***Dirty Computer* (2018)**

**Film background:** *Dirty Computer* is the name of Janelle Monáe's third studio album as well as her short film, or "emotion picture" that accompanies it. The film was directed by Chuck Lightning and Andrew Donoho. As in her earlier works, Monáe's music and visuals explore Afrofuturism. More so than in her previous works, however, *Dirty Computer* aligns her Afrofuturist aesthetic with a vision of freedom that includes queerness, gender fluidity, pansexuality, and polyamory.

**Plot Summary:** Monáe plays Jane, a so-called “dirty computer” who is captive in facility of white “cleaners” who are holding her against her will and erasing her memories. As they erase each memory, the film cuts to flashbacks of those memories, which are discrete music videos that work together to build a story arc. The arc of the narrative, which occurs out of chronological order, features Jane arriving a party with friends, reuniting with a male partner, Che (Jayson Aaron), and meeting a female partner, Zen (Tessa Thompson) for the first time. The party is broken up by law enforcement, and Jane and Zen narrowly escape, though several other partygoers are apprehended. Jane, Che and Zen furtively dance, sing, and celebrate, but eventually Zen and then Jane are apprehended as well. Once in the facility, Jane discovers that Zen has had most of her memories erased, and is now a “torch,” who is supposed to lead her through her own process of memory erasure. However, Jane eventually convinces Zen that they need to escape the facility, and when Che is also apprehended, the trio escape together into an unknown future.

**Content warnings:** *Dirty Computer* contains some sexually suggestive imagery.

**Running time:** 48 min.

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plan
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts
  + Day 2: Vernallis, Carol, Gabriel Zane Ellis, et. al. “Janelle Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* Music Video/Film: A Collective Reading.” *Journal of the Society for American Music,* vol. 13, no. 2, 2019, pp. 250-271.
  + Day 3: Dery, Mark. "Black to The Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose" in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scenes:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (10-15 min) Student-led scene close-reading and analysis (Recommended: “Screwed” or “I Like That” since we will be covering “Crazy Classic Life,” “Django Jane” “Pynk,” “Make Me Feel,” and “Americans” throughout the week)
3. (5 min) Teacher-led close-reading and analysis opening – Watch Clip 1: Intro (0:00-5:04)
4. (5 min) Discussion prep. Students take notes on the following question:
   1. Consider the contrast between the two spaces juxtaposed in the first five minutes. How and why do Lightning and Donoho (the directors) emphasize the contrast between those spaces through the mise-en-scene, sound, editing and cinematography? How do they establish continuity between these two spaces? What are the effects of the contrasts and continuities you see?

**Contrasts:**

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| --- | --- |
| **Within the “cleaning” facility – present moment** | **Flashback to 78 days ago (prelude to “Crazy Classic Life”)** |
| *Costumes/Casting: all of the “torches” are dressed in all white, form-fitting uniform clothing and have their faces covered by masks. The cleaners are white men wearing white clothing.*  *Setting: the location is reminiscent of many sci-fi movies (e. g. the opening shot echoes opening shots of several Star Wars films where the viewer sees the underside of Imperial ships; the close-up on the loudspeaker perhaps echoes 2001: A Space Odyssey); we are presented with a sterile, enclosed environment devoid of people or objects*  *Sound: the soundtrack features slow, atmospheric synthesizers that have a foreboding quality, perhaps echoing Blade Runner; the only speaker besides Jane is heard over the loudspeaker, disembodied, the other diegetic sounds include the hum of the Nevermind gas and the whirring beeps on the cleaners’ touchscreen*  *Editing/Cinematography: In the first shot, the torches walk in slow-motion towards the cleaning space* | *Costumes: Jane and her friends are all Black women who are dressed in of black and white punk-inspired clothing, with a variety of piercings, makeup designs, hairstyles, etc.*  *Setting: Jane drives through a desert in a flashy, red convertible hovercar. Notably, this vehicle highlights that it is not only the authorities who can access advanced technology; Jane can wield it as well.*  *Sound: Jane and her friends drive, enjoying the sounds of Monáe’s “I Got the Juice” on the radio, until they get pulled over by a robotic police officer: the police siren sounds exactly like a present-day police siren, potentially reminding viewers of the consistency of police violence and abuse across time. The contrast between these sounds sets up the tension between Monáe’s band of dirty computers and the authorities that continues throughout the film.*  *Editing/Cinematography: in contrast to the slow-motion shots in the first space, Jane and her friends are shown in motion – they dance in their seats while they race down the highway – until they are pulled over* |

**Continuities:**

* *In both sequences, the protagonist is asked by the authorities to identify herself, or is identified by them as “Jane 57821”*
* *In both sequences, the authorities are presented as mediated by technology – the police appearing as a robot, and the disembodied voice preparing Jane for the Nevermind through a loudspeaker*

**Effects:**

* *Tension built by this dichotomy: This sequence sets up the contrasts between dirty computers vs. authorities, flashbacks v. the present, freedom v. capture, expression v. sterility, group v. isolation, that produce the tension that continues throughout the film.*
* *Mood – nostalgia and grief: Because the experience of watching Jane in the desert is mediated by the viewer’s knowledge that this is a memory that is currently being erased, the viewer experiences this story through a frame of nostalgia, grief and loss. We know that Jane in the present is in pain and danger, and that this vision of Jane, free from captivity, is a moment in the past that is being stolen from her mind by her captors.*

1. (10 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. Consider the contrast between the two spaces juxtaposed in the first five minutes. How and why do Lightning and Donoho (the directors) emphasize the contrast between those spaces through the mise-en-scene, sound, editing and cinematography? How do they establish continuity between these two spaces? What are the effects of the contrasts and continuities you see?
      1. Additional questions if needed: What contrasts do you notice in the costumes? The setting? The sound? Editing/cinematography?
      2. Did the first scene in the “cleaning facility” remind you of any science fiction films you’ve seen?
      3. Why do you think the directors chose to keep the police siren sound effect similar to what we might hear today, rather than updating it to a more futuristic sound? What’s the effect of that choice?
      4. What connections or continuities did you see across the two spaces? Why are these continuities important?
      5. When considering the contrasts established in this scene, what’s the effect? What opposing forces are set up to be at odds with each other here?
      6. What mood is established for the viewer through these two scenes? How did you feel watching Jane’s memory, knowing it is in the process of being erased?
2. (6 min) Watch clip 2: “Pynk” (23:27-29:02).
3. (5 min) Discussion prep:
   1. What elements of the mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography, lyrics, and editing stood out to you? What messages emerge from these elements?

* *Setting: Jane and her friends drive through the pink-tinted desert in a pink hovercar. The landscape itself may be a rebuttal to the vision of womanhood presented in Rihanna’s 2010 video for “Only Girl in the World,” which was also shot a pink desert landscape. While the vision of womanhood Rihanna presented suggested that the ideal is for a woman to be made to “feel that I’m the only girl in the world,” “Pynk” presents the opposite – a landscape filled with women, some as friends and some as lovers. This desert landscape is also the location chosen for a section of the song in which Jane declares her love for Zen on a pink mattress. The open landscape seems to highlight the natural aspects of this love, as opposed to the cold and clinical spaces that Jane and Zen appear in when they are both in captivity.*
* *Characters: Unlike many other parts of this film, which feature and celebrate men and women including Jane’s male partner Che, this scene includes no men to draw its focus to a celebration of women. Similarly, while other scenes, including “Make Me Feel” and “Crazy Classic Life” feature some Bowie-inspired white characters, this scene celebrates Black women exclusively.*
* *Costumes: There’s much to say about costumes here, but one of the pieces that stands out are the so-called “labia pants” that Jane and her friends wear, a rare example of yonic, as opposed to phallic imagery displayed in music videos and film. (It might be worthwhile to bring up and define the term “yonic imagery” since it will appear in students’ reading for homework tonight.) While the labia pants celebrate women’s embodiment in ways that appear visually transgressive and subversive, Monáe was conscious of not claiming that vaginas are the essential nature of womanhood, which she aims to celebrate more broadly. As she has stated in interviews, several of the dancers do not wear labia pants, in order to recognize the womanhood of transwomen.*
* *Imagery: as with the costumes, the video includes a great deal of yonic imagery through clamshells, cats, fruits, blown bubbles and overflowing drinks. All of these objects are shown as fleeting images in brief close-ups, with the preponderance of objects suggesting a willingness to overtly display these images, and yet the video suggests the “risqué” nature of yonic imagery in general by showing these objects so quickly, as if they can’t be seen for too long.*
* *Lyrics: The lyrics of this song, while straightforward, function to celebrate women’s sexual expression and also, more fundamentally, the universality of human embodiment.* 
  + *Queer sexuality: especially the sequence towards the end of the song in which Jane sings to Zen, queerness is a major motif, as she sings “I don’t want to hide my love” directly to Zen; other lines celebrate sexuality more generally and could be applied to any sexual pleasure*
  + *Universal human embodiment: Monáe’s commentary on the power of women’s embodiment extends to a universal message with lines like “pynk is where all of it starts…crazy,” “pynk like the folds of your brain,” “deep inside we’re all just pynk”*
* *Dance: In one dance sequence, a line of women lie on their stomachs with Zen and Jane on opposite ends of the line, shown in shot-reverse-shot sequences as they gaze at each other. This sequence highlights the queer sexuality being celebrated. Other dance sequences show a crowd of Jane and her friends, celebrating women’s friendship and community alongside sexuality.*
* *Mood: As with “Crazy Classic Life” and “Screwed,” while the mood of this video is undeniably a pleasurable celebration of, in this case, Black women’s sexuality, gender expression, and embodiment, the viewer’s enjoyment is somewhat tempered by the knowledge that this memory is being erased by white male cleaners who don’t even seem to understand what it is that they’re deleting, as they discuss immediately prior to this scene.*
* *Message: Throughout this sequence, Lightning and Donoho emphasize the power of Black women’s free and liberated gender and sexual expression. However, as with the other joyful and exuberant sequenes throughout the film, the viewer is conscious of the precarity of this joy – this memory is being viewed as it is being erased by white men who are “cleaning” Jane’s mind.*

1. (12 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. What elements of the mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography, lyrics, and editing stood out to you? What messages emerge from these elements?
      1. Additional questions, if necessary: What did you notice about the objects featured throughout the video? How did the cinematography draw your attention to those objects?
      2. What do you notice about the costume choices? What might be the intent behind those choices?
      3. How does the casting of this video contrast to other components of *Dirty Computer?* Why do you think Lightning and Donoho made that choice?
      4. We’ve talked about how the setting of the “cleaning” space echoes many other sci-fi films. This space seems to echo (and perhaps challenge) other music videos. Do any in particular come to mind? Why might this video be responding to those other videos?

**Lesson 2: Examining Dirty Computer Alongside Carol Vernallis, Gabriel Zane Ellis, et. al’s “Janelle Monáe’s** *Dirty Computer* **Music Vide/Film: A Collective Reading”**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Jot down notes:
   1. Consider the world of *Dirty Computer* that Janelle Monae and her team of directors and producers developed. Consider scenes like “Make Me Feel,” “Crazy Classic Life” and “Pynk” as fantastical worlds that might have been spun from Monae and the directors’ minds of a liberated and joyful world. Now, imagine that it’s up to you to design your fantasy world, complete with the people, spaces, clothing/aesthetics, values, etc. that you want. What does that world look like? Provide as much detail as possible.
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (5 min) Re-watch today’s clips: “Django Jane” (18:40-22:00) and “Make Me Feel” (29:00-32:50).
4. (10 min) Discussion prep. Students jot down notes in response to the following questions:
   1. “Django Jane” Analysis: Choose Sterbenz’s (p. 255-257) or Lochard’s (p. 267-270) piece and 1) explain the author’s claim, 2) provide 1-2 important pieces of evidence to summarize this claim and 3) explain whether you find this claim compelling, and why or why not?

* *Sterbenz:* *Sterbenz highlights a visual connection between “Django Jane” and “Make Me Feel”: “The two works open in a similar way: the viewer is guided through a slow approach to a conference with Monáe, who delivers the first few lines of each song from a stationary seated post. Her relative stillness and elegant, confident postures giver very strong initial impressions of self-assurance and poise” (257). Sterbz suggests that, given this connection, as well as the contrasts in the moods and character she takes on in each video, this highlights that the two videos “offer complementary takes on contemporary femininity, both of which are unequivocal and unapologetic in their assertion of black women’s power” (257).*
* *Lochard: Lochard addresses the presence of endless doubles throughout “Django Jane” and references them as indicative of “a woman who locates identity as much in community as in the cool, faced mirrors of her imagination” (269). She explains, “the narrative of identity falls inwards and through the looking glass” (269).* 
  1. “Make Me Feel” Analysis: Choose Shaviro’s (p. 253-256) or Vernallis’s (265-267) piece and 1) explain the author’s claim, 2) provide 1-2 important pieces of evidence to summarize this claim and 3) explain whether you find this claim compelling, and why or why not.
* *Shaviro: Shaviro does not have an overarching claim, but instead draws attention to significant elements about “Make Me Feel,” including its*
* *references to Michael Jackson, James Brown and Prince*
* *use of doubling as Monáe’s “ideal performing self reaches out to her fleshly incarnation” (255)*
* *the video’s use of “bisexual lighting” – a “formal pattern that corelates to the colors of the bisexual pride flag and thereby parallels the content of the video” (255)*
* *Vernallis: Vernallis explores the role of a music video director such as Ferguson is in “glossing the relaitions between image, music and lyrics…all these elements—and parameters like dancing, costumes, makeup and props—interpolate us into the song and the video” (266). She provides examples from “Make Me Feel” that highlight how the director “can help us hear a song” (266) by connecting particular sound effects to visuals, and foregrounding or limiting the impact of particular elements over the course of the video. She connects the sounds used to the dancing and themes, as in the line: “And I should call out the equally affirmative resolute shapes suggestive of yonic forms, like the recesses formed by dancers and the urinal/alcove, and Monae threading herself among her dancers’ V-positioned legs. How might this content give energy to Monáe’s exclamation of “pow”? (266)*

1. (25 min) Whole group discussion.
   1. What was Sterbenz’ claim, and what evidence was used to support it? Did you find this argument compelling? Why or why not?
      1. Additional questioning, if needed – for all four of these, return to the quotes listed above and ask – what does this line suggest? Why is this significant?
   2. What was Lochard’s claim? Did you find this argument compelling? Why or why not?
   3. What was Shaviro’s claim? Did you find this argument compelling? Why or why not?
   4. What was Vernallis’ claim? Did you find this argument compelling? Why or why not?
   5. **Extension question:** What did these authors *not* address about “Django Jane” or “Make Me Feel” that you found significant? What visuals, music, or themes struck you that we have not yet addressed? Why were these details important to you?

**Lesson 3: Examining** *Dirty Computer* **Through Afrofuturism**

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast – choose 1 and jot down notes:
2. Compare *Dirty Computer* to another film we’ve seen so far in this unit (“San Junipero,” *Ma Vie En Rose, Pose* or *Kiki.* What do the two films you’re considering have in common? What makes this one different?
3. Consider our discussion of Jose Esteban Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* from the last several weeks. How do Munoz’s ideas apply to *Dirty Computer?*
4. (7 min) Discuss.
5. (14 min) Re-watch today’s clips: “Crazy Classic Life” (5:04-10:19) and the conclusion (39:05-48:18)
6. (15 min) Study groups. Groups will work on the following questions. (You may want to divide students up so that some groups are reviewing the Delany excerpt and others are reviewing the Tate excerpt).
7. What quotes from Dery’s interviews seemed significant in terms of defining and explaining Afrofuturism? How do those quotes connect to the two clips we’ve just watched, or to other parts of *Dirty Computer*? Feel free to also draw connections to the video, “Afrofuturism Explained: Not Just Black Sci-Fi.”

*Samuel Delany Interview:*

* 1. *“It was fairly easy to understand why, say, from the fifties through the seventies, the black readership of SF was fairly low…the flashing lights, the dials, and the rest of the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction functioned as social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, “Boys Club! Girls, keep out! Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!” (Dery 188)*
     1. *Notably, throughout Dirty Computer, technology is primarily used to subdue the “dirty computers” – through the Nevermind gas, police drones, and cleaning facility. However, the film is invested in the “dirty computers” claiming this technology for themselves—by driving hovercars, and by using the Nevermind gas to assist with their escape. The Black, queer women at the heart of this story are able to resist the “Old Boys Club” designation that Delany claims as a historical problem of sci-fi in order to establish an Afrofuturist claims on technology.*
  2. *The historical reason that we’ve been so impoverished in terms of future images is because, until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past…every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness. When, indeed, we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean, specifically, that it was founded on the systematic, conscientious and massive destruction of African cultural remnants. That some musical rhythms endured, that certain religious attitudes and structures seem to have persisted, is quite astonishing, when you study the efforts of the white slave-importing machinery to wipe them out...This is why black history is so important…in black intellectual life today” (Dery 191).*
     1. *The erasure of history, memory and culture, and the attempt to resist that erasure, is perhaps the central conflict in Dirty Computer. While Jane’s character resists her personal memories being erased, rather than historical/cultural memories, the fact that this also occurs to Che, Zen, and many other dirty computers suggest a kind of cultural genocide. But critically, the stubbornness of these memories is central to Jane and Zen’s ability to resist their captors. While the cleaners look puzzled and claim, “I thought we deleted this beach stuff already,” both Jane and Zen resist the erasure of this memory, perhaps due to the tattoo that Zen designed for Jane that reminds both of them of their pasts. The persistence of these memories enables them to develop the will and plan to overthrow their captors and escape.*

*Greg Tate Interview:*

1. *“SF, like hip-hop, is a very sociohistorical genre. It’s a totalizing way of looking at America…science fiction eschews the psychological dimension in terms of character portrayal for a more all-encompassing look at the impact of various institutions that govern behavior and the transmission of knowledge…so that we can see the specter haunting society that society doesn’t want to acknowledge” (Dery 211)*
   1. *While there is a basic character-driven plotline to Dirty Computer, one could argue that it also provides an “all-encompassing look at the impact of various institutions that govern behavior” through decontextualized threat that is presented by the white “Cleaners” and the associated law enforcement systems that work to capture and erase the minds of dirty computers. By providing visual cues of oppression, such as the sound of the police siren at the start of the film, or the image of a line of young Black people in handcuffs at the end of “Crazy Classic Life,” the film cues viewers to consider their present circumstances without tying the details to one particular moment in time. The threats faced by “dirty computers” in the film are reminiscent of threats to Black people throughout American history.*
2. *“The condition of alienation that comes from being a black subject in American society parallels the kind of alienation that science fiction writers try to explore through various genre devices…All of these devices reiterate the condition of being black in American culture. Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine” (Dery 212)*
   1. *Many moments in this film, such as Zen’s abduction by law enforcement, speaks to alienation and fear that is both a common trope in science fiction and particular to the Black experience in America.*
3. Review your notes from the video, “The Defiant Sci-Fi of Janelle Monáe” Considering that the creator made this video exclusively about the Metropolis saga (which was released prior to *Dirty Computer),* apply his claims to *Dirty Computer.* Which components of Afrofuturism that he mentioned seem most relevant to *Dirty Computer?* Support your claims with evidence from today’s clips or other evidence from the film.
   1. *The video explains that in “Q.U.E.E.N.,” The Great Divide “erases past history and culture,” but she responds to this erasure by becoming “time-travelling rebel who provides hope” for a better future. This connects to the significance of the Nevermind procedure within Dirty Computer and the attempts by the cleaners to erase the memories of the dirty computers. The importance of resistance to erasure is a critical element of Dirty Computer, especially in the closing scene of the film, in which Che, Zen, and Jane work together to escape and build a better future. While that future is unknown and is only understood to the viewer as a bright light that suggests something better, Jane, Zen and Che’s final act of walking into the sunlight with unconscious cleaners on the floor behind them sends a powerful message about the future they plan to build together.*
   2. *The video quotes John Jennings who argues that within Afrofuturism, “everything is a type of technology” that can be used for resistance, and the video argues that for Monáe, dance is an important tool for resistance. Throughout the Metropolis saga, dance is suggested to be “subversive” and is used as a tool for escape from an oppressive asylum. Similarly, in Dirty Computer, the dance routines of the “Black Girl Magic Dancers” (as they are credited in the end credits) is one of the most significant tools to demonstrate the joy and power of the dirty computers in “Crazy Classic Life,” “Screwed,” and “Pynk.”*
   3. *The video quotes John Calvert who calls Monáe a “new pioneer of Afrofuturism” for her transcendence of ideological borders and her ability to “appropriate” non-black genres and weave them into her music. This is also clearly evident in Dirty Computer, given the musical influence of artists like Brian Wilson and David Bowie, as well as through her visual nods to artists like Keith Haring, a gay artist whose 1980s work was influential in 1980s and 1990s HIV/AIDS activism.*
4. (15 min) Whole group discussion.

a.What quotes from Dery’s interviews seemed significant in terms of defining and explaining Afrofuturism? How do those quotes connect to the two clips we’ve just watched, or to other parts of *Dirty Computer*? Feel free to also draw connections to the video, “Afrofuturism Explained: Not Just Black Sci-Fi.”

1. Additional questions if necessary: Review the 2 quotes from Delany and 2 from Tate. After reading them one by one, ask: What connections do you see between this message and *Dirty Computer?*

b.Review your notes from the video, “The Defiant Sci-Fi of Janelle Monáe” Considering that the creator made this video exclusively about the Metropolis saga (which was released prior to *Dirty Computer),* apply his claims to *Dirty Computer.* Which components of Afrofuturism that he mentioned seem most relevant to *Dirty Computer?* Support your claims with evidence from today’s clips or other evidence from the film.

1. Additional questions if necessary: Consider the three premises present in this analysis of the Metropolis saga: 1) resistance to the erasure of past history and culture, 2) significance of dance as a technology of resistance, and 3) transcendence of ideological borders. How do those themes emerge in *Dirty Computer?*
2. **Extension question:** Based on what you know of Monae’s Afrofuturist vision, what would you expect to see in her next project? What continuities would you expect to see with *Dirty Computer?* What new ideas or focuses might emerge next in her work?