



PAUL KLEE. *ANGELUS NOVUS*, 1920, OIL AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 31.8 X 24.2CM. ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM (COURTESY OF CREATIVE COMMONS).

Akomfrah's Angel of History

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What is the nature of history in John Akomfrah's 1995 documentary, *The Last Angel of History*? One way to answer this question is to begin with the title. *The Last Angel of History* is surely a reference to Walter Benjamin's famous meditation on Paul Klee's 1920 painting, *Angelus Novus*, in his own "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In the ninth thesis of this text, Benjamin does a close reading of Klee's painting in order to make a critique of Karl Marx's historical materialism. Benjamin discerns that the image depicts an angel looking toward a catastrophic past: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."¹ The angel of history desires to stay and help mend this catastrophe, but his wings are caught in a storm that propels him toward the future: "This storm is what we call progress."²

There are two important aspects to this thesis that are relevant to understanding the concept of history in Akomfrah's film: the location of the storm and the angel's desire to stay. Benjamin explains that the storm's origin is Paradise. In Abrahamic religious traditions, Paradise is the subject of various interpretations. Paradise can refer to the mythic Garden of Eden (from which humans fell from grace), the future state of the universe that will eventually be restored, the afterlife (heaven), or a combination of the three.³ Usually depicted as a peaceful place, Benjamin portrays Paradise as the source of a violent storm that ferociously propels the angel of history's wings toward the future: "a storm is blowing in Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them."⁴

The angel of history's back is turned toward the future because he wants

to stay—presumably in the present (or perhaps even return to the past)—to help mend the catastrophe before his feet. However, historical materialism's sense of history is oriented towards the future. That is to say, each distinct historical event builds on another toward a logical end based on material progress. Critical of this position, Benjamin describes the past in this painting as a pile of debris that continues to grow skyward.⁵ Unable to fight the storm, the angel is forced in a temporal direction against his will for the sake of progress.

II

In the narrative of *The Last Angel of History*, Akomfrah deals head on with the notion of history by using a similar mechanism employed by Benjamin in "Theses." Rather than focusing on a character in a

painting, Akomfrah considers the story of the historical figure and blues legend, Robert Johnson. In the very beginning of the film, the narrator recites the famous story of how Johnson learned to play the blues: "Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in the Deep South. He sold his soul and in return he was given the secret of a black technology, a black secret technology that we know to be now as the blues."⁶

Using this story as inspiration, Akomfrah creates another character in Johnson's image he calls the Data Thief. Two hundred years into the future, the Data Thief is told a story: "If you can find the crossroads...you'll find fragments, techno-fossils, and if you can put those elements, those fragments together, you'll find the code. Crack that code, and you'll have the keys to your future."⁷ Before venturing on his journey to find the crossroads, he is given a clue: The

Mothership Connection. Following this clue, the Data Thief, "[Surfs] across the internet of black culture, breaking into the vaults, breaking into the rooms, and stealing fragments, fragments from cyber-culture, techno-culture, narrative-culture."⁸

Armed with a special set of sunglasses and a black box, this character is a time-traveler. The documentary follows the Data Thief as he discovers different fragments of black cultural productions throughout history in the form of video footage, pictures, and interviews with artists and critics. Several of these interviewees include Juan Atkins, John Corbett, Derrick May, Ishmael Reed, Greg Tate, DJ Spooky, Kodwo Eshun, Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and George Clinton. Eventually, The Mothership Connection leads the Data Thief to twentieth-century Africa.

According to the narrator, when the Data Thief reaches Africa, he

becomes the last angel of history. Similar to Benjamin's angel, Akomfrah's angel is trapped. Though the Data Thief wants to return to his own time in the future, his search for Johnson's crossroads has led him back in time to 20th century Africa where he will forever be stuck in time and space.⁹ The reason the Data Thief is trapped in this period is best understood through an analysis of how Akomfrah uses both *The Mothership Connection* and the crossroads throughout the narrative.

III

Released in 1975, *Mothership Connection* is Parliament's 4th studio album. The album cover features a photo of Parliament's bandleader, George Clinton, sitting in a spaceship near an unidentified planet. When asked about this album cover in an interview from *The Last Angel of*



History, Clinton states: "On [this] record, I had to find another place that we hadn't perceived black people to be, and that was on a spaceship. So, I pictured him in there leaning like it was a Cadillac. You know, slidin' through space, chillin'... coming from the planet Sirius."¹⁰

In addition to the imagery provided on the album cover, the music situates blackness in outer space through the use of electronic voice distortions and musical instruments such as Bootsy Collins' famous star-shaped electric guitar. In other

attempts to situate blackness in odd places, Parliament also became known for their jarring live performances and eclectic outfits. In one interview for *The Last Angel of History*, techno artist Derrick May states:

I went to go see a concert when I was a little kid... I'll never forget this man coming out of the top of the roof on a cable, dressed in a diaper and big white platform boots, playing a guitar and called himself Starchild. And then this other dude comes out of a so-called spaceship that lands out of the center of the stage.¹¹

The album tells the story of the arrival of Starchild, an alien from another planet, who has arrived in a Mothership (spaceship) to bring the people of Earth the *Funk*. This storyline is narrated by several different characters including the Lollipop Man. On the album's first track, "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked

Up)," acting as an intergalactic DJ, Lollipop Man informs the citizens of Earth that they are listening to a broadcast from the Mothership on a frequency he calls W-E-F-U-N-K:

Welcome to station WEFUNK,
better known as We-Funk
Or deeper still, the Mothership Connection.
Home of the extraterrestrial brothers,
Dealers of funky music.
P.Funk, uncut funk, The Bomb.¹²

Integral to interpreting *Mothership Connection* is Clinton's notion of Funk. According to Kodwo Eshun, an acclaimed music and Afrofuturism critic, Funk is a healing substance. In his book, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Eshun notes that Parliament's very first album was called *Osmium*, the world's most pungent metal: "Funkadelia... invades through the nostrils and seeps through the nerves, setting inhalation at war with the body. You breathe in

(LEFT) FIGURE 1:
The Data Thief
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

the purification of the universe.”¹³
Lollipop Man states “P-Funk”:

If you got faults, defects or shortcomings,
You know, like arthritis, rheumatism
or migraines,
Whatever part of your body it is,
I want you to lay it on your radio,
let the vibes flow through.
Funk not only moves, it
can re-move, dig?¹⁴

In addition to its healing properties, Starchild describes the Funk as a substance that is so ancient, it is likely that the citizens of Earth have simply forgotten how powerful it can be: “Face it, even your memory banks have forgotten this funk.”¹⁵ As referenced in the song “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” Funk is as ancient as the Egyptian pyramids that the Parliament crew has returned to claim. In fact, the secret to Funk, Earth’s regenerating life force, is in the pyramids. All Starchild wants to do is remind the citizens of Earth of

this fact by hitting them with pure, unadulterated Funk. Luckily, Funk is also something that is easy to obtain. All a person needs to do is listen to the Funky music performed by Starchild and his crew: “Put a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip and come on up to the Mothership.”¹⁶

Also in “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” Starchild welcomes the people of Earth to “good times” on the Mothership. He tells the listeners that his arrival, itself, is the Mothership Connection. Eshun states: “The Mothership Connection is Clinton’s symbol for what happens to Funk when you pass it through the studio and when it becomes astro, or it becomes space, when it becomes extraterrestrial.”¹⁷

As Starchild’s voice travels through the radio waves, a connection between the citizens of Earth and the UFO is forged. If the voice of Starchild is the medium through

which Funk is dispersed to the citizens of Earth, and Funk itself is the ancient source of good vibes and Earth’s life force, The Mothership Connection represents a return to origins: “The Mothership Connection is the link between Africa as a lost continent in the past and Africa as an Alien Future.”¹⁸ This logic is further supported by the name of the album and the connection that is forged between the people of Earth and the spaceship. The “Mother” ship Connection is a metaphorical allusion to the middle passage and a return to Africa. Likewise, it is no surprise that the Data Thief’s

(RIGHT) FIGURE 2:
Black Box and Sunglasses
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

search for the crossroads leads to Africa while aboard Clinton’s Mothership. However, it is still a quandary as to why Akomfrah’s angel gets stuck there.

IV

In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Houston Baker discusses the idea of the crossroads in blues and African-American culture. Baker’s attempt at developing a black vernacular theory through a blues aesthetic will help shed light on why the Data Thief finds himself trapped. Baker says of the crossroads, “the railway juncture is marked by transience. Its inhabitants are always travelers—a multifarious assembly in transit.”¹⁹ Baker asserts that blues singers, like Robert Johnson, are always situated at a crossroads because it is only at this sight of fluidity that



“HE ARGUES THAT WHEN BLUES ARTISTS SING [...] THEY PERFORM AN ACTION THAT IS SIMILAR TO THE BLACK HOLE...”

a blues singer finds the power to transform “experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song.”²⁰ In this way, Baker describes a concept of the crossroads where the rules and principles of the world that usually constrict or oppress a person no longer apply. By singing at the crossroads, the blues singer and his kin, such as the Data Thief, experience a form of liberation through artistic expression.

In an attempt to explain how his philosophy of a blues aesthetic

operates, Baker uses the scientific concept of the black hole. In the text, the black hole functions as a prime metaphor for how he believes the crossroads transforms time and space. A black hole is a star with gravity so dense that it consumes all light that comes into contact with it. Occasionally, because the amount of energy concentrated inside a black hole is so powerful, it pulls other stars and planets into its orbit. If a star were to get too close to a black hole, it would be consumed after crossing the event horizon and enter a field where time and space bends.

In scientific circles, what lies on the other side of a black hole is unknown, but there is conjecture that they may be portals to other universes altered by the bending of the space-time continuum.²¹ This is the aspect of the black hole that Baker finds so interesting. He argues that when blues artists sing or when writers such as Richard Wright employ a blues vernacular in their work, they perform an action that is similar to the black hole:

The symbolic content of Afro-American expressive culture can thus be formulated



(LEFT) FIGURE 3:
Mothership Connection Album Cover
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

in terms of the black hole conceived as a subcultural...region in which a dominant, white culture's representations are squeezed to zero volume, producing a new expressive order.²²

In *The Last Angel of History*, the narrator states that Robert Johnson received a secret black technology at the crossroads. He goes on to explain that this black technology was the blues and that, "the blues begat jazz, the blues begat soul, the blues begat hip-hop, the blues begat R&B."²³ Within the film's narrative, we follow the lineage of Robert Johnson 200 years into the future, where Akomfrah introduces the Data Thief. Just as in Baker's text, the Data Thief is drawn toward the crossroads because he wishes to be free of his own time. However, as he traces The Mothership Connection back to Africa, back to the crossroads, he realizes that he can never return to where he came from.



This realization at the end of *The Last Angel of History*, at first glance, appears contradictory. If the Data Thief stays tuned to the Mothership and locates the crossroads, he is supposed to find the key to the future! So why is he stuck in twentieth-century Africa? Baker argues that once a person enters the black hole (or the crossroads), they are utterly transformed. He likens entering the black hole to going through rites of passage. When a black person enters the crossroads, they go through three rites. The first stage "involves the black person's separation from a dominant, white society."²⁴ In the second stage, the black person feels a sense of

"... timelessness and spacelessness... outside of history...characterized by [the] receipt of ancestral wisdom."²⁵ During this phase, Baker argues that an ahistorical "sense of the black self's historicity" is achieved.²⁶

During the third stage, the initiate is reintegrated into the society from which they came, but they are totally and irreversibly transformed because that person has now been made whole through their interaction with ancestral wisdom:

The expressive community at the center of the black hole is always conceived as 'marginal' because its members never 'return' to the affective and perceptual structures of an old white dispensation. In actuality, the expressive community of the black (w)hole...is the center of a new order of existence.²⁷

That is to say, the black (w)hole is a space marked by fluid radicalism. Black people at the crossroads

allow themselves to become vessels whereby the blues are released into the world to take on forms and rhythms that can no longer be contained by the normative conventions of the day, such as the notion of linear history. Akomfrah further develops this connection to the crossroads when a frame featuring the Data Thief's sunglasses and black box (time-traveling tools) is followed by a frame of a nail and a piece of wood. This juxtaposition shows how the nail and the wood, perceived analog instruments, are actually time-traveling apparatuses that have aided black people in their efforts to move fluidly in and out of conceptions of rigid, linear historical frameworks for generations.

V I argue that the manner in which Akomfrah employs the concept of

(LEFT) FIGURE 4:
Nail and Wood
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

history in this film resonates quite well with Benjamin because *The Last Angel of History* also attempts to make a critique of historical materialism. Benjamin's angel sees the past as a whole catastrophe, not a series of independent catastrophic events leading toward a logical future. Throughout the text, Benjamin levels a critique against Karl Marx in particular, and other historical materialists generally, for failing to recognize the interrelated nature of seemingly separate events over time. Moreover, with too much focus on progress toward the future, the

past and the present conditions of actual people are easily overlooked.

In similar fashion, Akomfrah's angel serves as a critique of strictly linear notions of history by orienting his angel's narrative toward the crossroads and The Mothership Connection. Near the end of the film, Akomfrah's angel cannot leave twentieth-century Africa because he has gone through the black hole of the crossroads where time and space bend. It is where concepts such as past, present, and future no longer have the same meanings

that they did before. The Data Thief has returned via The Mothership Connection to an Africa that is both an ancient past and an alien future simultaneously. In other words, the world where history is linear is an "optical illusion."²⁸ There is no future or past for the Data Thief to return to because he has entered a realm where such distinctions are fluid and unfixed. Thus, at the end of *The Last Angel of History*, the viewer discovers that the Data Thief is not trapped at all. Instead, he is free of the very idea of chronological history altogether. ■

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

² Ibid., 258.

³ Editors Markus Bockmuehl and Guy G. Stroumsa discuss the various meanings of Paradise in the Christian and Jewish traditions in *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257. Susan Handelman's "Walter Benjamin and the Angel of History," *Crosscurrents: Religion and Intellectual Life* 41, no.3 (1992): 344–352 expands upon Benjamin's use of Paradise and its relationship to the Jewish religious tradition.

⁵ For more on Benjamin's critique of historical materialism see Theses I–VI, 253–255.

⁶ John Akomfrah, dir., *The Last Angel of History*. Black Audio Film Collective. 1995. May 9, 2014. <http://vimeo.com/72909756>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The narrator of the film makes two specific references to the Data Thief traveling to Africa during the film. In the 26th minute, the Data Thief travels to 'our time' and the

voiceover is accompanied by images of Africa from the early to the mid twentieth-century. In the 37th minute, the narrator states that this is the Data Thief's last visit to Africa, and the voiceover is accompanied by what is presumably video of Africa during the 1990's, the time the film was produced. Precisely where in twentieth-century Africa the Data Thief gets stuck is unclear.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Parliament. "P-Funk." *The Mothership Connection*. Casablanca Records, 1975. Spotify.

¹³ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 54.

¹⁴ Parliament, "P-Funk."

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Parliament. "*The Mothership Connection*." *The Mothership Connection*. Casablanca Records, 1975. Spotify.

¹⁷ Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), Kindle Edition, 228.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Neil Degrasse Tyson, *Cosmos: A Space Time Odyssey*, "A Sky Full of Ghosts." NBC Studios. Mar 30, 2014. Apr 10, 2014. <http://www.hulu.com/watch/615445#i0,p0,d0>.

²² Baker, 3526.

²³ Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History*.

²⁴ Baker, 3542.

²⁵ Ibid., 3554.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 3582.

²⁸ Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History*. Throughout the film, Akomfrah refers to how the difference between social reality and science fiction is an 'optical illusion.' In this sense, the film suggests that the real lived experience of black people around the world is quite similar to popular science fiction narratives such as those offered by *The Mothership Connection*.