Afrofuturist Infrastructure as Allegory: Picturing Sustainability in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009)

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In an interview about her short film *Pumzi*, Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu invokes the ancient African tradition of seers and goes on to tell her audience that she wanted to create a hopeful vision of our world in which we as human beings "nurture Mother Nature."[1] By adopting science fiction elements, her acclaimed film directs the audience's gaze to the uses of infrastructure in the human realm, to their operational capacities, as well as to their limits. As a result, it imagines a world in which modern technology is primarily used to preserve a cyclical and sustainable lifestyle, thereby shedding light on the infrastructural workings in our world aimed at the excessive consumption of natural resources.

Infrastructure in *Pumzi*

Set in Eastern Africa some 35 years after World War III, the 'Water War,' *Pumzi* depicts the infrastructural workings of the Maitu community. Its Kikuyu name Maitu refers to 'mother' and could be interpreted as 'Mother Nature,' whose resources have been depleted by humankind.[2] Due to overconsumption and waste, pollution, and radioactive contamination, as well as subsequent distribution battles, Mother Nature has developed into an uninhabitable wasteland.[3]

The only way of guaranteeing the survival of humankind in this dystopian vision is to create an inside world which is self-contained and thus protected from the outside. In this inside world, the infrastructural conditions and mechanisms are con-

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1   Wanuri Kahiu, "Africa & Science Fiction: Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*, 2009," interview by Oulimata Gueye (2013): 00:00–10:16, 07:43, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWMtgD9O6PU (accessed 13/01/2023).

2   Daniela Fargione, "The Aquatic Turn in Afrofuturism: Women and Other Critters in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) and Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2010)," *Le Simplegadi* 19, no. 21 (2021): 55–66, 61.

3   Lizelle Bisschoff, "African Cyborgs. Females and Feminists in African Science Fiction," *Interventions* 22, no. 5 (2020): 606–623, 619–620.

verted into a cyclical economy aimed at self-sustenance. The community's inhabitants are asked, for instance, to purify their bodily fluids, like urine and sweat, and transform them into drinking water, which, in turn, represents the community's new currency.[4] What is more, everyone is expected to act as a self-power generator and to contribute his or her share to renewable energies by way of physical exercise on the treadmill.[5]

The community's infrastructural workings are, however, not always directed at ecological outcomes. In order to ensure the intactness of the inside world, all members are asked to take dream suppressants.[6] They limit their imagination, that is their capacity to picture something which does not exist in reality. To put it differently, their imagination might lead to wishful thinking, a deviation that needs to be contained according to the patterns of the fictional world depicted in the short film. Hence, an authoritarian regime resorts to medication and digital communication as tools of control.[7]

Thematically speaking, infrastructural mechanisms are foregrounded in this science fiction storyworld, which speculates about humankind's future. As sketched above, the routines they enable set the pace of the protagonist's daily responsibilities. At the same time, they point to another world prior to the Maitu community: newspaper headlines stored at the natural history museum, for example, bear witness to the greenhouse effect, climate change, and migration due to famine and devastation.[8] This preceding world, which then ushered in a collapse, strikingly resembles the world of our own experience with its current multiple crises.[9]

The film's double fictional world puts our world's infrastructure into perspective; it raises questions about infrastructural limits and possible disturbances; but it also alludes to alternative systems which might solve some of today's environmental problems. The depiction of infrastructure is thus turned into an allegory, which allows for the imagination of another world, of one existing prior to the Maitu community, but also of multiple others set in the distant future.

Interestingly, these possible alternatives result from an infrastructural failure within the confined world of Asha's existence: at one point, she is shown as a female seer whose visions of a magnificent tree in the outside world cannot be contained by

4   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi* (Kenya: Inspired Minority Pictures, 2009): 00:00–22:09, 02:20-03:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPD-mvR6C-M (accessed 13/01/2023).

5   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 01:50.

6   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 01:22.

7   Jane Bryce, "African Futurism: Speculative Fictions and 'Rewriting the Great Book,'" *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 1 (2019): 1–19, 5.

8   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 00:35.

9   Marie-Paule Macdonald and Sheila Petty, "Afrofuture ecosystems," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 23, no. 3–4 (2020): 331–340, 335.

dream suppressants.[10] When she receives a soil sample from an unknown sender, she transgresses her community's restrictions another time: she benefits from her access to the natural history museum, analyses the soil sample, which seems to be free of radioactive radiation, and additionally, finds traces of water.[11] Mother Nature seems to have restored herself, at least at the particular spot where the soil sample was taken.

An excursion to the outside world is, however, refused, so Asha needs to find another way of breaking free from her community. She finally succeeds, by the help of another female employee,[12] takes the soil sample from the natural history museum with her, mixed with water and a seed, and begins her long march through the desert.[13] Another vision of a tree tells her to stop at one place where she plants the seedling, cultivates it with the last drops from her water bottle, and protects it from the burning sun.[14]

The film ends with a final fade-out in which Asha's frame merges with and then changes into the tree of her imagination.[15] Her self-sacrifice allows for the renewal of life on earth, which is indicated by the film's title *Pumzi* referring to 'breath.'[16] The fictional world's collapsing infrastructure, i.e., Asha's visions as well as her transgressions, lay the groundwork for renewed infrastructural systems in an alternative world to come.

Afrofuturist Allegories

Reluctant to revert to negative stereotypes often associated with the African continent, like starvation, environmental devastation, and war,[17] filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu alludes to these images in the first place only to transform them into a positive vision indicated at the end of the film. Her speculative fiction has been repeatedly termed Afrofuturist in this respect.[18] Even if Wanuri Kahiu is skeptical towards particular labels associated with African storytelling traditions,[19] her short film

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10   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 01:10.

11   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 05:15.

12   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 11:18.

13   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 11:55.

14   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 19:30.

15   Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi*, 19:52.

16   Beti Ellerson, "Teaching African Women in Cinema: Part Two," *Black Camera* 7, no. 2 (2016): 217–233, 227.

17   Kahiu, "Africa & Science Fiction," 06:38.

18   Fargione, "The Aquatic Turn in Afrofuturism," 63.

19   Wanuri Kahiu, "No More Labels," *TEDxEuston* (2014): 00:00–15:41, 01:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4--BIIZE_78 (accessed 13/01/2023).

Pumzi blends various generic conventions, such as the ancient African tradition of seers[20] or elements steeped in popular culture, like science fiction and modern technology.[21] Accordingly, it shows the aesthetic hybridity typical of Afrofuturist works. As famously stated by Ytasha L. Womack, "[b]oth an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs."[22]

Hence, the short film's fictional world, turned into an extended allegory, exposes a "reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques"[23] by pointing to alternative environments.[24] Such a vision shifts the focus away from the overexploitation of natural resources to a cyclical economy, which is sustainable and actively promoted by everybody in society.[25] Every member of the Maitu community, for instance, is asked to use resources with moderation in order to contribute to renewables. Asha's self-sacrifice, in the end, might be seen as the epitome of a heightened sense of responsibility towards her community.[26]

Obedience towards authoritarian regimes, however, does not belong to the vision of a true alternative, as shown in the film: Asha follows her personal wisdom for a higher good when analysing the soil sample and escaping to the desert in the outside world. Her common sense combined with courage tell her to speak up for herself and transgress the boundaries that are in place to safeguard the inside world of the Maitu community.

If moderation and common sense laid the groundwork for an alternative world, a balanced resource allocation could finally be achieved. Even more so, the sensible view that human beings truly form an integral part of the earth's ecosystem could become reality.[27]

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20   Kahiu, "Africa & Science Fiction," 03:48.

21   Kahiu, "Afrofuturism in Popular Culture," *TEDxNairobi* (2012): 00:00–15:12, 11:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY (accessed 13/01/2023).

22   Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism. The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 9.

23   Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 9.

24   Tobias van Veen, "Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe," *Dancecult* 5, no. 2 (2013): 7–41, 10.

25   Sofia Samatar, "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism," *Research in African Literatures* 48, no. 4 (2017): 175–191, 184.

26   Allison Mackey, "Guilty Speculations: The Affective Climate of Global Anthropocene Fictions," *Science Fiction Studies* 45 (2018): 530–544, 536–537.

27   Fargione, "The Aquatic Turn in Afrofuturism," 60–64.

Infrastructure as Allegory

Aesthetically speaking, thinking about infrastructures, their capacities, and their limits, puts those works into perspective in which infrastructures are accentuated, for example in *Pumzi*. In this case, the film's science fiction storyworld— with its detailed illustration of infrastructures— is formed into an extended allegory pointing to multiple worlds with infrastructural capacities and shortcomings while indicating futuristic alternatives at the same time. Interestingly, the failure of the world similar to the one of humankind's daily existence constitutes the prerequisite for the imagination of the Maitu community's contained regimes aimed at self-sustenance and rigid control, which show signs of disruptions and of an imminent breakdown as well.

The looming collapse of the Maitu community, initiated by Asha's visions and her subsequent escape, eventually amounts to a metapoetic argument, as it foregrounds the protagonist's imagination, that is her faculty for generating images and presenting them in her mind's eye. Asha's imagination is, in turn, guided by a structuring principle akin to that of allegory, which evokes images and associations by appealing to the audience's mind's eye in the same way.[28] To put it differently, both, imagination and allegory make the invisible visible by concealing their underlying structures and disclosing them simultaneously.

As a result, *Pumzi's* possible world to come, indicated by Asha's visions and ultimate self-sacrifice, suggests a truly sustainable way of life, thereby encouraging further discussions about posthumanist conceptions of co-living with nature after the Anthropocene. This possible world thus allows the film's audience to take a fresh look at their own experiential world with its infrastructural workings and shortcomings. To put it differently, the film's basic structuring principle, that is its depiction of infrastructures turned into an extended allegory, serves as a means of defamiliarization which breaks with the audience's expectations and patterns of seeing.

Viewed from an aesthetic or, more broadly speaking, cultural angle, infrastructures within our world may be perceived as complex systems open to interpretation, which do not conceal their own mechanisms per se.[29] On the contrary, their spectators' patterns of seeing and experiencing them rather amount to processes of familiarization, which, in turn, make infrastructures seem invisible. An aesthetic perspective, however, may add to their defamiliarization, thereby making the seemingly invisible visible again.

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28 Verena Olejniczak Lobsien and Eckhard Lobsien, *Die unsichtbare Imagination. Literarisches Denken im 16. Jahrhundert* (München: Fink, 2003), 62–86.

29 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 327–343, 336.

It is precisely this line of thought which is developed in *Pumzi*. And it is this idea which allows its audience to see infrastructures in their aesthetic duplicity similar to allegorical structures: as something, which is visible, and as something else, only hinted at, which might be possible.