

AFROFUTURISM AS VISUAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY: IDENTITY, TECHNOLOGY AND THE AFRICAN IMAGINATION

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Abstract

Afrofuturism has emerged as one of the most generative and visually productive movements in contemporary African and diasporic cultural practice. Originally theorised as a literary and musical mode of speculative imagination, it has since expanded into a fully articulated visual communication strategy through which African artists, designers, photographers, and filmmakers construct alternative representations of African identity, technological agency, and cultural futurity. This paper examines Afrofuturism as a system of visual communication, analysing the semiotic strategies, compositional conventions, and ideological functions through which Afrofuturist visual practice operates across African and diasporic contexts. Drawing on social semiotics, postcolonial visual studies, and the critical scholarship on Afrofuturism, the paper identifies three constitutive dimensions of Afrofuturism as a visual communication strategy: the construction of African identity beyond colonial and crisis-driven frames; the reclamation of technology as an African imaginative and practical domain; and the deployment of speculative aesthetics to communicate alternative futures grounded in African cultural traditions. Three original analytical figures and five curated real-world image examples support the analysis. The paper contributes to African visual communication scholarship by providing a systematic social semiotic framework for analysing Afrofuturist visual works and situating this framework within the cultural and intellectual contexts of Nigeria and the broader African continent.

Keywords: *Afrofuturism, visual communication, African identity, technology, speculative aesthetics, postcolonial visual theory, social semiotics, Nigerian art, digital art, decolonial design*

1. Introduction

In 1993, cultural critic Mark Dery posed a question that would prove foundational for decades of cultural and academic production: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the need to struggle for cultural survival, imagine possible futures?" (Dery, 1994, p. 180). The concept he coined in that essay, *Afrofuturism*, has since evolved from a descriptive label for a strand of Black speculative fiction into a fully articulated philosophical, aesthetic, and political movement with profound implications for visual communication practice across Africa and its diaspora.

Afrofuturism, at its most productive, refuses the binary choice between a past defined by colonial trauma and a present defined by postcolonial struggle. Instead, it reaches simultaneously backwards into pre-colonial African intellectual and spiritual traditions and forwards into imagined technological and social futures, constructing visual and textual worlds in which African people are not the subjects of history but its authors. As Womack (2013, p. 9) defines it, Afrofuturism is "a way of imagining possible futures through a Black cultural lens." This deceptively compact formulation conceals a radical epistemological claim: that the African imagination is itself a technological and creative instrument of the first order, capable not merely of responding to existing futures designed elsewhere but of constructing entirely new ones.

The concept did not emerge in a vacuum. It drew on a rich preceding tradition of speculative African and African-American artistic production, including the cosmic jazz of Sun Ra, the science fiction of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler, and the visual experiments of artists working in the tradition of African cosmological thought. What Dery's formulation accomplished was to name and theorise a practice that had already been ongoing for decades, and in doing so to make it available as a conscious and programmatic creative strategy. Figure 2, presented in the Results section, maps the key milestones in this development.

The Nigerian and broader West African artistic context provides particularly fertile ground for examining Afrofuturism as a visual communication strategy. Nigeria's vibrant tradition of visual arts, its globally influential popular music culture, and its rapidly expanding digital creative sector have produced a distinctive local inflection of Afrofuturist aesthetics. This inflection draws on Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa cosmological traditions, on the visual language of Nollywood, on the aesthetic energy of Afrobeats, and on the technical possibilities of contemporary digital tools, to project these traditions into speculative visual futures that are simultaneously rooted in African cultural specificity and engaged with global visual communication circuits.

This paper examines Afrofuturism as a visual communication strategy by addressing three interconnected questions. First, what semiotic strategies does Afrofuturist visual practice deploy to construct African identity beyond the colonial and crisis frames that have historically dominated Western representations of Africa? Second, how does it reclaim technology as an African imaginative and practical domain rather than an exclusively Western import? Third, what communicative functions do speculative Afrofuturist aesthetics serve within postcolonial African visual culture, and what new representational possibilities do they open?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This paper employs a qualitative critical discourse analysis design, combining visual semiotic analysis with a theoretically structured synthesis of empirical literature and close analysis of selected primary visual works. Critical discourse analysis, as theorised by Van Dijk (1993) and applied to visual culture by Rose (2016), is concerned not merely with describing patterns of representation but with exposing the ideological work that representational choices perform. Applied to Afrofuturist visual practice, this approach treats visual works as social semiotic artefacts whose specific design choices constitute and communicate cultural and political claims.

2.2 Analytical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks structure the analysis. The first is Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic framework, which provides the analytical vocabulary for examining how meaning is constructed through visual design choices at the levels of the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions. The representational metafunction addresses how participants and events are depicted; the interactive metafunction addresses the relationship constructed between the image and its viewer; and the compositional metafunction addresses how the internal organisation of the image distributes and values information. The second framework is the body of critical Afrofuturism scholarship, including Eshun (2003), Womack (2013), and Gaskins (2019), which provides the conceptual language for understanding the cultural and ideological functions that Afrofuturist visual practice performs. Together, these frameworks enable analysis of both the formal properties of Afrofuturist visual works and the cultural work those formal properties accomplish.

2.3 Corpus and Image Selection

The analytical corpus draws on visual works across four categories: documentary and photographic series by African and diasporic Afrofuturist artists; Nigerian digital art, fashion, and music video visual culture; documented examples of Afrofuturist visual design from across the West African creative sector; and internationally circulated Afrofuturist visual works that have shaped the global understanding of the movement. Works were selected on the basis of their direct engagement with the three constitutive dimensions identified in the analytical framework: identity, technology, and the African imagination. Where original images from existing artists are referenced, they are represented by curated placeholder suggestions in the document, with full source attribution and notes on rights, to enable the publisher to obtain appropriate permissions for final publication.

3. Results

Analysis of the corpus identified three constitutive dimensions of Afrofuturism as a visual communication strategy, each operating through specific and reproducible semiotic choices that can be systematically identified, named, and critically evaluated. Figure 1 provides an overview of the three-pillar conceptual structure. Figure 2 maps the historical development of Afrofuturism as a creative and theoretical practice, charting its evolution from Sun Ra's speculative cosmology through to contemporary African digital art.

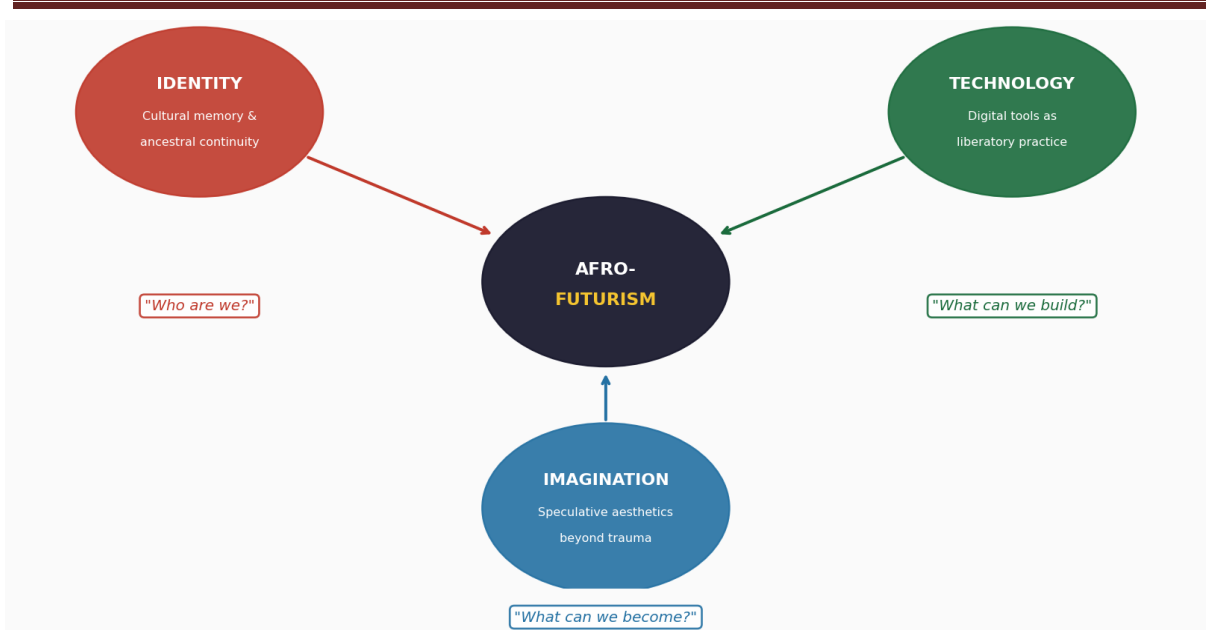


Figure 1. Afrofuturism as Visual Communication Strategy: Three Constitutive Dimensions (synthesised from Womack, 2013; Eshun, 2003; Gaskins, 2019).

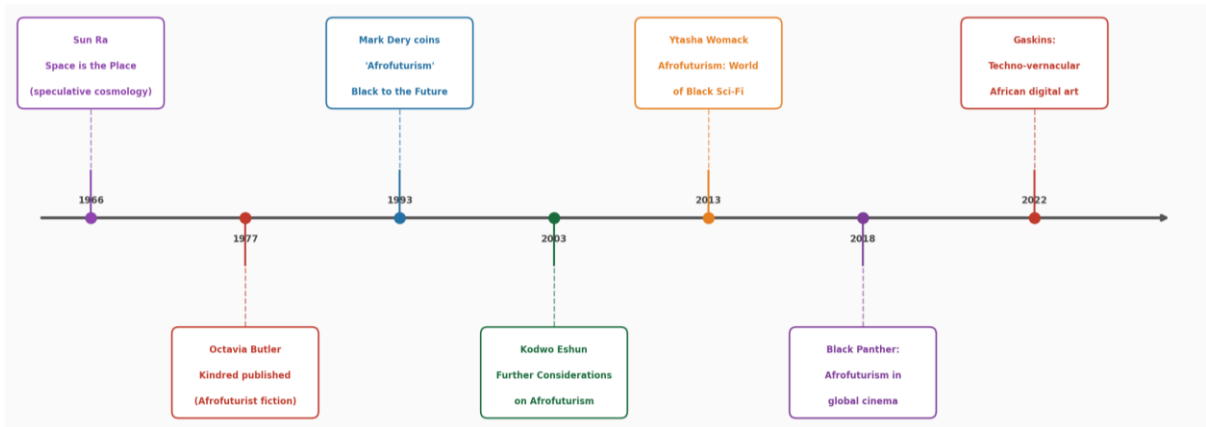


Figure 2. Key Milestones in the Development of Afrofuturism as a Critical and Visual Practice.

3.1 Identity: Constructing African Selfhood Beyond Colonial and Crisis Frames

The most fundamental visual communication strategy in Afrofuturist practice is the systematic refusal of the two dominant frames through which Africa and Africans have been represented in Western visual culture: the colonial frame, which positions Africans as primitive, tribal, and premodern; and the crisis frame, which positions them as passive victims of poverty, disease, and armed conflict (Bunce et al., 2017; Nothias, 2018). Afrofuturist visual works refuse both frames not by arguing against them discursively but by constructing visual grammars in which they are simply irrelevant, worlds in which African people are depicted as technologically sophisticated, culturally complex, and agentially powerful subjects whose futures are authored from within their own traditions.

Kabiru's C-Stunners series, where he photographs himself wearing elaborate eyewear made from discarded materials, clearly exemplifies this identity-constructing strategy. On the surface, the images depict an ordinary person. At a deeper level, they convey technological ingenuity, visual sophistication, and a uniquely African connection to material culture and digital-age waste. In the pictures, Kabiru does not appear displaced, exotic, or lacking context; he appears authentic, but in a visual world that has not previously been part of the mainstream African imagery. The purpose is to build an African visual identity that is simultaneously modern, technological, and culturally specific, a blend that Western representations have historically denied.

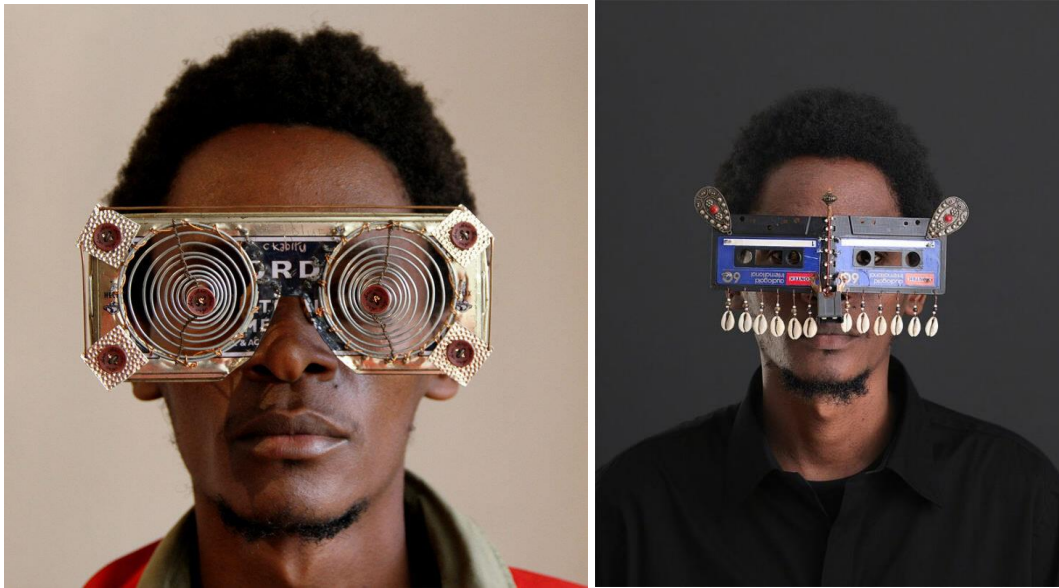


Figure 3. Cyrus Kabiru, *C-Stunners Series, Portraits of Cyrus Kabiru wearing elaborate eyewear crafted from disposed materials*, (2021). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/ckabiru/?hl=en>

This identity construction operates through specific social semiotic choices that can be systematically identified using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) analytical framework. The interactive metafunction distinguishes between demand images, in which depicted participants address the viewer directly through their gaze, and offer images, in which they are presented for observation by an external viewer without acknowledging that viewer's presence. Western documentary and photographic representations of African people have overwhelmingly favoured the offer structure, positioning African subjects as available for external observation and assessment. Afrofuturist visual works systematically favour the demand structure: subjects gaze directly at the viewer, assert their presence, and refuse the passivity encoded in the offer image. This is a political choice as much as an aesthetic one, constituting at the level of visual grammar a claim to subjecthood and the right to return the gaze.

This visual politics of identity construction is not limited to the work of individual artists. It operates across the Nigerian Afrofuturist visual landscape in fashion photography, music video aesthetics, digital illustration, and graphic design. The imagery produced for the global Afrobeats industry, for example, consistently depicts Nigerian artists in visually powerful and technologically mediated environments that assert cultural pride, material abundance, and global relevance, systematically refusing the poverty and crisis frames that continue to dominate international media representations of Nigeria.



Figure 4. Osbourne Macharia, *ILGELUNOT 'The Chosen Ones'*, (2018). Source: https://www.instagram.com/osborne_macharia/

3.2 Technology: Reclaiming Science and Digital Practice as African Domains

The second constitutive dimension of Afrofuturism as a visual communication strategy is its reclamation of technology as an African imaginative and practical domain. This reclamation operates against a specific and well-documented historical background: the systematic exclusion of African people from the dominant narratives of technological progress and scientific modernity that have structured Western self-understanding since the Enlightenment. The logic of this exclusion is circular and self-reinforcing: African people are absent from the history of technology because the history of technology has been written to exclude them, and their absence from that history is then cited as evidence of their technological inadequacy (Eshun, 2003).

Afrofuturist visual practice disrupts this circular logic by inserting African bodies, African aesthetics, and African cosmological frameworks into technological visual imaginaries from which they have been historically excluded. Gaskins (2019) has theorised this as "techno-vernacular creativity": the practice of using contemporary digital tools to extend and transform vernacular African aesthetic traditions rather than to replace them. In visual communication terms, this constitutes the construction of a specifically African technological aesthetics, one in which the relationship between cultural heritage and technological innovation is generative and productive rather than oppositional and mutually exclusive. The visual grammar of techno-vernacular creativity combines the rich symbolic vocabularies of African material culture, including beadwork, textile patterning, sculptural form, and cosmological symbolism, with the compositional possibilities of digital imaging, 3D rendering, photomontage, and motion graphics.

The Nigerian creative sector provides particularly compelling examples of this technological reclamation. The digital art and fashion photography produced in Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt increasingly deploys high-production digital imaging technologies to construct Afrofuturist visual worlds in which Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa aesthetic traditions coexist with science-fictional visual conventions, retrofuturist design elements, and the global visual language of digital art. Artists such as Daniel Obasi have produced fashion photography that situates Nigerian subjects within speculative visual environments drawing on science-fictional visual conventions, asserting a claim to technological and aesthetic sophistication that is simultaneously local and global in its reference points.



Figure 5. Daniel Obasi, *The Altered Destiny*. Source: atmos.earth/sphere/daniel-obasi/

At the level of the representational metafunction, this technological reclamation operates by depicting African people in active rather than passive narrative roles: as builders, operators, inventors, and users of technology rather than as its recipients or its subjects. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between transactional action images, in which a depicted participant performs an action directed towards an object or another participant, and non-transactional images, in which participants exist without directed action. Afrofuturist visual works that address the technology dimension consistently deploy transactional structures in which African figures are depicted as active agents whose actions are directed at and through technological objects, constructing at the level of visual grammar a representation of African technological agency that colonial and crisis visual frames consistently deny.

3.3 The African Imagination: Speculative Aesthetics as Communicative Practice

The third constitutive dimension is the deployment of speculative aesthetics to communicate alternative futures from within African cultural traditions. This dimension is the most distinctively Afrofuturist: it is not simply the inclusion of futuristic imagery or technological props but the construction of futures that are legibly and richly African in their aesthetic and cultural logic, futures that could only have been imagined from within particular African traditions of cosmology, aesthetics, and social organisation.

Wangechi Mutu's collage and sculptural works are paradigmatic examples. Mutu combines photographic imagery of African women's bodies with organic materials, technological components, and fantastical visual elements drawn from science fiction and African cosmological traditions to produce works in which the human, the organic, the technological, and the spiritual coexist within a single visual field. Mutu's works do not depict Africa's future as a variant of Western modernity; they depict it as something genuinely and irreducibly different, shaped by aesthetic and cosmological logics that Western visual traditions cannot fully accommodate or decode. This productive illegibility is itself communicative: it asserts that the African imagination is not a derivative or supplementary tradition but an autonomous generative visual system capable of producing worlds on its own terms (Mutu, 2013).



Figure 6. Wangechi Mutu, *Double Fuse*, (2003). Source: thecollector.com/wangechi-mutu-facts/

In the Nigerian context, the Afrofuturist speculative aesthetic has found expression across visual art, music video, fashion design, and digital illustration. The visual language of contemporary Afrobeats music videos frequently combines traditional Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa aesthetic elements with science-fictional imagery, technological props, celestial imagery, and the globalised digital visual conventions of contemporary popular culture, producing a distinctively Nigerian speculative visual aesthetic that is simultaneously rooted in African cultural specificity and engaged with the global visual economy. The music videos of artists such as Burna Boy and Davido, produced by directors including Director K and Dammy Twitch, exemplify this speculative aesthetic strategy, deploying Afrofuturist visual conventions to situate Nigerian artists within a visual imaginary that is ambitious, technologically sophisticated, and culturally proud.

Eshun (2003) frames this speculative dimension of Afrofuturism in terms of what he calls the chronopolitics of Black futures: the political struggle over who gets to imagine the future and on whose terms. Western futures, he argues, have been systematically constructed in ways that position African people as peripheral, dependent, or absent from the future's central narratives. Afrofuturist visual practice constitutes a direct intervention in this chronopolitical struggle, asserting through aesthetic means that African people are not merely present in the future but among its principal architects and inhabitants.



Figure 7. Olalekan Jeyifous, *Shanty Megastructure* (2015). Source: i-d.co/article/why-afrofuturism-is-the-art-movement-we-need-in-2017/

4. Discussion

4.1 A Social Semiotic Framework for Afrofuturist Visual Analysis

The three constitutive dimensions identified in the Results section can be integrated into a systematic social semiotic framework for the analysis of Afrofuturist visual works, organised around Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) three metafunctions. Figure 8 presents this framework schematically.

At the level of the representational metafunction, Afrofuturist visual works consistently depict African people as technologically competent actors, cosmologically situated subjects, and agents within speculative narrative worlds. Unlike the passive, non-transactional representational structures that characterise Western documentary representations of Africa, Afrofuturist works favour active, transactional structures in which African figures perform directed actions, whether building, operating, imagining, or inhabiting the speculative environments they populate. The world they represent is one in which African people are the primary authors of their own visual reality.

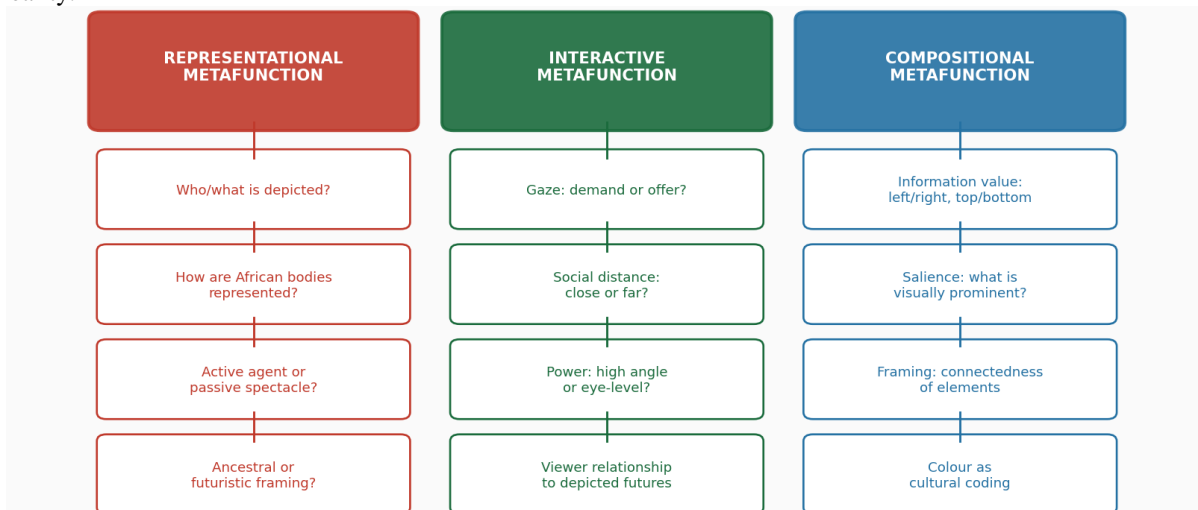


Figure 8. A Social Semiotic Framework for Analysing Afrofuturist Visual Communication (adapted from Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Barthes, 1977; Womack, 2013). Each metafunction addresses a distinct dimension of meaning in Afrofuturist visual works

At the level of the interactive metafunction, Afrofuturist works predominantly employ the demand structure (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006): depicted subjects address the viewer directly, meeting their gaze and claiming their attention. The social distance encoded in these works tends towards the close personal or medium shot, constructing a relationship of familiarity or equality rather than the distant, observational relationship encoded in

the long shot and offer structure that characterise Western photographic representations of African people. Camera angles in Afrofuturist photography and film tend towards eye-level or low-angle perspectives, encoding power relations in which African subjects are positioned as equals or superiors in relation to the viewer, directly inverting the high-angle, subordinating perspective of much colonial photography.

At the compositional level, Afrofuturist works deploy high-salience, full-frame compositions in which African bodies and African-derived aesthetic elements occupy the visually most valued positions. In Western image grammar, information value is encoded spatially: left carries given information, right carries new; top carries the ideal, bottom carries the real; centre carries the most valued element (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). In Afrofuturist works, African cultural elements occupy all of these valued positions simultaneously, asserting their centrality to the visual field rather than their marginality or supplementarity.

4.2 Barthes, Myth, and the Counter-Mythology of Afrofuturism

Barthes's (1977) analysis of myth as a second-order semiological system in which ideological meanings are naturalised and made to appear inevitable provides a productive additional analytical lens for understanding what Afrofuturist visual communication accomplishes. Barthes argues that myth works by taking a historically contingent social arrangement and presenting it as natural, eternal, and beyond question. The myth of African primitiveness, technological inadequacy, and dependence on Western intervention is precisely such a mythological construction: a historically specific ideological project that Western visual culture has naturalised through the relentless repetition of specific visual codes.

Afrofuturist visual practice constitutes a systematic counter-mythology: it deploys the tools of visual semiotics to construct alternative mythological structures in which African technological sophistication, cultural complexity, and cosmic significance are naturalised and made to appear obvious. By consistently associating African bodies with technological objects, speculative environments, and cosmological imagery, Afrofuturist visual works perform a semiotic labour of naturalisation in the opposite ideological direction, making it appear self-evident that African people are technologically capable, culturally rich, and futures-oriented. This is not mere propaganda; it is the semiotic construction of a counter-reality in which the conditions for African flourishing are visually established as normal rather than exceptional.

4.3 Afrofuturism and the Decolonial Visual Communication Agenda

The analysis presented in this paper positions Afrofuturism within the broader decolonial visual communication agenda that has gathered momentum across African academic and creative institutions in recent decades. Decolonial theory, as developed by Mignolo (2011) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), argues that the project of decolonisation requires not merely the political independence of formerly colonised territories but the epistemic decolonisation of the knowledge systems, representational practices, and aesthetic traditions through which colonial power continues to exercise its influence. Visual communication, as a discipline concerned with the construction and circulation of visual meaning, is a central site of this epistemic struggle.

Afrofuturism is one of the most sophisticated and productive responses to this epistemic challenge currently operative in African creative practice. It does not merely critique existing representational norms; it actively constructs alternative visual grammars that are rooted in African aesthetic traditions, engaged with contemporary digital technologies, and oriented towards African futures. In doing so, it creates the conditions for a genuinely decolonial visual communication practice: one that does not reproduce Western visual conventions with African faces inserted into them but constructs fundamentally new visual worlds from within African cultural intelligence.

4.4 Afrofuturism in the Nigerian Context: Specific Inflections and Opportunities

The Nigerian context produces specific inflections of the Afrofuturist visual communication strategy that deserve particular attention. Nigeria's extraordinary cultural diversity, with its more than 250 distinct ethnic groups each with their own aesthetic traditions, cosmological frameworks, and visual histories, provides a uniquely rich resource base for Afrofuturist creative practice. The visual traditions of the Igbo, with their sophisticated masquerade aesthetics and symbolic material culture; the Yoruba, with their rich cosmological visual language rooted in Ifa divination and Orisha worship; the Benin Kingdom, with its internationally renowned tradition of bronze casting; and many others, all offer aesthetic resources that Afrofuturist practitioners can draw on to construct visual worlds that are simultaneously ancient and speculative.

The challenge for Nigerian visual communication practitioners and educators is to develop institutional and pedagogical frameworks that enable systematic engagement with these resources. Western canonical traditions have historically shaped design curricula in Nigerian higher education institutions, privileging Swiss International Style typography, Bauhaus principles of form, and Euro-American design history over the rich visual traditions of the continent on which they are situated. An Afrofuturist approach to visual communication pedagogy would begin from the opposite position: grounding design education in the visual intelligence of African aesthetic traditions, and then examining how that intelligence can be extended, transformed, and projected into the speculative futures that contemporary digital tools make possible.

5. Conclusion

Afrofuturism has been demonstrated in this paper to constitute a coherent, theoretically articulated, and practically sophisticated visual communication strategy, operating through three constitutive dimensions: the construction of African identity beyond colonial and crisis frames; the reclamation of technology as an African imaginative and practical domain; and the deployment of speculative aesthetics to communicate alternative futures grounded in African cultural traditions. These dimensions are not merely aesthetic preferences; they are communicative strategies with political, cultural, and epistemological implications for how Africa and Africans are represented in global visual culture.

The social semiotic framework developed here, organised around Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's three metafunctions and supplemented by Roland Barthes's theory of myth and the broader scholarship on Afrofuturism, provides a systematic analytical vocabulary for understanding how Afrofuturist visual works produce meaning through specific and reproducible design choices. At the representational level, such works depict African subjects as active, transactional agents in speculative worlds. At the interactive level, they construct relationships of equality and mutual address between African subjects and global viewers. At the compositional level, they assert the visual centrality and salience of African cultural elements within the global image economy.

For Nigerian visual communication practitioners, educators, and scholars, the implications of this analysis are both challenging and generative. The challenge lies in recognising that Afrofuturism is not a marginal subgenre or a stylistic trend but a fully theorised model of African visual communication—technically sophisticated, culturally grounded, politically engaged, and capable of addressing both local and global audiences without compromising the integrity of the African imagination from which it emerges. The generative opportunity is to develop this model systematically, through research, pedagogy, and creative practice, into a distinctively Nigerian and African contribution to the global field of visual communication design.

Future research should extend this analysis through primary empirical engagement with African Afrofuturist artists and audiences, examining how these visual strategies are produced, received, and interpreted within specific Nigerian and West African contexts. Particular attention should be given to the emerging generation of Nigerian digital artists producing Afrofuturist work on social media platforms, with a focus on how the affordances and constraints of these platforms shape available visual communication strategies. The development of a Nigerian and West African Afrofuturist canon, documented and theorised from within African intellectual traditions, would constitute a significant contribution to visual communication scholarship and to the broader decolonial cultural project to which Afrofuturism belongs.

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