

# Space oddities: aliens, futurism and meaning in popular music

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## Abstract

*Despite the rampant popularity of space, alien and futuristic imagery in popular culture, little scholarship has recognised the impact of such themes on popular music. This article explores the complex relationship between the numerous uses of space, alien and techno futuristic themes in popular music and the construction of various marginalised identities. Arranged roughly chronologically from early 1950s rock and roll to late 1990s techno, I discuss how many artists, such as Bill Haley, David Bowie and George Clinton, have used such imagery to promote various nonconformist ideologies and identities ranging from African-American empowerment to Gay and Lesbian agendas. This article also relates developments in scientific space research and popular science fiction culture to corresponding uses of space and alien imagery in various forms of popular music. In general, popular music's use of futuristic space and alien themes denotes a related neo-Gnostic withdrawal and alienation from traditionally dominant cultural structures in an attempt to unite us with a common 'other' that transcends divisions of race, gender, sexual preference, religion or nationality.*

## Introduction

As manifest in the popularity of films and television series such as *Independence Day*, *E.T.*, *Men in Black*, *X Files* and the numerous incarnations of *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*, images of space and aliens pervade contemporary pop culture. Ongoing accounts of U.F.O.s, crop circles, bacterial life on Mars, and images from the Hubble telescope fuel public fascination with both scientific space exploration and the more fantastical possibilities of alien encounters. Despite the extent of such media attention, the extraordinary impact of space, alien and futuristic themes on popular music remains largely unrecognised.

Notions of alien anxiety have, historically, permeated Western culture. As a society we often seek to absolve ourselves of responsibility for our own social problems in a way that promotes intolerance of immigrants, racial and religious divides, and virus fears. Throughout history, various gods, goddesses, demons, angels, fairies, vampires, monsters and a host of other chimera have hard-wired the 'alien' into the collective Western consciousness. Broad similarities exist between sightings of such fantastic figures and more modern scientific visions and stories of futuristic hi-tech aliens. The fascination with such images involves, of course, a fundamental fascination with the unknown, the unidentified. Reflecting an ultimate mystery and associated feelings of awe and quasi-spirituality, space, aliens and the future deflect the often darkly rational, scientific, and sometimes militaristic notions of progress that have characterised much of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century life.

Music is heavily involved in both the creation and literal colonisation of

space – music creates an embodied but imaginary space that mediates our internal space (feelings, desires, dreams) with external space (the physical, the experienced). As cultural musicologist Jody Berland has recognised, listening to local, regional or national radio broadcasts brings listeners together in time outside of space that both narrates an imagined community and defines a cultural space but also takes us outside of where we are and our everyday activities – driving, working, etc. (Berland 1998). Thus music, in general, connects listeners to fantasy, pleasure and an ever-elusive future. Like a time-travelling, omnipresent alien presence – music takes us outside of our bodies and place while simultaneously reminding us of our location and what it means to live there.

The discussion of space, alien and techno futuristic themes in popular music which follows is intended to be neither exhaustive nor to provide a teleological narrative of stylistic inheritances and influences but, rather, an illustration of the scope of the phenomenon. Extraterrestrial imagery is certainly prevalent in media other than music and is found in a plethora of science-fiction novels, comic books, movies, television, websites and video games. Such themes also form a significant category of subject matter in music videos. Here, I include artists (for example Michael Jackson's video/film *Black and White*) who use alien and space travel themes in videos yet whose marketing and image are not typically defined by space alien association or imagery. Michael Jackson's alien moonwalk, for example, was merely one manifestation of his popularity. Alien and futuristic iconography also pervades countless album and CD packaging and promotional merchandise.<sup>1</sup>

My discussion of musical appropriations and evocations of space and aliens encompasses numerous styles and agendas. The sheer number and variety of these styles and agendas testifies to the general sense of alienation, and accompany a quest for higher or alternate states of being, that has characterised late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century life. To be sure, rock and popular music, whether Elvis, the Beatles or Madonna, has often offered society a superficial distraction from the hard, sometimes grimly militaristic, science associated with space. Space and alien imagery, however, forms a consistent and recurring trope in rock music that is particularly important in resisting reductive worldviews, commonly associated with scientific essentialism, and in providing an empowering voice to many marginalised identities.

### Youth culture and 'alienation'

The impact of literal 'alienation' in youth culture is well documented. The sociological work of Marx, Durkheim and Merton, which centre on the estrangement and/or opposition to the socio-structural position to particular groups in society, is central to the Birmingham School's well-known theories regarding the resistant nature of youth subcultures.<sup>2</sup> The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' influential work, *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*, in particular, has provided considerable insight into the role of alterity and the 'deviant' labelling of subcultural groups in opposition to mainstream society (Hall and Jefferson 1979). Simon Frith and David Dotter have expanded this line of inquiry into the realm of rock music, positing that adolescents who identified themselves with particular styles of music were often the targets of alienating labelling processes (Frith 1981; Dotter 1994).

Many youth subcultures, counter-cultures and associated musical trends are

often theorised as 'authentic' expressions – existing somehow outside of co-opted dominant cultural experience. Typically, futuristic or alien personification and representation by popular musicians attempt to circumvent this line of thinking. By drawing on the fantastical, at least improbable, possibility of alien existence, such artists actively subvert and negate notions of authenticity. These artists often consciously place their own identities in question through the creation of new mythologies, typically achieved by masking themselves in costume, alter egos, aliases and faceless technologies. By employing metaphors of space, alien beings or futurism, metaphors that are by definition unknowable, such artists and works constantly 'differ' the notion of 'authentic' identity. In this manner, the use of an alien aesthetic functions analogously to a camp aesthetic that subverts claim to artistic privilege or autonomy.

As explored in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, many, if not most, socio-cultural readings of rock/popular music have been situated upon various notions of youth music as resistance to mainstream/dominant values. As such, the use of alien tropes in popular music typically resists the bourgeois concept of normality which, in Adorno's words, leads to 'the very disintegration of the subject' (Adorno 1987, p. 171). Psychoanalytic theorists have also sought to explain 'Otherness' in terms of the 'non assimilable alien . . . monster' (Kristeva 1982, p. 11). Similarly, Derridian deconstructive readings of rock music typically seek to explain popular music in terms of its Otherness or 'difference' or, by any other name, its ability to reflect, repress, empower or encode the alien. As illustrated below, such literal representations of resistance and metaphoric 'difference' lie at the heart of many instances of space and/or alienation appropriation. Such images, however, also allow room for alternate, more pluralistic definitions – the space alien as a transcendent form of Other capable of challenging simplistic binaries of male/female, black/white or rich/poor. Particularly evident in rave culture, for example, alien labelling allows for a symbolic incorporation of the idealised raceless, classless and genderless plurality of the dance floor. As Susan McClary has remarked:

The musical power of the disenfranchised – whether youth, the underclass, ethnic minorities, women or gay people – more often resides in their ability to articulate different ways of construing the body, ways that bring along in their wake the potential for different experiential worlds. (McClary 1994, p.34)

The adoption and embodiment of alien and/or futuristic personas represents one of the most powerful of such articulations, one that is common to all the disenfranchised groups that McClary lists. As such this article is concerned not just with the politics of music and the construction of identity but also with the politics of potential, of who we might become.

### Early visitors

The space age is generally acknowledged to have begun on 4 October 1957 with the successful launch of the Soviet satellite 'Sputnik 1'. This was quickly followed by the earth orbit of 'Sputnik II' (nicknamed 'Muttnick' for its canine cargo Laika), the launch of the probe Lunik I to the moon and the return of the first close-up lunar photographs by Lunik III in 1959. Until actual humans went into space, however, the general public were more concerned with what rockets could deliver to targets on the ground than to destinations in space. Indeed, following the United

States' first Hydrogen Bomb tests at Eniwetok Atoll (1952) and Bikini Atoll (1954) the threat of nuclear war and its radioactive after-effects gave a unique perspective on the nature of the modern world and of the human place upon that world.

Hand in hand with the advent of scientific space exploration was a rise in popular culture concerned with space and the future. The science fiction genre, for example, underwent a tremendous expansion in the 1950s. The decade saw the launch of numerous science fiction magazines and a plethora of important science fiction novels by such well-known authors as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Robert Heinlein and Frank Herbert. Hollywood also witnessed an explosion of films centred on space and alien subject matter. Classic sci-fi films such as 'The Day the Earth Stood Still' (1951), 'It Came from Outer Space' (1953), 'War of the Worlds' (1953) and 'Godzilla, King of the Monsters' (1954) rolled onto the screen throughout the 1950s. Television, in series such as 'The Twilight Zone' (1960), also jumped on board the science-fiction bandwagon.

Rock and roll developed roughly contemporaneously with the era of space exploration and the concomitant boom in science fiction. In its earliest manifestations, space was a popular subject. A leading candidate for the first ever rock 'n' roll record, Jackie Brenston's hot rod ode 'Rocket 88' (1951), immediately linked space travel with 1950s teenage rebellion. The formation of Bill Haley and His Comets (1953) followed in this tradition. The band name Comets was, of course, a pun on the famous Halley's comet; however, it was also consciously chosen to reflect the image of rock 'n' roll rebels, whose wild stage antics could have come from outer space.<sup>3</sup> A similar early image of space and early rock 'n' roll rebellion is evident in the DJ antics of Allan Freed which were broadcast to the world in the mid 1950s via his radio show, *Moon Dog Rock 'n' Roll House Party*. Indeed, the association of space and alien themes with rock 'n' roll rebellion is found throughout rock's history and has had an impact on nearly all its stylistic manifestations. To list a few examples, such themes are employed in the glam rock of David Bowie, George Clinton's funk stylings, the astro-jazz of Sun Ra, the reggae-dub mixes of Lee Perry, the New Wave experimentalism of Nina Hagen and Gary Numan, the progressive album-oriented rock of Pink Floyd, the alternative rock of Smashing Pumpkins and in the urban genres of hip hop and techno dance music.<sup>4</sup> As evident in the music of Sun Ra, Clinton and Perry space and alien themes are integral to a musical stream of Afro-futurism in which artists project empowering images of black power through futuristic imagery and control of technology. The most recent, and most prevalent, manifestation of alien imagery and identification occurred in the plethora of artists, DJs and participants engaged in various forms of electronica and techno dance music.

The 1960s reinforced the initial flourishing of interest in alien and science fiction themes in popular culture that occurred in the 1950s. This was the decade when human beings first went into space, with the tentative suborbital flights in the X-15 and Mercury Redstone, a single orbit flight by Yuri Gagarin in Vostok-1, and the first women in space, Valentina Tereshkova in 1963. Outside the arena of human space flights, however, the first weather satellite was launched in 1960 and the first live transatlantic television broadcast by satellite was in 1962 (Telstar).<sup>5</sup> The 1960s were also the heyday of paperback science fiction as, for the first time, science fiction books regularly hit the best-seller lists. It was also the decade of the 'Star Trek' (1966) television series and of influential movies adapted from science fiction novels such as *The Day of the Triffids* (1963), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *Planet of the Apes*

(1968), *The Andromeda Strain* (1970) and the critically acclaimed *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

Though existing in 1950s rock 'n' roll, Space and Alien themes particularly blossomed in popular music following the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing. This period was also marked by the socio-political tumult evident in protests against the Vietnam War and against institutional racial and gender discrimination. Consequently, many influential artists used space and space alien themes to represent political and sexual liberation and also the freedom associated with the use of mind-expanding drugs. Perhaps the best-known exponent of this trend was David Bowie's alter-ego Ziggy Stardust who, in Bowie's own words, was a 'Martian messiah who twanged a guitar'. Bowie's 1972 album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* narrates the story of a bi-sexual alien rock superstar who ends up a victim of his own success and commits rock 'n' roll suicide. Bowie's fascination with outer space was evident several years earlier with his song 'Space Oddity' (1969) which was directly inspired by the plight of the stricken Apollo 8 astronauts and by Stanley Kubrick's 1968 epic, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In 'Space Oddity', Bowie uses a series of atonal and rhythmically irregular tape effects and electronic squelches in combination with an ethereal string section to represent the defamiliarising experience of space. The combination of avant-garde electronic sounds and instruments juxtaposed with familiar rock timbres (most notably a strummed acoustic guitar and military drum beat that sonically evoke the stability of home and tradition) provides a musical analogue for the lyrical content of the song that warns of the dangers of technological nihilism and alienation in an increasingly dehumanised world. It was a theme that Bowie revisited in several later projects including the 1976 movie *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, 1980's 'Ashes to Ashes', and his 1990 album *Loving the Alien*. Bowie's conscious construction of an alien rock star was certainly meant to shed light on the artificiality of rock in general. Equally importantly, however, Bowie's alien persona was emblematic of his bi-sexual alienation from the heterosexual male-dominated world of rock music. Bowie's successful theatrical use of alien imagery and empowering bi-sexual/asexual symbolism was adopted by numerous artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

### Afro-futurism

While less well known than Bowie, one of the most vibrant and pervasive displays of extraterrestrial themes in contemporary popular music occurs within the realm of what cultural critic Mark Dery has termed 'Afro-futurism' (Dery 1993, p. 736). The term refers to African-American signification that appropriates images of advanced technology and alien and/or prosthetically enhanced (cyborg) futures. Afro-futurism is found in a variety of artistic genres including the science fiction writings of authors such as Steve Barnes, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany and Charles Saunders, films such as John Sayles' *The Brother from Another Planet* and in the android creations of New York graffiti artist/theoretician Rammellzee.

Such Afro-futuristic art is typically concerned with black nationalism and empowerment and the creation of mythologies based on the confrontation between historical prophetic imagination, such as Egyptian theories of the afterlife, and modern alienated black existence. As Mark Dery observes, 'African-Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendents of alien abductees' (Dery 1993, p. 736). Similarly, sociologist Paul Gilroy discusses Black diaspora in terms of a history of dis-



persed peoples, but also of the space that results from this dispersal – ‘a utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics’ (Gilroy 1993, p. 198). Therefore, Black diasporic consciousness seeks to return to an inaccessible homeland – in some sense, an imaginary utopian homeland that outer space metaphorically represents.

This sense of African-alienation is also, of course, transferable to other marginalised social groups. Science fiction author Samuel R. Delany writes of the similar marginalisation from technology experienced by women and Hispanics:

... the flashing lights, the dials, and the rest of the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction have historically functioned as social signs – signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying ‘Boy’s Club! Girls keep out. Black and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away’. (Dery, 1993, p. 744)

The direct confrontation of such notions, of course, goes a long way to explain the seemingly disjunctive mix of black dance music and science fiction imagery that pervades much contemporary hip hop.<sup>7</sup> Proto-hip-hop works, such as Afrika Bambaataa’s ‘Planet Rock’, embraced the android synth-pop of Kraftwerk because, in the words of hip-hop critic Tricia Rose, they recognised ‘an understanding of themselves as already having been robots . . . Adopting “the robot” reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labour for capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society’.<sup>8</sup> Hip-hop can thus be interpreted as a social emancipation of the robot slave.

Other musical realms also reflect an Afro-futuristic fusion of space, technofuturism and magical/mystical African heritage. Such elements, for example, can be glimpsed in the experimental cosmological jazz of Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Jet-Set Arkestra, a pioneer of the use of synthesizers and African percussion; similarly, the techno-tribalism of Miles Davis’ ‘On the Corner’, Herbie Hancock’s jazz-cyber funk ‘Future Shock’ or Bernie Worrel’s ‘Blacktronic Science’. In a similar fashion, Jimi Hendrix, in works such as ‘Third stone from the sun’ and ‘Astro man’, employed a psychedelic mix of electric guitar and studio effects to sonically project a futuristic image of black exploration and experimentation.<sup>9</sup>

Among the most prominent exponents of a black futurist style is the celebrated Jamaican dub/reggae producer Lee Scratch Perry. Perry combines elements of traditional mysticism with a modern futuristic vision. He specialises in dub mixes, a technological subset of reggae, that relies on electronic manipulation of pre-recorded tracks – saturating individual instruments with reverb (often achieved through the use of an analogue effects device called a Roland Space Echo), phase and delay, and abruptly dropping voices, percussion and guitars in and out of the mix. The result is a ‘spacey’ sonic effect that is typically compounded by the role of ganja in both dub production and consumption.<sup>10</sup>

The outer-spatial aspects of dub have often been noted. Consider Luke Ehrlich’s description of dub:

The drums and bass conjure a dark, vast space, a musical portrait of outerspace, with sounds suspended like glowing planets or the fragments of instrument careening by, leaving trails like comets and meteors . . . If reggae is Africa in the New World, dub is Africa on the Moon (Ehrlich 1982, pp. 104, 106).<sup>11</sup>

To some extent the studio, with its mixing consoles, microphones, effects processors and multiple-track tape recorders, is literally a music machine – a machine or space ship that Perry piloted to explore sonic alien worlds.

Perry infused his dub productions with a complex mixture of Christian, African and Jamaican folk references. Indeed his studio, which Perry called 'Black Ark', resonated with a number of prophetic crafts, the Ark of the Covenant, Noah's Ark and, perhaps most importantly, Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line – a transportation company formed early in the twentieth century with the intention of shipping New-World blacks back to Liberia. Perry described his studio as being 'like a space craft . . . something there was like a holy vibration and a godly sensation'.<sup>12</sup> Later, Perry's well-known eccentric behaviour came to a head as he began to literally see UFOs only to subsequently burn down Black Ark.

In a different vein of musical Afro-futurism, George Clinton and his band Parliament-Funkadelic also drew heavily upon space and alien themes. During the same period as David Bowie's adoption of his Ziggy Stardust persona, in albums such as *Mothership Connection* (1974), Clinton assumed the alter ego of an alien named Starchild who was sent down from the mothership to bring Funk to earthlings. Starchild was an allegorical representation of freedom and positive energy – an attempt to represent an empowering and socially activist image of African-American society during the early 1970s. In creating his Afro-futuristic myths, Clinton provided an empowering mixture of glib science fiction fantasy, street slang and ancient black history. Often drawing on stereotypical white fantasy (note the reference to sleeping beauty below), such imagery is presented in the form of a fairy tale in the liner note 'Prelude' to the 1976 release, *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*:

Funk upon a time, in the days of the Funkapuss, the concept of specifically designed Afro-nauts capable of funkatizing galaxies, was first laid on Man Child, but was later repossessed and placed among the secrets of the pyramids, until a more positive attitude towards this most sacred phenomenon, Clone Funk, could be acquired. There in these terrestrial projects it would wait along with its co-inhabitants, the Kings and the Pharaohs, like sleeping beauties for the kish that would release them to multiply in the image of the Chosen One, Dr. Funkenstein.<sup>13</sup>

This space prophecy, tongue in cheek though it may have been, would later prove to be quite accurate as Clinton (a.k.a. Dr. Funkenstein) would become one of the most sampled (cloned) and influential artists in hip-hop history. Described by rock critic Tom Vickers as 'a dozen funk-ed-up crazoids . . . decked out as spacemen', the Afro-nauts of Parliament-Funkadelic combined synthesizers, acoustic piano, brass, heavy funk bass and wah wah effects to create their highly layered, otherworldly grooves. Like Bowie, the otherworldly mechanistic sound of various synthesizers and wah wah effects creates an exotic soundscape. It is a sonic fingerprint that simultaneously reflects and empowers the alienation experienced by Clinton's primarily black audiences from mainstream white society, and also comments on the otherworldly exoticism of funk music in general. Clinton's lyrics, such as 'get down in 3D' and 'do the light year groove', additionally manifests an empowering mix of black street slang and a progressive futuristic imagery. Parliament also supplemented their alien image through audacious live shows that combined the theatrics of bands like Kiss and Electric Light Orchestra to create an orgiastic celebration of excess (including a strobe-lit fog-belching flying saucer that lowered Clinton to the stage).

The combination of the communal presentation of Funkadelic (evident in many previous acts from the Temptations to Sly and the Family Stone), the use of synthesizers and other electronic effects associated with the latest in musical

technology, and Clinton's futuristic lyrical references served as powerful markers of the potential for black wealth and power – a futuristic vision in which, in effect, the previously marginalised aliens assume control of the world. One of the god-fathers of rap music, Clinton revived his alien motif in 1996 with his CD entitled *The Awesome Power of a Fully Operational Mothership*.

Sun Ra, Lee Perry and George Clinton all call upon similar tropes and metaphors of space and alienation that link their common diasporic African history to a notion of extraterrestriality. Indeed, as noted by cultural scholar and music critic John Corbett, these three figures have constructed remarkably similar mythologies based on the use of aliases, technology, costuming, the re-appropriation and manipulation of language, and, perhaps most notably, insanity. In regard to this latter issue, Corbett theorises:

The mind, and more specifically the *reasonable* mind, is configured as a terrestrial zone, as earth; sanity is the 'ground' from which one departs in flights of fancy. Hence, the connection is established between 'going way out' (a common phrase in jazz for a solo that transgresses a widely held musical code . . .) and leaving earth. Tradition = earth; innovation = outer space. In the language of black music, madness and extraterrestriality go hand in hand. (Corbett 1994, p.17)

In this manner, metaphorical tropes of eccentricity or madness intensify and magnify the over-arching metaphoric trope of the alien marginalisation of the black community while simultaneously providing an empowering narrative of creative self-determination.

Afro-futurism is also a particularly cogent aspect of more recent rave and techno music. One of the seminal moments in the development of techno was the formation of Cybotron in 1981. Comprising black turntable wizards Juan Aitkens and Rick Davis (a.k.a. 3070), this group launched the Detroit techno scene on their Deep Space label. Influenced by a local DJ called Electrifyin' Mojo, who specialised in playing European synth-pop acts like Gary Numan, Ultravox, Human League and Kraftwerk, their music is a minimalist wash of analogue Roland, Arp and Korg MS-20 synthesizers that, according to Davis, 'extrapolated the necessity of interfacing the spirituality of human beings into the cybernetic matrix: between the brain, the soul and the mechanisms of cyberspace'.<sup>14</sup> While essentially designed as dance music, the darkly mechanistic style of Cybotron also spoke to Detroit's economic collapse in the late 1970s following the city's heyday as the centre of the American automobile industry. The stripped-down aesthetic was also, of course, a function of the limited analogue technology available to such early innovators.

The emphasis on futurism in techno continues to manifest itself in the subgenre known variously as 'Drum 'n' Bass' or 'Jungle'.<sup>15</sup> This style of techno emphasises intense polyrhythmic drum and bass lines, often influenced by Indian ragas and reggae beats. As first popularised in the works of DJ/producers Goldie and LTJ Bukem, the drum 'n' bass style emerged in the mid-1990s with the addition of atmospheric vocals and a soundscape ambience that made it just as relevant for living-room contemplation as for dancing. If there is a central idea to the various manifestations of techno, it is the emphasis on the increasing harmony between man and machine. Many recent critics have decried the detrimental impact of technology on music and the body. Commenting on the rise of 1970s disco music, Donald Clarke, for example, claims



Young urban blacks also adopted the disco as a place to dress up and show off, playing records being a cheaper way to run a club than hiring live music. And machinery began to take over completely. (Clarke 1991, p. 501)

In contemporary club/dance music, however, the use of technology, and its attendant hypnotically repetitive beats allows a type of technological spirituality – a literal transference of spirit from the machine to the body. In this manner, techno dance music defeats what Adorno saw as the alienating effect of mechanisation on the modern consciousness.

The connection between alien or futurist personas and Black Nationalism can be established through the general importance of technology in establishing a shared sense of communal identity. In his influential book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson discusses the close relationship between the advent of technology, notably print technology, and 'print capitalism', which allowed the dissemination of information to mass audiences and helped establish the large-scale concept of the nation. To some extent it is a similar manipulation of technologies in sound recording that allowed many artists, such as Public Enemy, in the words of Greg Dimitriadis, to 'envision their audience as a wide and encompassing nation within a nation, one which transcended any and all local contexts of production' (Dimitriadis 1996, p. 187). The concentrated use by African-American musicians of MIDI, samplers and, more recently, CD burning and digital recording technologies has facilitated a dissemination of ideas and information similar to that achieved by the printing press.

The use, common to many African-American musical genres, of sampling and multi-tracking also allows for a type of aural time travel through the simultaneous representation and experience of past and present. With sampling technologies, black artists can juxtapose decades-old speeches by Martin Luther King or loops from James Brown against contemporary tracks. Thus such technology has allowed these artists to intertextually signify a collective notion of African-American historical memory.

The increasing use of cutting-edge technology, particularly in dance music and hip-hop, directly calls into question the role of human agency in creating music and conjures up images of cyborgian artists and composers where, again, notions of race, ethnicity, gender and class are problematised. For example, the use of technology, alien and futuristic imagery in various forms of African-American music seems, on first appearance, antithetical to the commonly held view of 'authentic' black music as natural, funky or soulful. However, such images can also be interpreted as merely the result of human interaction with their environment. As Tricia Rose observes in terms of hip-hop:

If we take a kind of Frankfurt School/ fascist/ industrial regimentation/ lack of creativity as our model for the machine, then of course funky cyborgs would seem like an utter contradiction; but if we understand the machine as a product of human creativity whose parameters are always suggesting what's beyond them, then we can read hip-hop as the response of urban people of color to the postindustrial landscape.<sup>16</sup>

The fear/fascination with the increasing dependence of humans on machines (computers, television, cell phones, etc.) and the influence of machines on the human body (genetic engineering, micro-chip implants, pacemakers, hearing aids and prosthetics) is commonly personified in the half-human / half-machine cyborg concept (popularised by *Star Trek's* villainous 'Borg' characters). To quote Mark

Dery, 'Cyborgs populate a cultural landscape in which the human body is increasingly the site of what might be called *micropolitical* power struggles between an information-rich, technocratic elite and the information-poor masses' (Dery 1992, p. 507). Cyborg imagery, similar to alien imagery, suggests alternatives to the many dualisms with which we regard our bodies (notably questions concerning gender, sexuality and reproduction). Alternately, though cyborgs undoubtedly offer the potential for transcending limitation of bodily gender roles, the masculine coding of machine culture also suggests that they are also prime sites for reinscribing feminine and homosexual subjugation/marginalisation.

### **Progressive rock: colonising technology**

In a markedly different musical vein from the Afro-futurism of Lee Perry or George Clinton, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) provides yet another use of space imagery from the early 1970s. Pink Floyd's association with drugs is well known and the album's title is typically interpreted as referring to the exploration of alien worlds of madness and drug-altered consciousness, the unknown side of the human experience. Again, the primary means of sonically evoking this alienating experience is through synthesizers and the heavy use of electronic recording techniques. *Dark Side of the Moon* is well known for the comprehensive attention the group played to studio production and sonic experimentation. The album is essentially a series of soundscapes, interspersed with introspective pop songs that owe much to the techniques of avant-garde electronic music composers such as Morton Subotnick and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Despite its apparent lack of commercial influences, this work was immensely popular (spending an unprecedented 741 weeks on the Billboard album charts) and ushered in the era of album-oriented rock, bringing the group superstar status.

Unlike the futuristic fantasies of utopian black empowerment and mysticism advanced by the Afro-futurist artists, the space imagery and associations manifest in the progressive rock of bands like Pink Floyd, Hawkwind (*In Search of Space*, 1971), King Crimson (*Earthbound*, 1972), and Yes (in songs like 'Starship Trooper' from *Yessongs*, 1973), appears to stem from a somewhat different set of motivational principles.<sup>17</sup> The desire to master, to dominate and to, in effect, colonise new and uncharted realms of technology and musical experimentation are forefronted to a far greater degree in this music. The impressive banks of keyboards, the complex myriad of knobs and dials associated with the analogue synthesizers of 1970s progressive rock (not to mention the considerable programming skill needed to effectively control such machines), and the increasingly advanced and variegated number of electronic guitar effects, were roughly analogous to the advanced technology being developed and exploited in the real space programme. Thus the fetishisation of technique, virtuosity and musical complexity, which marked much of this music, is mirrored in the complexity of its instrumentation and technology. Indeed, the increasing US space race militarism of the 1970s, associated with the Vietnam war and Soviet arms race, was reflected in various aspects of the rock music industry as manifest in advances in studio recording technologies, live sound reproduction systems, and increasingly complex logistics involved in staging and touring. To some extent, the technology and performance virtuosity employed by many progressive rock bands reflected the 'sound' of a military industrial complex

while simultaneously offering a utopian (futuristic space) vision of its end product value.

In contrast, the use of technology by African-American musicians can be read in much different terms. Indeed Samuel Delany propounds the notion that hip-hop constitutes 'a specific *miss-use* [sic] and conscientious *desecration* of the artifacts of technology'.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, as English pop music specialist Nabeel Zuberi observes: 'The machinations of hip-hop work belong to a continuum of black "misuses" of technology from the broken bottleneck applied to the blues guitar, and the oil drum bashed and buffed to create Trinidad steel sound, to the Roland 808 drum machine . . . [an instrument] dumped by many musicians, and . . . picked up second-hand by black producers in Chicago who turned its 'unmusical' sounds into the basis of house music' (Zuberi 2001, p. 149). The art of turntable 'scratching' also plays into the notion of an intentional miss-use of technology. The exploration of original, unheard sounds that arise from this miss-use of technology is intimately connected to what Kodwo Eshun calls 'AfroDiasporic futurism', a digital diaspora of 'computer rhythms, machine mythology and concepttechnics which routes and reroutes and criss-crosses the Black Atlantic' (Eshun 1998, p. 6). Such thinking also directly ties into the general sense of black alienation as described earlier in this essay.

The use of space and space alien themes by Bowie, Clinton and Pink Floyd was used to different ends, representing variously sexual or racial alienation, mind-altering drug experimentation and/or the sheer colonisation of technology and sound. A common denominator among these artists, however, is the use of advanced studio recording technology to represent such otherworldly themes. *Dark Side of the Moon*, for example, was recorded on state-of-the-art sixteen-track equipment at Abbey Road studios and was among the first albums to feature the Dolby noise reduction system. The album was also re-mixed for quadraphonic stereo, the now infamous sound system that was then just being introduced. Additionally, Pink Floyd experimented with new sequencing abilities of a VCS3 analogue synthesizer and, in keeping with its space theme, EMI records launched the album at the Planetarium, the traditional venue at which fans often gather to hear the work.

The association of synthesizers and hi-tech electronic sounds with outer space can be traced to the use of the exotic-sounding theremin in early science-fiction thrillers such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and, even more well known, in the theme to the original television series *Star Trek*. The unearthly purity and breathless singing tone of this instrument seemed uniquely to embody the possibility of an advanced alien voice. Similarly, in the early 1970s, acts such as Bowie and Pink Floyd increasingly relied on the technology of studios, synthesizers and, given the increasing size of stadium performance venues, huge P.A. systems. Their concern with alienation of any variety was reflected in this use of technology that literally alienated or distanced the artists from their audience who found it increasingly difficult to hear the connection between the performers and what they were playing. Indeed, audiences from this era often even described the electronically created psychedelic effects of such music as 'far out', 'out of this world', or 'spacey'.

### **New wave and 80s alienation**

In the post-*Star Wars* era of the early 1980s, many New Wave artists followed the theatrical approach of David Bowie and employed space alien stage personas to

symbolise their transgression of both sexual and musical boundaries. Rebutting the conformity of punk's aggressive social realism, artists such as Nina Hagen, Klaus Nomi and Gary Numan experimented with fusing futuristic imagery and technology through contemporary art music techniques and avant-garde vocalisation.

Nina Hagen is a German rock superstar who has recorded a series of international hits such as 'Smack Jack' and 'New York, New York' in addition to a plethora of other hit singles known primarily in Europe. Alien themes have played a large role in both Hagen's music and in her life. She has publicly described having many alien encounters and even describes her own daughter, appropriately named Cosma, as the outcome of a supposed alien liaison.<sup>19</sup> Characterised by one critic as 'Barbarella-meets-Swamp Thing', her vocal style is an equally alien combination of guttural snarls, ear-piercing screams, torch singing and operatic coloratura.<sup>20</sup> Her unique vocal technique is supplemented by her outrageous, heavily made-up, alien appearance and eccentric performances that, at times, included cross-dressing and masturbation.

Originating from similar German avant-garde roots as Hagen, Klaus Nomi represents perhaps the most outrageous use of alien identity in the annals of rock music. Nomi was a counter tenor who sang both opera and rock 'n' roll. An unabashed opera queen, he created the persona of a glamorous space alien sent to sing pop songs to earthlings. Nomi constructed his image with the help of a space suit, heavy make-up, trademark three-pointed hairdo, and an otherworldly operatic falsetto. Nomi's first self-titled album (1981) included the futuristic synth-pop hit 'Total Eclipse' juxtaposed with selections from Purcell's *King Arthur* and Saint-Saen's *Samson and Delilah*.<sup>21</sup>

Like Nomi and Hagen, Gary Numan is another artist from the early 1980s who adopted an alien stage persona, a persona that he reinforced, not with an alien soprano or alienating vocal experimentation, but with an expressionless drone-like vocal delivery that mimicked that of a robot. From the start of his career, science fiction was an influential element in Numan's work. Indeed, he initially took the stage name 'Valerian' from the 'Valerian, Space Agent' French comic book series. Numan's lyrics are also often inspired by the science-fiction works of Philip Dick, including songs such as 'Listen to the Sirens' and 'Praying to the Aliens'. Underlying Numan's fascination with alien futurism was the idea that human beings were fundamentally weak in comparison to the infallibility of machines and advanced alien intelligence. This ideology infused his music as he imitated an alien machine with his monotone vocals. Numan also avoids using acoustic instruments in his music, preferring to concentrate on futuristic synthesizer arrangements with short mechanistic phrases and static repetitive rhythms. These features are particularly evident in his 1981 hits 'Cars' and 'Down in the Park'.

Nomi, Hagen and Numan all use alien identification in order to stress their alienation from and transgression of traditional notions of both sexual and musical practices. Nomi's space-alien persona, alien-sounding counter tenor, and combination of alien genres of opera and rock were symbolic of his sexual alienation from the conventions of traditional 'straight' society. Likewise Hagen, an icon of the gay and lesbian community, used a transgressive alien appearance and vocal technique with which to shock her audiences in the manner of a spiritual revolutionary. Gary Numan also uses a monotone delivery and asexual alien appearance to deliver his mechanistic musical vision. The use of alien themes by these artists taps into a common strategy of much contemporary science fiction, such as Stanley Kubrick's

2001 or James Gunn's *The Listeners*, which sees a quasi-religious or mystical significance attached to matters of alien communication and social intercourse. Indeed, much of rock's fascination with science fiction themes, especially those involving extra-terrestrial intelligence, is dependent upon a sense of God's withdrawal from the universe and upon a radical sense of alienation from the traditional belief structures that have governed life on earth. This theme, for example, is particularly highlighted in Ziggy Stardust's 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide' that represents the crucifixion of an alien rock star messiah. The camp or kitsch alien imagery and exotic vocal style that are common features of these alien messiahs has likely resulted in their inability to achieve mainstream commercial success, but has also resulted in each artist having a small but extremely devoted group of followers.

### Alternative aliens

As rock became a global phenomenon of the information cyberspace-age, space and alien themes were more prevalent than ever in the 1990s and into the new millennium – particularly in the realms of alternative rock and electronica/techno dance music. A brief list of alternative bands adopting alien stage personas and a thematic influence includes Shonen Knife, Spacehog, Gwar, Star Kicker and I Mother Earth, among many others. In a form of musical end-of-the millennium angst, the more recent fascination with alien themes is often informed by a postmodern erosion of historical narratives of progress. This is reflected in the temporal, melodic and timbral dislocations that typify late-1990s alternative musical style and in a turn to nostalgic reifications of previous rock eras. Such dislocations can be regarded as a post-rock alienation from traditional rock 'n' roll clichés and the socio-cultural values associated with them. Many recent alternative artists and their audiences thus manifest an alienation from traditional rock music styles and values. The band Gwar, for example, dress in gothic alien costumes, as did Kiss before them, and conduct theatrical mock executions of their fans in order to ridicule the conventions of heavy metal shows. Other so-called 'retro' bands, such as Spacehog and Smashing Pumpkins, actively cultivate a nostalgia for the 1970s space-age glam rock, typical of Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* period, and religiously adopt the clothing, instrumentation and studio technology of this era. In their hit song 'Rocket', the Smashing Pumpkins, for example, evoke many such 'retro' production techniques, including heavily flanged, distorted and backward guitar tracks, acoustic drums, and analogue vocal reverb. Reinforcing the 'retro' sound of the song, the accompanying video directly imitates Georges Méliès' 1902 silent movie, 'A Trip to the Moon' (including the spear-wielding tribal representation of moon people) and evokes a similarly naïve, nostalgic representation of space travel.

Unlike the Smashing Pumpkins' angst-ridden look at space travel, Shonen Knife, an all-girl power-pop trio from Japan, provides a playfully punk inflected look at the space age 1960s and 1970s in the song 'Riding on the Rocket'. With their neophyte musical abilities, catchy melodies, broken English and naïve lyrics, such as 'space foods are marshmallows, asparagus, and ice cream', Shonen Knife effectively parody the naïve optimism of earlier generations towards space exploration and the progressive future it symbolised. Though Smashing Pumpkins and Shonen Knife take extremely different stylistic approaches, both songs, nonetheless, promote the idea of transcendence, of leaving earth by spaceship (or rockets) for worlds with more potential. Notably the synthesizer washes, digital drum and reverb



effects, and computer-aided recording techniques used to evoke a futuristic alien space in previous works of the 1980s are largely absent in the work of such bands. As with the recent fascination with lounge music (a.k.a. space age bachelor pad music), songs such as those by Shonen Knife and Smashing Pumpkins use nostalgic and somewhat naïve sounds and images of rockets and space exploration (evoking memories of early space-based television shows and cartoons such as *Buck Rogers*, *Lost in Space*, *The Jetsons* or *Space Ghost*) to comment on the lost or misplaced innocence of earlier generations.

Another 1990s manifestation of the fascination with pop music and futurism is found in the genre known as cyberpunk. Launched in the 1980s by sci-fi author William Gibson (*Neuromancer*, 1985), this genre looked at the darker side of human-machine interaction and into the darker side of human nature generally. According to science fiction critics Richard Kadrey and Larry McCaffery, cyberpunk 'appropriated punk's confrontational style, its anarchist energies, its crystal-meth pacings, and its central motif of the alienated victim defiantly using technology to blow everyone's fuses' (Kadrey and McCaffery 1991, p. 23). Mark Dery sees Front Line Assembly's 1992 album *Tactical Neural Implant* as a 'textbook example of cyberpunk rock. . . typified by "Mindphaser", a techno-tribal stomp about mind control and mechanical mayhem with references to "implanted brain cells" and "digital murder" along with a sampled voice from *RoboCop 2* talking about "cyborg technologies" and "destructive capability"' (Dery 1996, p. 82). The term cyberpunk has also been applied to a variety of acts including Sonic Youth, Trent Reznor's Nine Inch Nails, Front 242, Skinny Puppy, Billy Idol (*Cyberpunk*, 1993) and even to the earlier industrial angst of Throbbing Gristle (*Second Annual Report*, 1977) and Cabaret Voltaire. In the words of Mark Dery, 'cyberpunk's "virus-like" infestation of mass culture' has created a 'semiotic slippage' (Dery 1996, p. 107). Such 'slippage' has resulted from the fact that computer nerds and, previously unhip, synth players have now co-opted the rebelliousness and raw authenticity previously only associated with the electric guitar.

While the use of space and alien themes was common in 1990s alternative rock, nowhere, perhaps, has their use been more prevalent than in the burgeoning techno-electronic dance music scene. Rave culture, with its idealistic emphasis on creating a temporary classless, raceless and genderless society on the dance floor, found alien images to be a powerful symbol of that ideal. Likewise, the sensory overload of the repetitive beats, loud volume levels, ecstatic dancing, flashing lights and, of course, the influence of various drugs combine to produce a hyperstimulated experience that helped facilitate a communal integration with the alien Other. Fuelled by the feel-good warmth of Ecstasy, a synthetic drug first therapeutically prescribed by psychiatrists to enhance intimacy and communication, rave participants often talk of harmony, unity, acceptance and the community of the dance floor. In the words of rave author Cinnamon Twist, rave is 'those altered moments when each of us in being truest to our uniqueness enters into a harmonious whole . . . Our Motto: Utopia or bust' (Twist 1995, p. 208). Such a state of idealistic non-differentiation closely mirrors Victor Turner's notion of *communitas*: 'an undifferentiated community or even communion of equal individuals'.<sup>22</sup> Though commercially successful DJs, such as the Chemical Brothers, Fatboy Slim and Moby are subverting much of the anti-elitist faceless ideology of early rave, as discussed earlier in this essay, the identity that ravers appear most often to identify with is that

of a space alien – a faceless, genderless traveller from another world who transcends the socio-cultural baggage of Earth.

Alien imagery serves as a perfect model for the temporary transcendence of time, space and place that ravers desire. This phenomenon is particularly a feature of late 1990s American rave culture where the acid house yellow ‘Smiley’ face (representing the stoned childlike state to which British acid house participants aspired in the late 1980s) was replaced by images of flying saucers and alien faces. In the words of rave scholar Sarah Champion:

On dance floors across the country, the favoured logo on T-shirts, hat and fender stickers is a Martian spacecraft or a green, wide-eyed alien head. They’re produced by fashion companies like Liquid Sky Designs (New York), Anarchic Adjustment (San Francisco) and, most prominently, Alien Workshop and Schwa! Accessories include handy ‘alien-spotting guides’ available on chains to wear around your neck at parties (just in case). (Champion 1997, p. 97).

The typical live DJ presentation also plays into the alien spaceship iconography. Much like studio producers such as Lee Perry, the DJ is the ultimate mix of human and machine. They appear as distanced alien beings, surrounded by a circular bank of blinking sound equipment supplemented by various laser lights and smoke effects. Whether intentional or not, the image draws on the familiar trope, common in science-fiction works (and pseudo-scientific works like Erich von Daniken’s *Chariots of the Gods*) and earlier employed by Bowie, Clinton and Nomi among others, of an alien messiah (shaman?) descending in a futuristic spacecraft to bring enlightenment to the earthlings. As has been argued elsewhere, there is a strong association between the role of a shaman and the spiritual function of a DJ in rave culture. However, reading the DJ as an otherworldly futuristic benefactor, controlling foreign, unfamiliar technology, provides an equally powerful image.

The futuristic atmosphere of many club spaces also reinforces the alien mythos. As mentioned above, the lighting and pyrotechnics of these spaces plays into the synaesthetic hyperstimulation of the club/rave. Early discos often consciously employed such features in order to create exotic and alien (though not alienating) spaces in which participants could, at least momentarily, divest themselves of their more mundane everyday identities. The famous Los Angeles disco Xenon, for example, evokes the notion of interplanetary travel both by its science-fiction-like name and in its fantastic light display known as the ‘Mothership’. The ‘Mothership’ was a circular space-ship-like lighting rig that sporadically lowered itself onto the dance floor in an exhilarating burst of neon and laser light. Similar strobe and laser effects are of course now commonly used at raves and live DJ events. However, the transient nature of rave, particularly in the early 1990s, also added a further element of defamiliarisation. Under the restrictive tenets of attempts to ban or restrict illegal rave activities (England’s 1994 Criminal Justice Act in particular), raves in both Britain and North America were often forced into temporary locations, the locations often only being revealed at the last minute via the Internet or through a chain of phone calls to waiting participants. To avoid the police, rave participants were forced to constantly shift venues, often highly disparately, from cellars, empty buildings, warehouses, aircraft hangers, farmer’s fields, and, in time, purpose-built clubs. As such, this transient, liminal, component to recent dance culture also plays into the notions of space travel – the physical and mental exploration of other worlds.

In reaction to the dissatisfaction with the isolating and alienating culture of

the everyday outside world, the rave experience creates an enclosed temporary safe communal space (sometimes called TAZ – temporary autonomous zones) free from judgement and violence. In its anti-materialist stance, rave attempts to provide an alternate (if somewhat flawed) challenge to capitalist commodity culture. Flawed if only because consumers and producers of rave music must buy their technology, both of sound production and reproduction, from the same corporate culture from which they attempt to escape.

The emerging electronica dance music scene has also been dominated by groups such as The Orb, Legions of Green Men and Orbital, who were inspired by space and alien encounters. Unlike 'retro' bands, these artists place a premium on technology and usually employ high-tech sampling, advanced digital editing and computer recording techniques. Likewise, these groups are all, to varying degrees, part of the techno dance scene's fascination with hallucinogenic drugs such as Ecstasy and LSD. Recalling Pink Floyd, the use of alien and space themes are here again linked with drug use – hence terms like 'trip-hop' and 'acid house' designate sub-genres of such music. Indeed, The Orb (named after the Orb in Woody Allen's science fiction comedy *Sleepers*) often referred to Pink Floyd in their works, such as the irreverently titled 'Back Side of the Moon'. The group's top-selling single, however, was called 'Blue Room' – a mind-numbing thirty-nine-minute epic pastiche of ambient sampled sounds, including a recording of the first Gemini 4 spacewalk. This work, which reached Number 8 on the British charts in 1992, is named after the top-secret 'Blue Room' of Hanger 18 at the Wright-Patterson Air Base where the US government allegedly stores the remains from UFO crashes. Reflecting a generally heightened suspicion of government, this supposed alien cover-up is also immortalised in the movie *Independence Day* and in several recent songs, such as Megadeth's 'Hanger 18'.

To a large degree the turn to alien imagery and personification in late millennial rock and popular dance music is reflective of the postmodern condition as described by Frederic Jameson. For Jameson, the postmodern condition is marked by the disappearance or removal of the subject (Jameson 1984). In rave and techno genres, this loss of subjectivity is particularly marked in the literal self-liquidisation of rave participants to a communal whole, entering into a self-alienated state of distraction such that they are, at least for brief periods, unaware of their material existence – ultimately losing/surrendering themselves to the beat. This self-alienated state is reinforced by spectacular lighting effects and shifting of venues which further promotes a disorientating disjunctive physical space. The ingestion of drugs, sonic musical bombardment and ecstatic dancing also heighten the sense of a disembodied experience (often described by participants in terms of being abducted by aliens).<sup>23</sup> These features are also strongly reflective of another of Jameson's postmodern precepts – that of the shrinking and displacement of temporality into the present so as to, in effect, mimic the end of history and thus allow for the rise of a utopian political realm. This notion can also be glimpsed in rave culture's underlying ideology of creating a peaceful egalitarian co-existence, devoted to leisure and the immediacy of pleasure on the dance floor. In part this is achieved through the mixing of nostalgic samples, futuristic technologies and alien imagery that blur temporal existence.

## Conclusion

The term 'music' is increasingly losing its identification with any sense of a fixed, quantifiable or assignable object (be it a score, performance or recording). Particu-

larly in rave/techno dance culture, the term has come to signify a fluid, never finalised and never owned liminality of the mix. Though issues of locality are not to be minimised, the wide dissemination of sampling and other digital reproductive sound technologies has made it increasingly difficult to identify such music as belonging to a particular geographical location or definable community. The early 1980s arrival of the popular Yamaha DX7 digital synthesizer, cheap samplers, MIDI technology and, more recently, software such as Cubase and Pro Tools, represented a liberating escape from repetition (in contrast to the Adornian notion that it encourages conformity). It ushered in an era when anyone, to the extent that they had economic access, could become a composer. It was a pluralistic opportunity to make music, an impetus that has subsequently, with the advent of MP3, CD burning, and file sharing technologies, expanded beyond the scope of the major labels to be able to effectively control. In much recent popular music scholarship, the use of new technologies is interpreted as resisting geographical or community identity. In much the same manner as the alien and space imagery that often accompanies it, the use of digital sounds and samples creates a synthesised global melange in which race, class, gender and ethnicity melt away under the sway of various faceless technologies. Of course, the prevalent use of technology by previously marginalised musicians represents, at least in part, a sonic manifestation and appropriation of wealth, sophistication and privilege that was previously, in terms of Western classical orchestral music, only the domain of white musicians.

Though absolute conclusions are impossible, particularly given the inherent disjunctive diversity of the phenomenon, Jacques Attali's influential work *Noise* provides a persuasive justification for the fascination of popular music with futuristic themes:

Music is prophecy: its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible . . . it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future. (Attali 1985, p. 11)

In a sense, Attali here recognises that sound technologies facilitate liminal, imaginary identities – this is in opposition to visual technologies which objectify and often statically fix images of alienation and alterity. Indeed, pop cultural theorist Andrew Blake refers to this phenomenon as 'prophetic noise' (Blake 1999). In a similar fashion, the futuristic concerns with social decay and nuclear destruction that obsess many artists (such as Klaus Nomi's *Total Eclipse*), what Jeff Nuttall has labelled *Bomb Culture*, offer a prophetic glimpse into an imagined future (Nuttall 1968).

Whatever the ultimate rationale, it is clear that space, futurism and alien images permeate popular music history and its many stylistic manifestations. That such diversity of the use of space and alien images exists, however, appears symptomatic of a general alienation from late-twentieth-century life and of an increasing need to strive for higher, alternative ideals and states of being. To be different, or alien, is a significant and familiar cultural metaphor marking the boundaries of social identity. In general, rock, pop, dance and hip-hop music's use of futuristic space and alien themes denotes a related alienation from traditionally dominant cultural structures, subverting the often racist and heterosexist values of these genres themselves. It often represents a neo-Gnostic withdrawal from the world and its institutions – an artificial escape from social reality, from commitment, from one's self, and into a utopian future. Usually benevolently portrayed, futuristic images of aliens and outer space

unite us with a common 'other' that transcends divisions of race, gender, sexual preference, religion or nationality. Rock and popular music traditionally stress individuality (often in the guise of 'authenticity') to the point of virtually worshipping alienation, a trend particularly manifest in the fragmented popular music scene of the past decade. In an era of increasing self-alienation and suspicion of government and religion, institutions seemingly incapable of solving earth's problems, new music culture is increasingly looking to outer space for inspiration, if not outright salvation. The openness to the democratic pluralistic possibilities of the future may remain popular music's most lasting legacy.

## Endnotes

1. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship of these media to alien imagery in popular music, see my forthcoming book *Mothership Connections: Space, Aliens and the Quest for Identity in Rock Music*.
2. K. Marx, *Marxist Social Thought*, ed. R. Freedman (New York, 1968); Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*. (Glencoe, IL, 1947); R.K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York, 1968); S. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (Oxford, 1980), p. 198.
3. This image was part and parcel of Haley's switch from country to rock and roll. Previously his act was called Bill Haley and the Saddlemen.
4. This survey is in no way intended to be exhaustive. Bands and artists as diverse as the Rolling Stones, MC5, The Carpenters, Black Sabbath, Elton John, Spaceman 3, and Hawkwind, to name but a few, have a song, album or a stylistic phase which could fall under the remit of this paper.
5. It is interesting to note that this event was musically marked the same year by the top ten instrumental hit 'Telstar' performed by the British group The Tornados.
6. Though it is worth mentioning connections when they exist, it should also be noted that the use of alien images and futuristic themes and technology is typically disjunctive and nonlinear. It is precisely this liberating lack of inheritance and history that may account for the popularity of such themes – they allow space for unlabelled creativity.
7. Witness Afrika Bambaataa's 'Planet Rock', Public Enemy's 'Fear of a Black Planet', and even the post-apocalyptic imagery associated with Tupac Shakur's 'California', or Missy Elliott's futuristic personas adopted in videos for 'Sock it To Me' and 'She's a Bitch', to name but a few examples.
8. Tricia Rose as quoted in Dery, 'Black to the Future', p. 770. Tricia Rose also speculates that part of Kraftwerk's appeal to Afrika Bambaataa (particularly as manifest in the influence of Kraftwerk's 'Trans Europe Express' on Bambaataa's 'Planet Rock') was admiration for their mastery of technology.
9. Though it is largely discussed in terms of its deleterious effects, for an overview of the effects of technology on African-American music, see Donald Clarke's chapter, 'The heat death of pop music' in *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music* (New York, 1995), pp. 490–520. A more optimistic discussion is found in Mark Anthony Neal's chapter 'Post industrial postscript: the digitized aural urban landscape', in *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York, 1999), pp. 159–72.
10. Perry's music also often deals with the topic of outer space and cyborg imagery, as in 1983's 'Drum Song' which contains the repetitive phrase, 'I am a machine, I am a robot'.
11. Similarly William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* finds the central characters, Case and Molly, supported by dreadlocked rastas who listened to 'dub, a sensuous mosaic cooked from vast libraries of digitized pop; it was worship... and a sense of community' (New York, 1984), p. 104.
12. As quoted in Eric Davis, 'Dub, Scratch and the Black Star: Lee Perry on the Mix', <http://www.levity.com/figment/dub.html> (accessed 4/27/01).
13. Album notes to *Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (Casablanca, 1976).
14. As quoted in Jon Savage's, liner notes to the album *Cybotron – Interface: The Roots of Techno*, September 1993.
15. Take, for example, a leading practitioner of Drum 'n' Bass, A Guy Called Gerald's *Black Secret Technology* (1995).
16. Rose as quoted in Dery, 'Black to the future', p. 769.



17. Other early Pink Floyd songs that manifest this type of approach include 'Interstellar Overdrive' and 'Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun'. The career of the British art-metal band Hawkwind was, interestingly enough, closely aligned with that of the 'New-wave' science-fiction writer Michael Moorcock who helped organise some of their concerts as well as occasionally performing vocals.
18. Delany as quoted in 'Black to the future', p. 749.
19. See 'Nina Hagen Living in Ekstacy', interview by Michael Hessman, translated by Michael Epstein <http://208.24.252.87/nina/interv/living.html> (accessed 05/04/01).
20. Anne-Marie Praetzel, 'Shiva Diva', *10 Percent* (November/December, 1995), p. 2.
21. For more on the lives and music of Hagen and Nomi, see Ken McLeod, 'Bohemian rhapsodies: operatic influences on rock music', *Popular music* (2001), 20/2, pp. 189–203.
22. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1967). Also see Scot Hutson, 'Technoshamanism: spiritual healing in the rave subculture', *Popular Music and Society*, 23/3, Fall 1999, pp. 53–77, 66.
23. For more on the rave experience of alien abduction, see Sarah Champion, 'Fear and loathing in Wisconsin', pp. 97–8.

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