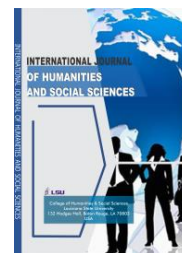# Black Panther / Black Panther II: Myth, Folklore, and African Renaissance Cinematic Aesthetics

Achibi Samuel Dede PhD

Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria.
samdede.sdx1@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines Ryan Coogler's Black Panther (2018) and Wakanda Forever (2022) as visual cinematic narratives that deploy African myths, folklore, and legends to articulate a contemporary African Renaissance aesthetic. Drawing on postcolonial, performance, and visual narrative theories, the study explores how the films construct African identity, cultural sovereignty, and collective memory while engaging global audiences. The analysis focuses on the interplay between visual design, costume, mise-en-scène, language, music, and character performance, demonstrating how these elements reinforce mythic storytelling and social commentary. The study further interrogates the representation of gender, power, and ancestral authority within the films, highlighting how Coogler's direction blends traditional African symbolic motifs with modern cinematic techniques. By situating the films within both African and global contexts, this research addresses gaps in Theatre and Film Studies regarding African diasporic narratives and postcolonial aesthetics. The findings reveal that Black Panther and Wakanda Forever not only visualise African cultural memory but also inspire a reimagining of Africa's political, social, and artistic potential. The article concludes that Coogler's work exemplifies how contemporary cinema can function as a medium of cultural preservation, aesthetic innovation, and critical reflection on identity.

Keywords: *African Renaissance, Black Panther, Wakanda Forever, Myth and Folklore, Visual Cinematic Narrative, African Identity, Performance Aesthetics.*

I.   Introduction

Cinema has long served as a space where culture, history, and imagination converge to produce narratives that both reflect and shape society. In recent years, African cinema and diasporic storytelling have increasingly gained global attention for their capacity to challenge dominant cultural frameworks and offer alternative visions of identity and power (Swartz, 2020, p. 12). Among these works, Ryan Coogler's Black Panther (2018) and its sequel Wakanda Forever (2022) stand out as landmark films that synthesise mythology, folklore, legend, and African aesthetics into a visually compelling narrative. The films do more than entertain; they construct an imaginative space where African heritage, technological innovation, and socio-political critique intersect. This intersection forms the central focus of this study.

The importance of examining Black Panther and Wakanda Forever lies in their ability to articulate African cultural memory and collective identity in ways that are rarely foregrounded in global cinema. Drawing on Fanon's (1967, p. 112) insights on cultural identity and the impact of colonial legacies, the films can be read as a postcolonial intervention, offering new narratives that resist cultural erasure. Likewise, Bhabha's (1994, p. 57) notion of the 'third space' provides a useful framework to understand how Coogler negotiates hybridity, blending traditional African motifs with futuristic aesthetics to create a space where identity is both performative and transformative. This study engages with these theoretical perspectives to interrogate how the films function as both cultural texts and aesthetic artefacts.

Visual and performative strategies are central to Coogler's storytelling. The films' mise-en-scène, costume, lighting, music, and choreography do not merely serve narrative purposes; they enact mythic and folkloric structures that are deeply rooted in African epistemologies (Arriaga Benítez, 2021, p. 98). As Labidi (2021, p. 252) observes, cinema has the potential to articulate the experiences of marginalised communities through symbolic representation and performative enactment. In the context of Black Panther, these elements construct an African Renaissance aesthetic, emphasising cultural sovereignty, social cohesion, and political imagination.

Another critical aspect of the films is the representation of gender and leadership. While African myths often centre male heroic figures, Coogler's narratives deliberately foreground female agency, highlighting the political, social, and spiritual power of women within Wakanda. This aligns with contemporary scholarship that stresses the need to examine gender dynamics in cinematic storytelling, particularly within postcolonial and African diasporic contexts (Hooks, 1992, p. 23; Irwan & Rosalinah, 2025, p. 127). By analysing these dynamics, the study illuminates how myth and legend can be reinterpreted to challenge patriarchal structures while reinforcing cultural continuity.

This research contributes to Theatre and Film Studies by offering a detailed analysis of how myth, folklore, and African Renaissance aesthetics operate in contemporary cinema. It addresses gaps in existing literature where African cultural narratives are often overlooked or simplified, particularly in global mainstream productions. The study situates Black Panther and Wakanda Forever within both African and diasporic cinematic traditions, exploring how visual and performative techniques construct cultural meaning, evoke collective memory, and foster critical engagement with history and identity (Gilroy, 2016, p. 52; Swartz, 2020, p. 15).

In order to achieve these aims, the article first surveys the literature on African myths, folklore, and postcolonial cinematic interventions. It then outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, followed by a methodology that emphasises close reading of visual and performative elements. The subsequent sections offer an integrated analysis of the films' visual narratives, performative strategies, and gendered storytelling, culminating in a discussion that synthesises these insights to highlight the films' broader cultural and aesthetic significance.

By foregrounding African myths and legends within a contemporary cinematic framework, Coogler's films not only entertain but also assert a vision of Africa as a space of creativity, resilience, and imagination. This study seeks to elucidate these dynamics, demonstrating how cinema can function as a medium of cultural memory, aesthetic innovation, and socio-political reflection.

Cinema functions not merely as entertainment but as a medium for cultural expression, identity negotiation, and historical reflection. In the context of African and diasporic cinema, scholars have increasingly emphasised the capacity of film to represent myth, folklore, and ancestral knowledge while engaging contemporary social realities (Labidi, 2021, p. 252; Arriaga Benítez, 2021, p. 98). Ryan Coogler's Black Panther (2018) and Wakanda Forever (2022) exemplify this potential, integrating African myths, legends, and folklore into a cinematic framework that conveys both cultural memory and political imagination.

Previous scholarship highlights how Black Panther disrupts traditional Western narratives about Africa. Tallapessy, Wahyuningsih, and Anjasari (2020, p. 78) argue that the film challenges colonial discourses by presenting Wakanda as a technologically advanced, culturally grounded society, blending futuristic aesthetics with African symbolism. Similarly, Sibiya (2024, p. 1039) emphasises the deliberate use of African languages and rituals to assert cultural sovereignty and authenticity, demonstrating how narrative, language, and performance intersect in the construction of African identity.

Afrofuturism emerges as a key lens in understanding these films. Afrofuturist narratives, as Kaunda (2021, p. 5) observes, allow African diasporic artists to reimagine futures free from colonial legacies while grounding them in ancestral knowledge and myth. Coogler's films, through visual motifs, costume, and performance, create a space where African myths and folklore are not merely decorative but central to the narrative's moral and social logic. Ebrahim (2021, p. 247) notes that visual design, from costume to architecture, functions as a repository of cultural memory, embedding legend and myth into the diegesis of the films.

Gender representation and leadership in these films have attracted scholarly attention. Hooks (1992, p. 23) emphasises that the politics of representation in cinema are crucial in shaping social consciousness. In Black Panther and Wakanda Forever, female characters such as Shuri, Okoye, and Queen Ramonda occupy roles that are simultaneously authoritative, strategic, and rooted in cultural mythos. Irwan and Rosalinah (2025, p. 130) further note that these portrayals signal a shift in African cinematic storytelling, where female agency is aligned with both cultural authenticity and narrative centrality.

Reception studies provide additional insight into the films' cultural impact. Sewchurran (2022, p. 7) explores African audience responses, showing that viewers interpret Wakanda not simply as fantasy but as a symbol of continental pride, cultural memory, and political possibility. Similarly, Paulin (2021, p. 18) situates the films within a broader African diasporic consciousness, arguing that the combination of myth, legend, and futuristic aesthetics enables audiences to negotiate complex identities shaped by historical trauma and contemporary aspirations.

Semiotic and visual studies further illuminate the integration of myth and folklore into the films' aesthetic. Hafitri and Rahmawati (2025, p. 260) argue that visual motifs, such as ancestral imagery, ritual dances, and symbolic objects, function as semiotic codes that communicate layered meanings. These codes allow audiences to decode mythic narratives, ancestral authority, and social ethics within the cinematic universe. Harjantoko, Djiwandono, and Ginting (2024, p. 125) emphasise that movie posters and promotional visuals reinforce the films' mythic and heroic framing, signalling to audiences that the narrative operates at the intersection of legend, folklore, and contemporary social commentary.

The literature also underscores the importance of postcolonial theoretical frameworks in analysing Black Panther and Wakanda Forever. Fanon (1967, p. 112) and Bhabha (1994, p. 57) offer insights into the negotiation of identity, hybridity, and cultural resistance, highlighting how these films function as postcolonial interventions. They simultaneously reclaim African cultural space, critique historical marginalisation, and offer imaginative visions of political and technological sovereignty. Tallapessy et al. (2020, p. 80) note that these narratives operate within a multimodal structure, combining music, visual effects, and narrative motifs to produce meaning that is both culturally resonant and globally legible.

Finally, scholars highlight the films' capacity to foster an African Renaissance aesthetic. Swartz (2020, p. 14) argues that Black Panther repositions Africa as a site of creativity, resilience, and intellectual innovation, challenging reductive or exoticised portrayals. Ebrahim (2021, p. 249) observes that visual storytelling, in combination with performance, costume, and music, situates African myths and folklore within a contemporary cinematic language that communicates both heritage and futurity.

This body of scholarship demonstrates that Black Panther and Wakanda Forever operate at multiple levels: as narratives that preserve and reinterpret African myths, as visual and performative texts that innovate cinematic aesthetics, and as cultural artefacts that engage global and African audiences in a dialogue about identity, history, and possibility. Despite this rich literature, there remains a need for integrated analyses that connect visual, performative, and gendered dimensions with postcolonial and Afrofuturist frameworks. This study seeks to fill that gap by systematically examining how myth, folklore, and legend inform the films' visual narratives, performance, and aesthetics, situating them within the broader discourse of African Renaissance cinema.

A strong theoretical framework is essential to analyse how Ryan Coogler's Black Panther and Wakanda Forever negotiate myth, folklore, legend, and African Renaissance aesthetics. This study adopts a multi-theoretical approach, combining Postcolonial Theory, Performance Theory, and Visual Cinematic Narrative Theory, allowing for an integrated examination of narrative, visual, and performative elements.

Postcolonial Theory provides a lens to understand how the films confront historical marginalisation and colonial legacies. According to Fanon (1967, p. 112), colonialism disrupts cultural identity, replacing indigenous narratives with imposed European frameworks. Coogler's films resist this by presenting Wakanda as a sovereign, technologically advanced society deeply rooted in African cultural traditions. Similarly, Bhabha's (1994, p. 57) concept of the 'third space' highlights the negotiation of hybrid identities, where African myths and legends are reimagined in dialogue with contemporary and diasporic realities. This theoretical perspective allows the study to examine how Coogler reconstructs African identity while engaging global audiences, situating the films as postcolonial interventions in mainstream cinema.

Performance Theory, as articulated by Schechner (1988, p. 45) and Turner (1987, p. 27), emphasises the embodied, ritualistic, and symbolic dimensions of human expression. Performance is not limited to theatre; in cinema, gestures, movement, costume, and ritual enactment communicate

meaning beyond dialogue. In the films, the ceremonial dances, combat choreography, and royal protocols function as performative acts that encode myth, legend, and social hierarchies. Schechner's (1988) notion of the "restored behaviour" is particularly useful: it allows analysis of how the films repeat, adapt, and transform African cultural practices into cinematic form, blending tradition and innovation. Turner's (1987) focus on ritual and liminality further helps unpack moments of transition, such as leadership succession or ancestral communication, where characters occupy symbolic thresholds that connect the living and the mythic past.

Visual Cinematic Narrative Theory complements these perspectives by foregrounding how storytelling occurs through visual means. Arriaga Benítez (2021, p. 98) emphasises that cinema conveys ideas not only through dialogue but through mise-en-scène, lighting, costume, spatial composition, and cinematography. In Black Panther and Wakanda Forever, visual motifs—such as ancestral landscapes, ceremonial objects, and architectural symbols—construct mythic worlds that communicate African cosmologies and social values. Ildırar (2015, p. 63) underscores that continuity in visual storytelling enables audiences to interpret symbolic systems embedded in film, revealing deeper narrative and cultural meanings. Visual Cinematic Narrative Theory allows this study to interrogate how myth and folklore are encoded visually, shaping audience perception and cultural understanding.

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives allows for a holistic analysis of the films. Postcolonial Theory situates the narrative in its historical and cultural context, Performance Theory reveals the embodied enactment of myths and legends, and Visual Cinematic Narrative Theory uncovers the semiotic and aesthetic mechanisms through which these narratives are communicated. Together, they illuminate how Coogler's films operate as cultural artefacts that simultaneously entertain, educate, and critique.

Additionally, this framework foregrounds human agency in storytelling. By centring character decisions, performative gestures, and narrative choices, the study resists purely technological or reductive interpretations of cinema. The agency of African characters—both male and female—is pivotal in enacting myth, legend, and political authority, reinforcing the films' broader themes of empowerment and cultural sovereignty (Hooks, 1992, p. 23; Irwan & Rosalinah, 2025, p. 127).

In summary, this multi-theoretical approach positions the analysis to explore how myth, folklore, and African Renaissance aesthetics are performed, visualised, and narrativised, providing a structured lens for examining Coogler's films. It ensures that the study remains analytical, contextually grounded, and attentive to the interplay of visual, performative, and cultural dynamics, which is essential for understanding the films' contribution to Theatre and Film Studies.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, focusing on textual, visual, and performative analysis of Ryan Coogler's Black Panther (2018) and Wakanda Forever (2022). The research is interpretive and analytical, emphasising human agency and cultural meaning rather than purely technical aspects of filmmaking. The methodology aligns with the postcolonial, performance, and visual cinematic narrative theories outlined in the theoretical framework, ensuring that analysis is both contextually and aesthetically grounded.

The primary data consist of the films themselves, including narrative structure, mise-en-scène, costume, cinematography, choreography, dialogue, music, and symbolic objects. These elements are examined systematically, scene by scene, to identify recurring motifs, mythic references, folkloric elements, and performative practices. For example, ritual dances, combat sequences, and royal ceremonies are analysed using Performance Theory to reveal how gestures, spatial arrangements, and ritualised movements communicate cultural meaning (Schechner, 1988, p. 45; Turner, 1987, p. 27). Likewise, visual motifs such as ancestral landscapes, ceremonial regalia, and architectural designs are studied using Visual Cinematic Narrative Theory to decode semiotic and aesthetic layers (Arriaga Benítez, 2021, p. 98; Ildırar, 2015, p. 63).

The study also employs intertextual analysis to connect the films' narratives to African myths, folklore, and legends. This involves comparing cinematic representations with documented African oral traditions, mythological texts, and scholarly interpretations. The approach ensures that the films are situated within both African cultural memory and diasporic storytelling traditions, allowing for a

nuanced understanding of the African Renaissance aesthetic embedded in the narratives (Labidi, 2021, p. 252; Swartz, 2020, p. 14).

Data collection and organisation involved repeated viewing of both films to identify salient visual and performative features. Notes were categorised according to thematic areas, including:

Myth and folklore representation
Gendered agency and leadership
Visual motifs and symbolism
Ritual and performance
Narrative and political commentary

Each theme was then analysed in relation to the theoretical framework. For instance, postcolonial theory helps interpret how Wakanda's sovereignty challenges colonial narratives (Fanon, 1967, p. 112; Bhabha, 1994, p. 57), while performance theory explains how embodied actions communicate ancestral knowledge and social hierarchies (Schechner, 1988, p. 45). Visual cinematic narrative theory decodes how aesthetic and symbolic features convey mythic meaning (Arriaga Benítez, 2021, p. 98; Ildırar, 2015, p. 63).

The study is interpretive rather than generalisable, focusing on depth and cultural specificity. The aim is not to produce quantitative results but to generate insights into how African myths, folklore, and legends are visually and performatively represented in contemporary cinema. Emphasis is placed on the agency of characters, filmmakers, and cultural texts, recognising that meaning is co-constructed through human creativity and audience interpretation (Hooks, 1992, p. 23; Irwan & Rosalinah, 2025, p. 127).

Finally, the research employs critical reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and potential biases. By foregrounding African cultural knowledge, postcolonial critique, and performative reading, the study ensures that analysis remains culturally sensitive, theoretically robust, and analytically rigorous.

Analysis I: Myth, Folklore, Legends, and African Renaissance Aesthetics

Ryan Coogler's Black Panther (2018) and Wakanda Forever (2022) offer a rich tapestry where myth, folklore, and legend operate alongside futuristic imagination to construct an African Renaissance aesthetic. The films do not merely retell African stories; they reinterpret them, blending cultural memory with cinematic spectacle. By analysing narrative structures, visual motifs, performance, and costume, this section demonstrates how Coogler positions myth and folklore at the centre of cinematic storytelling.

Myth and Ancestral Legitimacy

In both films, myth functions as a source of authority and cultural continuity. The ancestral plane, where past leaders communicate with the living, is a literal and symbolic manifestation of myth guiding political action. Schechner's (1988, p. 45) notion of "restored behaviour" explains how these sequences repeat and ritualise cultural memory, transforming it into cinematic experience. The ancestral plane visually combines traditional African iconography with mystical elements, signalling that leadership is both inherited and morally validated through mythic connection (Turner, 1987, p. 27).

Fanon (1967, p. 112) and Bhabha (1994, p. 57) provide a postcolonial lens for interpreting these mythic structures. By foregrounding African traditions as sources of wisdom and political legitimacy, the films resist colonial narratives that depict African societies as primitive or static. In Wakanda Forever, Queen Ramonda's consultations with ancestors underscore the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership, while also reinforcing collective memory as a central pillar of identity.

Folklore and Narrative Continuity

Folklore in Coogler's films operates both narratively and visually. Oral storytelling traditions are evoked through dialogue, rituals, and music. For instance, the use of ceremonial songs during coronation and combat sequences conveys historical and cultural continuity, linking present actions to ancestral precedent (Labidi, 2021, p. 252). These elements resonate with African storytelling principles, where music, dance, and narrative are inseparable, performing social and moral functions (Swartz, 2020, p. 14).

Visual continuity also reinforces folklore. Architectural designs, costume patterns, and ritual spaces are informed by African aesthetics, from the Ndebele-inspired palace designs to Dora Milaje uniforms inspired by Maasai and Himba motifs (Arriaga Benítez, 2021, p. 98; Torregrosa, 2023, p. 351). These choices communicate cultural specificity and authenticity while also constructing a mythic visual identity that situates Wakanda as both timeless and futuristic.

Legendary Figures and Heroic Archetypes

The films draw on legendary and heroic archetypes, constructing characters who embody courage, wisdom, and moral authority. T'Challa, Shuri, and Okoye are examples of this fusion of legend and modern heroism. T'Challa's journey reflects the "hero's passage" commonly found in African and diasporic legends: initiation, trial, and ethical responsibility (Hafitri & Rahmawati, 2025, p. 260). Shuri and Okoye exemplify how folklore can be reinterpreted to foreground female agency, challenging patriarchal conventions while maintaining cultural resonance (Hooks, 1992, p. 23; Irwan & Rosalinah, 2025, p. 130).

Costume and physical performance are central to constructing legendary status. The Black Panther suit itself functions as a symbolic artefact, merging technological innovation with ancestral legacy. Similarly, ceremonial attire, jewellery, and hairstyles communicate lineage, social roles, and heroic qualities, transforming visual design into performative storytelling (Torregrosa, 2023, p. 351; Ebrahim, 2021, p. 247).

African Renaissance Aesthetics

The integration of myth, folklore, and legend culminates in what Swartz (2020, p. 14) describes as an African Renaissance aesthetic a vision of Africa that is simultaneously rooted in tradition and engaged with futurity. Visual design, music, and narrative structure collaborate to produce a cinematic universe where African identity is celebrated, technologically empowered, and politically sovereign. Elements such as the vibranium economy, the heart-shaped herb, and Wakanda's advanced cityscape articulate an aesthetic that celebrates ingenuity while remaining culturally grounded.

Afrofuturist principles are embedded throughout the films. Kaunda (2021, p. 5) argues that Afrofuturism allows African diasporic storytellers to reconstruct history and envision alternative futures. Coogler's films employ visual and narrative strategies to achieve this: ancestral symbolism, mythic narratives, and folklore-infused performances create a continuum between past, present, and speculative future, demonstrating how cinematic storytelling can articulate African agency and creativity on a global scale.

Visual and Performative Techniques

Visual and performative strategies are critical in encoding myth and legend. Cinematography, lighting, and framing are used to signify sacred or heroic spaces, while choreography, ritualised gestures, and ceremonial interactions communicate cultural authority. For example, combat sequences, ceremonial dances, and coronation rituals are choreographed to simultaneously entertain and convey social, moral, and mythic significance (Turner, 1987, p. 27; Schechner, 1988, p. 45).

Moreover, the integration of folklore into cinematic spectacle enables a multi-layered reading experience. Audiences familiar with African traditions recognise subtle cues, while global viewers access a visual and narrative richness that conveys universal themes of heroism, justice, and collective responsibility (Rahmani, 2023, p. 375).

Gendered Myth and Folklore

Female characters enact mythic and folkloric authority. Shuri's technological innovation, Okoye's martial prowess, and Ramonda's maternal leadership demonstrate how Coogler reconfigures legendary roles to include women as central agents of change. Irwan and Rosalinah (2025, p. 130) note that these portrayals resonate with African mythologies where female figures are revered as warriors, healers, and spiritual guides. This gendered dimension enhances the films' cultural authenticity while challenging traditional cinematic norms.

Intersections of Myth, Folklore, and Politics

Finally, myth and folklore in these films intersect with political commentary. Leadership disputes, resource management, and foreign relations are framed through mythic and folkloric lenses, emphasising moral responsibility, communal values, and ethical governance. The films suggest that cultural memory and mythic wisdom are not mere aesthetic devices but guideposts for ethical and political action, reinforcing the notion of cinema as a medium of social reflection (Gilroy, 2016, p. 52; Tallapessy et al., 2020, p. 80).

Analysis II: Visual Cinematic Techniques, Performance, and Symbolic Representation

Ryan Coogler's Black Panther (2018) and Wakanda Forever (2022) achieve their cultural, mythic, and political impact not only through narrative but also through visual and performative strategies. This section examines how mise-en-scène, cinematography, performance, costume, lighting, and sound design combine to produce a rich cinematic tapestry that communicates myth, folklore, legend, and African Renaissance aesthetics.

Mise-en-Scène and Spatial Symbolism

Mise-en-scène in Coogler's films is central to meaning-making. The spatial design of Wakanda—the palace, villages, forests, and mountains—serves as a visual metaphor for cultural depth and technological sophistication. Arriaga Benítez (2021, p. 98) notes that cinema communicates ideas through visual arrangements; in Wakanda, architecture blends African motifs with futuristic forms, creating a space where myth, history, and imagination converge. Each location is carefully framed to signify hierarchy, power, and moral responsibility. For example, ceremonial halls are often shot in symmetrical compositions to evoke order, continuity, and ancestral authority.

Similarly, Turner's (1987, p. 27) work on ritual and liminality illuminates scenes where characters transition between private, political, and sacred spaces. Shuri's laboratory, T'Challa's ancestral plane, and Ramonda's throne room all function as liminal zones where ordinary action meets symbolic and mythic significance. These spaces are not mere backdrops but performative environments that enable characters to enact myth and legend.

Cinematography and Visual Semiotics

Cinematography enhances mythic storytelling by manipulating perspective, colour, and light. High-angle shots establish grandeur and authority, while low-angle shots emphasise heroism. Vibrant colour palettes signify thematic and emotional dimensions: gold and red dominate ceremonial spaces, suggesting power, continuity, and ancestral presence (Swartz, 2020, p. 14). Motion, framing, and camera movement also guide attention to symbolic artefacts such as the heart-shaped herb, ritual masks, and ancestral statues, highlighting their narrative and mythic significance.

Ildırar (2015, p. 63) stresses that continuity in visual storytelling enables audiences to decode symbolic meaning. Coogler's editing maintains spatial and temporal coherence, ensuring that mythic sequences are integrated seamlessly with action, dialogue, and ritual. This allows both African and global audiences to engage with cultural references and legends embedded in the narrative.

Performance and Ritualised Action

Performance is central to the films' mythic and folkloric communication. Schechner's (1988, p. 45) concept of "restored behaviour" is evident in ceremonial dances, combat choreography, and coronation rituals. These actions are codified, ritualised, and symbolic. For instance, the coronation ceremony in Black Panther demonstrates T'Challa's readiness to embody both political and mythic authority. Similarly, Okoye and Shuri's performances in combat sequences exemplify heroism, agency, and ethical responsibility.

Ritualised gestures hand movements, bows, and ceremonial touches communicate respect, lineage, and spiritual authority. Turner's (1987, p. 27) theory of liminality explains how these performances mark transitions, such as succession or the passing of spiritual wisdom. Such sequences demonstrate that Coogler utilises embodied storytelling to convey cultural and mythic knowledge beyond dialogue.

Costume, Symbolism, and Character Identity

Costume design in both films is a visual language of identity, myth, and legend. Torregrosa (2023, p. 351) highlights that attire communicates lineage, social rank, and heroism. The Dora Milaje uniforms draw on Maasai and Himba influences, signalling strength and cultural pride, while ceremonial robes link rulers to ancestral authority. The Black Panther suit embodies hybridity: ancestral tradition, technological mastery, and moral duty converge in a single visual artefact.

Costumes also mediate gendered myth. Shuri's attire combines practicality with ceremonial symbolism, reflecting innovation, intelligence, and royal legitimacy. Ramonda's robes in Wakanda Forever visually communicate maternal authority and ancestral connection, making clothing an active participant in mythic storytelling (Hooks, 1992, p. 23; Irwan & Rosalinah, 2025, p. 130).

Lighting, Sound, and Musicality

Lighting and sound function symbolically to emphasise mythic and folkloric dimensions. Dim lighting and shadow are employed during ancestral plane sequences, creating spiritual depth and mystery, while bright, saturated lighting highlights celebration and triumph. Music, including ceremonial chants and traditional rhythms, complements visual storytelling, embedding African oral traditions into cinematic form (Labidi, 2021, p. 252; Swartz, 2020, p. 14).

Sound design also highlights narrative significance. The roar of the Black Panther suit, vibranium effects, and environmental soundscapes reinforce heroism, ritual, and legend. Rahmani (2023, p. 375) notes that multisensory engagement increases narrative persuasion, ensuring that audience comprehension of mythic and cultural themes is enhanced.

Integration of Visual and Performative Narratives

Together, visual and performative techniques construct a holistic mythic universe. Mise-en-scène, cinematography, costume, performance, and sound combine to communicate African Renaissance aesthetics, reinforcing postcolonial identity and cultural empowerment. These techniques allow audiences to perceive Wakanda not only as a fictional space but as a site of cultural memory, heroic legend, and ethical reflection.

By foregrounding human agency, Coogler's films demonstrate that myths and folklore are not static artefacts but living narratives enacted through performance, visual representation, and ethical choice. Characters negotiate power, identity, and moral responsibility in ways that resonate with African traditions while engaging global audiences.

II. Conclusion

Ryan Coogler's Black Panther (2018) and Wakanda Forever (2022) offer more than cinematic spectacle; they are rich visual narratives where myth, folklore, legend, and African Renaissance aesthetics converge to create a culturally resonant and politically empowering cinematic universe. Through narrative, performance, mise-en-scène, costume, cinematography, and sound, the films construct Wakanda as a space where history, memory, and imagination intersect, presenting stories of leadership, heroism, and ethical responsibility grounded in African cultural knowledge.

Myth functions as a cornerstone of these narratives. The ancestral plane, ritualised coronations, and symbolic artefacts underscore the continuity of moral and cultural authority across generations. These sequences demonstrate that myths are not static relics but living practices enacted by human agency, linking the past to the present. Folklore, embedded in ceremonial chants, music, and dance, provides narrative cohesion and cultural depth while fostering a sense of collective identity (Labidi, 2021, p. 252; Swartz, 2020, p. 14).

Legendary figures such as T'Challa, Shuri, and Okoye embody heroism, wisdom, and ethical leadership, drawing upon archetypes present in African and diasporic storytelling. Their actions illustrate that heroism is inseparable from ethical responsibility, courage, and communal values. Visual and performative strategies—costume, gesture, lighting, and choreography—communicate these qualities beyond dialogue, highlighting cinema's ability to narrate through visual and embodied forms (Torregrosa, 2023, p. 351; Schechner, 1988, p. 45).

The African Renaissance aesthetic emerges from the integration of traditional cultural forms with futuristic imagination. Wakanda's architecture, technological innovations, and ceremonial practices create a space where African identity, sovereignty, and creativity are celebrated. Afrofuturist

elements allow the films to envision alternative realities, reclaiming African narratives from colonial and stereotypical representations (Kaunda, 2021, p. 5; Arriaga Benítez, 2021, p. 98). This aesthetic strategy conveys empowerment, collective memory, and moral vision, engaging audiences both emotionally and intellectually.

Gendered representations further enhance the films' cultural and mythic depth. Shuri, Okoye, and Ramonda demonstrate that women can enact leadership, heroism, and spiritual authority, challenging cinematic and social conventions while remaining grounded in African cultural motifs (Hooks, 1992, p. 23; Irwan & Rosalinah, 2025, p. 130). The visual and performative articulation of gendered myth shows that folklore and legend are dynamic frameworks, capable of accommodating contemporary social and ethical concerns.

Furthermore, Coogler's films show that cinema is not merely entertainment but also a medium of cultural reflection and empowerment. Myth, folklore, legend, and aesthetic design converge to promote African agency, ethical leadership, and collective identity. Visual and performative strategies ensure that these themes resonate beyond textual analysis, engaging audiences on sensory, emotional, and cognitive levels.

In conclusion, Black Panther and Wakanda Forever exemplify how visual cinematic narratives can preserve cultural memory, shape identity, and articulate ethical imagination. By blending myth, folklore, legend, and African Renaissance aesthetics, Coogler demonstrates that African culture can be simultaneously rooted in tradition and visionary in scope. As Fanon (1967, p. 112) argued in Black Skin, White Masks, reclaiming cultural and historical agency is essential for overcoming oppression and constructing authentic identity. Similarly, Bhabha (1994, p. 57) emphasises that the negotiation of cultural difference creates spaces for new forms of representation and expression. Through these films, Coogler enacts a cinematic vision of Africa where agency, creativity, and ethical responsibility converge, offering audiences a compelling model of storytelling that is both culturally grounded and globally resonant.

References

Arriaga Benítez, J. M. (2021, p. 98). Cinema: Image and Idea Manifestation through its Subtexts. Visual Review – International Visual Culture Review, 8(1), 95-108. https://doi.org/10.37467/gka-revvisual.v8.2865

Bhabha, H. K. (1994, p. 57). The location of culture. Routledge.

Ebrahim, B. K. K. (2021, p. 247). The Blending of African Heritage with Modern Technologies to Design a Futuristic Reality. Journal of Design Sciences and Applied Arts, 2(1), 244-257. https://doi.org/10.21608/jdsaa.2021.36669.1071

Fanon, F. (1967, p. 112). Black Skin, White Masks. Grove Press.

Gilroy, P. (2016, p. 52). Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture. Harvard University Press.

Hafitri, E., & Rahmawati, L. E. (2025, p. 260). Semiotic Analysis of Cultural Identity and Colonial Resistance in Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. Journal Spektrum Komunikasi, 13(2), 255-269. https://doi.org/10.37826/spektrum.v13i2.973

Harjantoko, L. A., Djiwandono, P. I., & Ginting, D. (2024, p. 125). Multimodal discourse Analysis on Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Movie Poster. LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal, 14(1), 121-142. https://doi.org/10.18592/let.v14i1.9384

Hooks, B. (1992, p. 23). Black Looks: Race and Representation. South End Press.

Ildırar, S. (2015, p. 63). Film Literacy: Continuity Cinema as a Visual Communication System. Sinecine: Sinema Araştırmaları Dergisi, 6(1), 57-89. https://doi.org/10.32001/sinecine.540272

Irwan, I., & Rosalinah, Y. (2025, p. 130). Female Empowerment and Leadership in Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. IKRA-ITH Humaniora, 9(3).

Kaunda, C. J. (2021, p. 5). Religion as Ideology in Black Panther: A Decolonial Ideological Critique of 'Religio-Political Problem' in Wakanda. Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies.

Labidi, I. Ben. (2021, p. 252). Representation and Emancipation: Cinema of the Oppressed. Media, Culture & Society, 43(2), 347-365. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920959338

Paulin, D. J. (2021, p. 18). Black Panther Shatters Social Binaries to Explore Postcolonial Themes. Chapman University Digital Commons. https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000244

Rahmani, B. (2023, p. 375). The Persuasive Effects of Narrative Entertainment: A Meta-Analysis of Recent Experiments. Behavioural Public Policy, 7(3), 370-388. https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2021.41

Schechner, R. (1988, p. 45). Performance Theory. Routledge.

Sere, S., Muarifuddin, M., & Masri, F. A. (2023). The Representation of African Cultural Identity in Black Panther. ELITE: Journal of English Language & Literature, 3(1). https://doi.org/10.33772/elite.v3i1.876

Sewchurran, A. (2022, p. 7). Black Panther: A Reception Analysis: African Perspectives. Image & Text, 36. https://doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2022/n36a5

Swartz, S. (2020, p. 12-15). Home, Belonging, and Africanity in the Film Black Panther. In S. Swartz (Ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Global South Youth Studies. Oxford University Press.

Tallapessy, A., Wahyuningsih, I., & Anjasari, R. A. (2020, p. 78-80). Postcolonial Discourse in Coogler's Black Panther: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. Humaniora, 32(1), 75-87. https://doi.org/10.22146/jh.47234.

Torregrosa, M. (2023, p. 351). Costume Design in Film: Telling the Story and Creating Malcolm X's Character in Spike Lee's Malcolm X (1992). Fashion, Style and Popular Culture, 10(3), 345-365. https://doi.org/10.1386/FSPC_00203_1

Turner, V. (1987, p. 27). The Anthropology of Performance. PAJ Publications.