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Sun Ra: Myth, Science, and Science Fiction.

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...

I am not a fantasy in a real sense

I am a fantasy in a false sense

yet I exist

there are no shadows where I am

because I am the fire of the lightning

and the flame of the sun

my name is the sun

...

– Sun Ra, “Stranger from the Sky”

This essay celebrates the 100th birthday of Sun Ra (1914-1993), a jazz musician, composer, poet, bandleader, mystic—and a myth. My aim is to explore the science-fictional and Afrofuturist aspects of Sun Ra and his work: his use of science and technology, and science-fictional imagery.

It is hard to pinpoint what it is exactly, but for me there is something very intriguing and sympathetic about Sun Ra, something that keeps me coming back to his films, music, and poetry time and time again. I was not at all astonished to find out that he had the same effect on his biographer John Szwed, who describes Sun Ra as a person who was “never easy to follow, whether in person or in reading a transcript of what he said, he was nonetheless fascinating, even compelling, and on reflection what he said made peculiar sense, though one that might not be easy to convey to others” (Szwed 346). After all, how could a science fiction scholar not be interested in a person, who claimed that it was time to think of the impossible, “because everything possible has been done and the world didn’t change” (qtd. in Lock 26).

When I first read about Sun Ra, I was finishing my Master’s thesis at the University of Helsinki and kept stumbling upon mentions of Sun Ra and his band, the Arkestra, later on when I was starting my dissertation on African American SF writers. And, when Szwed’s biography described Sun Ra as a person who, due to insomnia, “seemed never to sleep except for brief moments of napping, usually at the keyboard in the middle of rehearsal” (Szwed 37), it was definitely something that a tired doctoral student, nodding off by her computer having been up late researching some interesting new avenue of research, found easy to identify with. The more I familiarized myself with Sun Ra and his texts, music, and film, the more I wanted to know about

this man also in a “professional” sense, as part of the roots of Afrofuturism and African American science fiction.

The Man from Saturn

Even though he was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1914 and named Herman Poole Blount by his parents, the pioneer Afrofuturist changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra and lived, played, and philosophized science fiction to the extent that he claimed to be from Saturn. The claim was often taken quite literally, thus earning Sun Ra a reputation of an eccentric, if not a madman. Lock quotes the obituaries after the death of Sun Ra in 1993 describing him as a “nutter” and “galactic gobbledegook” (Lock 13). But as Lock points out, Sun Ra never actually insisted on being from Saturn in a concrete sense—instead, Sun Ra’s mythic identity and claims of originating from Saturn were metaphorical, meant “to initiate a discourse on Otherness” (Lock 62). For Ra, the alien was a metaphor for being different and alone: as Sun Ra described his life in an interview when he was 76: “I left my family, I left my friends. I left them *for real*. I left everything to be me, ‘cause I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white, not like Americans. I’m not like nobody else. I’m alone on this planet.” (Lock 38.) And besides, as anyone with talkative siblings knows, it would be pointless to claim anything outrageous as the truth will come out: Szwed quotes Sun Ra’s older sister commenting on his origins, backed up with firm evidence: “He was born at my mother’s aunt’s house over there by the train station. . . . I know, ‘cause I got on my knees and peeped through the keyhole. He’s from no Mars.” (7.)

He did claim having been to outer space, though, when he had an alien abduction experience in 1936—even though he seems not to have mentioned the experience to anyone before 1953 (Szwed 31). Sun Ra recounts how the “space men” asked him to come with them, and he was lifted up in a column of light: “it looked like a giant spotlight shining down on me, and I call it transmolecularization, my whole body was changed into something else.” He ended up on Saturn, where the aliens told him that “when it looked like the world was going into complete chaos,” he should speak to people, “and the world would listen.” (qtd. in Szwed 29-30.) Szwed interprets Sun Ra’s alien abduction story as an “act of personal mythology” that connected his past and future into one coherent narrative (Szwed 31-32). Whether Sun Ra really believed that he had an abduction experience, or whether the story was the result of his artistic creation, the story does have that effect, connecting pieces of his life into an understandable, mythic whole.

Space Music

After Sun Ra left Birmingham, he moved first to Chicago. During the Chicago years, Sun Ra founded his band, the Arkestra, whose whole name varied from the Myth Science Arkestra to the Intergalactic Research Arkestra among others—Szwed lists several dozens of variants (94-95). In addition to the names of the Arkestra itself, space and science-fictional terminology were an important part of the Arkestra’s music, titles of songs and albums, and abstract and futuristic album covers. Even Sun Ra’s instruments were futuristic. According to Amiri Baraka, Sun Ra was a “pioneer in using various—then weird—electronic instruments” (254). He was among the very first to own a Minimoog synthesizer, and the Outer Space Visual Communicator (OVC), “the much-vaunted color organ extrapolated by science fiction writers of the 1930s” as Bhub Stewart describes the instrument, was developed by its inventor Bill Sebastian only for Sun Ra’s use (Stewart xvi). With the OVC, Sun Ra’s music could be turned into colors reflected on the wall, creating a kind of synesthetic effect.

Playing avant-garde jazz—or in Baraka’s words, “[s]ome space metaphysical philosophical surrealist bop funk”—in exotic capes and gowns inspired by outer space and ancient Egypt, Sun Ra

Arkestra's concerts seem to have been quite an experience. The result of the fantastic clothes, the space-themed show, lights, and the music itself always made an impression on the audience—even more so on that part of the concert audience who increasingly “came prepared by hallucinogens and stimulants,” as often happened during the 1970s (Szwed 339).

For Sun Ra, music was the tool that could fix the sorry state of the world through creating “positive vibrations” (Corbett, “Sun Ra in Chicago” 9). He thought that music, especially his “space music” was the tool to comprehend “the meaning of the impossible and every other enigma” (qtd. in Lock 26). While Sun Ra was by no means the only one to use space imagery and space themes in his music, this utopian feature, the genuine belief in the power of his music to create a better world, sets him apart from other jazz artists of his time (Kreiss 63).

The Sun Ra Arkestra never gained enormous success in the US, but they toured the world quite extensively from the early 1970s onwards. They gave concerts in cities all over Europe, including Helsinki and Stockholm of the Nordic capitals, and they also visited African countries like Nigeria and of course Egypt. Later, with the revival of experimental music during the 1990s, Sun Ra was rediscovered—as Camille Norment points out, thus in a way proving Sun Ra right when he thought that his music was from the future (25).

Science Fiction, Science, and Myth

Sun Ra was a bookworm already as a child, and among his readings were books of science fiction and popular science (Szwed 21). He also liked to watch science fiction films, even though he did not agree with the premise of the early sci-fi films:

They make strange and horrible ones, and I don't see any reason why space is horrible. I believe, rather, that people who make these movies show a sort of portrait of the Earth. Moreover, in these movies you often see people from space who after doing something worthwhile, are conquered by Earthlings. I believe that someday Earth will be invaded by beings from outer space. It will be necessary that people from space and Earthlings teach each other, or else it will be general destruction for us all. (qtd. in Szwed 131-132)

He got a lot of influences from the films, sometimes as implicitly as to including “a midget dressed as Darth Vader dueling with light sabers with characters dressed like aliens from the bar scene” in their performances (Szwed 348). However, despite being interested in science fiction and getting inspiration and influences from it, as Leroy Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka) argued in 1966: “It is science-fact that Sun-Ra is interested in, not science-fiction” (227). Sun Ra saw technological and scientific knowledge as a key for African Americans to keep in the pace of the American society. Whoever failed to keep up with technology, that is, “to both use and reinvent the tools of white society,” would be left behind, Sun Ra thought (Kreiss 61). Therefore, he was always urging people to be prepared for the space age and future technology, even his band got their share of education during rehearsals (John Gilmore, qtd. in Lock 28; Szwed 49).

However, as Lock and Szwed note, there are at the same time certain quite unscientific sides to Sun Ra's science. As Szwed puts it: for Sun Ra, “‘science’ was somewhere between or beyond science fiction and science. More than a method of reasoning and a set of laboratory practices, it was also a mystical process, and . . . a kind of secret or suppressed knowledge which had the power to create new myths, erase old ones, altering our ratio to each other and the rest of the universe.” (Szwed 132.)

The mystical side of Sun Ra's science was most evident in the group Sun Ra was part of in Chicago, called “Thmei Research,” which was interested science, technology, and the future, but on the other hand, also in numerology, things mystical and paranormal, as well as “highly original readings of the Bible” (Corbett, “Sun Ra in Chicago” 7). They began to publish some of their

research and findings in the form of leaflets distributed in street corners and parks. The leaflets are a good example of Szwed's point which I quoted in the beginning of this essay, that what Sun Ra said usually made peculiar sense, but was hard to explain. The leaflets are logical and the arguments make a lot of sense in a way—but then again, not always. For example a leaflet titled “The Wisdom of Ra,” which begins by explaining the “[t]he way to True Living Life,” perhaps belongs to the latter category:

The movement called time is based upon 2. In the English alphabet 2 is ten (X) from Z which is a non curved 2. Z then is equal to 2 because the first is the last. The last in alphabet-numerical form is 2 because the first being Z is two. The way to True Living Life is the phonetic of two which is to because the way to is the way ot and the way owt is the way two, the way tuo is the way tu and to. (Sun Ra, “Wisdom” 122)

Alton Abraham, Sun Ra's manager and business partner, describes the motivation behind the Thmei Research group as an educating one, ensuring that African Americans were also a part of future history: “Southern blacks were still living in the past, because the future was hard in them: blacks would have to become disciplined and prepare for the Space Age to come, for the U.S. had a role to play in Space. Sonny wanted to do things not the right way, but *another* way, a *better* way.” (Abraham, qtd. in Szwed 76.)

Outer space and technology were present also in the politics of Sun Ra's contemporaries—for example the Nation of Islam, whose teachings included, among others, a giant Mother Ship waiting in the sky ready to wield destruction to the world (Szwed 132). Sun Ra and the Black Muslims both spent time in the Washington Park in Chicago, where they discussed, argued, and at the same time shared influences during the 1950s. According to Arkestra saxophonist John Gilmore, the Black Muslims “embraced a lot of [Sun Ra's] philosophy and started outing it in their newspapers as their own thing” (qtd. in Corbett “One of Everything,” 5).

The Black Panthers, who even housed Sun Ra and his Arkestra for a brief time in the early 1970s, were also avid users of imagery of technology and space (Kreiss 74). However, whereas for Sun Ra outer space was almost entirely positive and something worth striving for as a utopian concept, Black Panthers saw space exploration as continuation of colonialism driven by white capitalism (Kreiss 73). After a while, the Sun Ra Arkestra members were evicted from the Panthers-owned house, which Kreiss interprets as “the symbolic moment when these two incompatible approaches to consciousness and technologies clashed” (74).

Sun Ra's and his contemporaries' use of outer space as inspiration was not completely new in the African American cultural tradition either. Lock argues that Sun Ra's art and teachings were in many ways tied to “the broader African American intellectual context”: he points out how space, in the form of the “celestial road,” featured in the sermons in Southern Baptist churches during the early decades of the 20th century (Lock 26-31). For example, Szwed (134) describes how Reverend A. W. Nix, Baptist preacher from Birmingham, leads his congregation across the solar system in a sermon in 1927: they would “view the flying stars and flashing meteors and then pass on by Mars and Mercury, and Jupiter and Venus . . .” (qtd. in Szwed 134). Therefore, in addition to science fiction books and comics, Sun Ra as a teenager may well have drawn inspiration for his space travel metaphors also from church, where, according to Szwed, his “strict and pious” grandmother used to take him (9).

An Afrofuturist

The term Afrofuturism was coined and defined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1992 as “[s]peculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African American

signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (180). As is often the case with aesthetic movements, they are named and their origins charted only afterwards. This is also the case with Sun Ra’s status as an Afrofuturist pioneer. As Ytasha Womack points out, “[t]he roots of the aesthetic began decades before, but with the emergence of Afrofuturism as a philosophical study, suddenly artists like avant-garde jazz legend Sun Ra . . . were rediscovered and reframed by Afrofuturists as social change agents” (17).

The often very unscientific science of Sun Ra can be seen as an effective Afrofuturist strategy, especially if Afrofuturism is defined as Rollefson does: “Through playful engagement with the primitivist tropes of voodoo or black magic and their ironic juxtaposition to science fiction as a sort of white magic, Afrofuturism strikes blows to both the black nativist stance (read: essentialism) and the white poststructuralist argument (read: anti-essentialist)” (91). Furthermore, in Sun Ra’s case, Womack’s description of the Afrofuturist strategy is also most fitting: “At its heart, Afrofuturism stretches the imagination far beyond the conventions of our time and the horizons of expectation, and kicks the box of normalcy and preconceived ideas of blackness out of the solar system. . . . Afrofuturists write their own stories.” (16.) Sun Ra did indeed write his own story, and the term “normal” seems not to have been meaningful to him in any way.

Space Is the Place

All of these aspects of Sun Ra’s life—his relationship to science, myth, and science fiction—are concisely illustrated in the science fiction movie *Space Is the Place* (1974). The film, directed by John Coney, is for me one of the most interesting Afrofuturist things Sun Ra left behind. It is clearly science fiction, but contains many other elements as well. David Kerekes describes it as “dallying with a wealth of other cinematic forms, notably documentary, art house, blaxploitation and the concert film” (183). It combines a science-fictional plot with Sun Ra’s philosophical teachings and his music, both as sound track and as part of the plot as the fuel for his space ship.

In the beginning of *Space Is the Place*, we see Sun Ra in his Egyptian garments on an alien planet, musing that he could set up a colony for black people there. The means of transport could be “isotopic teleportation, transmolecularization, or better still, teleport the whole planet [there] through music.” And he sets on his way in his music-powered space ship, landing in Oakland, California, in the early 1970s. His mission is to save the black people of Earth; however, faced with obstacles ranging from a black nemesis “The Overseer” and NASA scientists he finally manages to save only a few. After they have taken off, the Earth explodes behind them.

Perhaps the most interesting scene in the film is one in which Sun Ra visits a community hall and talks to the black teenagers there. After materializing in the middle of the hall shoes first, he greets the “black youth of planet Earth,” who understandably are somewhat skeptic at first as to whether he is “for real.” Sun Ra answers:

I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn’t be seeking equal rights. You’re not real. If you were, you’d have some status among the nations of the world. So we’re both myths. I do not come to you as a reality; I come to you as the myth, because that’s what black people are. Myths. I came from a dream that the black man dreamed a long time ago. I’m actually a presence sent to you by your ancestors.

Then he tells his audience, who seem to be more receptive now, that white people “take frequent trips to the Moon,” whereas, obviously, none of the youngsters have been invited. Sun Ra asks them: “How you think you going to exist—the year 2000 is right around the corner.” In addition to beautifully illustrating Sun Ra’s philosophy and his use of the concept of myth, this scene also

expresses Sun Ra's worry that African Americans would be left behind as technology develops in the world around them.

There are also many events from Sun Ra's life inserted in the film, including the fallout with the Black Panthers (Kreiss 74-75). Lock points out how *Space Is the Place* is "a response perhaps to the heated debates on nationalism and separatism that engaged African Americans in the 1960s and that were given a wide public airing by the rise of the Black Muslim and Black Power movements" (Lock 69). Also, the time the Arkestra spent with the Black Panthers is reflected in the movie in a more mundane sense: when living in a house owned by the Black Panther Party, they were, according to Szwed, "under surveillance by both the FBI and the Oakland police" (286). In the film, the FBI and NASA are doing their best to prevent Sun Ra from playing in a concert and taking the black people with him. The reasons behind this operation are the traditional sci-fi motivation, i.e. craving for alien technology, but also the conservation of racist social structures. This interpretation is encouraged in the movie when, slightly after the landing of Sun Ra's space ship, we hear news on the radio reporting: "Today a party of Negroes claimed to know the secret of space travel, threatening to undermine both the economy and social structure of the strongest nation of Earth and destroy our way of life. They are on the FBI's most wanted list." (Zuberi 87.)

Separatism or preaching an approaching apocalypse were not usually typical of Sun Ra's work, yet both themes are clearly present in *Space is the Place*. Lock sees it as an indication of "the starkness of the choice that he saw facing black people between a 'real' world in which they were trapped in a history of slavery and racist dehumanization, or a 'myth' world in which black creativity was celebrated from the splendors of ancient Egypt to the spaceways of a future heaven" (Lock 73). *Space Is the Place* makes the comparison between the two options very clear. On the one hand, there is the utopian alien planet; on the other there is Earth, where African Americans seem not to have a future. Outer space has never been more inviting.

The Living Myth

Just as *Space Is the Place* contains documentary-styled parts presenting Sun Ra's philosophical reflection about myths, in the same way almost everything he did, played, or said had a mythic dimension. He enjoyed giving mystic and somewhat outrageous answers to interviewers; for example once he remarked that "I'm not here you see—I'm just my image and shadow. I wouldn't be caught dead on a planet like this. So my real self is somewhere else, and I'm talking with this self. The same way you look at a TV set." (qtd. in Lock 73.) In today's virtual reality terms, Sun Ra could be called "the very incarnation of an avatar" (Norment 25). However, as Szwed notes, the shock value was not an end in itself for Ra: there was always a reason for his "tricksterism" and elusiveness. Among other things, it masked or dissolved binaries (Szwed 346). Lock calls Sun Ra's mythology, which was in many ways based on African American history and tradition, "one of the most brilliant and comprehensive acts of self-representation in black culture" (Lock 74). One good example of this combination of African American cultural tradition and history, science fiction, and personal myth-making is Sun Ra's telling of the alien abduction experience (regardless of whether he actually had an experience or not). Szwed described the narrative as creation of personal mythology, while Lock points out the many similarities of Sun Ra's narration of his experience with former slaves' conversion testimonies, but expressed in science-fictional terms, where angels were replaced by aliens and heaven with Saturn (Lock 55).

Even though Sun Ra was completely unique, he was also deeply immersed in the African American traditions as well as the American society and the scientific advances happening around him. He took a little of everything, conducted his own research and original thinking, and formulated it into what Kreiss calls a "black knowledge society":

a metaphorical utopia of consciousness facilitated by science and technology and grounded in the cultural values of ancient Egypt and a reimagining of outer space. Sun Ra's engagement with artifacts and metaphors of energy, outer space, and advanced technologies represents a black cultural uptake and reconception of cold war science in terms of long-established African-American social narratives of liberation and empowerment. (60-61)

Sun Ra's Astro Black Mythology shares something in common with African American science fiction writer Charles Saunders's point that African Americans should write and read science fiction, because, "[w]e have to bring some to get some in outer space and otherspace, as we have done here on Earth. Just as our ancestors sang their songs in a strange land when they were kidnapped and sold from Africa, we must, now and in the future, continue to sing our songs under strange stars." (404.) Sun Ra was truly the first Afrofuturist. He used science and science-fictional elements to create a mythology of his own and to keep aiming for a better future. In an interview with John Sinclair in 1966, Sun Ra explained his conception of myth and the future:

since this planet for thousands of years has been up under that law of death and destruction, it's moving into something else which I choose to call MYTH, a MYTH-SCIENCE, because it's something that people don't know anything about. That's why I'm using the name MYTH-SCIENCE ARKESTRA, because I'm interested in happiness for people, which is just a myth, because they're not happy. I would say that the synonym for myth is happiness. Because that's why they go to the show, to the movies, they be sitting up there under these myths trying to get themselves some happiness. (qtd. in Sinclair 28)

Does this not beautifully sum up what science fiction is about, as well? Happiness. Either in the form of entertainment, as movies or as reading of an enjoyable book, but also as changing our consciousness, alerting us to future dangers and possibilities, thus shaping the world of tomorrow.

Sun Ra loved equations and he wanted to "associate words so they produce a certain fact" (qtd. in Szwed 319). Therefore, I will end this essay with an equation of my own, pointing out the importance of Sun Ra to all and everyone interested in speculative fiction: if myth equals happiness and happiness is one of the aims of science fiction, the man who can easily be said to have been a living myth was the most science-fictional man in our solar system.

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