

## Believe the Hype: Hype Williams and Afrofuturist Filmmaking – Thomas F. DeFrantz

In 1992, black film theorist Arthur Jafa imagined a “black visual intonation” that would echo prominent performative features of black vocal intonation. Jafa predicted a future of filmmaking that could reproduce “visual equivalencies of vibrato, rhythmic patterns, slurred or bent notes, and other musical effects ... samba beats, reggae beats, all kinds of things.” By now, certain music videos have answered Jafa’s call for a distinctive style of short-form filmmaking that echoes Africanist performance concepts of complex meter, antiphony, percussive attack, apart-playing, an “aesthetic of the cool,” and the competitive performance of derision. [1] In this essay I expand on the black aesthetic ideologies that allow for an articulation of “black visuality” tethered to an inviolable connection between music and dance in the Africanist grain. I also explore work of director Hype Williams in terms of its stylistic innovations. How does Williams represent blackness in his aesthetic approach? How does Williams’ approach correlate to its musical sources? A consideration of Williams’ feature film *Belly* launches a speculation of Afrofuturism in relation to the art of filmmaking.

### Cultural Studies and Black Performance Theory

Jafa’s statement emerged at a particular moment in African American cultural studies, at the height of the so-called “culture wars” in the American academy. As many black studies departments fought to increase, or maintain, funding from their universities, some scholars came under additional scrutiny from academics outside black studies to produce meaningful and particular accounts of black expressive culture and its affects. Simultaneously, postmodern literary theory had decisively rendered “race” an empty marker of social forces and political domination rather than a persistent system of cultural processes. Jafa, like other theorists working to deconstruct ontological explications of “race” as an abiding ideology for understanding black creativity, may have felt bound to disassemble the idea of black filmmaking as a stable practice that could produce texts that could be analyzed as “black” in terms of casting, narrative, mise en scene, or political ideology. Many film critics of the 1990s, including Manthia Diawara and a host of black British theorists, took aim at “black” as a “technique” in and of itself that could be read on a film being screened. These scholars began looking toward aesthetic and materialist theories that might account for the actual process of production of work that might be identified in terms of culturally-specific rhetorics; they questioned what the “black” in “black filmmaking” might be; they searched out ways to distinguish the process of film as an activity that might involve a black diasporan ethos of participatory spectatorship more aligned with other prominent aspects of black cultural expression including hip hop dance, music, gospel singing and black church preaching, and vibrant oral rhetoric contained by signifying and “trash talking.” In this, Jafa and others predicted a black performance theory built on an exploration of aesthetic commonalities that deployed for, by, and about African Americans and other black diasporan populations.

In a famous essay the same year as Jafa’s call, black British theorist Stuart Hall (1992) asked “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” A short overview of Hall’s query will give a sense of the critical anxieties of the time. Quoting work by American historian Cornel West, Hall first articulated what he called a “new cultural politics of difference” that emerged from three intertwined political developments:

- 1) the displacement of European models of high culture, which, of course, had given way to the rise of popular culture studies, cinema studies, and media studies;
- 2) the emergence of the United States as a global power, a political shift that underscores structures of domination and power in the hardening of a US-driven global cultural marketplace; and
- 3) the decolonialization of the third world, which he hoped had given way to multiple methods for the construction of subjectivities across geographies, class, sexualities, and race.

After distilling West’s point of view, Hall went on to trouble this assessment, first by resisting the idea of a so-called “global postmodern” since “postmodernism remains extremely unevenly developed as a

phenomenon” and as often as not this asymmetry causes “the old center/peripheries of high modernity to reappear.” This observation raises concerns for everyone working in media studies. While fluidity and access to divergent ideologies of the everyday may seem to be transparent and playfully abundant, the material experiences of everyday life are not equivalent in, say, Detroit and Melbourne. Hall was also suspicious of what he called the “return of the primitive” in discourses of global postmodernism, since the primitive returns, here, “uncannily at the moment of its apparent political eclipse. This rupture of primitivism, managed by modernism, becomes another postmodern event” (Hall, 1992: 23). This point in particular will become important as we turn to the video work of director Hype Williams.

Before we move away from Hall’s critique, though, I do want to underscore that he added a fourth important space to the critique of cultural politics that he termed “the aggressive resistance to difference” (Hall, 1992: 25). Here, Hall, like many other black cultural theorists around the world, wondered at the postmodern impulse to celebrate an encroaching sameness of global postmodern experience at the cost of disavowing patently divergent everyday lives. In this, I find Hall extremely useful as I try to think through African American performance history and practice; as I wonder about the material differences between, say, viewing a hip hop video at a friend’s home in Roxbury, the largest black neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, and viewing that same video in a lovely hotel room in Melbourne, Australia. Hall helps to remind me that my own work on Hype Williams and Afrofuturism emerges from a particular point of view and creative need that is informed by my own sensibilities as someone committed to the construction of African American performance theory.

Hall goes on to cite three impulses in black diasporan creativity that I will take up here in relation to Hype Williams: the importance of “style” as a subject; the importance of music and rhythm as a foundation of deep structure; and the importance of dance and the body to the formation of social knowledge among black people. We can certainly understand this constellation in relation to, say, hip hop music and its emergence as a black cultural practice in the early 1970s. Hip hop came with its particular physical, graphic, oral, and fashion style; clearly hip hop began as a participatory musical form with dance embedded in its formation. We can recall that the earliest hip hop songs involved a call to physical action through music, and of course embraced what hip hop theorist Tricia Rose termed “a style nobody can deal with.”

- [Musical Interlude: “Apache” by Sugar Hill Gang \(1981\)](#)

For example, I want to suggest here that the early recording “Apache” by the Sugar Hill Gang helps set in motion the terms of emergent black popular culture that formed the material – and kinesthetic – inheritance of certain black music video and filmmakers, including Hype Williams. “Apache” embraces complications of futurist hybridity with its patently odd “Indian” calls that signify with derisive irony on media representations of Native Americans; its assemblage of pre-recorded tracks that suggest an inevitable dance that has already taken place; its musical build-up and release into rap that is undeniably “funky” in an early 1980s context. The song sutures a mythic past of Native American centrality to its rupture and reformation as popular entertainment, all in the creation of a recording that predicts an inevitable future of mediated hybridity.

## **Black Musical Production**

Among the startling cultural shifts enabled by technology in the post-industrial age, the production process of black popular music changed dramatically from the late 1960s to the 1980s. To state this progression in awkward, categorical terms, R&B and soul gave way to disco and funk, which, in short order, sowed the seeds for hip hop. Simultaneously, the predominant practices of live black musicianship yielded to mediated soundscapes of sampling and digital production. The shift that interests me most in these transitions involves the lengths to which black American performers went to tether traditional practices of musicianship to the rise of electronic music technologies. While technological innovations allowed artists to record and produce more music with fewer musicians, black music in this era veered toward the

inclusion of the people surrounding the practice of making music: the engineers, producers, homies, fans, agents, etc., who contributed to the production of the recorded artifact. In the Sugar Hill Gang clip of “Apache,” for example, the recording includes the sounds of party-goers enjoying the music; we hear the sense of communal celebration shared across a group of performers who are captured, as if live in response to a dancing audience. This inclusion of the crowd sounds, as the intended response to the recording, heralded a broad shift in the terms of black popular music.

Black pop music of the Berry Gordy, Jr. and the “Motown sound” variety resisted the inscription of spontaneous antiphony, or call-and-response, onto the commodity of recorded music. In a market-driven gesture that hoped to smooth the incursion of African American artists into white-controlled mainstream media systems, including television and mainstream radio programming such as American Bandstand and its imitators, Gordy and his followers minimized aspects of the “unruly” Africanist traditions of spontaneity and aggressively layered complex rhythmic structures. The successful rise of black pop music shepherded by the Motown sound was not without consequence, though, as it shifted popular music away from traditions of aggressive irony, percussive attack, and especially the insistence on antiphony as a purpose for creating music.

Other traditions of black pop music, including funk and its antecedent soul, embraced recognizably Africanist traditions including audible call and response in their commercial recordings. For example, James Brown built his fame as a soul singer who consistently called musical structure to his bandmates and to his audience in performance, and importantly, in his recorded performances. Brown’s artistry crossed over from its primary African American audience to a multinational, multiethnic audience that responded to the directives he assigned his bandmembers as well as his dancing listeners. In his recording of “Sex Machine” (1970)

Brown leans into stylistic aesthetic imperatives of call and response, a percussive vocal attack, complex rhythm layering, and an overall cool demeanor as he directs the song’s sequence of events.

- [Musical Interlude: “Sex Machine” \(beginning\) James Brown \(0.30\)](#)

Brown offers a fine example of Africanist liveness in popular soul music before hip hop. The recording begins with a scenario in progress, as Brown calls a question out to his band – the “fellas” – whether or not he should dance. The rhetoric is ironic here, since all auditors and participants – including the bandmembers and listeners – want Brown to lead the song. In the chorus itself, Brown refers to a dedicated respondent “Bobby” (Byrd) who answers each of his exhortations to “get up” with an animated “get on up.” Like the rhythm guitar, bass, and drum pattern, Byrd’s voice effectively becomes an instrumental ostinato in the recording, a component that plays “apart” from the other instruments even as it contributes to the overall groove of the tune. The lyrics to the song are a series of almost nonsensical rhymes that are chanted/sung on pitch. At one point, the groove continues as Brown asks whether he should “take ‘em on to the bridge.” The bridge to the song offers both tonal and rhythmic release to the groove of the chorus, and animates a heightened kinesthetic response from the listener. After a rhythmic break, the original groove returns to provide a base for a piano solo, until Brown and Byrd turn their attention from the bandmembers and toward the audience, exhorting the crowd to “shake your money-maker.” To end the recording, Brown calls out how he wants the band to “hit it and quit it.”

- [Musical Interlude: “Sex Machine” \(bridge\) James Brown \(2.00 – 2.30\)](#)

Brown functions as a bandleader and emcee, in a mode that becomes much more prevalent with the rise of hip hop a decade later. His trademark combination of aggressive, direct oratory and overall cool demeanor foregrounds his very human performance as frontman to a band that is mostly electronic – electric bass, electric guitars, electrified piano, and of course, amplified voice. Because Brown and his recording producers were willing to document the process of creating the performance of “Sex Machine” in the resulting record artefact, they laid groundwork for an increased engagement of Africanist performance practice and emergent recording technologies.

Later in the 1970s, when George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic embraced emergent technologies in music production, they elaborated upon Brown’s example to underscore the performance inside its own finished object. As with Brown, Clinton’s strategy as a bandleader secured an oppositional position to the encroachment of recording technology as an arbiter of black art. Like Brown, the various P-Funk bands call and respond to each

other; they rely on seemingly-spontaneous spoken or chanted sections; they rely significantly on humor as a tactic of musicality; and most importantly, they set up a groove or aural universe of the recording that the “song” proper floats over. The driving force for P-Funk, uncut funk, “the bomb,” is the rhythm, and significantly, the movement that the recording provokes.

- [Musical Interlude: “Dr. Funkenstein” by Parliament/Funkadelic – 1976 \(0.30\)](#)

For Clinton and his various bands, black musicians arrived as impossible subjects: festooned partyers who claimed to be extra-terrestrials. Dr. Funkenstein, a “disco fiend with the monster sound” who could “cure the ills” of his patients through his music, introduced one recording with his dedication “to the preservation of the motion of hips.” Rife with double entendre and bursts of rhyme, the p-funk here, and in other Parliament/Funkadelic recordings, came “directly from the Mothership” – an alien vessel that brought the musicians to Earth. The references to aliens and other-worldly effects underscored a combination of Africanist musical practice and science fiction that gives way to the aesthetic concept of Afrofuturism. In “Dr. Funkenstein,” the recorded crowd responds to the musical funk with a chanted request – “hit me with the one” – to provoke the body to dance. The aliens have arrived to remind their audiences that dance and music are explicitly aligned here. Significantly, “Dr. Funkenstein” includes a trombone solo that might be heard on a jazz recording from an entirely different era of black music; the solo tethers the recording to other, earlier traditions of black musical production.

## **Afrofuturism**

Like James Brown, Parliament/Funkadelic fit into a postindustrial aesthetic project to propel black Americans toward a digital future where musical performance and technology collide, suture, and produce an impossible but undeniable synergy. If these songs sound fresh to contemporary ears, it may be in some part because they emerge at the edge of what we can call Afrofuturism, or the radical re-assembly of black musical practice through technology. Afrofuturism has been expounded by British cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun in many of his writings; he tends to talk about this concept in terms of digital media that has been supported by black cultural practices, and as an evocation of a world that doesn’t exist; a science-fictionalized world of the future built upon the musics and cultures of the past.

The concept of Afrofuturism may be difficult to grasp, and Eshun's writings revel in a certain obscurity that offers them up as entirely fun to read, but difficult to particularize. [2] The image of the character Jordy from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, as a black man in a predominantly white world permanently sutured to a non-existent technology of a visor that allows him to see, can give us a clue as to some terms of Afrofuturism. Here, Jordy's blackness, which is highlighted by his presence as one of the leading cast members of the multi-ethnic group, is physically tethered to technology that sets him apart from other members of the spaceship crew. In this way, Jordy, as the most "future-modern" of the human members of the crew, embodies both visual blackness, and its corporeal memory of the Middle Passage as the birth of modern existence, and emergent technology. Similarly, the image of George Clinton getting off the "mothership" into the "black ghetto" where his music can be appreciated offers a visual correlation of Afrofuturism that ties a earth-bound past of feathered, mardi-gras styled costume to the

impossible future of extra-terrestrial lives and technologies. It is worth nothing that Greg Tate, Nelson George, and Eshun have all written about the connections of science fiction and black American musical representations including Parliament and Sun Ra's radical, avant-garde Arkestra that echo black American experiences of being "alien" in our enforced home land. [3]

Afrofuturism offers a literary mechanism to correlate black creative practices from traditional aesthetic imperatives, like those delineated by Thompson, through their emergence as components of postindustrial culture, including hip hop. As I've tried to lay out above, hip hop emerged as a practice inspired by existing models of performance, and profoundly influenced – against all technological odds – by the spontaneous and live techniques of antiphony. Hip hop emerged as a black musical practice tethered to other idioms in terms of its extravagant stylization, complex rhythm, apart playing, percussive attack, and overall cool demeanor. Early hip hop musicians followed the lead set by Brown and Clinton, to connect their musicianship to the successful recording practices of earlier black American artists.

## Music Videos

By 1997, the call for a "black visual intonation" in film came to be re-stated by media theorist Valerie Smith as a component of "the search for an authentic black subject" onscreen. Even as postmodern literary theory had evacuated "race" as an ontological category of creativity, Smith compiled an important anthology of writings on film that considered the process of representing "blackness" on film and in video. She hoped to inspire scholarship on films dealing with, created by, or marketed towards African Americans that could embrace various analytic paradigms, including a consideration of the visual aesthetics preferred by black-identified filmmakers. In one essay, cultural critic Tommy Lott shrewdly asserted that "some of the most innovative black filmmaking" took place in music videos, a field of the industry that managed to operate outside the most stringent codes of practice that trouble Hollywood film production.

While still expensive and hierarchical in terms of its access to resources, short-format music video production offered filmmakers an opportunity to imagine a core black audience willing to explore differential aesthetics that echoed material experiences of black life in America and in the African diaspora. As Lott made reference to music videos, he pointed out that the "dominant influence of television on black popular culture has some rather interesting implications for black film practices that no theory of black cinema can afford to overlook" (Lott: 91). Lott may refer here to the overwhelming importance of music and dance to Africanist experience, and the extension of these practices into the realm of media through

music television. By extension, I take Lott to suggest that an “authentic black subject” of filmmaking may be discovered through an exploration of sound in motion on the small screen.

Among music video directors who have distinguished themselves with a particular aesthetic sensibility, Hype (born Harold) Williams has repeatedly proven his ability to create visual imagery that resonated with – and ultimately created – late twentieth-century hip hop ethos. Williams, who began making music videos in the early 1990s after writing graffiti and a brief career in graphic design, invigorated the industry with innovative technical processes including the use of the fisheye lens, highly saturated color palettes, and a constantly-moving camera POV that heightened a sense of kinesthesia and scale in his work. In all, videos by Williams initiated a correlation of smooth visual finish to black subjects that complemented the precise digital music production of hip hop.

## Scale

In interview, Williams has remarked that he wanted the hip hop videos he directed to suggest an emotional size and depth that resonated with qualities of the music he responded to as a listener and dancer. To achieve this, he often renders size as a simultaneously dominant and unstable visual marker. Through a combination of lens choices and digital editing, Williams creates aggressively kinetic videoscapes that propel objects forward, toward the viewer, and mix physical scale with an unchecked rhythmic ferocity. In his breakthrough 1996 video for Busta Rhymes, “Woo-Hah! Got You All In Check,” Williams employs a fisheye lens to exaggerate foreshortening in the center of the screen, and increase distortion of the image towards its periphery. The video trades in incongruous visual scenarios, bound together by the fidgety rhythmic track and Rhymes’s spitfire vocal delivery. Throughout, Rhymes appears in various proportions: miniaturized, enlarged, set on fire; dressed in a variety of outrageous, color-distinctive outfits coordinated to color-saturated settings; in impossible, patently constructed spaces as well as on recognizable, but visually distended, city streets. Williams matches Rhymes’s playful persona to a hyperactive visuality, the whole video implausibly connected by radical impossibilities of space, time, sequence, point of view, and ultimately, storytelling.

By 1997, Williams had adopted the fisheye lens as a stylistic marker of his video work. This particular lens distorts images into a visual dimensionality that suggests an Afrofuturist conception of distended time and space. Working frequently with Rhymes and Missy Elliot, Williams also honed a storyboarding technique in which visual dynamism consistently outweighs sequential storytelling. In “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” (1997) Elliot appears frequently in an oversized shiny jumpsuit, her size exaggerated by the visual examination of the fisheye lens coupled with highly-patterned stop-time editing. “The Rain” sutures imagery of Elliot in a variety of futuristic and size-altered spaces, yet the startling images resist assemblage into a time-sequence or narrative of place or event. The viewer sees Elliot trapped between huge mechanistic pendulums swinging ominously in the background; Elliott, uncomfortable and gigantic, seated atop a patently fake, day-glo green grassy hill; Elliot dancing spontaneously with friends wearing a glaring, bright yellow ensemble; Elliot leading a choreographed dance combination on a grey, rain-spattered industrial stage. The images convey no sense of sequence; but more than this, their radical shifts of point of view are linked, impossibly, by the unflagging rhythm of the song as soundtrack. The narrative of the video has to do with its shifting visual contradictions, connected by music and movement.

## Primitive Dimensions

In pursuing outlandish imagery that suggests Afrofuturist innovation, Williams and Rhymes follow Parliament/Funkadelic toward primitivistic imagery in “Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See” (1997). Here, Williams amplifies the tensely-honed rhythm track through stop-action editing that “audiovisualizes” the song, to use Eshun’s invented term. Rhymes appears in a broad range of scenarios and costumes; at times moving through an opulent mansion setting as a sort of nabob overseeing his estate and harem; witnessing a faux-African dance sequence set in a huge palatial foyer and performed by extravagantly feathered and bejeweled dancers; sparring in martial arts moves with a servant-trainer; dressed in an outrageous, mack-daddy suit decorated with animal bones and leading an elephant down a hallway; and at

one point festooned like an aboriginal tribesman, decorated with fluorescent markings on his skin that are illuminated by blacklight. The video opens with what Eshun might call a “hypersyncopation – stutter” effect that establishes an altered rhythmic timespace: oversized male pages beat “ceremonial” animal-skin gongs in an accelerated, stop-time action. The video closes with a “ritualistic” sequence of the “aboriginal” Rhymes and his dancers working around a fire, a primitivistic image that aligns the impossible futuristic rhythmic scenarios to an inevitable ritualized past, echoing the “return of the primitive” sounded by Stuart Hall. Here, visual Afrofuturism is tied – inevitably – to a primitivistic scenario.

## Queer Future Vision

Williams’ videos for Rhymes and Elliot propel considerations of black visibility, as they highlight personae that fit with an Afrofuturist proposition to project an impossible black subject into a technologically-bound future shaped by an ancestral legacy of rhythmic music and dance. In their videos, we see these artists and their cohorts continually peering out towards the viewer, as if to scrutinize our presence on the other side of the screen. Elliot consistently wears elaborate dark sunglasses with large lenses that hide her eyes from the viewer; their ovate shape resonates with popular imagery of extraterrestrials as depicted in science fiction films. As hyperactive “aliens,” Elliot and Rhymes also construct themselves as queer; beyond normative sexualities in their eager embodiment of the hyperreal. In these videos, they engage humor as an intervention to the overuse of sexuality as a tool of music video production; they offer music and dance movements as social practices that subvert correlations of hip hop, blackness, and sensuality. Notably, both Elliot and Rhymes have at times been “outed” by fans as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In this, Williams’ futuristic imagery points toward a blurring of normative tyrannies of gender and sexuality.

## Space

By 1999, Williams had virtually delimited the Afrofuturist potential of impossible spaces in music videos he made for Rhymes and the group TLC. In “No Scrubs” (1999) he managed to yoke his trademark futuristic scenography to the recognizably feminine sexuality regularly displayed by TLC. Clad in provocative vinyl jumpsuits that shift in colour from black to white, the women dance, preen, and peer at the viewer from inside a chilly, silvery soundstage. In one sequence, Lisa “Left Eye” Lopez battles with a large, floating video camera, bringing forward, at least, issues of surveillance and spectatorship; the unknowable physical location of the audience for Lopez’s constructed performance; and – in the binary suggested by the singer’s femininity in opposition to the camera’s mechanical hardness – the persistence of masculine domination as a cipher of technology and futurism. While the song is lyrically about women who “don’t want no scrubs”, the effect of the video as a whole is chilly, extravagant, and masculinist, tying aggressive black female desire to an impossible futuristic space.

Among Williams’ futuristic videos (which in no way constitute the sum total of his short-form work), “What’s It Gonna Be?! Featuring Janet Jackson” (Busta Rhymes, 1999) surely stands as the most illusory. A spilled vial of water mutates into an indeterminate, watery Rhymes clad in a silver cyborg outfit; Jackson enters the frame as a purple-leather clad dominatrix of sorts, singing hooks that answer Rhymes’ verses. Rhymes metamorphoses throughout the video, floating in and out of frame as a shape-shifting alien who becomes a drum major to an aqueous marching band of silvery drummers and dancers. At one point, miniaturized images of Rhymes rain from the air past Jackson’s surprised face. The video ends when the duo metamorphose to become sound itself; they float through the air to be transferred into the substance of the fluid-like wall of speakers lining the area. Here, as in “No Scrubs,” we witness African American performers working in impossible invented spaces as hyper-corporeal figments of Williams’ imagination.

## Belly

Williams completed the feature-length film *Belly* in 1998, but the project acquired extremely limited distribution and quickly became a cult favorite for fans of the director and his friends, the rappers DMX and Nas, who star in the gangster drama. The work holds obvious importance as an exploration of how Williams's aesthetic practices can sustain narrative storytelling. As written, produced, and directed by Williams, *Belly* offers a simple story with obvious narrative structure, following a group of friends through a downward spiral guaranteed by diminished economic resources and non-existent educational or employment opportunities. The young men careen through a fast life of casual sex, drugs, and gangsterism, to confront difficulties of maturing beyond young adulthood in a bleak urban American context. The film features tons of sex and violence, drug trafficking, and profanity that stands in for verbal rhetoric. (Midway through the film, the audience has to wonder how reliable the dialogue "Fuck you, niggas!" can be as a marker of emotional subtlety.) Interestingly enough, Williams does not offer hip hop music as a convenient sign of capitalist degradation or an oppositional radical politics that the storyline seems to invite. The film soundtrack actually employs more R&B and instrumental beats than rap in its aural landscape.

With *Belly*, Williams offers an extended meditation on how movement, musicality, and outrageous style can create a visual experience that extends possibilities for the medium of filmmaking toward the evocation of black visual intonation. In the stunning first seven minutes of the film, the audience encounters extreme saturations of color, familiar from the videos Williams previously directed; sensuous and meticulous art direction that coordinates costume and scenery in complementary palettes; and, of course, the tactile accordance of musical soundscape and rhythmic editing to produce a seamless, Afrofuturistic whole.

The distinctive aesthetic that Williams has achieved spawned a visual style widely imitated among video artists outside of hip hop, and we must note how its radical rhythmicity has placed black visual intonations center screen in widespread manifestations of global popular culture. Like some filmmakers who begin their careers working in the field rather than in film schools, Williams has not been especially articulate about his methodologies or visual intentions. In interview, he tends to celebrate the opportunities he has received with little regard for his reputation as an African American artist seemingly "best suited" to work with African American subjects on recognizably – or stereotypically – black projects, including music videos. [4] Surely his blithe public persona may represent a strategy of survival in the difficult marketplace of film production. We also might recall that the tiny tradition of black radicalism in the public sphere of American entertainment has been tied almost exclusively to stand-up comedy; few black Americans working in the entertainment industry have been allowed public platforms from which to consider a political economy of aesthetics. In terms of contemporary artistry, this truth contributes to the ideological importance of, for example, iconoclast filmmaker Spike Lee and rapper Chuck D as politicized black men in the public sphere. Because there are so few black radical voices speaking out in terms of politics or aesthetics, the few that survive become more important than they might in other contexts. It may be that Williams has little to say about what he does because he is constantly forced to strategize ways to keep doing it.

Williams is one among many music video directors who have made a transition from short-form to feature-length projects. An obvious concern in this market-driven progression involves the director's ability to sustain storytelling through time – a problem that Williams has yet to surmount. In *Belly*, he brings his short-form visual aesthetic to bear with considerable effect, to realize an impressive coordination of rhythmicity, music, image, and style that at times answers a call to echo a "black visual intonation" predicted by Jafa. The film features a palpable rhythmic sensibility in its camera motion and editing; its numerous references to elements of popular culture beyond the black public sphere, as in scenes from Harmony Korine's *Gummo* (1997) and clips from MTV news that the characters reference; its saturated and even "bent" use of color palettes and art direction that stretch its visual order; and in its overarching visual cool that contributes to a prevalent "chilly" sensibility in the form of the film. While *Belly* may not be profound in its literary narrative, its visual impact startles. We can imagine more movies like *Belly* that feel more like music as they emerge from the legacy of musical structures of soul and hip hop to recreate those structures on screen.

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## Endnotes

[\[1\]](#). These are the commonalities of Africanist performance as established by art historian Robert Farris Thompson (1966) in his documentation of West African practice. Although defined variously by many authors, I take Thompson’s concept of “cool” to refer to a performance strategy of detachment and stabilization in which a “hot” gesture – a vocal shout, or a deep bend toward the ground – is balanced by a gesture of quiet or stillness.

[\[2\]](#). Alondra Nelson edited a special edition of *Social Text* (2002) devoted to Afrofuturism as defined variously by several authors.

[3]. Eshun's essay "The Kinematic Pneumacasm of Hype Williams" offers a fine example of invented words and phraseology evocative of literary Afrofuturism.

[4]. An on-line chat session with Williams, reprinted from Vibe Magazine, has been posted at <http://www.egads.com/nemceff2/transcript.html>.

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An accomplished director and choreographer, his work includes *Monk's Mood: A Performance Meditation* on Thelonious Monk a solo performance that explores the life of Thelonious Monk with tap dance and technology, and *Queer Theory: A Musical Travesty*, in development with the Theatre Offensive of Boston.

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