

## **“The Master’s tools will never dismantle the Master’s house”: How Afro-Surrealist aesthetics tackle neoliberalism and its racist regime to help fill a post-capitalist space**

The critique of neoliberalism is in urgent need of radical imaginary of its other. Neoliberalism once focused on “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” (Leitch 1775) whilst operating within an institutional framework characterised by “strong private property rights” (1750), so that human well-being could best be advanced. However, theorists like Harvey have come to recognise that neoliberalism has instead become “hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (Leitch 1775) as it seeks to bring “all human action into the domain of the market” (1776). Thus, Fisher’s term ‘capitalist realism’ provides a clearer depiction of the current oppressive and pervasive conditions of the neoliberal and late capitalist systems. Neoliberalisation propagates as a “political project” (Fisher, 29) to re-establish the conditions for “capital accumulation” (29) and restore the “power of economic elites” (29). The way in which this socioeconomic order is structured directly affects “marginalized and racialized peoples” (Van Veen and Anderson 5), especially as racial regimes are integrated within this social structure. These constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a “justification for the relations of power” (Camp 702) further contributes to the deteriorating conditions of the political landscape. Being masked as “natural orderings” (Camp 702) these racial regimes enable late capitalism to “contain and absorb energies from outside” (Fisher 8), as it has “colonized the dreaming life of the population” (8), marking Black people as docile participants of their own oppression. If the depowering and marginalisation of racialised peoples is fundamental to maintaining a neoliberalist structure, then this is the point at which an uprising must occur. By recognising that racism is part of

the founding economic and epistemic violence of capitalist realism it is therefore clear that the “Master’s tools will never dismantle the Master’s house” (Lorde 2). Affirming the necessity to turn to “black lives, black politics and black futures” (Van Veen and Anderson 6) as crucial spaces from which to include othered perspectives in shaping possible futures.

The Afrofuturist movement is a logical starting point to help create such possible future realities. It focuses on using the black imagination to conceive of a more utopic future as it can be difficult to imagine ourselves outside “our present hell” (Thrasher). However, I believe the movement of Afro-Surrealism is what is necessary to help fill a post-capitalist space. By depicting the realities of contemporary Black life through its “intersections with the absurd and unlikely” (Phillips) our understanding of the neoliberal regime shifts. Afro-Surrealism is thus a “form of disobedience” (Miller) as it exposes the farcical nature of our current reality and, through this rupture of accepted truths, a total reorientation to self and society is required. I will analyse Spike Lee’s *BlacKKKlansman*, a semi-fictional film in which a black police officer infiltrates a white supremacist organisation, and Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You*, a sci-fi dark comedy that follows a young black telemarketer who is faced with the choice between profit and the organised labour movement. These two films are part of the current resurgence in Afro-Surrealism and will allow me to unmask the racial structuring of neoliberalism and help create an empty space where discussions of a post-capitalist reality can begin.

Both films expose the racist structuring of a neoliberalist order by exacerbating the oppression of minority ethnic groups. For instance, there is a clear juxtaposition in the treatment of the two separate political movements in *BlacKKKlansman*, especially as it is the same department that focuses on both groups. The Black Panther Party is considered by the chief figure of authority to be the “greatest internal security threat to the United States” (Lee 00:12:45-00:12:49), capable of sparking a race war that is targeted at police officers. In

comparison the Ku Klux Klan is viewed as a minimal threat that would be incapable of orchestrating a bomb attack, although they inevitably do. The contrast in attitudes is heightened by the fact that the “ghosts of slavery” (Camp 703) occupy spaces of authority as paintings of ships contribute to the mise-en-scène when the chief discusses The Black Panther Party. Signifying how “Blacks are labelled as threats to social order” (Camp 703) under a neoliberal racial regime. These signifiers of slavery hint at the regime that neoliberalism intends to uphold, a system of control and exploitation, despite protesting its differences to the colonial period. This is supported by Chief Bridges’ (Robert John Burke) closing of the department that was infiltrating the KKK due to supposed “budget cuts” (Lee 01:20:00-01:20:03). This supports Harvey’s argument that state withdrawal helps “complete the domination of capital” (Leitch 1776) in a neoliberal society. Thus, corroborating with the chief’s request to “destroy all evidence of this investigation” (Lee 01:20:25-01:20:28) so that the public never knows of this investigation. An indication of how “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (Fisher 8) exacerbated by the intimidating close-ups of the chief in his uniform, as capitalist authority controls access to information.

Riley uses the ‘white voice’ as a recurring motif in *Sorry* to epitomise how Blackness in America is “inextricably intertwined with socioeconomic status” (Phillips) and how the ‘American dream’ is more accessible to a privileged white majority. The ‘white voice’ is about “sounding like you don’t have a care” (Riley 00:14:55-00:14:59) and putting into your voice an “embrace of ease that white privilege brings” (Touré). Even if it’s not what white people sound like, they at least think they should sound “as if [they’re] entitled to the good life” (Touré). Pertaining to the notion that “black lives cannot matter in a white supremacist society” (Van Veen and Anderson 10) as they are impoverished due to their race, and can only chase the capitalist myth – ‘if you work hard you will succeed’ – once they leave their ‘Blackness’ behind and embrace the white identity. This is signified by the symbolic

aspiration of being a ‘Power Caller’ in *Sorry*. Although Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield) is promoted to a ‘Power Caller’, this is merely a neoliberal technique to cause divisions within the labour force and contain their attempts of striking, as alluded to by the vertical power structure of ‘Regal Free’ and its literal restriction of workers to a tight compact space on the bottom floor. Unable to even survive in an average work space, Sergio Green (Terry Crews) – Cassius’s uncle – is forced to consider signing himself up to ‘WorryFree’ – an unpaid human labour corporation that provides full-time accommodation and food at the expense of one’s labouring capabilities being exploited – as he is in too much debt to survive. Sergio Green represents the common worker, someone who believes that “neoliberalism can’t be fought” (Honkwiler 27) and that it is instead about “pragmatic survival” (27), adapting to the neoliberal regime. Individual security is therefore “a matter of individual choice” (Leitch 1776), a question of whether people are prepared to comply to ultimately ensure their continued existence. Pertaining to how neoliberalism is “shaped by a security political economy” (Camp 696) that expands “militarized policing and mass imprisonment” (696) to control the production of labour surpluses that are “disproportionately Black” (696), signified by the literal imprisonment of workers in *Sorry*. Contrastingly, within the open and free space of the top floor of ‘Regal Free’, ‘Power Callers’ sell firearms and slavery to other nations and companies, keeping both the individual and the collective indebted to the capitalist order. The geographical mobility of capital “permits it to dominate a global labour force” (Leitch 1777) whose own mobility is restricted. Detroit’s (Tessa Thompson) art exhibition therefore “broaches the topic of racial masking” (Phillips) by illustrating lives shaped by exploitation and how capitalism started “by stealing labour from Africa” (Riley 00:46:32-00:46:35). By identifying neoliberal spaces haunted by racism it is clear how both films reveal the oppression of Black people.

Following on from this, both protagonists – Cassius Green and Ron Stallworth (John David Washington) – are “flexible and fluid in their performances and self-identification” (Phillips) in order to survive in a society that disregards them. However, both directors explore the pitfalls of accepting a neoliberal regime. Cassius Green’s character highlights how easily people will “compromise their principles for money” (Touré) and the conditions of “possessive individualism” (Leitch 1778) in a late capitalist environment. Prepared to maintain a “near-total absence of any critical reflexivity” (Fisher 54) to his new role as a ‘Power Caller’, Cassius is consequently rewarded for his work. Cassius is now able to fulfill his world of “pseudo-satisfactions” (Leitch 1778) by a series of purchases that reflect his new-made wealth, including a new sports car and home. The high-paced nature of the scenes depicting Cassius’s attainment of symbols of upward mobility creates an allure of it being “superficially exciting” (Leitch 1778), which reflects capitalist culture and its “pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires” (Fisher 9). This is reinforced by the presence of Cassius’s picture of a man in front of a Cadillac. He hangs this up everywhere he goes. Cassius even maintains his ‘white voice’ within the intimate space of the bedroom signifying an “introjection of the surveillance apparatus” (Fisher 52) of neoliberalism and the fear of not knowing whether you’re being observed. Supporting Van Veen and Anderson’s argument that identity has re-emerged as a “function of the state to mark, contain, surveil and incarcerate” (9), further corroborating the perceived difficulty for Black people to be successful under a neoliberalist system. Especially as Steve Lift (Arnie Hammer) – a member of the capitalist elite and owner of ‘WorryFree’ – views the labour force – who are mainly formed of minority groups – as sub-human, reflecting how “white supremacy excludes non-whites from human subjectivity” (Van Veen and Anderson 14). Steve Lift’s desire to reduce the labour force to equisapien forms is therefore considered a direct containment of the Black community, as the only two equisapiens we meet are Cassius and Demarius (Forest

Whittaker) both played by black actors. This surreal depiction of workers as sub-human is particularly unnerving as “the roots of the horror lie in reality” (Phillips). However, by using excessive imagery to subvert expectations one is reminded that “capitalism itself is not realistic” (Honkwiler 252). Despite this, after the uprising Cassius still keeps certain possessions acquired from his ‘Power Caller’ days and even gives his sports car to his friend Salvador (Jermaine Fowler). Although this may seem a gesture of good will, such an action indicates that “desire is compatible only with capitalism” (Honkwiler 32). It is the “serpent which will destroy any non-capitalist system” (32), or so it may seem – a point I will later contest.

Equally, Ron is forced to “comply with every directive from bureaucratic authority” (Fisher 54) in order to survive within his job, even if it results in an initial degree of reflexive impotency. Ron’s first mission is to infiltrate a local Black rights rally led by national civil rights leader Kwame Ture (Corey Hawkins). Ron is used as a tool by the neoliberalist regime to monitor the actions of his own people. When Ron’s girlfriend Patricia (Laura Harrier) discovers he is a cop she rejects him, as she does not believe that someone who serves the powers that oppress his people could possibly be working for the liberation of Black people. Although Ron and Patricia reunite after his heroic actions, it is clear that Patricia’s words: “you can’t change things from the inside; it’s a racist system” (Lee 01:03:47-01:03:50) ring true as the chief shuts down the department, illustrating how the “white man will not give up his power” (Lee 01:03:01-01:03:04). Again, there are echoes of how the “Master’s tools will never dismantle the Master’s house” (Lorde 2) as Ron is told they will find him a new assignment in the narcotics division creating a circular structure to the narrative, as one is reminded that this is the original role Ron was offered when he was asked to monitor The Black Panther rally. Further insinuating that the chief figure of the neoliberal regime wants Ron to maintain his role of infiltrating his own people. The fluidity of both Cassius and Ron

in their self-identification within their narratives allows both directors to explore pitfalls of late capitalism and the futility of trying to affect change using neoliberalist tools.

Lee's Afro-Surrealist technique differs to Riley, as the most unsettling part of this semi-fictional narrative is the sustainment of neoliberalist oppression and the clear parallels that can be made from the 1970s to the present. Nelson states how Afro-Surrealist images "revisit the past, redefine the probable, and forecast the possible" (Leitch 2635) and so Lee ties the present moment with past thoughts that once seemed impossible as a future reality. For instance, Ron laughs off the idea that "America would [ever] elect someone like David Duke [leader of the KKK]" (Lee 00:48:42-00:48:48) as president, a direct allusion to Donald Trump now holding presidency, especially as Spike Lee himself is an outspoken adversary of President Trump. Notably, at the Cannes Festival of 2018 Lee lambasted President Trump stating that "the motherfucker did not denounce the motherfucking Klan, the alt-right and those Nazis motherfuckers" (CNN). Here, Lee refers to President Trump's controversial response to the Charlottesville Attack. Returning to the film, Sergeant Trapp (Ken Garito) replies to Ron that: "coming from a black man that's pretty naïve" (Lee 00:48:50-00:48:54) illustrating the foolishness of people to not expect conditions to deteriorate if the right action is not taken. Reinforced by the minimal lighting and dark setting of this conversation, emphasising how this conversation is part of a past reality, as this is now an actual lived reality for many. This coincides with actual footage of the Charlottesville Attack concluding Lee's film, used to depict how society is wrestling with racial violence, bias and inequality, as these harrowing clips serve as a reminder of the current neoliberal domination, resulting from the "apparent impunity" (Bond) that allows racist organisations to thrive on.

Such neoliberal domination is centred on how capitalist realism "feeds on and reproduces the mood of the population" (Fisher 35), dominating popular culture. Lee alludes to this with the depiction of a screening of *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith) within his film as a

light-hearted cinema viewing. This emphasises that although cinema today may not produce images as explicit as *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith), racial undertones still dominate capitalist films like *Tarzan* (Lima) that has had so many reboots, and is referenced also in *BlacKKKlansman*, as it taps into “latent notions of colonialism” (Schilling). Cinema-going should be viewed as a populist action and therefore such films are simply “reproduc[ing] the mood of the population” (Fisher 35). Even so, it could be argued that the current Afro-Surrealist movement is simply the “new meat on which the system could feed” (Fisher 9), especially as both *Sorry* and *BlacKKKlansman* are either produced or distributed by the conglomerate Universal Pictures, producing huge profits for this capitalist company. Furthermore, Afro-Surrealism perhaps epitomises a world in which “stylistic innovation is no longer possible” (Fisher 9) as it is only imitating a dead style that originated in 1974 (Phillips). However, this form of expression transforms “spaces of alienation into novel forms of creative potential” (Leitch 2633), therefore inhibiting late capitalism from reproducing the mood of the people as “cultural production can produce social reflection” (2634). By polluting popular culture with new transparent images like *BlacKKKlansman* and *Sorry* that represent the “absurdity of black life” (Bakare), individuals are “liberated from a bondage” (Fisher 35) becoming more active as they are empowered by knowledge.

Polluting popular culture with new images helps reveal the racist structuring of neoliberalism, however greater action is needed to politically engage those that are reflexively impotent. Firstly, “reflexive impotence” (Fisher 21) is when people know things are bad, but more than that “they know they can’t do anything about it” (21), which is why people have been so politically disengaged. Squeeze (Steven Yeun) even states that “if you get shown a problem and you have no idea how to control it then you decide to just get use to the problem” (Riley 01:36:48-01:36:53), which is why instead they take affirmative action and physically confront neoliberal agents of suppression. It is no coincidence that Kwame

Ture also calls for action during his rally. Evidently the goal of a “genuinely new left” (Fisher 77) or antithesis to the current late capitalist regime should not be to “take over the state” (77) but to “subordinate the state to the general will” (77). Clune is right to argue that Fisher’s attempt is “critically weakened” (Honkwiler 205) as his picture of the anti-government left lacks “a robust and detailed vision of the general will” (205), yet both *BlacKKKlansman* and *Sorry* form images of what is needed to affect change. Young, actively engaged individuals are the focus of both films, illustrating that while for some, like Jameson and Žižek, it may be “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Honkwiler 250), it is certainly not for those that are prepared to rebel and take action now. Although Cassius initially removes himself from the rebellion to return to his normal life, he is then later reduced to an equisapien form demonstrating that he cannot return to being a docile worker. He is too aware of how a neoliberalist state aims to exploit him, which is why he rejects his capitalist desires and disposes of the sports car, illustrating a choice between “equality and solidarity” (Honkwiler 30) on the one hand and “desire and entertainment” (30) on the other. Thus, the final images of *Sorry* are that of a united people tearing down the capital symbolised by the stampede of Steve Lift’s house. In this instance, Fisher would indicate that it is “only the individuals that can be held ethically responsible for their actions” (69) despite the cause being “systemic” (69), indicating what is lacking in late capitalism. Nonetheless, *Sorry* is challenging its audience to be both persistent and relentless in their rebellious actions as this is the only way that true change can occur. Equally, *BlacKKKlansman* confronts its audience with the troubling final scene of Ron and Patricia nervously approaching the door with their guns raised to then see the KKK Cross burning. Indicating the continued existence of this racist order that will not cease until greater action is taken. This is why the final image of *BlacKKKlansman* is a black and white American flag that is turned upside down,

signalling both the distress of the nation and the social and racial divide enforced by neoliberalism.

Neither of these films provide images of a post-capitalist space, despite revealing the racist structuring of neoliberalism. However, that would be missing the point entirely of what Afro-Surrealism strives to do. Afro-Surrealism depicts the realities of contemporary Black life through its intersections with the absurd and unlikely, as sometimes the current reality is so ridiculous that the only way to address it is to be absurd. Thus, only by producing “clear and vital images” (Leitch 2638) of our current reality does it prevent one from being “trapped by blind history, economics and politics” (2638), beyond our control. Although we need images of tomorrow to help unite the oppressed and work towards a shared goal, this cannot begin until the individual is empowered with knowledge and challenged to become active and politically engaged. It is here where Afro-Surrealism intersects with a post-capitalist space. Afro-Surrealism exposes the racial structuring of neoliberalism and how Black people are oppressed, even within a capitalist society that sells the myth that anyone who works hard enough can be successful. It is absolutely essential that a movement like Afro-Surrealism takes precedence in today’s world, floods our screens and dominates popular culture. If we are to achieve a new order free of the attempts of neoliberalism, the common person must be fully exposed to the truth and how our current regime of late capitalism really operates.

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