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AFRO-SURREALISM—A NEW LANGUAGE FOR DISCUSSING THE BLACK EXPERIENCE? AN EXPLORATION OF THE TREND IN RECENT FILMS, TV SERIES, AND MUSIC VIDEOS

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Introduction

The Black Lives Matter movement, and the tragic events that put it into motion, sparked a new wave of discussion about not only police brutality, but also other manifestations of corruption, bias, and injustice, which still shape American society on a structural level, bringing the myth of a post-racial America into question. This discussion also extended into media and popular culture in significant ways, with the Hollywood industry being pushed for more and better representations of minorities (the #OscarsSoWhite backlash of 2015 and beyond), and hip-hop music becoming increasingly more socially conscious and involved. In the case of the Academy Awards the success is debatable, because of their apparent tendency to honor comforting “racial reconciliation fantasies,” like Peter Farrelly’s *Green Book* (Morris), rather than more ambitious, thematically challenging and artistically innovative works of black filmmakers. However, the rise in stature of hip-hop music as a respected art form is unequivocal—culminating with the success of Kendrick Lamar, whose song “Alright” was often chanted at protests as a kind of unofficial anthem for the BLM movement (Gillette). Lamar ultimately received the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2018, making him the first artist outside of jazz and classical music to be honored with this award. Creative and often multi-talented African American artists have been gaining more prominence and recognition than

ever before, which results in creating more space and opportunities for experimentation, inventing new styles and trends, or transplanting the already existing ones to the mainstream. Afro-Surrealism is one of the most interesting and vibrant examples of these projects.

The term 'Afro-Surrealism' was coined in 1974 by Amiri Baraka in his introduction to the poet Henry Dumas's book *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*. He used it to describe the writer's "skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one... the Black aesthetic in its actual contemporary and lived life" (as cited in Miller, para. 6). Writer, visual artist and curator D. Scot Miller, with Baraka's permission, borrowed and expanded the term in his "Afrosurreal Manifesto," originally published in the San Francisco Bay Guardian in 2009. The text was, of course, inspired by the original surrealist manifestoes, most famously those by André Breton. Influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud on the interpretation of dreams, Breton saw surrealism as a form of rebellion against the dictate of reason and logic in modern society, suggesting that "[t]he imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights" (10). Furthermore, he defined surrealism as a form of expression of "the actual functioning of thought" in the manner of "psychic automatism," which functions outside traditional aesthetic and moral categories (26).

Breton was the pioneer and one of the most recognizable figures of surrealism, but the movement itself was far from monolithic, and did not follow any precise artistic program. The term "surreal" over the years was watered down and became shorthand for anything vaguely odd or dreamlike, often connected to unusual juxtapositions. Early surrealism was also not, as it is often believed, a strictly European movement made up of Caucasian men. Politically involved poets, such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon Damas, founded the *Négritude* movement in the early 1930s, which is seen by many as a continuation of surrealism in the African diaspora (Césaire was also a close friend of Breton). In his manifesto, Miller cites Senghor as allegedly having said:

“European surrealism is empirical. African surrealism is mystical and metaphorical” (Miller, para. 8). He also points to Jean-Paul Sartre, who had similar ideas about distinctive and unique features of *Négritude* poetry as surreal works. The writer enthusiastically advocated for the movement’s distinctiveness and significance in his famous essay “Black Orpheus.” In it, he defines the surrealist method, similarly to Breton’s understanding of surrealism, as a form of automatic writing, akin to mysticism in that it requires a degree of discipline and practice to delve beyond “the superficial crust of reality” and “touch the very bottom of the soul and awaken the timeless forces of desire” (309). Sartre differentiates the tradition of white Surrealism, which he sees as largely universalistic and apolitical (“beyond race and condition, beyond class, behind the fire of language—dazzling silent darkneses which are no longer opposed to anything”), from *Négritude* poetry, filled with strong emotions of resentment towards Europe, colonization and white culture, expressing “the revolutionary aspirations of the oppressed Negro”—an *engaged* and *directed* application of automatic writing (311).

Miller’s ideas about Afro-Surrealism are even bolder. In his manifesto he states, following Frida Kahlo’s famous quote (paraphrased therein as “I’m not a surrealist, I just paint what I see”), that the very fact that a work depicts the subjective experience of a member of a marginalized minority is what makes it surreal—“all ‘others’ who create from their actual, lived experience are surrealist” (para. 8) presumably because they present an experience so alien to most. The manifesto proper provides ten “resolutions,” which seem more like a loose series of inspirations about what Afro-Surreal art can be. Among others, they include tactics such as: subversion through excess and hybridization, exploring fluidity and ambiguity of identity (concerning ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and the intersectional issues connected with them), expressing a full range of emotions not to be found e.g. in 50 Cent’s “cold monotone” (“We want to feel something! We want to weep on record,” para. 22), appropriating symbols connected with slavery and colonialism, and reintroducing elements of

magical beliefs to uncover another world beyond the visible one. Miller is also very liberal about his choice of artists and works he picks as sources of inspiration for Afro-Surrealism, disregarding traditional divisions between high and low art—he mentions renowned writer and scholar Toni Morrison, and rapper Ghostface Killah of Wu-Tang Clan fame in the same sentence, describing their style as rococo: “the beautiful, the sensuous, and the whimsical” (para. 23).

Afro-Surrealism in Mainstream Media

Until recently, Afro-Surrealism was a term circulating mostly in museum and gallery spaces, explored thoroughly in contemporary forms of visual arts, such as video installations: Arthur Jafa’s *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* effectively combined documentary footage of everyday struggles of Black America with popular culture (Urbańska 2019: 64). Jafa can also be seen as a pioneer of Afro-Surrealism in film, with his sensual cinematography for Julie Dash’s critically acclaimed *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). But the term Afro-Surrealism was never used on a larger scale in the context of films, TV series, or other popular forms of visual media. That is, not until Lanre Bakare’s article “From Beyoncé to Sorry to Bother You: the new age of Afro-Surrealism,” published in *The Guardian* in 2018. In the article, the author notes how the success of films such as Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), which mixed genre thrills (a peculiar blend of dark comedy and horror) with social commentary, and also contained a memorably unconventional hallucinatory sequence, paved the way for bolder and more uncanny stylistic experimentations in the mainstream. He sees it as a revival of a style “in which strangeness and blackness not only co-exist but are impossible to separate” (Bakare). This vague idea of strangeness and surreality as inescapable features of the Black Experience is difficult to specify, and it certainly does not help that the author brings up so many diverse examples of modern Afro-Surreal art, ranging from the relatively understated, independent films such as Estrada’s *Blindspotting*

(2018), to the baroque excess of the music video for Beyoncé and Jay-Z's "APES**T."

This is the reason why I decided to attempt to produce my own classification of features that many recent Afro-Surrealist works share, which might be seen as a draft for further research on the subject. In my analysis, I will go into the most detail about two works. The first is FX's TV series *Atlanta* (2016—), notable for having an all-black writing staff (extremely uncommon in American television), created by actor and musician (under the nickname Childish Gambino) Donald Glover, who famously pitched the premise of the show as "Twin Peaks with rappers" (see e.g. Cwik). The second is the film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), a genre-bending satire on capitalism directed by a rapper and activist Boots Riley. However, to broaden the scope of analysis, I will also reference other Afro-Surreal works, including: the aforementioned *Get Out*, as well as Peele's following horror-comedy *Us* (2019); Carlos López Estrada's dramedy *Blindspotting*, concerning police violence and gentrification; HBO's series *Random Acts of Flyness* (2018), a Monty Pythonesque experimental sketch show created by Terence Nance; as well as a selection of music videos, mostly those inspired by the music of Flying Lotus and Childish Gambino, with some examples from the unambiguous mainstream.

What is worth noting at this point is that many of these films, shows and music videos already have a lot in common on the level of the creative process. First of all, many of these artists have a background in comedy and/or hip-hop, and some of the same figures reappear in multiple Afro-Surrealist works, already strongly associated with the style: Donald Glover AKA Childish Gambino, actor and rapper Lakeith Stanfield (leading or prominent roles in *Atlanta*, *Sorry to Bother You* and *Get Out*) and director Hiro Murai (14 episodes of *Atlanta* and clips for Childish Gambino and Flying Lotus), just to name a few. Interestingly, the presence of a distinct personality such as Lakeith Stanfield can itself serve as foreshadowing of a certain degree of oddness and unconventionality, but in this particular outline I will focus on more general

stylistic and thematic aspects of modern Afro-Surrealism. Below, I present a list of the most common characteristics, all of which I will elaborate on further:

- bouts of the dreamlike, hallucinatory, and the fantastical passing into a generally realistic setting;
- an atmosphere of unease and paranoia, often supported by tonal dissonances, ambivalence of the genre and features of the grotesque;
- an experimental, eclectic form;
- elements of satire and parody;
- a significant role of hip-hop;
- a specific kind of intertextuality, often referencing staples of Black popular culture and history;
- anti-capitalist and anti-institutional messages;
- a complex exploration of Black identity and subversion of its traditional archetypes.

Genre and Tone

Afro-Surrealist films will often begin as relatively mundane stories, grounded in reality, not unlike the 1990's subgenre of hood films (sometimes referred to as New Black Realism, see e.g. Bausch). These films showed the everyday hardships of working-class African Americans living in poor and violent neighborhoods, who "struggled (often for naught) for better lives and to simply live," presenting "Hobbesian renderings of inner-city black life as short, poor, nihilistic, and unforgiving" (Bradley 143). The grimness and self-seriousness of these films were later subdued by a more light-hearted and parodistic spin on the genre, for instance that of the *Friday* films featuring Ice Cube. The modern Afro-Surrealist films combine elements of both the tradition of the hood film and its comedic counterparts (Urbańska 2020: 75). They feature unassuming protagonists who work ordinary and unspectacular jobs (telemarketing in *Sorry to Bother You*, house moving in *Blindspotting*, airport kiosk retail at the start of *Atlanta*) and deal with their day-to-day economic and relationship

problems. The abnormal events which eventually happen to them (often with a certain degree of uncertainty whether they are actually supernatural or are only projections of the characters' inner psyches) are thrust upon their world suddenly, often without any explanation. A model example of that would be a sketch from the first episode of *Random Acts of Flyness* in which Nance, the show's creator and its de facto host, is stopped by a white police officer while riding his bike. He continues to film the unpleasant encounter (which can be easily mistaken for documentary footage) before abruptly flying away and hovering high above the cityscape in a literal "random act of flyness."

In *Blindspotting*, Collin's (Daveed Diggs) witnessing of a police shooting triggers bizarre nightmares that involve a torturous courthouse setting with officer Molina (Ethan Embry), who shot an unarmed black man in the back, acting as a literal judge, jury, and executioner. These dark visions ultimately follow the protagonist into the daytime—while jogging through a cemetery, he sees several black men, most probably also victims of police violence, standing still next to their gravestones. Resurrection is also a recurring motif in the works of Flying Lotus, often containing "esoteric imaginings about death" ("Afrosurrealism: Binaural Blackness"). The young man shot dead in the street in the short film for "Until the Quiet Comes" and the two children at their own funeral in "Never Catch Me," both rise from their resting places and fall into an ethereal dance, seemingly at peace with their bodies and surroundings, while staying invisible to the bystanders.

In films such as *Get Out* or *Sorry to Bother You*, unambiguously supernatural or science fiction elements are usually introduced very late in the narrative and often with a shocking twist. The liberal elites and the house servants in *Get Out* certainly present odd mannerisms and suspicious behavior. There is an abundance of warning signs and bad omens for the protagonist, and, of course, the already mentioned hypnosis-induced hallucination sequence. Nevertheless, the film does not really transform into explicit horror until its final act, with the reveal of twisted experiments, conducted by the Armitage clan, which involve

transplanting their own brains into the bodies of strong, athletic black men, potentially granting themselves immortality. *Sorry to Bother You* has a very similar structure, with most of the narrative in its first half focusing on Cassius (Lakeith Stanfield) working his monotone job as a telemarketer and occasionally attending his girlfriend's art exhibitions, with the most abnormal element being him finding his inner "white man's voice," a superpower which helps him excel at his job and advance his way up the corporate ladder. The world of the wealthy elites is filled with twisted personalities and artificial gestures, but it is not until near the end of the story when Cassius discovers their darkest secret—a genetically modified race of 'Equisapiens,' horse-human hybrids used as slave labor. This sci-fi concept becomes a major plot element and the Equisapiens ultimately function as an organic part of the film's reality, brushed off by many of the characters as not all that shocking, especially in a world where employee rights are routinely violated.

In the series *Atlanta*, on the other hand, purely fantastical elements are not that common in the characters' lives. One notable exception is the invisible car in the episode "The Club." It is seen for the first time as a piece of novelty tech the fictional NBA star Marcus Miles brags about on his social media, of which Alfred, alias "Paper Boi" (Brian Tyree Henry) is very skeptical ("That shit ain't real"). After it actually 'appears' (only the driver is seen, hovering above the ground), at the end of the episode during a drive-by shooting, neither the characters nor the TV news report covering the event, mention the unusual car. This is common in *Atlanta*—strange events occur suddenly and are never brought up again. The very first episode, "The Big Bang," was already not shy about puzzling the viewers with various idiosyncrasies in between ordinary situations—from the suggestion that Darius (Lakeith Stanfield) has some kind of clairvoyant powers, to the reappearing ominous dog with a Texas-shaped spot on his bottom, to the old man on the bus who orders Earn (Donald Glover) to bite his Nutella sandwich.

Oddities like this, while not inherently implausible, bring a surreal edge to everyday hijinks of the characters in *Atlanta*, disturbing the familiar conventions of a hood movie. Some of the more exemplary encounters include: an old-timer gangster who owns a pet alligator in “Alligator Man,” the re-imagining of pop star Justin Bieber as a black teenager in “Nobody Beats the Biebs,” or the moody, pale-skinned hermit evocative of Michael Jackson in “Teddy Perkins” (see Philips). One of the more common formulas of an episode of *Atlanta* is an ordinary, slightly comedic situation turned into a nightmarish scenario, which continues to get worse. In “The Jacket,” Earn’s quest for the eponymous item of clothing, which he lost during a night of heavy drinking, culminates in a police shooting, with the jacket ending up on a corpse of a drug dealer.

This is also an example of a drastic tonal shift, which is another characteristic of Afro-Surreal films. Scenes turn from comedic to tragic or even to pure horror, often in a matter of seconds. This is especially apparent in the films of Jordan Peele, which I have already described as daring genre hybrids. In *Us*, for example, very similar situations of home invasions are played out in two completely different emotional registers. When the main characters are attacked by their doppelgangers (“The Tethered”), there is a tense confrontation. The villains, whose motivations remain unclear at this point, are introduced as terrifying and appalling figures, characterized by their dead-eyed faces, intimidating outfits and weapons, as well as Red’s (Lupita Nyong’o) distorted, raspy voice. However, when another group of the Tethered breaks into the mansion of a snobbish, upper-middle class Tyler family, it is darkly comical: from the oblivious behavior of all family members, to their off-color references to O.J. Simpson and the ultimate punch line—when Kitty (Elisabeth Moss) tries to get the family’s home A.I. system Ophelia to “call the police,” the machine ‘mishears’ her command and proceeds to play the song “Fuck tha Police” by the N.W.A., which continues throughout the graphic massacre. In an

act of tragic irony, the classic protest song of the Compton 'ghetto' comes back to taunt the privileged white family.

A lot of Childish Gambino's music is similarly moody, rapidly switching from light-hearted and whimsical to dark and existential. The videos produced for it reflect that. Both the song "3005" and the video associated with it, appear deceptively innocent—images of Gambino riding a ferris wheel with a teddy bear complement the upbeat love song. However, if one is to observe the relatively uneventful scene closer, the morbid details are clearly visible: the teddy not only appears to be alive (turning its head by itself), but it also 'ages,' becoming more worn down over time, while Gambino mouths the lyrics with a fixed apathetic expression on his face, reflecting the feelings of loneliness and alienation which are also present in the lyrics (see Tardio). The song "This Is America" constantly changes from cheerfully silly to dark and foreboding, not unlike Gambino's careless dancing (though uncannily reminiscent of Jim Crow caricatures) presented in stark contrast with the violence and mayhem around him in the clip. This striking combination of images and music has been often interpreted as a commentary on how popular culture distracts with 'song and dance' from the horrors that lie at the core of American society (see e.g. Menzies).

These tonal shifts often contribute to an atmosphere of uncertainty and paranoia. *Blindspotting* may appear generally comedic, but there are nearly always visual reminders of the threat of police violence and of going back to prison for violating parole, looming over the protagonist. These feelings of unease can be effectively enhanced by film techniques. In the *Atlanta* episode "Woods," after Alfred is mugged and then followed through the woods by a homeless man, who berates him for not making more of his life, a combination of handheld camera shots, rapid cutting and disorienting racks of focus, creates a feeling of instability and dread. The oppressive, paranoid atmosphere is sustained by the unclear topography of the area and the recurring images of irregular patterns of numbers, found throughout the episode.

But a lot of the time, what produces this unease are the narrative choices themselves, such as a simple act of taking the main character out of their element and putting them in a series of uncomfortable situations. This happens in *Get Out* and *Sorry to Bother You*, with black protagonists surrounded by the liberal bourgeois who often patronize them and make cluelessly inappropriate remarks. It is also the premise of multiple episodes of *Atlanta*—the eponymous “Juneteenth” celebration held in what looks like a plantation home, the German festivity Fastnacht (involving a blackface performance), which Earn has to attend with his girlfriend in “Helen,” or the gang getting lost on a college campus and stumbling into a Confederate-themed frat party in “North of the Border.”

This strategy of “inserting black people into a space they are not usually found in” can bring about horrifying and uncanny results, but it can also be turned into something subversive or even empowering. In Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s “APES**T,” dark-skinned bodies fill up the empty halls of the Louvre after hours, symbolically colonizing a space historically associated with European elites and the ‘old masters,’ with the two performers dressed in extravagant garments, ostentatiously posing in front of fine art masterpieces. This provocative video showcases the success, excessive glamour, and limitless wealth of the stars, who are able to proudly and audaciously rent out the Louvre, dress like Cleopatra, and frame themselves next to Mona Lisa, with disregard for any criticism. Yet the music, the high-contrast cinematography, and the images evoking colonialism and slavery (the brief glimpses of bound hands, and the inclusion of Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*) also bring a darker, more sinister, even confrontational vibe to the piece, as if it was a slightly threatening message by the enormously successful black performers stating “There is nothing you can do to stop us now.”

All of the described tonal shifts, genre transformations and ambivalences can be ultimately connected to the aesthetic of the grotesque. In one of the oldest and most influential studies on the subject, Bakhtin defined

exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness as key features of this category (303), but also pointed to its essential embracing of the “contradictory and double-faced fullness of life” (62), where birth and death, creation and destruction, laughter and terror, and other such oppositions can intertwine and influence one another. According to Rémi Astruc, although the understanding of the grotesque evolved over centuries, three elements have always been at its core: doubleness, hybridity and metamorphosis (2). All three can be successfully applied to the different strategies of Afro-Surrealist film depicted in the previous paragraphs. They are tonally metamorphic genre hybrids, which also often feature images of doubleness and duality, sometimes as their main theme—*Us* is a horror about doppelgangers which is nearly obsessed with images of doubleness (elaborated upon in Smyk), and the clip for Childish Gambino’s “Sweatpants” features a diner continuously filled up with differently dressed Gambino doppelgangers.

Experimental Form

Afro-Surreal works are often stylistically adventurous and eclectic. A film like *Sorry to Bother You* constantly finds novel ways to spice up and enhance its storytelling. Even scenes as simple and seemingly monotone as those concerning work in telemarketing are presented in creative and unconventional ways. Instead of cross-cutting images of talking heads or using split screen techniques, the scenes of phone conversations are presented as if Cassius was materializing with his desk in the personal homes of his potential customers. This is both visually interesting and contributes to the film’s ever-present aura of strangeness. Another interesting example is the introduction of the Equisapiens, presented by means of stop-motion clay animation, in place of a standard expository monologue by the villain.

The show *Random Acts of Flyness* is even more unrestrained with its formal eclecticism, being a series of sketches loosely connected by the technique of free association. The range of the sketches presented is massive: more

traditional narrative skits, mockumentaries, musical performances, fake ads and news reports, interviews (e.g. with artists or black queer people), video-essays (as the one discussing the “white devil” trope in episode 5), subliminal messages, as well as an abundance of different animation techniques, often with an unsettling, psychedelic edge added to them. Animation in general provides a limitless potential for Afro-Surreal artists to bring their darkest and most outlandish visions to life. Flying Lotus, for example, worked with different animators over the years, all of whom had very diverse styles. From the more traditional 2D animation of the hallucinatory “Zodiac Shit,” depicting the Chinese zodiac animals seamlessly transforming into one another, to the crude and twisted computer-generated corporeal monstrosities created by David Firth in “Ready Err Not.” Another heavily discussed video was the black and white animated clip for Jay-Z’s “The Story of O.J.,” heavily inspired by racist caricatures and other striking imagery of America’s dark history.

Surreal aesthetics and enthusiasm for experimentation have found their way into the mainstream hip-hop video in general. The clips made for the music of Travis Scott (e.g. “BUTTERFLY EFFECT,” “SICKO MODE,” “STOP TRYING TO BE GOD”) are full of strange filters, offbeat transitions, different After Effects, distortions, and fantastical imagery, all contributing to their hallucinatory, dreamlike distinctiveness. The recent clip for Kanye West’s “Wash Us In The Blood,” directed by the renowned Afro-Surrealist Arthur Jafa, combines the footage of black COVID-19 patients, police brutality, gospel singers, street riots, cars doing donuts, the video game *Grand Theft Auto V*, computer-generated images of West, the rapper’s daughter at a Sunday service, and many more. All of these devices create a disturbing collage, which might be interpreted as a reflection of the rapper’s fragile mental state amidst the chaos of the year 2020, and his desperate need for spiritual guidance. All these examples prove that elements of Afro-Surrealism now have a significant presence in contemporary African American popular culture.

Intertextual Strategies

Afro-Surrealists often turn to satire and parody, and the target of their mockery is usually white America and its culture. It can be as simple as poking fun at the ignorance or moral panic of individuals, as in the case of the opening scene of the *Atlanta* episode “Money Bag Shawty,” which reimagines a popular viral video of a religious suburban mother brought to tears by the vulgarity of rap lyrics (originally Vince Staples’ “Norf Norf,” and a Paper Boi song in the parody). The video for Jay-Z’s “Moonlight” features a recreation of an episode of the popular series *Friends* with an all-black cast, which is also an example of a very direct and specific parody. Other times, satire can be used for more nuanced commentary on white mainstream media and representation. An extended sketch from episode 5 of *Random Acts of Flyness* follows the production process of a major Hollywood film, which concerns an unspecified African war involving child soldiers, but told through the lens of a heroic white man (the ‘white savior’ or ‘white angel’ trope). The casting professionals also treat black child actors instrumentally throughout, seeing them as living props whose purpose is to evoke strong emotions in the viewers. The sketch is played in a straight-faced manner, but the satire on ongoing trends and narrative biases in film is apparent, “playing with ideas of Hollywood’s self-satisfaction, exploitation of black suffering and virtue signaling” (Bakare).

Random Acts of Flyness also features other satirical oddities like fake news reports, such as the one discussing whether white babies are born racist in episode 6, and advertisements for nonexistent products and services: in episode 1, actor Jon Hamm endorses “White Be Gone,” an ointment for easing “white thoughts” (ranging from ones of extreme bigotry to “I read Chomsky, I can’t be racist”); and in episode 3, Nance announces his project “Bitch Better Have My Money,” which can be described as a dating app for securing reparations for slavery from white families who acquired their wealth in unjust means. The *Atlanta* episode “B.A.N.” (short for Black American Network), has a similar premise of parodying daytime television, combining bizarre humor with

signaling unresolved social issues. It features a talk show “Montague” in which Alfred AKA Paper Boi is berated for a tweet interpreted as transphobic, which extends to a general condemnation of rap music as regressive by the show’s hosts; the “Transracial” segment, which is a human interest story on a black teenager who identifies himself as a 35-year old white man, while rejecting his original ethnic identity and the African American community; as well as a number of parodies of advertisements, most notably for the cereal “Coconut Crunchos”—the clichéd formula of a cartoon wolf stealing cereal from children takes a dark turn in a scene of police brutality, with the officer kneeling on the wolf’s neck (note that this episode was produced four years before the George Floyd incident) and the children begging the policeman to stop, willing to give up their cereal.

Another common aspect of the modern Afro-Surrealist media is a strong connection to hip-hop culture. As already mentioned, many of the creatives behind these films and shows have a background in rap, most notably Glover/Gambino and Boots Riley. Occasionally, the main characters are also associated with the music industry—in *Atlanta*, Earn is learning to manage his cousin Alfred’s career as small-time rapper Paper Boi, and plots of many episodes focus on their struggle for success and day-to-day dealings with fans, rivals and studio executives. Hip-hop music features prominently on soundtracks to practically every Afro-Surrealist film, the characters routinely reference rappers and rap lyrics in dialogue, famous artists appear in cameos (e.g. the Migos trio as drug dealers in the *Atlanta* episode “Go for Broke”), and the films are often set in places with historical significance for the development of hip-hop (*Atlanta* in its namesake show, the San Francisco Bay Area in *Blindspotting* and *Sorry to Bother You*).

Rapping can also be seen as an alternative form of self-expression and a kind of universal language of minority communities. *Blindspotting* explores this by delivering a lot of its dialogue in a nearly theatrical manner, with characters constantly speaking in a kind of an *a cappella* recitative, prone to monologues

and long-winded, free-flowing utterances. Collin's ultimate confrontation with the racist killer cop Molina is a resentment-fuelled freestyle soliloquy, in which he remarks "I say it while I'm rapping, ni—a, 'cause everyone conditioned to listen to a rapping ni—a," expressing how rap is often the only medium through which Black voices are heard and acknowledged on a larger scale.

African American men are also stereotypically expected to be naturally talented rappers, which is obviously not always the case. In *Sorry to Bother You*, Cassius is pushed by the corporate elites to perform for them, despite him insisting he is an embarrassingly bad rapper. After a few unsuccessful verses of trivial rhymes, the protagonist settles on rhythmically repeating the words "ni—a" and "shit" in various combinations. The nearly all-white crowd cheers him on and chants the improvised lyrics right back, embracing the banality, while being troublingly comfortable with shouting the n-word.

Afro-Surrealist films are full of intertextual references and this is not limited to just hip-hop, other works of popular culture, or celebrities. They often bring up historical figures, events and iconography, which the viewer is required to be familiar with in order to grasp all of the given text's meanings. Clips such as the aforementioned "The Story of O.J." or "This Is America" bring back images of slavery, segregation and later instances of systemic discrimination and violence (a reenactment of the 2015 Charleston church shooting in Gambino's video is worth noting), 'weaponizing' them in order to comment on how the issues of racism are far from resolved in contemporary society—Jay-Z laments in the chorus of "O.J." that no matter how rich and successful he becomes, internally he feels he is still subjected to discrimination, just with different labels added to the n-word. Also notable are the historical allusions in Jordan Peele's films, which often enhance the eery, oppressive atmosphere of the scenes—a grisly parody of a slave auction in *Get Out* or the numerous images referring back to the dark realities of the Ronald Reagan era in *Us* (see Marcotte), to name a few.

To present how this specific intertextuality, often strongly associated with Black culture and history, can be a crucial element of the narrative, one may

also look at the dialogue in *Atlanta*. Below I present a piece of a dialogue from the very first episode—this is a scene in which Earn, desperate for money, visits his cousin Alfred with an offer of working as his manager. It also serves as an introduction of the major characters to viewers:

Earn: I don't want a handout. I want to manage you.

Alfred: Manage me? You know where the word "manage" come from?

Earn: "Manus," Latin for hand.

Alfred: Probably, but I'm gonna say no for the purpose of my argument. "Manage" come from the word "man," and, uh, that ain't really your lane.

Earn: My lane?

Alfred: Yeah, man, I need Malcolm. You too Martin. You know what they did to him? They killed him.

Earn: Didn't they kill Malcolm too?

Darius: Oh, no, no, no, they say that. But ain't nobody seen the body since the funeral.

Earn: That's how funerals work. Alfred, you already Malcolm, okay? You have that already. What you really need is a silent wild card, somebody who's about the money, the opportunity, who can play both sides if needed.

Darius: Oh, like Don Lemon. (1.1: The Big Bang)

This short, quick-witted exchange requires the viewer to have some basic knowledge about who Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were, as well as strong connotations with what their names represent. The off-color reference to liberal journalist Don Lemon made by Darius seems like a minor stab at the figure's controversial centrist views, however it is not as significant here. The major purpose these references serve is establishing character. Earn is labeled as the 'Martin' of the group, meaning the more pacifist, good-natured intellectual (also proven by his knowledge of the exact etymology of the word "manager"). Alfred establishes himself as a strong believer in traditional, aggressive masculinity; therefore, he is the 'Malcolm.' Finally, Darius' otherworldly comments and doubts about whether Malcolm X is actually dead, establish him as the oddball 'conspiracy nut' of the gang. This is just one example of *Atlanta's* continuous use of intertextuality as an inseparable part of its storytelling, which extends to other Afro-Surrealist texts.

The Politics of Afro-Surrealism

Both Afro-Surrealist films and the Black Lives Matter movement running parallel to their increasing popularity are often very critical of American capitalism and expose how much of it is built upon discriminatory politics. Of course not all artists associated with Afro-Surrealism up to this point are avid revolutionaries, seeing that Jay-Z, for instance, is a billionaire who in “The Story of O.J.” criticizes the injustices of capitalism, while also endorsing the spirit of entrepreneurship and seeing the strategic exploitation of the free market as the only means of breaking the cycle of hardships for African Americans.

Generally, the themes of poverty, class struggle and criminalization are ever-present in Afro-Surrealism, as already suggested by their association with hood films. Much of *Atlanta*, especially the first season, focuses on Earn’s economic precarity. He is a college dropout who struggles to hold a job, cannot afford to support his girlfriend and child, so he continues to live in a storage unit; a single dinner date can put him on the edge of bankruptcy (the episode “Go for Broke”), and later he also has ongoing parole obligations, such as expensive classes and drug tests. This situation appears inescapable, a prime example of a “glass ceiling” determining the social position of a huge portion of African Americans (Urbańska 2019: 64), which is effectively summed up in the episode “The Streisand Effect.” After failing to pawn his cellphone, Earn is manipulated by Darius into joining an elaborate dog breeding venture, which promises returns in a matter of months. Earn responds to this long-term plan in simple and honest words: “Poor people don’t have time for investments, because poor people are too busy trying not to be poor.”

However, the most explicit anti-capitalist statement of Afro-Surrealism is by far *Sorry to Bother You*. This is expected for those familiar with the film’s director. Boots Riley is an outspoken communist, whose parents were social justice activists, he himself joined the Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party at the age of 15, and he founded the very political rap group, The Coup (with hit singles and albums such as “Kill My Landlord,” “5 Million Ways to Kill A CEO,”

or “The Guillotine”). He stated in multiple interviews that he expects his debut film to inspire unionizing and revolutionary attitudes (see e.g. *Democracy Now!*). *Sorry to Bother You*, yet again, features a protagonist in a bad financial situation (Cassius lives in a garage at the start of the film) and working a menial job. Telemarketing as presented in the film can be seen as a typical job of late capitalism, since it involves the coercion of incidental people into buying products and services they would probably not even think about otherwise, disguised behind false corporate politeness—the titular phrase “sorry to bother you.” The employees must follow one rule: “Stick To The Script.” This “script” can also be understood in a metaphorical sense as the fixed determinism of the system—by using his “white man’s voice,” Cassius manages to break the script of capitalism and access the higher social strata. The world of the wealthy elites is presented as ugly and appalling, defined by drug abuse, sexual orgies and, of course, exploitation of workers taken to the extreme by the invention of the dehumanized Equisapiens slaves. Disillusioned with the vices of the capitalist world, Cassius decides to go back to his unionizing friends, which he rejected before, saving his soul by joining the revolution, whatever the cost may be for him.

Interestingly, this revolutionary dimension of Afro-Surrealism could also be connected to Bakhtin’s commentary on the political underpinnings of carnival, which were inseparable from the previously discussed grotesque aesthetics. The scholar saw the medieval carnival as a form of social resistance: a bustle of lively folk culture running in opposition to the dominant narratives, hierarchies and decorum of the ‘old order’ represented by the aristocracy, nobles and the clergy (Bakhtin 154). It used excessive, corporeal imagery of gluttony and wastefulness in order to, for example, lampoon the rituals of the ruling classes, with laughter and folly seen as challenges to “the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology” (74–75). It is not hard to see Afro-Surrealism as possibly a new incarnation of the carnivalesque—defiant, unapologetic works of popular culture which serve both as boundless entertainment and a challenge to an

unjust system built on a dangerous marriage of capitalism and white supremacy.

Anti-capitalism is often intersectional with a distrust towards state institutions such as the police. The Black Lives Matter movement openly advocates for defunding American police forces, which is understandable, knowing their history of racist violence and the overpolicing of minority neighborhoods during controversial programs, such as “the war on drugs” of the Reagan era. The primary function of police, since its inception, has been protecting private property, the state’s interests and monopolies. As Kropotkin put it:

Magistrature, police, army, public institution, finance, all serve one God—capital; all have but one object—to facilitate the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist. (Kropotkin 16)

Afro-Surrealist films never present the police in a positive light. They are either nowhere to be found in situations of need, bring discomfort or a threat of violence and death, or are a depersonalized mob which breaks up peaceful protests, as in *Sorry to Bother You*. The only slightly developed character of a police officer is Molina from *Blindspotting*, who initially appears as a bit of a caricature, obsessed with his job, which he treats as an identity (his garage is full of police-related memorabilia), but his discernible look of terror at the prospect of death during the confrontation with Collin may be seen as humanizing.

Last but not least, Afro-Surrealist films often explore the complexities of Black identity and challenge orthodox ideas about what it means to be Black. Whether it is by the criticism of toxic masculinity found in the tradition of gangsta rap, to which *Atlanta*’s Earn falls victim when attempting to prove himself as up to the standards of the violent world of hip-hop (episodes “The Club” and “North of the Border”), while also being complicit in this toxicity; or by the inclusion of black queer and female voices, most notably in many sketches of *Random Acts of Flyness*. *Atlanta* also discussed how ethnic identity can be erased and never reclaimed (“Juneteenth”), how Blackness can be in fact

chosen (the conversation on biraciality between Vanessa and Christina in “Helen”), and how intersectional issues complicate matters of injustice even further, since all minority groups cannot automatically be allies just based on their experience of discrimination (accusations of transphobia, homophobia and misogyny thrown at Alfred in “B.A.N”). The intricacies of identity politics in Afro-Surrealist works could warrant a separate analysis.

Conclusions

The trend of Afro-Surrealism is a refreshing development in the context of African American popular culture, which has been dominated by stark realism, pathos and martyrdom for many years. Following D. Scot Miller’s ideas about the Black Experience being surreal in and of itself, these works definitely succeed in emphasizing this surreality, with their flair for bold stylistic experimentation, dark humor, visual inventiveness, unpredictable storytelling, thematic complexity and creative ways of tackling issues of social relevance. They may not all be spectacular in terms of popularity—*Random Acts of Flyness*, for instance, was cancelled after only six episodes, which is unsurprising, due to its unorthodox form, elaborate intertextuality, and challenging themes and ideas, which may have alienated many non-black viewers (see Narcisse). But the success of Jordan Peele’s horror-comedies, the prevalence of Afro-Surreal elements in music videos, and the renewal of *Atlanta* for at least two more seasons, enable high expectations for more developments in the style. There are certainly still other aspects of the Black Experience that need to be addressed, calling for similarly complex artistic representation. The analyzed works may be just the beginning of a larger phenomenon, which will create even more space for unrestrained expression of marginalized voices, who will be more widely heard and acknowledged. Afro-Surrealism appears primarily as works made by black people for black people, but with their aesthetic uniqueness and effectively communicated ideas and emotions, they have

potential to reach diverse audiences and help build empathy for experiences that might be vastly different from their own.

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Abstract

In the article, I analyse the implementation of Afro-Surrealist stylistic elements in mainstream American media, such as films, TV shows, and music videos. This phenomenon runs parallel to the Black Lives Matter movement, the emergence of new discourses on identity politics, and a general flair for experimentation among African American artists in popular culture. I begin by tracing the history of ideas on African counterparts to Surrealism, from poets of the *Négritude* movement to D. Scot's Miller 2009 "Afrosurreal Manifesto" (which popularized the term), and the developments that followed. I then proceed to produce a set of methodological categories, which can be used to analyze contemporary forms of Afro-Surrealism in media. These categories include: the grotesque, intergenericity, intertextuality, and anti-capitalist themes. I explore these ideas in confrontation with many examples, noting the different ways these strategies are applied in recent works of African American artists (such as Donald Glover's TV series *Atlanta* and Boots Riley's film *Sorry to Bother You*), in particular the unique ways in which they combine entertainment with social commentary.