Introduction to Part 4

“In times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers.”¹ This quote from the fictional superhero and king of Wakanda, T’Challa, played by the late Chadwick Bosemann, Black Panther, tells us a lot about the contributions in this section. They show that the arts and creative thinking are such bridge builders, even and especially in the face of uncertainty and crises. They highlight the huge potential of imagination and creativity in making African futures.

The first contribution by Ute Fendler ties in precisely with the topic of superheroes. Delving into African comic arts, it demonstrates how drawing and storytelling can inspire free imagination and utopian worlds. Local super heroes, Fendler argues, draw on rich myths and legends and may ultimately incite the readership to follow these models.

In the second chapter, Kerstin Pinther takes us to the fashion worlds of Lagos and explores the vital role of craft and sartorial practices in shaping African textile and design futures. The third chapter by Anne Storch invites us to reflect on the communicative practices of future making and non-linear time. Sitting on chairs and humming, or the simple flow of conversation and the continuing presence of voices are suggested as alternatives to a future dictated by orders, directives and commands.

The tower is a self-made skyscraper, an urban landmark in the DRC’s capital of Kinshasa and, as Steven Van Wolputte, Ann Cassiman and Filip De Boeck put it in the fourth chapter, a giant question mark that begs profound reflection on the nature of the city. The tower epitomizes the urban futures of makers and hackers, on which the authors reflect in the CityLabs project at Catholic University of Leuven.

The fifth chapter by Jonathan Ngeh and Michaela Pelican explores the creativity of African youth. Using the example of Google Code-in (GCI) competition winner Collins Nji and Afrobeats singer Wizkid, they demonstrate how young people in Africa, who are confronted with challenging political and economic environments, come up with a spirit of innovation and networking across cultural and geographical boundaries.

In the final chapter, Ludovic Ouhonyioué Kibora takes us to Ouagadougou’s arts scene. Despite all the political crises and economic hardships, we encounter artistic expressions of Afro-optimism in the events and theatrical performances by Récréâtrales and in the sculpture workshop of Abou Sidibé.

1 <https://everythingmarvel.net/black-panther-best-tchalla-quotes/>.

Animating the Future: Storytelling and Super Heroes in Africa

Ute Fendler

1 Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, one can observe a considerable change in the image of Africa ranging from its representation as the lost continent to the continent of the future. This involves a large variety of transmitted narrative elements taken from stories about Africa invented in the long history of narratives about the 'other' seen from a European perspective – from the dark and dangerous continent where archaic forms of life appear and reappear to the place of the threat of unknown pandemics. At the same time, it is the continent of nature and therefore of unexplored resources and living space. In both cases, Africa has been and continues to be the space for projections of imagined worlds. Kodwo Eshun describes this entanglement of predetermination by negative scenarios for Africa and an inability to imagine a better future for it in his reflections on Afrofuturism and the zeal of artists to create alternative scenarios (Eshun 2003: 291–2). More recently, Afrofuturism also became trendy in the African context, so that the few African films that could be labelled science fiction, like *Les Saig-nantes* (2005) by Jean-Pierre Bekolo (Bekolo 2009) or *Pumzi* (2010) by Wanuri Kahiu, attracted ongoing attention by critics. However, it is striking that in sub-Saharan Africa (with the exception of South Africa), very few films use genres or narrative patterns that can be linked to the construction of an imaginary of future times (Fendler 2018a, 2018b). The fantasy film genre in which super heroes might appear are also lacking in the African context. A rare exception is the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood. From its beginnings in the 1980s, it has used narrative elements of local storytelling that include mystical and mythical figures as part of films and series set in contemporary Nigeria that draw on local religious practices and mystical beliefs (Haynes 2016; Krings and Okome 2013). Special effects in films would be used to bring to life the interferences of mythical heroes and of witchcraft in daily life.

This is unlike Western film cultures, especially the American one, in which imagining the future has a long tradition in the numerous sub-genres of utopian and apocalyptic narratives that rely on strong heroic characters. Paralleling the growth of Afrofuturistic productions in the arts in Africa, are the

increasing numbers of futuristic films swamping the international markets. Mainly over the last decade, there have been striking tendencies in this realm of (fictitious) discourses on the future. Super heroes like Superman and Spiderman, invented in the USA in the 1930s and 1940s as part of a larger political discourse on political and military power, are back in new versions and media formats that fascinate spectators with technical innovations that turn imagined worlds – often based on novels and comics – close to the illusion of being real in feature films (Dittmer 2013; Regalado 2015). The most prominent example is without doubt the film *Black Panther* (2018), which not only brought the super hero of the Marvel universe to the screen but also became part of the larger discourse on the question of (a more positive) representation of Africans and African Americans closely linked to the imaginary of a future for Africa (Jackson and Moody-Freeman 2011; Nama 2011). While *Black Panther* has been very popular in African countries, it has also stirred numerous critical voices about the representation of Africa designed once again by US-American productions (Balogun 2018; Lebron 2018). As Achille Mbembe underlined in an interview with Françoise Vergès (2010: 294) about the relevance of the post-colonial, the need for local heroes and imaginative scenarios for the future has become integral to discussions about imagining and conceptualizing future settings for and from the continent. Imaginaries are important in that they are breaches opening up to a different vision of contemporary modes of living. Bill Ashcroft (2013: 96) also highlights the ‘anticipatory’ power of imagining Africa in a different way, while Chiara Bottici (2011: 24) stresses the “faculty to make present what is potentially absent”. In the African context, this ability is crucial in the process of questioning existing representations and the imagining of the self and the continent different from dominant representations. Ashcroft underlines that these artistic modes of expression are the formats that enable the creation and the bringing into being of new images different from pre-existing ones, while drawing on examples from African literature and films (Ashcroft 2013: 97).

In this article, I turn to a rather recent trend in popular culture of inventing heroes for comics – mainly in urban hubs like Lagos, Cape Town, Nairobi (Omanga 2016), Accra (Pijnaker and Spronk 2017) and, to a lesser extent, Abidjan. It is striking that some super heroes invented in Lagos are linked to Yoruba myths and legends, which are now entering the field of animation (Coetzee 2016). Interweaving the past, present and future into a blend of myths and modern heroes is familiar in the genre of Western super heroes, as for example Thor drawing on Norse mythology, or the gods of Olympus appearing in both DC and Marvel universes. However, in the African context, stories that link a

contemporary theme to narrative elements from myths, mainly in conceiving the protagonist as a half god or super hero, but that adapt the historical figure to the demands of a new narrative genre, contribute to the high demand for local stories that can also stir interest and recognition at a global level. These stories bring African perspectives and a positive self-representation into global discourses, thereby slowly changing the old perceptions of Africa and African diasporas, as for example Pijnaker and Spronk show in their study on the work of the team of Leti Arts based in Ghana. The artists confirm that they try to create an imaginary, inspired by Marvel and DC, but with a view to creating their own aesthetics and style on a technologically competitive level in order to become global players (Pijnaker and Spronk 2017: 339). The recent evolution towards an animated imaginary drawing on local stories and settings and reaching out to a local, regional and global public is mainly based on animation in various formats, ranging from comics and cartoons to video games. The question addressed here is about the specific aesthetics of animation that allow for a combination of these two lines – the aesthetic linked to the question of representation and identity on the one hand and the economic and cultural on the other.

Having briefly outlined the highly complex field of imaginaries in different formats and diverse settings of production and distribution in varying historical and socio-political settings, the following examples will permit the reader to grasp some initial arguments about how and why aesthetic practices enable imagining and make alternative perspectives and concepts visible or tangible in the context of the complex entanglements of chronotopical settings in a postcolonial dispensation.

2 Animating the Future

Comics and animation build on sketching and drawing rather than on picture taking. This is why art books – storytelling via drawing – might be the way forward in building an imaginary for a different future as practised by a growing number of young artists on the African continent. Contrary to cinema, where these stories are still rather rare, the number of comics with positive heroes has been on the increase across the continent in the last decade. Drawing (in all formats) seems to be the medium for free imagination from pre-given genres and patterns bringing up new combinations and genres. One explanation for a favourable setting of this medium in terms of creating new imaginaries might be the specificity of the process, of the ‘gesture’. The visual anthropologist and

architect, Ray Lucas (2016: 217, quoting Vilém Flusser), explains that a drawing is not an image:

Flusser, writing on the gesture of painting, describes gestures as enigmas rather than problems: “One analyses problems to be able to see through them, and so to get them out of the way. ... One analyses enigmas to enter into them.”

Contrast this with his account of photographing (notably not photography): “A photograph is a kind of ‘fingerprint’ that the subject leaves on a surface, and not a depiction, as in painting.” The subject is the cause of the photograph and the meaning of painting. ...

In painting, according to this tradition, we ourselves form an “idea” to fix the phenomenon on the surface. In photography, by contrast, the phenomenon itself generates its own idea for use on the surface.

This definition of drawing circumscribes the essence of the force of imagination bringing something into being. Further on, Lucas states that drawing is a process like thinking, quoting Maxine Sheets-Johnston’s (1999: 485) view that “thinking is itself, by its nature, kinetic.” Therefore, Lucas invites the reader to conceive of drawing as a process of thinking, of generating ideas and concepts. In the following, I would like to present two examples for the imagining power of comics to support my arguments.

Comic Republic is a company founded in 2013 by Jide Martin and based in Lagos, Nigeria. Martin explains that he was very fond of comics as a child but wondered why there were no African heroes. The foundation of his company is motivated by the need for iconic characters with which young readers can identify. In response to this need, he creates heroes who can solve problems, fight gangsters and change the difficult living conditions of the majority of inhabitants in Lagos – just like Superman or Batman could do. The big difference, argues Martin, is that no European iconic hero will come to the rescue of the African population, as in many blockbuster films.² The young generation needs icons, positive models based on local myths and history, so that readers will adopt the idea of being capable of solving their own problems.³

2 For example, *Blood Diamond* (2006) and even the most recent version of the stories of Tarzan, *The Legend of Tarzan* (2016).

3 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClwGwxgzqmM> [23 February 2020]. <https://thecomicropublic.com/2020/CharacterBible.html> [9 May 2021].

FIGURE 1 Guardian prime COMIC REPUBLIC

In their visual representation, some heroes, like those in the classical US comic strips, are physically very strong, muscular, with imposing statures and postures and a challenging gaze, usually masked to hide their civilian identity. The importance of the double-sided character for an icon lies in the invitation to identify with the hero who is a normal human being in daily life to whom nobody would pay attention. This is the case for the 16-year-old character Marcus Chigozie. He is presented as a “teenage boy with anger management issues, who had no idea he had powers until an event changed his life. Now, he has the ability to move at supersonic speed and this new discovery has led him into becoming the super-fast hero and member of the Extremes known as Max-speed.” His status is indicated as ‘Hero’ and announced with a quotation: “It’s time for a new generation.”⁴

Another character is Guardian Prime, Tunde Jaiye, 27, fashion designer:

[Guardian Prime] is the fifth element, one of the five essential elements on Earth (earth, air, water, fire and man). He is the perfect man created how God intended man to be (in his image). He can do everything a normal man can do only magnified to almost God-like levels. He is the guardian born to the human race as customary every 2000 years. He is Nigerian. He is Guardian Prime.⁵

The characters are portrayed as normal young inhabitants of Lagos – a student, a fashion designer – with whom the reader can easily identify. They turn into heroes when they discover their supernatural powers, so they can fight villains and save citizens as well as protect nature from criminal dealers. Two quotations at the end of the book, *Guardian Prime*, summarize the main messages directed to the readers. The first is by the main character whose key point is taken from the story: “I believe that humanity can actually be more than it is.” This is followed by a statement by Jide Martin, CEO of Comic Republic, linking the fictitious character to that of the real creator. This merging point of fiction and reality encourages the belief that the statements could become real in the future. The success of the enterprise run by Martin who trains and hires a growing number of young talent, reinforces this positive image. Martin invites his readers to realize that they can improve their lives by believing in the possibility of changing things for the better.

4 https://www.thecomicropublic.com/site/web/Characterbibleviewer.html?file=The_Comic_Republic_Character_Bible_May6_2020_Web.pdf; p. 55. (25.12.2021).

5 <https://m.thecomicropublic.com/comics/MightOfGuardianPrime.html> [10 May 2021].

FIGURE 2 Cover of *irètí*, issue 2 COMIC REPUBLIC

2.1 *Hope Rising*

I feel like we all have a calling, a reason, something we are all meant to do. Something we are born to do. I think mine is *Guardian Prime*. Why? Truth is I don't know. I am also finding it out along the way, but this I do know. ... *Guardian Prime* has brought me faith. I believe that humanity can actually be more than it is. ... That we have nothing but ourselves holding us back, and that with faith, nothing is impossible. That you are reading this is proof for me that faith works.

Till next time, always have faith.

JIDE MARTIN, Creator *Guardian Prime*.⁶

The drawings strengthen this message and allow the reader to enter the enigma of the comic book to look for possible readings of daily life combining history and stories with real life experiences and the young heroes who serve as role models in their way of taking action. Following Ray Lucas, the comic would stir up a process of thinking that is also kinetic, so that the readers might accept the invitation to get involved in an 'animated vision' of the future, assuming responsibilities to engage in making Lagos a better place in which to live.

Another example is the heroine Ìrètí Bidemi, an archaeology student at Lagos, or perhaps the incarnation of the mythical Yoruba goddess Ìrètí. When she visits the museum to view her namesake's statue, it turns into a monster who wants to kill her and send her back to her ancestors. In response to the danger, she unexpectedly acquires supernatural powers that later turn her into an anti-crime fighter.

The story opens with images of the young student sitting on a bus heading to the national museum. It places the story in contemporary Lagos where a student is looking for more information about local history. In this way, the comic links the past to the present.

The transformation of the young woman into a character with supernatural powers activates the present gap in which imagining a possible future is lacking. Unexpectedly, the girl defeats the monster. Her newly gained power enables her to project herself into the future as a fighter for a city without crime.

With this story, the authors pick up some historical elements of oral history and link them to the present. The unexpected combination of orature and institutional memory in the museum with the present that reactivates the

⁶ https://www.thecomicropublic.com/site/web/Characterbibleviewer.html?file=The_Comic_Republic_Character_Bible_May6_2020_Web.pdf, 41. (25.122021).

FIGURE 3 Page 8 of *irètí*, issue 2 COMIC REPUBLIC

FIGURE 4 Page 9 of *irètí*, issue 2 COMIC REPUBLIC

FIGURE 5 Cover of *irèti*, issue 4 COMIC REPUBLIC

legend opens up a breach in the act of reading, when the thought turns into a kinetic experience that could be prolonged into a future act. The two illustrations (Figures 2 and 5) visualize this transformation from a student to a heroine when the character builds up a relationship with the goddess whose name she is bearing. On the front page of the comic, the goddess is represented as a strong warrior in a posture of the frozen movement to step forward, ready to fight, holding her sword in a way that impresses the student standing in awe in front of the statue looking up to the goddess. The illustration of the character *Ìrètí* as a student shows the young woman running towards the spectator, ready for action, wearing the same shield on her shoulder as the goddess. The two women on the cover come up as a blended one of the young woman with superhuman powers. While the storyline is typical of legends and myths, as well as of comics with heroes that deal with the confrontation of good and evil forces in general, the twist comes with the use of Yoruba mythology, as this genre is usually occupied by the visualizations in predominantly US comics, animation and films. Comic Republic succeeds in using a visual aesthetic of comic books developed in Europe and the USA to bring forth stories that explain the world drawing on local myths. This opens up a new perspective on a possible future, as local knowledge and capacities solve the problems the population has to face.

Comics and animation have the advantage of being able to create stories about actual preoccupations without depending on a large team and production chain. Furthermore, this hybrid format of using visual and verbal techniques invites the reader to deconstruct and reconstruct the story (Dacheux 2014: 171). It contributes to a remediation process along the lines of Bolter and Grusin (1999) who distinguished between three major types of redress – reconfiguring media formats to bring up new ones; transposing processes from reality to mediated formats of representation; and the impact of the remediation process on reality by bringing about changes in reality. The two examples presented above contribute to the various processes of remediation as they propose new comic formats as a remediation between the past and future using the enigmatic and kinetic quality of the medium to stir some social changes. They can be placed in the larger context of producing comics and animation, which has developed into a growing trend, so that the animation of the future in Africa is taking place across the continent with artists like Roye Okupe in Lagos with his company Youneek,⁷ Loyizo Mkize in Cape Town and his super

⁷ <https://yoneekstudios.com/>. The company is based in Lagos and in Laurel, Maryland, USA.

hero character Kwezi.⁸ In the same vein, the production company Leti Arts⁹ based in Accra and Nairobi turns the comics into interactive video games and, last but not least, Netflix is featuring Zambian artist Malenga Mulendema's story 'Mama K's Super 4'.¹⁰ All these artists claim to have turned to animation through a wish to see African heroes in comics. They want their favourite childhood stories of super heroes to highlight the importance of African icons. They want young people to imagine themselves and to think of Africa in a positive and self-determined way. Most of them also train young artists and some bring the comics to new platforms like applications for cell phones or video games (Dunn 2015), so that the gesture of drawing as kinetic thinking is combined with a format that allows direct interaction with the hero and the story, which will be the next step in the development of animating the future.

References

- Ashcroft, B. 2013. "African futures: The necessity of utopia." *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity*, 8, 1: 94–114.
- Balogun, U. 2018. "Wakanda is not Africa." 12 June. <http://bostonreview.net/race/christopher-lebron-black-panther> [7 September 2018].
- Black Panther*. 2018. [Film] R. Coogler. dir., United States: Marvel Studios.
- Blood Diamond*. 2006. [Film] E. Zwick. dir., UK: Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Bekolo, J.-P. 2009. *Africa for the Future: Sortir un nouveau monde du cinéma*. Yaoundé: Dagan Editions.
- Bolter, J. D. and R. Grusin. 1999. *Remediation. Understanding new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bottici, C. 2011. "From imagination to the imaginary and beyond. Towards a theory of imaginal politics." In *The politics of imagination*, edited by C. Bottici and B. Challand, 16–37. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Coetzee, C. 2016. "Afro-superheroes: Prepossessing the future." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28, 3: 241–244.
- Dacheux, É. 2014. "La Bande Dessinée, un média méconnu des chercheurs en communication." *Hermès*, 70: 171–173.
- Dittmer, J. 2013. *Captain America and the nationalist superhero*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

8 <https://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/14058/homegrown-comic-superhero-kwezi-is-proudly-south-african> [30 March 2020].

9 <http://www.letiarts.com/about-us/> [30 March 2020].

10 <https://www.shondaland.com/live/a27276236/malenga-mulendema-mama-k-team-4/> [30 March 2020].

- Dunn, C. 2015. "Leti Arts a pioneer in African gaming market." CBC News, 22 February. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/african-superheroes-take-flight-in-video-games-1.2958837> [22/6/2020].
- Eshun, K. 2003. "Further considerations on Afrofuturism." *The New Centennial Review*, 3, 2: 287–302.
- Fendler, U. 2018a. "Cinéma Africain: Cinéma populaire, cinéma de genre, cinéma de masse ou cinéma comme "expérimentation philosophique"? In *Archeology of the future: African cinema and imaginaries*, edited by V. Azarian, U. Fendler and A. Mbaye, 25–36. Munich: Akademische Verlagsgemeinschaft.
- Fendler, U. 2018b. "Superheroes for Africa?" *Africa Today*, 65, 1: 86–105.
- Haynes, J. 2016. *Nollywood: The creation of Nigerian film genres*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jackson, S. and J. E. Moody-Freeman. 2011. *The Black imagination, science fiction, futurism and the speculative*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Krings, M. and O. Okome (Eds). 2013. *Global Nollywood: The transnational dimensions of an African video film industry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lebron, C. "Black Panther' is not the movie we deserve." 17 February. <http://bostonreview.net/race/christopher-lebron-black-panther> [7/9/2018].
- Les Saignantes*. 2005. [Film] (English: *Those Who Bleed*.) J.-P. Bekolo. dir., Cameroon: Quartier Mozart Films.
- Lucas, R. 2016. "Inscriptive practice as gesture." In *Speculations in contemporary drawing for art and architecture*, edited by L. Allen and L. C. Pearson, 217–223. University College London: The Barlett School of Architecture.
- Nama, A. 2011. *Super Black. American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Omanga, D. 2016. "Akokhan returns': Kenyan newspaper comics and the making of an 'African' superhero." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28, 3: 262–274.
- Pijnaker, T. and R. Spronk. 2017. "Africa's Legends: Digital technologies, aesthetics, and middle-class aspirations in Ghanaian games and comics." *Critical African Studies*, 9, 3: 327–349.
- Pumzi*. 2010. [Film] W. Kahi. dir., Kenya: Inspired Minority Pictures.
- Regalado, A. J. 2015. *Bending steel: Modernity and the American superhero*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Sheets-Johnston, M. 1999. *The primacy of movement*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.
- The legend of Tarzan*. 2016. [Film] D. Yates. dir., UK: Village Roadshow Pictures.
- Vergès, F. 2010. "Echanges autour de l'actualité du postcolonial." In *Ruptures postcoloniales. Les nouveaux visages de la société française*, edited by N. Bancel, et al., 293–308. Paris: La Découverte.