FILM REVIEW

Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman, dirs. *Neptune Frost.* 2021. 105 minutes. Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Swahili, French, English. Rwanda, USA. No price reported. Swan Films, Sopherim, Knitting Factory Entertainment, SPKN/WRD, JMK Films, Quiet.

In a small town in central Italy, the film *Neptune Frost* screened at the opening event of a festival on African literature (CaLibro Africa Festival). As people left the theater, some were enchanted and dazed by the music they had just heard, while others still had the fluorescent colors of those images in their eyes. Some wanted to know more about the exploitation of mines in Africa for global technological production, while others were shaken in their usual ideas about transsexuality. Some thought they had just seen a musical, while others were carefully holding up their cell phones, no longer taking for granted the human price of its construction. Some were no longer sure what it means to tell a story, and others were no longer sure what dimension they were really living in.

Neptune Frost is a film created by Anisia Uzeyman and Saul Williams. Uzeyman is an actress, screenwriter and director from Rwanda. Williams, who provided the screenplay and music, is an American poet, actor, and a musician with unique spoken word skills. Their film, released in 2021, is set in Burundi.

The story is about the struggle of a group of anti-colonialist hackers, who are refugees in a village resisting the current dictatorship. They live in an otherworldly world filled with electronic waste, specifically parts of old computers. The rebel group moves between different temporal and spatial dimensions. Their leaders are Matalusa and Neptune. The first is a coltan miner who has escaped after his brother Tekno is killed in the mine by regime guards. The second is a transgender woman on the run. Their rebel group refers to Martyr Loser King, an entity that guides them in their struggle to subvert the regime that is exploiting the workforce of the local population (*Martyr Loser King* is also the title of the Saul Williams' album, which inspired this sci-fi musical).

Neptune Frost consists of a hypnotic poem from the first to the last minute of the film. One of its strengths is its ability to construct a single, coherent narrative by relying on a complex network of binary oppositions—real and virtual, present and past, sleep and wakefulness, masculine and feminine, colonized world and free world. The tension that runs through the entire film is encapsulated in its first few minutes, its opening double scene. The narrator's opening is literary gold: "I came into the world at the age of 23. My first breath, just before the war, was followed by 22 years that my aunt called our 'afterlife.'" We see the protagonist watching the coffin of his beloved aunt being covered by a few handfuls of flowers and soil. Meanwhile, in the coltan mine, Tekno, who was

killed solely for lingering too long after finding a precious piece of ore, lies in the arms of his brother Matalusa. Tekno lies in a state between wakefulness and mystical-technological ecstasy, between vision and rebellion. "Death surrounds us," says one of the protagonists. Then begins a scene in which the drums played in protest by the other miners seem to dictate the pace and intensity for the entire narrative to come—the intensity will not drop for a moment throughout the entire work.

The film flows through a technical realization that, both visually and musically, combines an extremely high level of complexity and originality with deliberately and only apparently sometimes imperfect performances and visions, as if to remind us that it is this real world we are talking about, and not a cold artistic empyrean separate from our political and human realities. Among the many things for which to be grateful to *Neptune Frost* and those who created it, I believe we can also identify at least two deeply epistemological contributions and methodological suggestions.

First of all, multidimensionality. The story takes place in multiple dimensions, but in such a way that, precisely by not making the boundaries between those dimensions clear, it makes them all constitutive in a single one, univocal, and co-present: "We choose dimensions like cities to live in," says one of the rebels. This is a highly effective way to teach us how to reflect on the many political and human stratifications of our reality, which is so complex that it is often difficult for us to think in its concrete oneness.

Second, intersectional heuristics of visual, conceptual, and audio aesthetics. To say that music sublimates and intensifies the feelings and messages expressed by the film is an understatement—just think of opera, of musicals, of music in general. It is important to note how *Neptune Frost* does so in a very specific way. When we consider all of the many themes that run through this film, the intensity of the musical soundtrack and narrative interweaving becomes a real heuristic tool in itself. The soundtrack becomes indeed a sonic guide for the audience, using sound to bind together the complex entanglement of the film's core themes without flattening, isolating, or simplifying them. *Neptune Frost*'s visual aesthetics are a surprising and unexpectedly powerful means of grasping a vast range of thematic complexity and stratified urgency—an urgency that transforms from the emotional directly to the political. Thus, *Neptune Frost*'s multidimensional themes require an intense repertoire of multisensorial expressive and artistic modes. This musical, literary, and visual density becomes a vital and illuminating epistemology. The social sciences have so much to learn.

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