

## The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk: *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra and Afrofuturism

Nabeel Zuberi

In the longer version of this paper, I examine how the film *Space is the Place* has been remediated (along with its star Sun Ra) in emergent techno-centric or media-centric writing on popular music as well as science fiction film. I also examine and critique notions of the 'post-human' in debates about Afrofuturism in the African diaspora as they appropriate the figure of Sun Ra in *Space is the Place*<sup>1</sup>. But given the limited time here I'll focus on the unstable generic status of the film, as well as its music—in particular, the use of the Moog synthesizer as an agent of transformation.

The musical science fiction film *Space is the Place* was directed by John Coney in Oakland, California in 1972, and produced by Jim Newman for release by North American Star Systems in 1974. The film stars Sun Ra, jazz keyboardist, composer, arranger and bandleader of the Intergalactic Myth-Science Solar Arkestra. Though US state documentation registers his birth as Herman Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, for much of his life Sun Ra claimed to be an alien from the planet Saturn.

In *SITP*, Ra visits Earth in a spaceship, time travelling between Chicago 1943 and Oakland, California 1972 where he communicates with local African Americans and tries to convince them to leave with him for a space

colony. Ra engages in no less than a struggle for the souls of black folk against an archetypal pimp/mack/player/business figure called the Overseer. The medium of combat is a magic card game and Ra's most potent weapon is his music. In the film, the Arkestra performs many pieces of diegetic and non-diegetic music in its effort to uplift the race to outer space. Ra also encounters the largely corrupt media network system, using it to spread his message despite the fact that black radio in the form of announcer Jimmy Fey is compromised by the evil Overseer's influence. Ra also contends with the surveillance and violence of the United States government. The FBI kidnaps and sonically tortures him with a recording of the Confederate anthem 'Dixie'. Three young black men rescue Ra just in time for the Arkestra to perform a concert for the community. During this show the FBI men try to assassinate Ra at his Minimoog keyboard, but are again foiled by the three youths. Ra teleports these youths into his spaceship and the Arkestra departs for outer space. Like the alien prophet Klaatu played by Michael Rennie in the 1951 liberal Cold War sci-fi classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Sun Ra lands on earth to inform the human race that it needs redemption, but leaves after relatively little success.

In his excellent biography of Sun Ra, John Szwed describes *SITP* as 'part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic'<sup>2</sup>. Initially envisaged by producer Jim Newman as a documentary, Szwed suggests that the film became a mishmash of genres due to the different, often conflicting inputs of Newman, screenwriter Joshua Smith, director John Coney, and Sun Ra himself. Many changes and scene cuts were made during the film's production and post-production, some at Ra's behest. Like Szwed, many other brief descriptions or reviews of the film on the Web represent it as an early 70s curiosity, a bizarre or camp oddity with a disorganized and almost nonsensical plot. In fact, the film's mix of signifyin(g) humour, space-age prophecy and various generic elements are hardly beyond comprehension. In the style of much African diasporic vernacular expression and media practice<sup>3</sup>, the film 'signifies' across and between a number of recognizable film genres and modes such as science fiction, the musical, the urban youth film and the documentary. We can view it as the kind of 'imperfect cinema' lauded by Third Cinema theorists and filmmakers or a generic/genetic mutation in the margins of the early 70s New Hollywood system<sup>4</sup>. This molecular milestone in the history of African American film plays a small role in the process of what Arthur Knight calls 'disintegrating the musical', further exposing the contradiction that the utopian

Hollywood musical in its form integrated the community while maintaining racial-social segregation and division. Though Knight's study focuses on an earlier period of film history (1929-59), he contends that aspects of the disintegrated musical appear in a number of later forms such as blaxploitation, pop musicals and music videos<sup>5</sup>. Recent film genre theory also confirms a view of genres as unstable, mutable, fleeting and mobile formations. Against the long *durée* of film cycles and linear historical sedimentation, a more horizontal and hypertextual sense of genre formation has emerged in the genre theory of Nick Browne and Rick Altman<sup>6</sup>. In the digital era, the science fiction film theory of Scott Bukatman and Brooks Landon also concentrates on cinematic moments, intensities, spectacle and special effects at the expense of linear narrative<sup>7</sup>.

In this low budget sci-fi film, music is *the* special effect. Like much of Sun Ra's oeuvre, *SITP* is concerned with how music can transport black people to other states of being in both material and spiritual terms. At the beginning of the film in a forest on another planet Ra says to the camera: 'The Music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like Planet Earth. Planet Earth sounds of guns, anger, frustration. We'll set up a colony for black people here. See what they can do on a planet all their own, without any white people there. We'll bring them here through either isotope teleportation, transmolecularization or better

still, teleport the whole planet here through music'. According to Ra, redemption of black people comes through music. Musical form is a template for society and the body. Ra's statement expresses ideas akin to those in the discourse around the music of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Eric Dolphy, Cecil Taylor and others. As Lawrence Kart puts it, the avant-garde conceived of 'new techniques as a means of more than technical transformation, the work as a transcendental laboratory or proving ground'<sup>8</sup>. Attention to aural texture meant stretching the sonic possibilities of existing instruments, often producing dissonance and atonality. Rock music in the 1960s distorted tones and chords through electrical means such as amplification and feedback. New electronic instruments such as the Moog synthesizer produced peculiar tones outside the parameters of previous listening. Though the eerie otherworldly sound of the theremin had weaved through thrillers, science-fiction film soundtracks, and the 'exotica' recordings of Les Baxter and others since the 1940s, the line between noise/sound effects and music in rock, jazz and other popular music styles becomes increasingly blurred in the 1960s. This is why Sun Ra's music has become something of a point of origin for today's advocates of electronica and cited as an example of the power of noise to disrupt the social and musical status quo or system. For example, in his Afrofuturist sermon *More Brilliant Than the Sun*:

*Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, black British cultural critic Kodwo Eshun argues: that Sun Ra uses the Moog to produce a new sonic people<sup>9</sup>.

The sounds of the Moog are semiotically charged with rematerialization (or transmolecularization, if you will). In their history of the Moog, Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco state that it became an 'apparatus for transgression, transcendence, and transformation'<sup>10</sup>. Gershon Kingsley, a musician-engineer who worked with Robert Moog, programmed Sun Ra's Minimoog for him<sup>11</sup>. But Jon Weiss, who worked on the overall design of the Moog, comments that Ra 'had taken this synthesizer and I don't know what he had done to it, but he made sounds like you had never heard in your life, I mean just total inharmonic distortion all over the place, oscillators weren't oscillating anymore, nothing was working but it was fabulous'<sup>12</sup>.

Sun Ra's soundtrack for the film, recorded in 1972, exploits the Minimoog's capabilities for a range of alien textures, 'dark' as well as warm tones, rapid keyboard runs and less 'musical' beeps and burps, as well as drones produced through stable sine wave generation. Ra uses the Minimoog for discrete sci-fi effects that primarily signal a disruptive presence.

The minimoog joins the piano, Farfisa organ, Hohner Clavinet and Rocksichord in Sun Ra's electrical keyboard armoury. The Arkestra's horns feature strongly in the sound of *SITP*. Brass usually evokes

the military and warfare in science fiction films, but in the urban action film, blaxploitation and road movie, trumpets and saxophones complement the screeching tones of tyres in car chases and the high-pitched whooping of police sirens. In *SITP*, the Arkestra's horns lead the marches of many pro-space anthems such as 'We travel the spaceways' and 'Watusa', but also propel the film's one car chase sequence. Another strong element in the soundtrack is the polyrhythmic 'Africanist' drumming and percussion of congas, koras, bongos and bells, common to other African American genres of this period. Though Ra's soft voice offers pedagogical monologues, engages in dialogues and 'declamations' (such as 'I am the Brother the Wind'), June Tyson's voice dominates with her repeated long phrases, chants, slogans and quasi-jingles for outer space travel.

The Arkestra's music accompanies almost all the action in the film but the musicians are rarely in the space of the film narrative. They have clearly been filmed in a recording studio. Close ups of June Tyson other medium shots of the Arkestra feature a dark anonymous background. Though *SITP* shows the musicians in 'authentic' live performance—common in many post-1950s jazz films and entrenched by the early 1970s after the rock concert films *Monterey Pop* (1967) and *Woodstock* (1969)—here shots of the Arkestra cut back and forth to the story world of Oakland. We are

never clear where the Arkestra is—if it's in the space ship or is the sonic motor of the spaceship itself. Only in the rehearsal and final concert at the end of the film do we briefly see the group in Oakland, a generic nod to the backstage musical and youth film in which the culmination of the narrative is the 'kids putting on a show' for the community. *SITP* also riffs on the language (and some of the clichés) of black nationalism in the urban African American film of the period. The film's dialogue pastiches and parodies the babble of radio and television. And like many films of the American Vietnam War and Watergate period, *Space is the Place* foregrounds the government's audiovisual surveillance of citizens and resident aliens. These themes make the film and Sun Ra's body of work still relevant today. They are so much exemplars of a post-human that supercedes the human, but illustrations of how limited and provincial the notion of 'humanity' remains in the USA<sup>13</sup>.

## Endnotes

1. A longer discussion of *Space is the Place* can be found in Philip Hayward (ed.), *Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science-Fiction Cinema*, forthcoming, Sydney and London: John Libbey, 2003.
2. John F. Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra*. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1997, p 330.
3. see Gladstone Lloyd Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition*. Trenton, New Jersey & Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2000.
4. see Juan Garcia Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema", in Michael Chanan (ed.) *Twenty-five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*. London: British Film Institute and Channel Four Television, 1983, pp 28-33; see also Ted Gioa, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
5. Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.
6. see Rick Altman, 'Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process' in Nick Browne (ed) *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998, pp 1-41 and Nick Browne, 'Preface' in N. Browne (ed) *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998, xi-xiv.
7. See Scott Bukatman, 'The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects and the Sublime' in Annette Kuhn (ed) *Alien Zone II: the spaces of science fiction cinema*. London and New York: Verso, 2002, pp 249-275; and Brooks Landon, 'Diegetic or Digital? The Convergence of Science-Fiction Literature and Science-Fiction Film in Hypermedia' in Annette Kuhn (ed) *Alien Zone II: the spaces of science fiction cinema*. London and New York: Verso, 2002, pp 31-49.
8. Lawrence Kart, 'The Avant-Garde, 1949-1967' in Bill Kirchner (ed) *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p 447.
9. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books, 1998, A[185].
10. Trevor Pinch & Frank Trocco, *Analog Days:*

*the invention and impact of the Moog synthesizer.*

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p 305.

11. V. Vale V./Andrea Juno *Re/Search #14: Incredibly Strange Music, Volume 1.* Re/Search Publications, 1993, pp 82-91.

12. Quoted in Pinch & Trocco, 2002, p 223.

13. See Alexander G. Weheliye, "Feenin": Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music' in *Social Text*, 71, Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer 2002, p 40; and Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, p 356.