

THE UNREACHABLE DREAM OF THE BLACK PANTHER

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ABSTRACT

In a “disenchanted”** West, in Max Weber’s words, science fiction as a field of speculation, prediction, warning, and as a «lab of the future» is undeniably popular in theaters this last decade. Faced with recurrent themes, such as «natural» disasters, clashes, wars, dehumanization and social fractures, Black Panther, a 2018 Marvel science-fiction film, and its diegetic world may have looked as a eu-topia (a good place), a model to look forward to. As such, from its *afrofuturism*, the modern yet traditional fictional kingdom Wakanda, to its reversal of the balance of power, Black Panther is a milestone on many levels in the contemporary sci-fi landscape. However, with the insurmountable limitations of its societal model, it is closer to utopia in its more depressing form: its unreachability.

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** Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Beacon Press- 2nd edition, 1993).

In a ‘disenchanted’ West, to use Max Weber’s words (1993), a predictable world, where modern science, secularism, an impersonal market economy, and bureaucracy reign supreme; science fiction as a field of speculation, prediction, warnings, and as a “lab of the future” is undeniably popular in theaters. If we have a look at the 20 biggest box office hits of all time according to Box Office Mojo,¹ eleven of them could be considered as belonging to the science fiction genre. Mostly thanks to the tidal wave of superhero films produced by Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the DC Comics Extended Universe (DCEU), two mega studios with the ambition and the means to dominate the genre of science fiction. The border between science fiction and the real world has never been thinner. With new discoveries every day and a seemingly endless marge of progress for technologies, each week is a small revolution in itself. And this race toward progress is clearly reflected in our theaters.

If science fiction was born from a paradoxical distrust /faith in science (like in *Frankenstein*), it is also at the intersection of many other fields as well, such as history, politics, and sociology. Hence the eternal dilemma in which science fiction cinema finds itself. It cannot exist without the very same technologies, and the capitalist system, which it very often criticizes in its scenarios, especially in dystopian ones. Science fiction also has the ability “to move readers to imagine alternative ways of being alive,”² as Greene notes. Booker and Thomas even argue that science fiction is “the genre most capable of capturing the energies of the historical process.”³

With recurrent themes, such as ‘natural’ disasters, wars, dehumanization, and social fractures, dystopia in all its nuances seems to be dominating the current cinema trend. It seems that utopia is becoming rarer and rarer as traditional utopia, with no real spiritual guidance or “legitimate” alternative to the old familial system somehow failed to stay relevant in the previous century as well as in ours.

In contrast to this gloomy observation, *Black Panther*, a 2018 Marvel movie seems at first glance like a breath of fresh air and the closest thing to a utopia we can find nowadays in science fiction. From the film’s take on *afrofuturism*, its modern yet traditional kingdom Wakanda, to its reversal of the balance of power, *Black Panther* is a milestone on many levels in the contemporary sci-fi landscape. Black Panther actually offers a vision of what could happen

1 Box Office Mojo, *Top Lifetime Grosses - Box Office Mojo*. [online] Available at: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww_top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW> [Accessed 10 January 2022].

2 Maxine Greene. *Releasing the Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 101.

3 M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas. *The Science Fiction Handbook* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 6.

to us if technologies were used fairly and for the good of all.

I propose to look at *Black Panther* through a symptomatic interpretation lens, which considers films as part of a broad context of society as argued by Louis Althusser.⁴ Although we may be tempted to look at *Black Panther* as an eu-topia, a "good place" or a model to look forward to, the insurmountable limitations of its universe make *Black Panther* actually closer to a traditional utopia in its more hopeless aspect: its unreachability.

I. AFROFUTURISM

Black Panther tells the story of King T'Challa, aka Black Panther, endowed with super powers thanks to 'vibranium' a metal coming from a meteorite and able to store and release kinetic energy. King T'Challa lives in an imaginary futuristic African kingdom called Wakanda and tries to prevent his cousin, Erik who has his own agenda, to steal and use their overwhelming technological superiority outside their territory where they've been living in isolation so far.

Black Panther, although a risky choice for Marvel, paid off with a worldwide total of \$1,346,913,161 and three Oscars. In terms of representation of a possible future, an unusual style of science fiction had its moment of glory in 2018 with this film which in a matter of weeks became not only a staple of the MCU franchise but also the leading figure in Afrofuturism. The character of *Black Panther* was first introduced by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1966 when civil rights movements were on a rise. *Black Panther's* name was even changed to Black Leopard not to be associated with the Black Panther Party, which was patrolling the streets of Oakland city to challenge police brutality, a too familiar subject in this « Black Live Matters » era showing how unanswered these issues have been so far. It also demonstrates that this a priori risk that Marvel was taking by producing an almost all-black cast film (figure 1) was actually very mainstream.

4 Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar. *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2009).



Figure 1. The main cast of *Black Panther*. Coogler, R. (2018). *Black Panther* (Film) Marvel Studios

With its black characters who actually have the means this time to have a voice and to potentially take the power, the film belongs to the Afrofuturist genre. Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in 1994 in his essay *Black to the future*.⁵ It is different from classical science fiction in the way that it is grounded in African traditions and that “it must be rooted in and unapologetically celebrate the uniqueness and innovation of black culture”⁶. *Black Panther* is all of this, from its score and its costumes, to its unapologetic black characters setting, for once, their own rules. The director Ryan Coogler even refers to mainstream debates about the responsibility of western nations regarding colonialism, or ownership of artifacts featured in their museums and their shady history, as shown in the scene taking place in the Museum of Great Britain (a barely hidden reference to the British Museum) where we first encounter the villain, Erik.

Part of this Afrofuturist ambition is also seen in the use of Xhosa, a language with click consonants “associated with the South African fight against white colonizers.”⁷ Although most of the film is in English, the usage of Xhosa grounded it even more in reality and strengthen its ambition and its authenticity in featuring African characters. This language is especially used in spiritual scenes between king T’Challa (aka Black Panther) and his late father but also in scenes where the king doesn’t want to be understood by other characters. Wakanda doesn’t

5 Mark Dery. (1994). “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose” (Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture).

6 Jamie Broadnax. “What The Heck Is Afrofuturism?”, *Huffpost*, February 16, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-broadnax-afrofuturism-black-panther_n_5a85f1b9e4b004fc31903b95

7 John Eligon. “Wakanda Is a Fake Country, but the African Language in ‘Black Panther’ Is Real”, *New York Times*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/us/wakanda-black-panther.html>

only have technological superiority, its citizens are also multilingual and have high ground in multiple situations. During the interview of Klaw, the FBI agent is quite frustrated to be left out of the conversation between T'Challa and his general. "Does she speak English?" he asks T'Challa when she wants to reply to General Okoye. They refuse his authority by not speaking his language, English, which is the lingua Franca. The choice of making the main characters speak in a local African language rather than exclusively in English is an informed choice from the director who clearly puts his film in the vein of Afrofuturism.

II. WAKANDA FOREVER AND REVERSED POWER

In contrast with the mainstream dystopia, *Black Panther* shows a desirable alternative of the future where the powerful, Wakanda here, deliberately chooses not to reproduce the past mistakes of the powerful nations. Wakanda has access to vibranium, a metal of extraterrestrial origins that landed on Earth a million years ago, which enabled them to develop high technologies that they used to hide from the world thus escaping from the colonialism period and its ravages. Wakanda doesn't only physically hide behind holograms but behind Western stereotypes as well as illustrated by the conversation between Klaw, a mercenary, and Everett Ross, a CIA agent, the only two main white characters. "What do you know about Wakanda?" Ross "It's a third-world country- Leopards, textile, cool outfits?" Wakandians have benefited from this powerless image to stay out of the radar of those who might be more than interested in their technological developments, especially in their weaponry.

The conflict in the film is actually a civil war to prevent these weapons to be used outside because Wakanda has indeed the power to annihilate other nations. However, King T'Challa's first action by the end of the film will be to open a Wankandien center in a poor district in Oakland in a direct reference to the Oakland Community School (OCS) also called the Black Panther school (the party not the Marvel hero).⁸

Wakanda, and the film itself, are above all the story of a family and a loving one, to the point that even the villain is actually from this same family. Science fiction elements such as the meteor, the metal and the technological prowess are more contextual than key elements themselves. Wakanda "looks and feels like a society where scientific advancement occurs not

8 Tammerlin Drummond. "Black Panther School a Legend in its Time", *East Bay Times*, October, 6, 2016. <https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2016/10/06/black-panther-school-ahead-of-its-time/>

at the cost of, but in harmony with tradition and culture”⁹ argues Devika Girish. The film features a blend of natural elements, African and Western architecture in green and lively Wakanda where the leader can walk safely in the streets among his people. It truly gives the impression of a harmonious city living with its geography without taming it. Very unlike the first scenes we had from the West in the poor suburbs of Oakland, or those of London, whose introduction through the museum of Great Britain, is like an open door to the past, to history and a dark one. On the contrary, Wakanda is very much alive and shown right away as a futuristic city (figure 2).



Figure 2. Wakanda. Coogler, R. (2018). *Black Panther* (Film) Marvel Studios

Erik, the antagonist, and cousin of T’Challa, wants to take the throne to open the country and help black people all over the world emphasizing the difference between T’Challa who was a privileged African and himself, a black American from a suffering community. So close, yet so far, they have little in common except for their blood. It also puts this time the Africans in a privileged position over their ‘cousins’ of America. Erik’s message resonates, even more, when T’Challa argues with his companions about the idea of opening the frontiers. His friend W’Kabi expresses his worries regarding the possible arrival of immigrants: “You let the refugees in, they bring their problems with them and then Wakanda is like everywhere else.” This type of statement is regularly heard in contemporary immigration debates and appears to be a particularly complex issue related to the fear of losing one’s identity as a nation. As T’Challa states it. “We are different, we could lose our way of life.” As a consequence, Erik

9 Devika Girish. “Out of This World”, *Film Comment*, March-April 2018 issue, published by Film at Lincoln Center, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/black-panther-science-fiction/>

seems, so far at least, almost worthier than T'Challa as a Black Panther in his will of opening the kingdom and coming to the aid of what he considers his community all over the world. However, if T'Challa is reluctant to open the doors of his kingdom, it is because he is aware of the power of their technologies and as he answers to W'Kabi "Waging war on other countries has never been our way" another nod to the former colonizers and to the first military power in the world, the same country which ironically produced *Black Panther*.

Although Wakanda's monarchical system might look archaic, it is as far away from dictatorship as it gets. T'Challa is presented as a fair king, open to criticism and ostensibly more egalitarian than many democratic leaders. Wakanda, as a state, is also very quickly identified as an ally to a Western audience. Indeed, in the first scene, we are introduced to Black Panther's rescue mission of women, from a terrorist group a 2018 audience would have identified without a doubt as Boko Haram.

Throughout all the dialogues of the film between the Wakandians, humanity and affection transcend all the discussions in a sort of sisterhood - brotherhood feeling. Black Panther is strong but not inhuman, his whole power depends on his people and family, and on rituals that cannot be performed alone: from his costume, his coronation, and the ritual fight, to the transcendental ceremony to the ancestral plane guided by a priest. No wonder it is a 'heart-shaped flower' that gives Black Panther his powers. His powers come from a plant that requires nurturing, caring, and patience. In the same way, few technologies are actually involved in daily life or in these same rituals, showing once again that technology is a mean and not an end in itself in Wakanda.

In that same vein, although the film is conventional as it is built around one strong man character, it is however quite refreshing to have a strong cast of female main characters who are not relegated to the background although they are not as such active participants in the plot but are mainly here to support the hero. T'Challa would be nothing, without the suit created by his sister Suri a genius inventor (figure 3), Nakia his spy/lover's advice, and his powerful General Okoye's protection (all female characters). Therefore, this archaic form of power which is monarchy is compensated by the open-minded, selfless attitude of the hero very early in the film.



Figure 3. Suri, T'Challa's sister. Coogler, R. (2018). *Black Panther* (Film) Marvel Studios

From the urban planning to the relation between the characters, Wakanda seems like 'the place to be'. Between modernity and tradition, technological comfort and harmony with nature, all the while preserving the local culture, this kingdom is the perfect illustration of what is called eutopia. Unlike other forms of utopia such as *euchronias* (or the best time to live) or *evantropias* (the best possible human being), *eutopias* designate mainly a place where urban design and morality are in harmony with the desire for a perfect place. Wakanda is, in fact, the perfect illustration of the "secularization of the idea of paradise"¹⁰ according to Servier (as cited in Misseri, 2016). This ideal society is based on science and human genius in full control of the creation of heaven on earth. In the pure science fiction tradition, a perfectly rational explanation is given to the super powers of Black Panther, the vibranium, and of all the technological advances it opened the way to. Wakanda is the product of this science and of generations of trials and errors in a pure positivist tradition, rather than of supernatural intervention. Wakanda is thus shown as deserving and worthy according to western criteria, but also, at first glance, attainable.

10 Jean Servier. *Histoire de l'utopie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), (Collection Idées) as cited in Lucas Misseri, *Evantropia and Dysantropia: A Possible New Stage in the History of Utopias* (Chapter in the book "More After More Essays Commemorating the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas Mores Utopia" edited by Ksenia Olkusz, Michal Kłosiński, and Krzysztof M. Maj (Krakow, 2016), 26.

III. LIMITS OF THE DREAM

The insistence of T'Challa of not intervening outside of his frontiers makes us realize the limits of Wakanda as a desirable future, which makes it closer to a utopia rather than to a real alternative of life. Wakanda's strength is not only due to the vibranium, a fictional metal only present there, but also tied to the kingdom's isolation. It survived so far by hiding and refusing to share with the outside world as this peaceful universe's existence seems to be possible only on the condition to stay hidden and unheard of. «Pour vivre heureux vivons cachés»¹¹, to live happily, live hidden. De Florian stated this now proverbial moral in 1792 in his fable called "Le grillon" where a cricket laments, comparing its fate to that of a superb butterfly parading in the air. But when he sees children chasing the butterfly and "tearing the poor beast apart", the cricket changes his mind: "[...] It costs too much to shine in the world. [...]" This attitude that one could deem selfish and isolationist makes Erik's fight even more relevant. "Where were you?" asks he to T'Challa. Where was Wakanda when its people were suffering all over the world? The film ends in a final CGI over the top fight between T'Challa and Erik in the pure Marvel tradition. While Erik is dying T'Challa offers to heal him, but Erik retorts: "Just bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors who jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage." This last statement almost undermines T'Challa's victory. Erik's death will not be in vain though as it will finally convince the king that opening Wakanda to the world is the right thing to do.

The ending scene takes us to the United Nations in Vienna (figure 4) where T'Challa officially opens Wakanda to the world through an emotional speech about peace, acceptance, fraternity and exchange: "We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other (...) we all know the truth, more connects us than separate us (...) in time of crisis the wise builds bridges, while the foolish builds barriers." The rest of the nations' representatives seem little impressed and ask: "With all due respect, what can a nation of farmers offer to the rest of the world." An arrogant but somehow legitimate question. Only their technical knowledge and superiority will actually give the Wakandians a voice on the international scene.

11 Jean-Pierre Claris De Florian. *Le grillon* (Paris: Les Fables, 1792), 93-94.



Figure 4. King T'Challa at the United Nations. Coogler, R. (2018). *Black Panther* (Film)
Marvel Studios

Moreover, *Black Panther* is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and will eventually be part of the Avengers (in 1968 in the comics, in 2018 and 2019 in the MCU films), a group of international (but mostly American) superheroes who have the mission to protect the Earth against any internal or external attack, usually causing as many destructions as the invaders. Thus, *Black Panther* in order to be assimilated into this universe has to tame his ambitions or messages at the end of the film. The ending scene in the United Nations almost feels like an interview from the Avengers. Do we have the same politics, the same objectives, do we serve the same cause, and will you accept our leadership although you technically are stronger than us? All those questions are implied in this last scene. Thus Erik's fight and T'Challa ambition to open Wakanda to the world are undermined or limited within the scope of the Avengers and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The second part of the franchise will show us the consequences that we can already imagine drastic on Wakanda. But if Wakanda fails to offer a viable future, one can only hope that the rest of the world will make Suri's motto theirs, "just because something work it doesn't mean it cannot be improved." In that statement lies probably the true embodiment of eutopia as argues Sargent, to advocate change, realizing that things" are not quite what they should be, and to assert that improvement is possible."¹²

With seven nominations and three Oscars won, *Black Panther* was the first Academy

12 Lyman Tower Sargent. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", *Utopian Studies* 5 (1994), 1-37; as cited by Graham J. Murphy, *Eutopia, The Routledge companion to science fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint, 2009.

https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww_top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW, accessed: 10 January 2022.

awards ever for the studio Marvel. Praised for its scenario as well as its beautiful costumes, *Black Panther* seduced a public eager to see hope among the bleak landscape of contemporary science fiction. However, Wakanda had as many fans as it had detractors, offended that a blockbuster, let alone a Marvel film, could even be nominated for an Oscar. Many sociological and political factors were at play when this film was selected for Best Motion Picture of the Year. It might not have won this much sought for award, but Wakanda did win many people's hearts with its futuristic yet traditional, modern yet in harmony with Nature urban designs and its wise king T'Challa. The film successfully showed a glimpse of what Africa could have become if it had not been touched by the Europeans as well as what a society could do when leaded with the heart rather than greed. In the pure tradition of Afrofuturism, Black Panther featured what seemed at first glance to be a eutopia, or a good place. However our findings showed that its society is actually a utopia, in its most depressing aspect, its unreachability. Indeed, not only its existence depends on an extraterrestrial metal, but its whole success and progress was only possible due to its isolation of the outside world. Despite its progressive ideas from the reversed power play between an African country and the USA, its strong female characters and its ideal society, as usual, contemporary cinema seems unable to feature a plausible bright future. As such Black Panther, as well as films like Avatar, are the perfect illustration of Raymond Williams' definition of "the paradise" type of utopian fictions "in which a happier life is described as simply existing elsewhere."¹³

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