsuperscript{63} George, \textit{Last Angel}, op cit, 04:55–05:35

*Last Angel* was made in response to a moment in cultural studies marked by a valorisation of black popular culture, in Hall’s ‘What is this “black” in black popular culture?’ (1993), and Dery’s theory of Afrofuturism, in ‘Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose’ (1994).

‘Or’, ‘And’, and the ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture

In Hall, popular culture is the means through which struggles are waged to make present modes of sexual, racial and ethnic being that would otherwise have neither cultural nor political presence. The value of the marginal spaces in which black popular culture takes place is that they are locations in which difference emerges.65 This is the meaning Hall gives to popular culture when he writes that it brings about ‘the appearance of new subjects’.66

But these marginal spaces are neither shared spaces of the popular and the non-popular nor spaces in which the popular is present within the non-popular, or vice versa, but are spaces solely of the popular. This rendering of appearance thus takes place through a sense of the popular in which cultural expressions that are marginal both to black popular culture and the margins of the broader cultural mainstream are not present to Hall’s text.

One could argue that these doubly marginal expressions of black culture are present to Hall’s text as subordinate absences in a privileging of presence, such as Derrida identifies in Western metaphysics,67 which serves to position presence as the meaning of being through oppositions of presence to non-presence.68

Hall identifies a binary role in the term ‘or’, whose application in the phrase ‘black or British’ presents a separation of racial and national identity into irreducible qualities, or essences, which

65 Stuart Hall, ‘What is this “black” in black popular culture?’, in *Social Justice*, vol 20, nos 1–2, pp 1–8, 1993
66 Ibid
limit the possibilities of there existing a range of modes of being. In place of the binary function of the ‘or’, Hall offers ‘a logic of coupling’, whose function he identifies in the conjunctive term ‘and’. Through coupling, identity becomes a matter of creating conjunctions and chains of conjunctions. Hall thus cautions against thinking of culture, or indeed of being, in binary and thus oppositional terms.

Hall also identifies the value of the term ‘and’ for the struggle waged through popular culture. Its conjunctive function renders identity potentially interminable, if not inexhaustible, while also evading the reduction of identity to a hierarchy of essences of race, gender or nation. Hall’s argument suggests that conjunctive thinking could also be applied to popular as well as non-popular culture: the popular and non-popular could comprise each other. On the other hand, this application of coupling is not present in his text.

My reading of Hall clarified the necessity of making present the non-popular within the popular in a thinking in which the conjunctive force of the ‘and’ of coupling would serve to disintegrate the presumed exclusivity of the processes and practices designated by the oppositions in Hall of the popular and non-popular.

This disintegrative service is descriptive of the task Derrida allocates to deconstruction; of overturning and dislocating the conceptual and non-conceptual, discursive and non-discursive relations of power by which the privileging of presence is maintained. An example of this, in Last Angel, is the presence within the avowedly populist cosmological project of Clinton of a thinking on interstellar human origin. On the one hand, Clinton’s thinking conforms to the function of creating the appearance of new subjects that Hall confers on popular culture. On the other hand, it follows a minor, non-populist genealogy of relations of formal discontinuity, whose genus is Sun

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69 Hall, ‘What is this “black” in black popular culture?’, op cit, p 111
70 Ibid
71 Ibid
72 Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, op cit, p 21
73 Akomfrah, Last Angel, op cit, 10:00–10:37
74 Hall, ‘What is this “black” in black popular culture?’, op cit, p 106
Ra, and whose disseminations include the jungle of 4 Hero, and the techno of Underground Resistance and Juan Atkins.

In the founding example of Ra, ‘George Clinton’s mentor. Period’, according to Derrick May, the genealogy of Clinton’s thinking is rooted neither ‘in the experience of popular communities’ or ‘popular experience’, but in discreet, singular experiences, whose generic figurations present a discontinuity of marginal musical figures that cohere in Last Angel. This cohering, a bringing of marginal presences and practices into diegetic proximity, was our founding intent.

‘He Didn’t Know’: Africa in Afrofuturism

Dery identifies as Afrofuturism’s specificity a speculative writing that, unmarked by racial designation, addresses African American concerns in a contemporary, technologically defined context.

Concurrent with this specificity is Afrofuturism’s general designation, the racially specified practices of production particular to African Americans (with the Central American, Caribbean exception of Lee Perry), whose function is the production, across artistic and cultural media, of images of technology and a present sufficiently marked by absence to necessitate the imagining of a future brought about by artificial augmentation: this is how I understood Dery’s phrase ‘a prosthetically advanced future’.

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75 Akomfrah, Last Angel, op cit, 13:58–14:18
76 Ibid, 14:50–15:23
77 Derrick May, in Last Angel, op cit, 06:43–06:47
78 Hall, ‘What is this “black” in black popular culture?’, op cit, p 108
80 Ibid, p 180
Dery brings questions of race to the digitally driven social practices and creative activities constitutive of cyberculture.\textsuperscript{81} Cyberculture and its literary correlate, cyberpunk, frame and thread the relations Dery suggests between African American expressions of futurity and science fiction.\textsuperscript{82}

However, an idea of inclusivity, informed neither by the structuring presence or absence of white European or Euro-American practitioners, nor by conceptual models, such as cyberpunk, that in Dery foreground white perceptions of black practice, but informed, rather, by the distance that separates black practitioners, governed the making of \textit{Last Angel}. For us, what defined the disparate exponents of black non-popular culture and the expressions of the popular in which the non-popular was present were the historical, geographical and cultural distances that separated them. We wanted to close this distance by having these exponents reflect on each other and each other’s work.

The ‘Mothership Connection’ functions as the clue that coheres these reflections:\textsuperscript{83} it is the means by which we differentiate \textit{Last Angel}’s engagement with Afrofuturism from Afrofuturism’s engagement with black culture. My scripts for \textit{Last Angel} are nonetheless composed of citations of Dery’s text informed by this versioning of Afrofuturism, central among them a rethinking of the role of Africa in Afrofuturism.

There is, for example, Dery’s reference to Clinton, Ra and Perry, made to assert an Afrofuturist continuum whose practitioners are drawn, inclusive of Perry’s Central American, Caribbean background, from America, and thus present Afrofuturism as a decidedly American phenomenon.\textsuperscript{84}

In \textit{Last Angel}’s commentary script I contextualised the futurity represented by these musicians in a genealogy whose beginning is in Africa.\textsuperscript{85} The function of this genealogy was to create a departure from Afrofuturism’s American continuum to an idea of a continuum of a clandestine futurological sonic tradition, through which the passage of a ‘black secret technology’ of sound


\textsuperscript{82} Dery, ‘Black to the Future’, op cit, pp 191, p 198, pp 199–201

\textsuperscript{83} George, \textit{Last Angel}, op cit, 00:40–01:30

\textsuperscript{84} Dery, ‘Black to the Future’, op cit, p 182

\textsuperscript{85} George, \textit{Last Angel}, op cit, 05:06–05:26
takes place. The effect of this departure is that in contrast to the nationalist continuum present to Dery’s idea of Afrofuturism, Afrofuturism in Last Angel describes a diasporic continuum. This departure marks a key aspect of Dery’s theory that I decided not to cite, his sole emphasis on African American culture. In Last Angel, African American cultural expression comprises a component of a politicised diasporic versioning of Afrofuturism.

Last Angel’s diasporic Afrofuturism includes the figuration of pre-colonial Africa (in my screenplay at 04:55–05:35, for example), and, through Akomfrah’s use of archival film of pioneer of decolonisation Kwame Nkrumah, African aspirations for a postcolonial future and the disappointments present to its arrival.

I read Dery with an eye for the tear in the text, described by Derrida as the irreparable ‘snag’ in writing that dissemination, the ceaseless proliferation of meaning, tears even further. In Dery, Africa is the snag that provided Akomfrah and I with our most productive point of departure for producing a proliferation of significations of Africa.

For example, a particularly striking feature of Dery’s text is the paradoxical absence of any reference to an unhyphenated Africa, both in Dery’s writing and in the works and interviews he orchestrates in the name of Afrofuturism.

This is the paradox: Africa is present not within Afrofuturism, but before it, outside it, in a distance so remote that it is beyond memory. The continent names what, in Dery, is located beyond memory’s margin, what cannot be remembered or known. Africa is present in Dery’s text as the inherited memory of the location, present beyond the boundaries of knowledge, of a catastrophic break with tradition, wisdom, and thus a ‘transmissibility’. This break is replaced not by

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86 Ibid, 00:30–00:38
87 Akomfrah, Last Angel, op cit, 05:56–06:16, 26:57–27:15
88 Derrida, ‘Dissemination’, op cit, p 26
89 Dery, ‘Black to the Future’, op cit, p 191
citational activities, which in Benjamin constitute the removal and repetition by the actor of a text or gesture from its initial moment of performance to another,\textsuperscript{93} or the writerly task of excision that informs the literary montage,\textsuperscript{94} but by an inability to cite.

Africa in Dery is present across generations as the repetition of an absence of knowledge, in a discursive tradition, the passing of whose carriers had not precipitated a transmissible form for their knowledge, as Benjamin suggests, apart from their admission of its deeply felt lack:

[to] talk about [his] roots in Africa is a hopeless task. He [Delany’s grandfather, born a slave] didn’t know. His parents – born here, in this country [America], didn’t know. They were not allowed to.\textsuperscript{95}

Production: Science-Fictionalising Africa

Production started in September 1995 and ended in October. Our desire to inscribe Africa in the genealogy of science fiction has its central, futurological expression in my interview with astronaut Bernard Harris. Africa finds its most consistent expression in my commentary: the script, written in post-production, coheres Akomfrah’s bricolage of archival and B-roll footage sourced from his film Testament,\textsuperscript{96} found sculptural fragments, and the connections made in the film’s interviews between the Euro-African slave trade and its speculative pre- and post-histories.

The Significance of Ghana

\textsuperscript{92} Benjamin, ‘Letter to Gerhard Scholem’, op cit, p 565
\textsuperscript{95} Dery, ‘Black to the Future’, op cit, p 191
\textsuperscript{96} John Akomfrah, Testament, (1988)
Ghana, figured by Akomfrah’s use of archival and B-roll footage and narrativised by my commentary, functions as the film’s figuration of Africa. 97 Ghana’s significance is that it is a major site of a double origin (both a key location of indigenous human trafficking98 and a major site of pan-African emancipation),99 whose significance for me, as the descendant of enslaved Africans, is that both origins are integral – as places of becoming (African, then European) property and becoming (pan-) African and European – to my relationship to questions of migration, the body, space(s), and to the body as the producer of senses of space.

We thus engaged with the history of the African diaspora in its quest for self-determination, and registered pan-African history through a moment of collapse in that history’s epicentre: the fall, in 1966, of Ghana’s revolutionary government, Africa’s first postcolonial state, whose independence in 1957 inspired subsequent anti-colonial struggles for independence in the African continent100 and initiated a commonality between African anti-colonialism and the African American Civil Rights101 and Black Power movements.102

This Africa, present as a non-presence in the ‘distortion of the present’103 that comprises the multiple presents and futures of classic science fiction cinematic narrative, was the focus of my

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97 Ibid
103 Samuel R Delany in Last Angel, 31:05–31:07
concern with themes of memory and forgetting, of history and genealogy, the location of the future’s crisis of memory.

The figuration, in Akomfrah’s directing and my writing, of Ghana as a synecdoche of African diasporic struggles for freedom, comprises a virtual Africa, a ‘land of African memory’, space of ‘African dreams and catastrophes’, dreams understood here as political aspirations and fantasies, whose geography of hope and decline was shaped by what James called, in the wake of Nkrumah’s death in 1972, the exiled leader’s ‘former grandeur and present decadence’.

In dialogue with Akomfrah, I initiated, through my writing, the film’s cyberspatial figuration of a virtual archive, an architecture of entrances to rooms and vaults, which are openings on to other times, other spaces, in which, in the history room of ‘the land of African memory’ in the film’s eighth commentary, the living and the dead are equally animate, if neither alive nor dead: Martin Luther King is no less alive in the 1960s than is Kwame Nkrumah, who is no less alive than a group of World War II-era female, African American welders, who fleetingly catch the data thief’s gaze before fading into whiteness.

‘I Know’: A Counter-citational Africa

There is, in retrospect, a Deleuzian temporality, informed by Bergson, at work in my interview script for Last Angel. In Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, past and present co-exist. The past is present as that which never stops passing and which, in its function as the location of perception’s recourse by which the present takes place, comprises the present. The present, regarded as an effect of the

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104 George, Last Angel, op cit, 06:01, 33:49
105 Ibid, 34:58–35:00
106 James, ‘The Rise and Fall of Kwame Nkrumah’, op cit, p 180
107 George, Last Angel, op cit, 02:22–02:29
108 Ibid, 06:00–06:12
109 Ibid, 24:00–24:01
110 Ibid, 26:57–27:01
111 Ibid, 30:05–30:06
past, never stops passing. Regarded as a fleeting present, the present, which never stops arriving and
is never fully present, is only ever present, even as such, but for the past. The present comprises and
is inseparable from the past precisely because of the service it renders to perception, of functioning
as the medium of the past through which all presents pass.\footnote{Gilles Deleuze, \textit{Bergsonism}, Hugh Tomlinson, and Barbara Habberjam, trans, 4th Edn, Zone Books, New York, 1997, p 59}

The black bodies comprised of, for example, the citations of zoology, biology and anatomy in
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are thus no less present in the twentieth century in the
fictional personae of Clinton’s Starchild\footnote{Derrick May in \textit{Last Angel}, op cit, 03:51–04:15} or Perry’s Firmament Computer\footnote{Lee Perry in \textit{Last Angel}, 08:20–08:24} than they are in
science fact, in which ‘race’ as a category of the sciences is discredited, but whose force is
nonetheless present, and which occupies a more determining role in the film’s engagement with
futurity than it does in Dery’s theory of Afrofuturism, through the questions I scripted for the
interviews with Reed, Eshun, Tate, and, notably, the interview with Harris.

This interview dislocates the opposition in Dery of a hyphenated Africa as a space of knowledge
and an unhyphenated Africa as a space beyond knowledge and narrative. Harris’s mastery of
astronautical technology is the activity of science through which the black body,\footnote{Bernard Harris in \textit{Last Angel}, 19:03–20:00} his body, affirms
and is affirmed by scientific exploration: the act Harris recounts of flying, during his first space
mission, a flag composed of the flags of the nations of Africa, and his subsequent ambition to
display this flag on his forthcoming visit to the continent,\footnote{Harris in \textit{Last Angel}, op cit, 19:11–19:38} constitutes a recitational, restorative
gesture of reinscription, through which Africa in \textit{Last Angel} is cited as a founding location of
scientific, astronomical and mathematical mastery.
Africa in *Last Angel* thus serves a counter-citational function, which, in Harris, contextualises Africa as a memorial space of both historical continuity and transmissibility, of which it can be said, in retrospective contrast to its figuration in Dery: ‘I know’. ¹¹⁷

**Improvisation and Performance:**

**Embodying the Last Angel of History**

In my performance in *Last Angel* there is a relation of thinking to improvisation and embodiment. Moseley’s reading of Czerny suggests a paradox of improvisation that reverberates through my writing read backwards, from *Last Angel* to *Handsworth Songs*: ‘extemporizing possesses this singular and puzzling property, that reflection and attention are of scarcely any service in the matter. We must leave nearly everything to the fingers and to chance’.¹¹⁸ Moseley claims that improvisation comprises a knowledge that takes place in the body, ‘a type of embodied knowledge’, that gives the slip to consciousness.¹¹⁹ The moment and place of my performance is thus no place or time to think, even when I am, in the act of standing,¹²⁰ dancing,¹²¹ sitting,¹²² doing nothing but breathing, which took place by my not thinking at all, and by my not having thought beforehand about even this most foundational aspect of acting, named as such in Stanislavsky.¹²³ Thinking, for example, in my third presentation,¹²⁴ breaks the flow of thought. We stop and start again: what makes it to the final cut is marked by my absence of forethought about my body, voice or performance.

¹¹⁹ Moseley, ‘Entextualisation’, op cit, p 7
¹²⁰ Akomfrah, *Last Angel*, op cit, 06:16–06:25
¹²¹ Ibid, 16:52–17:01
¹²² Ibid, 20:06–20:10
¹²⁴ George, *Last Angel*, op cit, 26:11–26:57
I follow Akomfrah’s advice: I relax. I get into a groove, a rhythm of moving, of wandering, along the track of a deserted Detroit train line\textsuperscript{125} and its abandoned station,\textsuperscript{126} or in front of the exterior of an old, disused building,\textsuperscript{127} and a rhythm of being still, for example in the scene in which I sit surrounded by computer screens.\textsuperscript{128} This being in rhythm, even in its most nominal expression, is also the foundation of performance, of theatre in Stanislavsky: the rhythm of breath conveys to the spectator the necessity of theatre\textsuperscript{129} and is the foundation of creative practice.\textsuperscript{130}

The idea, in Jones, of the performing body as the medium by which an idea is given context,\textsuperscript{131} and the notion, present in multivocity, of an embodying of more than one person,\textsuperscript{132} could be extended to the idea of a body, my own, multiplied by cinematography, twice, in the shell of a building,\textsuperscript{133} three times, at the exterior of a disused building,\textsuperscript{134} and, later in the film, five times at the same location.\textsuperscript{135}

My performance as the intersection of the film’s themes of speculative fiction and questions of history, memory and futurity, underscores \textit{Last Angel}, and centres around four presentations and my silent acting, the performance of which comprises a series of location-based gestures of movement and stillness.

The act of further synthesising my process into a display of textually informed exhibitionism came easily: I could, unselfconsciously, dance, in the sequence filmed in and around a deserted

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{125} Akomfrah, \textit{Last Angel}, op cit, 21:47
\bibitem{126} Ibid, 17:49–17:53
\bibitem{127} Ibid, 06:16–06:25, 20:11–20:23
\bibitem{128} Ibid, 00:50–00:53
\bibitem{129} Stanislavsky, \textit{Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage}, op cit, p 93
\bibitem{130} Ibid, p 168
\bibitem{132} Ibid, p 26
\bibitem{133} Akomfrah, \textit{Last Angel}, op cit, 17:49–17:53
\bibitem{134} Ibid, 06:16–06:25
\bibitem{135} Ibid, 20:11–20:23
\end{thebibliography}
Detroit railway, inspect the remains of a broken radio in the shell of a building, and stand on the ledge of an expanse of water, because I was essentially acting from the comfort of a textual practice of screenwriting informed by black culture, critical theory, science fiction, poetry, high and low literature, music and film, that I had brought to our practice and which had already found its mutuality with my colleagues Akomfrah, Mathison, Johnson, Auguiste, Gopaul and Lawson.

I was able to serve as the film’s bodily intersection because I felt I was embodying a practice that was simultaneously collective, that of Black Audio, and singular, my own practice of writing, a way with words, those of my own, and those of others. I was embodying an invention, of ourselves as a collectivity, of myself as a writer, and as such I had been prepared for this by the necessity Derrida identifies in the beginning of every invention: it can only begin by being already capable of being reinscribed. We, the collectivity of Black Audio, were the means by which the reinscription of my writing practice became, in performance, a presentation of speech and, in my acting, a presentation of silence in, for example, the scene in which I sit, surrounded by computer screens, which Akomfrah intersperses through the film, at the beginning, and at the end.

My body was thus the citational medium of this intersection, the medium through which we cited our practice, and through which we inscribed our collaborative practice anew in our work as that of a singularity, the invention of which took place through the repetition of a collaborative method of writing and researching.

The capacity for repeatability of our inventive, collaborative process, conforms to the description in Derrida of a first time in which is present its reproducibility as an unforeseeable event to come, ‘the arrival of a future’, which, in the example of my collaborative writing with Akomfrah, from

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136 Ibid, 16:52–17:01, 17:23–17:35
137 Ibid, 36:24–36:53
141 Derrida, ‘Psyche: Invention of the Other’, op cit, p 7
Handsworth Songs\textsuperscript{142} in 1986 to Seven Songs For Malcolm X\textsuperscript{143} and in my solo writing with Black Audio, in Memory Room 451 (Akomfrah, 1997),\textsuperscript{144} Martin Luther King – Days of Hope (Akomfrah, 1997),\textsuperscript{145} and Gangsta Gangsta – The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur (George, 1998),\textsuperscript{146} I could not have foreseen; a future that finds me embodying this process, of beginning again, by which, Derrida reminds us, the reinvention of invention takes place.\textsuperscript{147}

In Derrida’s dialogue with Ornette Coleman, this first time is no first time at all: Coleman agrees with Derrida that there is a relation of improvisation to reading and writing that takes place on the margin (‘the verge’) of these activities,\textsuperscript{148} and precedes and is present as iteration in performance, particularly, I would add, if we consider performance as the production of a signature, my signature contribution to Last Angel, a form of writing, separated, as Derrida writes, from ‘the present and singular intention of its production’,\textsuperscript{149} which, prior to my double performance, was to reproduce my signature as that of a work of writing made of two voices, mine and Akomfrah’s.

On the other hand, the framework, of production, of collectivity, discursivity, non-discursivity and writing, by which this improvisation took place is, strictly speaking, shocking; this is the word Coleman uses to describe improvisation based on a framework.\textsuperscript{150}

How far did I depart from my framework? Far enough to begin, not with a beginning which takes place with a question, with which my script outline begins: ‘We begin with a question – is there such a thing as black cyberspace, a techno constellation by which we can navigate our way

\textsuperscript{142}John Akomfrah, Handsworth Songs, (1986)
\textsuperscript{143}John Akomfrah, Seven Songs For Malcolm X, (1993)
\textsuperscript{144}John Akomfrah, Memory Room 451, (1997)
\textsuperscript{145}John Akomfrah, Martin Luther King: Days of Hope, (1997)
\textsuperscript{146}Edward George, Gangsta Gangsta: The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur, (1998)
\textsuperscript{147}Derrida, ‘Psyche: Invention of the Other’, op cit, p 22
\textsuperscript{149}Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, op cit, p 20
\textsuperscript{150}Ornette Coleman, in Derrida, ‘The Other’s Language’, op cit, p 321
through black speculations, musings, and imaginings on the future? But retrospectively, with a middle; an account, in my first presentation, in the Mojave Desert, unnamed in the film, and thus, to the viewer, a middle of nowhere, of the middle of a (re)search, which has already taken place, in which we have made a discovery, ‘the story of a bluesman’, the act of which, Derrida reminds us, is what an invention amounts to: finding something for the first time.

In this presentation I do not name the object of our search: what is important is the significance of the middle for improvisation and repetition; the middle is where ‘one takes up or lays down rhythms’. I begin in the middle, in rhythm with Akomfrah, in the performance of repeating, as an invention of storytelling, what has already taken place, to the viewer, for the first time.

Post Production: Commentary Script and Performance –

Voicing Two intervallc Functions

Akomfrah used the content of my four presentations to structure the film’s themes of music, memory, diaspora and race, science fiction and technology. My improvised, verbal authorship thus served and structured the director’s authorship, and produced a film comprised of more than one kind of writing, more than one mode of authorship. In contrast to the propulsive function of my acts of verbal authorship, my acts of silent movement and sentience provided two intervallc functions.

The first is directorial: Akomfrah used the scene of my sitting surrounded by computer screens no fewer than thirteen times, as a motif of punctuation inter-cut, for example, between Perry and Clinton, Corbett and Ra, between Atkins, and Reed. This scene allowed for Akomfrah’s

151 George, screenplay for Last Angel, p 1
152 Akomfrah, Last Angel, op cit, 00:00–00:30
153 George, Last Angel, op cit, 00:07–00:10
156 Akomfrah, Last Angel, op cit, 08:29–08:33
orchestration of my embodying of silence in a sound-driven film about phonological forms, whose non-phonetic, literary forms are presented discursively, and whose main components of visual actuality are landscapes, depopulated but for my body, and the staple of the television documentary, the immobile interviewee.

The second is to do with screenwriting: Akomfrah’s orchestration of my silent scenes served as counterpoints to the silences of the archival, location, and B-roll footage, and the sonority of Mathison’s soundscape, over which I wrote and read the film’s nine commentaries.

**Voicing Melancholia**

My commentaries for *Last Angel* differ from my previous screenwriting collaborations and my screenwriting practice, in two ways. Both are to do with voice and performance. First difference: my speaking voice and my writing voice are, for once, and only once in Black Audio’s work, synchronous. I had until then always written in the knowledge that someone other than myself would perform my writing: a reader would bring an emotional tenor to the text. My reading, a non-musical vocal performance, extends and coheres my visual performances, while also cohering the contents of the edit, and thus integrates Akomfrah’s authorship of my body, and my own, in the film. This difference is structural.

The second difference is that my voice is part of a contrapuntal relation of musical and non-musical vocal performance through which the film’s emotional tenor is sounded. This second difference is to do with the emotional tone of the film, which is one of melancholia.

I named the object of this melancholia in my second commentary: it is ‘the end of the world’ of pan-Africanism and the beginning of the end of pan-Africanism’s future, imaged in the film’s archival fragments and my commentary.\(^{160}\) I registered this end and its aftermath in my eighth

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157 Ibid, 09:10–09:14
158 Ibid, 15:21
159 Ibid, 23:20–23:28
160 George, *Last Angel*, op cit, 06:00–06:16
commentary, in my idea of a ‘land of African memory’ as a location of multiple historical traumas, of ‘catastrophes’.\textsuperscript{161}

Through this phrase Akomfrah and I extended the aftermath of this end into the postwar twentieth century. The ‘after’ of the ‘after the end of the world’ is a quotation of Sun Ra’s eponymous composition,\textsuperscript{162} which Akomfrah repeats in its phonographic form over location footage of a remnant of the demise of industrial revolution-era space travel and twentieth-century industrial decline, an abandoned Detroit train station.\textsuperscript{163} Akomfrah and I thereby registered a spatio-temporality in whose troubled aftermatts of colonialism, segregation and industrialism the practices assembled under the name of Afrofuturism take place, and conferred an extra-musical necessity on the figurative integration by May of Kraftwerk’s notion of the Man Machine in music forms such as techno and its contemporaneous diasporic correlate, jungle, which were formed by, against and between the spaces of these aftermatts.\textsuperscript{164}

Akomfrah’s use of a phrase from Trevor Mathison’s soundscape as a melodic motif, present throughout the film, with my commentary,\textsuperscript{165} gives musical expression and temporal unity to this sense of a lost futurity and its aftermath. The contrapuntal relations between this motif and the tone of voice I bring to my reading emerged discursively, in the process of the edit, from which I discerned the rationale for my use of tonality: to produce a consonance with the melancholy present in Mathison’s soundscape, by articulating this affective quality of his musical voice in my speaking voice and, in retrospect, producing a creative reordering of Barthes’s experience of hearing voices within voices.\textsuperscript{166}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 34:29–35:04
\item \textsuperscript{162} Sun Ra, ‘It’s After The End Of The World’, in Sun Ra in Space is the Place, Sutro Park, 1972, 2010
\item \textsuperscript{163} Akomfrah, Last Angel, op cit, 22:09–22:21
\item \textsuperscript{164} Ibid, 20:45, 20:54–21:01
\item \textsuperscript{165} Akomfrah, Last Angel, op cit, 05:11–05:33, 10:48–10:51, 34:27–35:02
\end{itemize}
These differences of writing and tonality converged in my voice: I was aware, through the accumulated experience of listening to my words spoken by other readers, that my signature contribution, of body and writing, and the success of their act of balancing actuality and archive, music, sound and silence, would be registered through my embodiment in my speaking voice, of my writerly voice.

I was also aware of the significance of this convergence for the viewer. The commentary would integrate but not exceed its components, and make seamless the disjuncture between the cinematographic, editorial voice of the director, the voiceless voicing of the soundscape, the verbal, embodied performance of the writer/presenter, the sonorous, disembodied performance of the writer/locutor, and the silence of the actor.

What emerged from my reading of my commentary is a unity of cinematographic and alphabetical writing, whose effect is both an evocation of a lost pan-Africa, and the idea of the invention, as an effect of intertextual reading and a possibility of citational writing, of an Africa as a founding location of science and science fiction, a beginning of Africa in alphabetical, phonographic, cinematographic writing, which takes place against the catastrophes of history by which loss takes place.