On creating your own aesthetic

Filmmakers Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman discuss honoring and following your instincts, changing mediums, and overcoming massive obstacles.

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The idea for *Neptune Frost* came to you while you were both working on a movie in Senegal. What do you think it was about that environment that sparked the idea?

Saul Williams: Okay, this was 2010/2011—so it's during the time of the Arab Spring, WikiLeaks, all this stuff is going on in the news. We're in Senegal, and there's huge unrest there at the time. So we are witness to protests and even stopped our shooting on the film we were doing because of those protests. There's a lot of movement around elections, and there's something in the air.

Beyond that, Senegal doesn't have the same blockade against China that the American market does, so you could get Beats headphones and stuff like that direct from China, and they might be $10. So we would see these kids who would have smartphones and Beats headphones, but doing something that belonged very much to Senegalese culture, which is coming home after school and building a drum to participate in a community drum and dance ceremony or competition. So it was the fusion of the old technology—the drum—and literally seeing someone building a drum, but having a smartphone and Beats headphones on. You realize, "Wow, the drum is also about communication."

Anisia Uzeyman: You would hear the drums and people would run to that part of town, which would mean that there was something happening there—either ceremony or competition or whatever. So you would witness those two means of communication. Of course, these movements in Arab Spring and elsewhere were certainly enabled by modern technologies. The technology was reclaimed as a means of building communities and to gain greater democratic representation.

Meanwhile, the manufacture of smartphone and computer technology is especially hard on the parts of Africa where coltan is mined. This is the backdrop for *Neptune Frost*.

SW: Yes. At some point around that time, Anisia and I were also learning about e-waste camps, which is another phenomenon on the continent. It's where our tech goes to die. When you get that new iPhone, that new whatever, where does it go? We learned about these huge village-sized camps where you have piles of motherboards and keyboards and towers. They are almost always closely connected to coltan and titanium mines. Basically, the planes that were flying out with the coltan would fly back with the e-waste.

The main character, Neptune, is gender fluid. What inspired that?

SW: Another thing that made an impression at the time was learning about anti-gay laws on the continent that were responsive to American evangelists who were arriving in places like Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda and offering governments money to try anti-gay laws. This is stuff they'd love to pass at home—they're working on it here, and they're not doing too badly—but at the time they were doing the experiments there on the continent. So the project was pretty much born out of the discussions we were having about all these things while we were shooting

that other film in Senegal.

You initially envisioned *Neptune Frost* as a Broadway musical, not a film. How far did you get into the musical before you had to pivot to film—and what was that process like?

SW: The first stage of the writing was when we came back from Senegal, and I was going to write music surrounding the idea. Anisia and I are both from theater, we're actors—and I'm from New York. I was like, "We need to take this idea to Broadway." We were so serious about it that we moved from Paris to New York in 2013 to be close to where we wanted it to land onstage. Then we did a writing residency in Banff, Canada, where Anisia started to plan out the stage play and incorporate the songs which I had put energy into. She was starting to put dialogue and story around this thing there.

We came back from Banff in the summer of 2014, and the day we landed was [the murder of] Michael Brown, I believe. So the timeline plays a lot into this thing. The spirit of protests and all these things that enter the film is because of all the things that were going on. When we got back from Canada, we had something to show producers. We had just been introduced to Stephen Hendel, who had produced *Fela!* on Broadway. He said, "I love this idea. I'd be willing to invest if it were a film." He became one of our executive producers.

AU: Producing a play on Broadway is very heavy. You wouldn't imagine it, but it can also be more expensive than a film. So that was one of the reasons behind making a film instead. We could also make it happen in a timeline that would be more manageable.

SW: His offer put us in a position to go, "Well, if it's a film and we're talking about a story that takes place in Burundi, does that mean we would go and shoot in Burundi? Does that mean we would go and work with African actors?" A pet peeve is seeing the actors that you know and recognize in every fucking storyline. You want to use your imagination and go into outer space and suddenly Matt Damon steps out onto Mars, you're like, "Fucking hell. Now I don't believe it." So the idea of seeing new faces in cinema is exciting.

That producer helped us take what was my first trip to Rwanda in 2016 to shoot the sizzle reel, and that's when we met so much of our cast and crew. There was just a magical alignment that happened once we landed in Rwanda. Of course, we went to Rwanda for several reasons, but one of the first being that it would be impossible to shoot in Burundi because there was political unrest there. To our surprise, when we arrived in Rwanda, it's full of young Burundian refugees who are artists and activists and students—and many of them ended up being in the film, along with the local talent from Rwanda.

There're so many themes running through the movie—rebirth, dream life, exploitation, race, gender, technology—but none of them get lost or drift away as the film progresses. How did you keep track of all that as you were writing?

SW: That has lot to do with the timeline, and it also had to do with that moment that we came to Kickstarter, because at some point we realized that we wanted to do something that might be termed as revolutionary. We wanted to do something that did tackle all of these topics in an interesting and unique way. But when you're out pitching something in Hollywood, the first question is, "Who's in it?" So we knew that there was very little chance that we were going to find a means to do it without having some people to hold our hand through the process. We needed to create a community.

AU: We had to build a community that would be reflected in the community that is shown in the film. That community would protect our ability to give you access to that other community, to that otherworldly place. And I love the idea of layered narrative that you mention. I think this is the kind of narrative that is embedded in our dreams. If you want to portray a humanity, you have to walk those layers and connect them through a story—through a rebirth, through encounters, through how love transforms those layers, and how those layers contradict and at the same time go together.

I think it's also a musical thing. You have multiple layers of information that touch you in different ways, but at the same time, it creates a sound, it creates a story. It creates somebody that is more complex than just one

thing. The film was really also a way of questioning that: If you are one thing, how you are seen or how you want to present yourself is already two things that are in conflict. So the layering wasn't easy in terms of writing with multiple characters. It's a very ensemble film, so how do you connect them? They come from different spaces and they come together with different stories and nonetheless with something in common.

SW: Sometimes you feel kind of talked down to by certain forms of narrative when it's not complex enough, and we wanted to speak to that. How can we get used to all the exposition being given in a film, so you have no questions, you have nothing to think about? You just have to watch. And so we wanted to leave space for questions. We wanted to leave space for people to go, "I wonder…" That's a part of the story. That's a part of life.

AU: It's a part of you being in the movie, I think. It's a part of you also being that person that travels those layers and those question in life. It's not like, "This is what you have to think, this is what you experience." And I think we both have the same feeling that when you are watching a movie, the marvel of it is to be wondering, to be surprised, to be completing things yourself. I think that's something that we experienced in films that we love.

The atmosphere, the mood and the unconventional transitions—from maybe a conversation to music to these digital glitches you have sprinkled throughout Neptune Frost—reminded me of a Jodorowsky film. Was that a reference for you?

SW: Big time. For me, yes. I was like, "I need this to be as fucking crazy as *Holy Mountain*." As a musician, I used to tour with this band called The Mars Volta. They turned me onto Jodorowsky in the early 2000s. On the tour bus, we'd be blasting Fela Kuti with Jodorowsky visuals on the screen all the time. I know about his love of poetry, his relationship to spirituality, and his connection to comics and graphic novels. Our film is also a graphic novel that'll come out next year. And those layers we were talking about earlier—that's something that he explores. So I was definitely hoping to make that connection for what we were doing.

Anisia, you were the director of photography on Neptune Frost as well. What were your touchstones and references when you were putting together the look for the film?

AU: First off, I think it started with musical inspirations. I had access to the world-building through sounds, so I could feel this alternative world that was coming together. After that, I was very interested in how to be in that conversation of filming skin tones, and how we could push that conversation towards not something realistic, but something fantastic or futuristic.

Wong Kar-wai was a big inspiration for his use of colors and movement, and also for all types of inventions—how he makes all those images that are full of creativity, and his unusual ways of capturing them. His work on *2046* and *Chungking Express* really resonated with what I was looking for. Another influence was Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas*. That was really also liberating in terms of narrative and in terms of ways of filming. I love his way of showing people in Senegal and his exploration of lights and the fantasy he has in putting together unconventional narratives that end up being very meaningful.

You had an eye on contemporary African artists as well. How did that come into play?

AU: Yes, the new generation of young photographers from the continent, from South Africa to Nigeria to Kenya. I paid tremendous attention to what was happening at that point in the image world because in terms of photography, fashion, documentation, archival work, there is amazing work being done on the continent about how we want to see ourselves. How do we present ourselves in discussion, and how have we been represented in the past?

This is a huge discussion because, for instance, Rwandan cinema is very young. There was no film before the 2000s. The only images coming out of that place were captured by outside perspectives that were motivated either by ethnographic researchers or by money. And the people that invest in films are also very much represented in films, so it was an exciting idea to be free from that, and to try to show ourselves how we want to be seen.

I imagine your connection to Rwanda played an important part in the cinematography as well.

AU: Yes. I think the reason behind Saul asking me to direct the photography here is that I have an intimate relationship with Rwanda, and I wanted to show it maybe as I see it, as I intimately know it. To approach that, I just started watching movies with maybe a particular lighting. I was looking for conveying emotion through colors, and how to really envelop the actors with colors that would give their emotions the most appropriate surrounding. We also had to convey that travel that goes from one world to another. A lot of that is done through light and choice of colors.

I also had to think about movement of the camera. How does the choreography impact a camera movement? What kind of framing do you use? With the surveillance moments in the film, how do you convey that? How do you respect the distance, but at the same time make something that people would feel? It is an active camera, I think, that we were looking for. That's a big part of the film.

What were the biggest challenges in making the film?

SW: We knew that we would not be able to fund the entire film off the Kickstarter campaign. What thought if we could show some excitement on the ground, then maybe we could approach other producers who would be willing to invest in the project to get it done. But we arrived in Rwanda without the money to shoot the film. We had spent the money building the set out of over two tons of e-waste. And we couldn't tell anybody. We were in the process of putting together our crew, who were expecting to be paid weekly. Talk about fucking stress.

But we put together a team and determined that we could shoot everything in 27 days. This is November 2019. So Anisia and I are on the phone calling everybody we know to see if they can help. We're trying to get lights, but there's no cinema rental facilities in Rwanda so Anisia oversaw a crew that built our lights. They built our dollies, our apple boxes, LED panels—we had everything built in Rwanda. We hired people saying, "No, no—the money's coming."

AU: People were telling us to stop the project. It was also physically challenging because Rwanda is a country of a thousand hills, and the roads are not so good. So you're traveling with five trucks of equipment and sometimes 100 people, for 12 hour days with very little sleep. And the whole set is powered by a generator that's about a mile and a half away.

SW: We knew that it was now or never. If we didn't get it done, I'd never be able to come back. We cannot let these people down. At some point, our executive producer sent another wire and told us that was it unless we could bring other people on board. That wire got us through the first three days of shooting. But we now have 100 people with us. We have 65 hotel rooms. We have to feed everybody. A lot of the film is at night, so we'd sometimes shoot from 6pm to 6am, and then we'd be on the phone to people in New York and LA and France, trying to get more funding. We'd get bits and pieces to pay for one or two more days, and it kept going like that. With pre-production and shooting, it was five months where we slept maybe an hour a night.

AU: We arrived back in LA on March 18th, 2020, straight into a global lockdown. I sincerely thought I was going to die—not from the pandemic, though. From exhaustion. But the film is very focused. When you have only 27 days to shoot, every minute counts. So the precision and the craft of all those people really made it possible to have what we can call Neptune Frost. We're very tired, but we made it.

Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman Recommend:

Books:
Lose Your Mother: Sadiiyah Hartman
Three Body Problem: Cixin Liu
Everything Man: Shana Redmond

Film:
Black Goddess dir. Ola Balogun
Losing Ground dir. Kathleen Collins

Je Tu Il Elle dir. Chantal Akerman

Music:
Vigro Deep
MSYLMA
MUSTAFA

Food:
Yassa Poisson
Oysters

Name
Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman

Vocation
filmmakers