

Cinematic Futures: Afrofuturist Animation, Immersive Technologies, and Black Speculative Joy

Rosalind Murphy, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Portugal

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper explores how contemporary Afrofuturist animated works, including *EnterGalactic* (Netflix, 2022), *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (Sony theatrical, 2023), and *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* (Disney+, 2023) employ immersive technologies such as AI enhanced visual effects, 2.5D animation, and metaverse-inspired world-building to redefine cinematic storytelling and Black speculative culture. Positioned at the intersection of cultural studies, media studies, technology, and digital humanities, this interdisciplinary study investigates how these works present diverse expressions of Black speculative futures that range from Afrofuturist romance and multiverse heroism to reimagined African heritage grounded in diasporic memory, emotional resonance, and collective joy. Using comparative case study analysis and thematic readings, the paper draws on Afrofuturism, technoculture, and narrative design to demonstrate how these animated films serve as innovative storytelling approaches that challenge dominant narratives, reimagine identity, and expand cultural agency. It highlights the leadership of digitally native Generation Z creators and audiences in shaping participatory, engaging stories created and shared across streaming, social media, and interactive technologies. By situating Afrofuturist storytelling within broader conversations on cultural representation, technological innovation, and speculative world-building, this paper offers a model for understanding how animation can function as both a cinematic and socio-cultural tool. These works entertain, educate, empower, and provide celebrated visions of the future that center Black imagination, emotional depth, and creative sovereignty. Ultimately, it argues that Afrofuturist animation exemplifies the transformative power of media and technology to imagine inclusive, culturally resonant futures that bridge digital creativity and global storytelling.

Keywords: afrofuturism, animation, immersive technology, speculative, film, digital culture

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In recent years, Afrofuturism has re-emerged as one of the most dynamic cultural movements shaping global media, technology, and speculative storytelling. While the monumental success of *Black Panther* (2018) helped propel Afrofuturist aesthetics into mainstream visibility, this resurgence extends far beyond a single franchise. This intellectual tradition, stretching from Sun Ra's cosmic jazz explorations (*Sun Ra*, 1972 [Album]) to the critical frameworks of scholars like bell hooks and Mark Dery (Dery, 1994; hooks, 1990, 1992), has long positioned Black creativity as a site of futuristic speculation and cultural resistance. Contemporary creators across film, animation, gaming, VR, and digital art have begun using immersive media to articulate complex visions of Black futures rooted in cultural memory, technological experimentation, and diasporic imagination.

This paper explores how Afrofuturist animation, in particular *Entergalactic* (Netflix, 2022), *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (Sony, 2023), and *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* (Disney+/Triggerfish, 2023), engages with world-building, identity, and technological innovation to propose new forms of narrative sovereignty and self-representation. The relevance of this work in today's socio-cultural and technological climate is prominent worldwide. As digital platforms, AI systems, and algorithmic ecosystems increasingly structure everyday life, questions of representation and cultural agency become inseparable from questions of technological power. Afrofuturist animation offers a space where Black creators and communities can reclaim ownership over history, aesthetics, and speculative possibility, while countering centuries of cultural erasure and imaginative constraint. These works present futurity as a continuation of a long history of African and diasporic innovation, artistry, and philosophical inquiry. They propose futures in which Black creativity, technological fluency, and emotional intelligence are central to global narratives of progress.

This paper argues that Afrofuturist animation constitutes a critical site for cultural speculation, digital experimentation, and generational identity formation. Through immersive technologies, experimental aesthetics, and transmedia storytelling, contemporary animated works articulate a multi-layered vision of Black speculative futures that is both celebratory and politically meaningful. By examining three major case studies, this research reveals how Afrofuturist animation constructs new cinematic languages, redefines diasporic identity, and engages the emerging "Metaverse Generation," a cohort for whom hybrid identities, immersive platforms, and digital participation are foundational aspects of everyday life.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together Afrofuturism, Technoculture, Animation Studies, Cultural Translation, and Media Studies. Together, these frameworks illuminate how contemporary Afrofuturist animation negotiates technology, identity, and world-building across global digital landscapes.

Afrofuturism and Afrofuturism 2.0

Afrofuturism provides the central lens through which this research interprets animation as a medium of Black speculative imagination. Scholars such as Alondra Nelson (Nelson, 2002), Ytasha Womack (Womack, 2013), and Reynaldo Anderson (Anderson, 2016) describe Afrofuturism as a cultural practice that merges ancestral memory, technological innovation, and creative reworlding. The foundations of this movement can be traced to pioneers like Sun

Ra (Sun Ra, 1974 [Film]). Later scholars like Mark Dery (Dery, 1994) and cultural critics like bell hooks (hooks, 1990, 1992) provide critical touchstones for analyzing animation as a space of aesthetic innovation and political reclamation. Anderson's notion of Afrofuturism 2.0 includes AI, gaming, social media, and metaverse environments, where Black storytelling intersects with digital authorship.

Technoculture and Digital Power

Technoculture scholarship interrogates how digital media participate in producing and regulating race, identity, and social possibility (Nakamura, 2007; Noble, 2018). Safiya Umoja Noble has demonstrated how algorithmic architectures often reproduce racial hierarchies rather than dismantle them. Afrofuturist animation, in this context, becomes a site of technological resistance, where creators subvert algorithmic marginalization by crafting alternative digital worlds rooted in Black agency and cultural sovereignty.

Animation as Speculative Language

Animation Studies (Ryan, 2001) positions animated worlds as socio-political terrains where identity, memory, and cultural imagination are renegotiated. Animation is not merely a representational tool but a speculative engine, capable of visualizing new modes of existence unconstrained by realism or conventional narrative logic. In Afrofuturist contexts, animation becomes a technology of reworlding: a space where myth, emotion, and digital aesthetics converge to shape alternative futures.

Cultural Translation and Global Diaspora

Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity and representation (Hall, 1997) informs this paper's analysis of how Afrofuturist narratives circulate across global platforms. These frameworks shed light on the interaction between local cultural specificities and global diasporic consumption, revealing how Afrofuturist aesthetics negotiate cultural translation within international streaming economies.

Black Speculative Joy

This study extends Afrofuturist theory by centering joy as a critical analytical framework. Drawing on cultural theorists who examine Black pleasure and creativity as political acts, these animations deliberately move beyond trauma-centered narratives to imagine futures where Black emotional depth, laughter, love, and artistic expression are normative rather than exceptional. Black speculative joy represents both aesthetic practice and political intervention, using animation's capacity for wonder to envision futures where Black flourishing is central.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining thematic analysis, visual analysis, digital ethnography, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and audience review. These methods collectively offer a comprehensive lens for understanding how Black speculative futures are constructed, circulated, and experienced in Afrofuturist animation.

Thematic Analysis: Identifies recurring motifs across the three case studies, including technological liberation, cultural heritage, hybrid identity, joy, and Afrocentric futurism. For

example, in *Entergalactic* (Netflix, 2022), thematic analysis highlights how Jabari and Meadow's romantic narrative underscores Black love as a site of speculative possibility (Nelson, 2002; Womack, 2013). In *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (Sony, 2023), multiverse storytelling emphasizes diasporic identity and relational heroism (Hall, 1997).

Visual Analysis: Examines animation techniques, color palettes, perspective, and sound design to understand immersive world-building. This includes 2.5D visual layering and painterly textures in *Entergalactic*, multiverse stylistic shifts combining hand-drawn and CGI animation in *Spider-Verse*, and culturally rooted Afrocentric aesthetics in *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* (Disney+, 2023) (Anderson, 2016; Ryan, 2001).

Digital Ethnography: Observes Generation Z audiences engaging with Afrofuturist narratives on streaming platforms, fan forums, and social media. For example, TikTok, Instagram and Reddit discussions around *Spider-Verse* reveal active engagement with Afro-Latino identity, multiverse dynamics, and fan interpretations of heroism.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Analyzes interviews, press coverage, and scholarly debates to uncover ideological frameworks and representational politics. CDA examined interviews with Kid Cudi and Kenya Barris, Netflix press materials for *Entergalactic*, and commentary on the pan-African narratives in *Kizazi Moto*.

Audience Review: Evaluates reception, engagement, and interpretation to assess narrative impact and cultural resonance. Reviews on Disney+ and fan commentary on social media highlight appreciation for African storytelling, Afrocentric futurity, and the emotional depth of characters across all three works.

Ethical considerations include respecting privacy in digital ethnography, avoiding misrepresentation of creators, and analyzing media content responsibly.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: *Entergalactic* – Afrofuturist Romance and Urban Digital Realism

Entergalactic (Netflix, 2022), created by Kid Cudi and Kenya Barris, represents a distinctive contribution to Afrofuturist animation through its hybrid form as a feature-length visual album. The film blends romantic storytelling, music-driven narration, and a stylized vision of contemporary New York City to explore Black love, creative identity, and emotional futurity. Rather than positioning futurism as distant or technologically spectacular, *Entergalactic* situates Afrofuturism within the everyday textures of urban life, artistic labor, and intimate relationships (Dery, 1994; Womack, 2013).

The narrative centers on Jabari, a graffiti artist transitioning into professional success, and Meadow, a photographer navigating emotional vulnerability and creative independence. Their relationship becomes a form of world-building in itself, presenting romance as a speculative practice that reimagines Black masculinity, tenderness, and mutual care. This emphasis on emotional intimacy aligns with Afrofuturist traditions that foreground interiority, joy, and imagination as political acts (Hall, 1997; Nelson, 2002).

Visually, the film employs a 2.5D animation aesthetic that merges painterly textures with digital depth, creating a cityscape that functions as an emotional landscape. Color palettes,

spatial distortions, and movement respond directly to the characters' inner states, transforming New York into a living, affective environment. This immersive visual strategy reinforces animation's capacity to externalize emotion and memory in ways that exceed live-action realism (Ryan, 2001).

Music operates as the film's emotional core. Kid Cudi's soundtrack is integrated into the narrative structure, with lyrics, rhythm, and mood shaping transitions between reality, dream states, and imaginative sequences. Cosmic graffiti worlds, floating cityscapes, and surreal visual interludes merge urban culture with outer-space aesthetics, reinforcing Afrofuturism's fusion of the cosmic and the everyday (Sun Ra, 1972 [Album]; Womack, 2013).

Ultimately, *Entergalactic* reframes futurity as relational rather than monumental. Its Afrofuturism is grounded in creative labor, love, and emotional openness, asserting that Black speculative futures are built through intimacy, artistic expression, and digital imagination.

Case Study 2: Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse – Afrofuturist Heroism and Multiversal Identity Futures

Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse (Sony, 2023), directed by Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, and Justin K. Thompson, extends Afrofuturist inquiry into the domain of superhero animation through its radical use of the multiverse as both narrative device and metaphor for diasporic identity. Centered on Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino teenager navigating family expectations, cultural belonging, and heroic responsibility, the film positions youth identity as inherently hybrid, networked, and unfinished (Hall, 1997; Nakamura, 2007).

The multiverse functions as a visual and conceptual representation of diaspora, multiplicity, and self-determination. Each universe operates according to its own aesthetic logic, rendered through a hybrid animation style combining hand-drawn illustration, CGI, collage, and glitch-based effects. These stylistic differences are not merely decorative; they encode cultural, emotional, and ethical distinctions between worlds, transforming animation into a language of identity and difference (Ryan, 2001).

Miles' journey challenges traditional superhero exceptionalism. His heroism is relational rather than solitary, shaped by intergenerational dialogue, community ties, and ethical resistance to predetermined narratives of sacrifice. The film explicitly questions who gets to define canon, destiny, and narrative authority, aligning with Afrofuturist critiques of dominant storytelling structures (Anderson, 2016; Dery, 1994).

Sound design and music further reinforce the film's thematic concerns. An eclectic soundtrack blending hip-hop, orchestral scoring, and global musical influences mirrors the film's cultural hybridity and emotional range. Music becomes a connective tissue across universes, emphasizing continuity amid fragmentation.

Through its layered storytelling and experimental aesthetics, *Across the Spider-Verse* demonstrates how animation can articulate complex negotiations of race, youth, and futurity. It asserts that Black and Afro-Latino identities are not deviations from heroic norms but central to imagining expansive, inclusive futures.

The Spider-People themselves embody multiversal hybridity, with each version of Spider-Man rooted in distinct cultural, geographic, and narrative contexts. Their intersecting journeys

across universes underscore how location, identity, and relationality co-construct heroism, suggesting that selfhood is both multiply situated and collaboratively negotiated.

Case Study 3: Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire – Afrofuturist Anthology Series and Pan-African Speculative Futures

Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire (Disney+, 2023), executive produced by Peter Ramsey and Tendayi Nyeke, stands as one of the most significant recent contributions to Afrofuturist animation by foregrounding African-led speculative storytelling. The ten-part anthology brings together creators from Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Egypt, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, each articulating distinct visions of futurity grounded in local histories, mythologies, and socio-political concerns (Nelson, 2002; Womack, 2013).

The anthology format allows for a plurality of speculative imaginaries. Stories feature AI deities, robotic ancestors, interstellar travelers, ecological guardians, and mythic figures, presenting technology not as a rupture from tradition but as an extension of ancestral knowledge. This narrative orientation challenges Western science fiction's frequent opposition between spirituality and technology, instead proposing a continuum between past, present, and future (Dery, 1994; Sun Ra, 1974 [Film]).

Visually, *Kizazi Moto* is marked by stylistic diversity. Animation techniques range from sculptural 3D forms to painterly 2D aesthetics inspired by local artistic traditions. These visual strategies assert cultural specificity while embracing digital experimentation, positioning animation as a tool for cultural preservation and speculative innovation (Ryan, 2001).

Music and sound design further anchor the series in Afrocentric futurity. Afrobeat rhythms, electronic soundscapes, choral arrangements, and traditional percussion function as immersive narrative elements, reinforcing emotional resonance and cultural continuity. For digitally native Generation Z audiences, the series offers speculative futures that are participatory, culturally grounded, and resistant to homogenizing global media logic (Nakamura, 2007).

Kizazi Moto reclaims African futurity as sovereign and self-authored. By centering African creators and knowledge systems, the series disrupts dominant global narratives and affirms Afrofuturism as a living, evolving practice rooted in joy, resilience, and imaginative freedom.

Conclusion

Contemporary Afrofuturist animation demonstrates how Black speculative storytelling can be simultaneously culturally rooted, technologically innovative, and emotionally resonant. Through *Entergalactic*, *Spider-Verse*, and *Kizazi Moto*, creators leverage animation's unique affordances, visual experimentation, immersive aesthetics, and transmedia reach, to construct sovereign futures that center Black and African diasporic identities, joy, and agency.

These works challenge traditional paradigms of futurity by blending relational intimacy, multiversal identity, and Pan-African storytelling. They illustrate that animation is not merely a medium for entertainment but a strategic tool for cultural sovereignty, allowing communities to imagine, enact, and share futures that reflect their histories, aspirations, and values. For the digitally native "Metaverse Generation," these narratives offer conceptual frameworks to negotiate identity, community, and creativity across interconnected global media ecosystems.

Ultimately, Afrofuturist animation asserts that Black futures are real, inventive, sovereign, and central to global narrative possibility. By centering joy, emotional depth, and digital innovation, these works embody a transformative vision of cinema as a site for speculative liberation, artistic sovereignty, and cultural imagination.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the EDP Foundation International Grant for the Lisbon Consortium and the Research Centre for Communication and Culture (CECC) at Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Sincere gratitude is extended to the doctoral supervisors, Professor Adriana Martins and Professor Carla Ganito, for their invaluable guidance and insightful feedback throughout this research. Appreciation is also expressed to the reviewers of *The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture* for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this work.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The core ideas, analytical arguments, case study details, theoretical framework, conference dialogue, and original research insights originated from the author's own work and presentation. The DeepSeekAI tool functioned strictly as an editorial, organizational, and drafting aid in the preparation of this manuscript.

References

- Anderson, R. (2016). *Afrofuturism 2.0: The rise of astro-blackness*. Lexington Books.
- Dery, M. (1994). Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. In M. Dery (Ed.), *Flame wars: The discourse of cyberculture* (pp. 179–222). Duke University Press.
- Entergalactic*. (2022). [TV special]. Netflix.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. South End Press.
- Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire*. (2023). [TV series]. Disney+ / Triggerfish Animation.
- Nakamura, L. (2007). *Digitizing race: Visual cultures of the Internet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Nelson, A. (2002). Introduction: Future texts. *Social Text*, 20(2), 1–15.
- Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York University Press.
- Ryan, M.-L. (2001). *Narrative as virtual reality: Immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*. (2023). [Film]. Sony Pictures Animation.
- Sun Ra. (1972). *Space Is the Place* [Album]. Impulse! Records.
- Sun Ra. (1974). *Space Is the Place* [Film]. Saturn Research.
- Womack, Y. (2013). *Afrofuturism: The world of black sci-fi and fantasy culture*. Lawrence Hill Books.

Contact email: s-rmurphy@ucp.pt