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CORRELATION BETWEEN AFROFUTURISM AND SCIENCE FICTION IN *SPACE IS THE PLACE*: PRAXIS OR PARADOX?

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I use the culture studies approach to investigate how themes such as the space age, psychedelia and the creation of a post-apocalyptic black colony in the film *Space is the Place* (Coney 1972), interweave with Darko Suvin's (1974) concept of cognitive estrangement and *novum*. I specifically study how these relate to science fiction, with the goal of subverting the stereotype of blackness as uncivilised and Luddite. I propose to critically review the general categorization of the film as Afrofuturist and argue that what is positioned in the film as a novelty and salvation is, in fact, constructed in a problematic way. As such, positioning the film just as Afrofuturist, as demonstrated, may contradict the genre's goals. Instead, I follow David Seed's proposal to use an interdisciplinary reading method for film analysis based on deconstructing the relation of the film within the two framings: Science fiction and Afrofuturism.

KEYWORDS: Afrofuturism; Apocalypse; Psychedelic; Science fiction (sci-fi/sf); Space Age; Technology.

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1. Introduction

Scholars studying science fiction in the context of US popular fiction note that from the 1950s onwards, the future was commonly constructed in such a manner as to erase matters of race completely. As a result, people of African descent and pertinent issues of race and prejudice were marginalised (Bould 2007). Structures of racism as such were rarely truly confronted in mainstream science fiction, which often presented a colour-blind technocratic future. That means that the so-called technocultural matrix was created as a Western construct that explicitly embedded whiteness.

Within such a framing, the mainstream vision of a technoculture of the future primarily transmits Western conceptions of humanity and global citizenship, excluding the experiences of black people and their cultures in the process of its construction. Nevertheless, Ruha Benjamin maintains that technoculture, which is particularly prevalent in literary and artistic works, incorporates "most appealing post-postracial visions for challenging entrenched social inequalities and hierarchies in a way that do not flatten differences" (Benjamin 2019, 10). More precisely, according to Ricardo Guthrie (2016), [s]ci-fi movies have created an engaging space in which it is possible to speculate about the kinds of solutions—and ongoing challenges—that would help current viewers make sense of human experience. But one continues to question how this can truly happen when we have been engaging in narratives of a colour-blind future for decades. In mainstream works addressing technoculture, blackness has often been either absent or defined in antagonistic terms in relation to technology, such as the notions of blackness as constituting technological inertia, and as technologically inept . In fact, depictions of technology are often plagued by unnecessary and harmful dualisms: the modern vs the traditional, nature vs culture, self and other, male and female – categories that are artificially divided into unequal groups.

Science fiction becomes as such part of the technocultural discourse, which is traditionally characterised by the invisibility and unethical representation of blackness. Science fiction movies like *I, Robot* (2004) and *DETROPIA* (2012), according to Guthrie (2016), have portrayed black people as being resistant and unable to advance technologically. For instance, although *I, Robot* has a black protagonist in the character of Detective Del Spooner, portrayed by Will Smith, he is depicted as someone who is not only technophobic but also hostile to

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

technological progress in much the same way as Blacks in the film *Detropia* are portrayed as anachronistic and an obstacle to the technological progress of the city of Detroit. According to Ytasha L. Womack (2013), these manifestations of unethical and unequal representation of black people in the world of the future, are what provoked the emergence of Afrofuturism.

The term Afrofuturism was first coined and defined by Mark Dery (1994) in his article "Black to the future". During an interview with Samuel Delany, Tricia Ross, and Greg Tate, Dery described Afrofuturism as,

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future (Dery 1994, 80)

Dery's idea of Afrofuturism in a way construes technology as an obstacle to Black lives. It reflects the mainstream technocultural sensibility that relies on the perception of black people as objects and vulnerable victims of modern technology. The phenomenon is not only particular to technoculture in the fictional realm but emerges from Afrodiasporic social historical experiences with technology since the Middle Passage and the dawning of the transatlantic slave trade. Despite the experiences of exclusion and objectification that define blackness in terms of technoculture, black people still consider technology an imperative to social transformation. Thus, Afrofuturism explores how black people and their communities engage technology to envision alternative futures. By so doing, it poses as liberatory framework within which existing patterns of domination and exclusion can be combatted. Even though it may have seemed like a black cultural neologism at the time when it was coined by Dery in 1994, engagements in Afrofuturism have long existed in Afrodiasporic cultural expressions. Afrofuturism was significantly inspired by Space Age technology, and currently focuses on black identity and technology as explored through science fiction.

The futures described in science fiction narratives are driven by the yearning for a world, civilization, or ways of being that are better than our own. The point about science fiction narrative is not particularly in the better worlds that it imagines but rather the notion of difference that it registers. Science fiction writters employ fictional devices, material and non-material, including objects such a spaceships, and concepts to produce novelty and innovation that allows a distinction between

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

their created world(s) and their empirical world. This fictional device, known as the novum[1] enables us as readers to comprehend the imagined world as different from our own world and to perhaps consider the possibility of inhabiting such world(s); a phenomenon which provokes change. As a result, the *novum*, a phenomenon which Darko Suvin (1974) theorised as emerging from cognitive estrangement, serves as a marker for the future. In light of this and in the context of the issues already described above, I would like to introduce the main object of the study of this article - *Space is the Place* film (John Coney, 1972). Since *Space is the Place* is usually classified as a science fiction film, I intend to use it to explore the methodological potential of the science fiction genre.

Space is the Place is a blaxploitation[2] science fiction film co-authored by Sun Ra and John Coney. The film is a remarkable project aimed at reinventing African American history and claiming the technological future through the revision of the relationship between music, technology, society, and African American identity. By invoking and reclaiming the idea of the Egyptian civilisation and the African continent as the cradle of humanity, *Space is the Place* seeks to counter stereotypes that pose a threat to the representation of black subjectivity and technological agency.

As an illustration of this, we can address the opening of the film. In it, we see a close-up of the protagonist - Sun Ra - dressed in pharaonic garb in the middle of a forest, which he claims to be a psychedelic planet in outer space where he plans to establish an exclusively black colony. The image of the forest and the idea of a utopian black colony remind us of the negative projection of black primitivism and the reading of blackness as alien, which is prevalent in modern science fiction. Rather than countering this antithesis of blackness as a victim of modernity, the scene appears to mirror these stereotypes by emphasising nature and segregation.

[1] According to Suvin, the *novum* is the novelty or newness derived from the disruptive interaction between the old and the new, or the familiar and the uncanny.

[2] Derived from the exploitation genre, the term blaxploitation emerged in the United States in the 1970s as an ethnic subgenre and was used to define films that depicted black protagonists defeating symbols of white oppression. The genre took two forms based on local context. Blaxploitation films set in the Northeast or the West coast depicted poor urban neighbourhoods and unsavoury black life, which became a source of great concern for black people. In the US South, Blaxploitation films exploited slavery and miscegenation. *Space is the Place* blends Southern and Northern ideas because it mixes genres and crosses generic boundaries. The film addresses national agenda issues like Space Age technology, which can be considered as a feature of the exploitation film genre.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

This is highlighted by Sun Ra's appearance in the middle of a forest with a group of aliens at the beginning of the film. The use of aliens as characters and outer space as the setting can be read as falling in line with the usual tropes employed by modern science fiction in its depictions of the future. But these tropes are also symbolic of Afrofuturism's future imaginings (van Veen 2016). According to Isiah Lavender III (2019), these stereotypes emerging from flights of fantasy under the guise of science dating back from the period of the Enlightenment created what he described as a science-fictional blackness, making it impossible to distinguish the reality of blackness from its fiction.

Nevertheless, it can be said that *Space is the Place* attempts to subvert stereotypes by employing the science-fictional language of cognitive estrangement.The experience of segregation and alienation was too familiar to Afro-Americans, which significantly precluded them from being full citizens in their own country, therefore denying them the feeling of belonging. Based on this dynamic, Greg Tate, in conversation with Mark Dery (1994) in the article "Black to the Future", describes the African American experience as science fictional. These elements of strangeness and familiarity are what Darko Suvin (1979) described as cognitive estrangement, which is a critical principle in science fiction narrations. Since the goal of *Space is the Place* is to problematise the antithesis of blackness, namely black primitivism and blackness as alien, in this article I intend to explore how this particular scene interacts, or better, dialogues with the overall reflective form of the film to support the notion of Afrofuturism as a powerful critical lens that can subvert these stereotypes by reclaiming fundamental reality reflections that speak to the humanity of blackness and projecting them into the future.

Produced by Jim Newman, *Space is the Place* was released in 1974. A low-budget film, its reception at the beginning was marred by limited distribution. For decades, the film remained invisible and was considered bizarre and incomprehensible. This is attributed to the fact that Sun Ra's worldview and perspective stressed culture rather than politics as the primary arena for the performance and attainment of black subjectivity and agency, an idea that stood in contrast with the prevailing nationalistic rhetoric of many Black movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which saw traditional political means as the only avenue for pursuing black subjectivity and agency (Sexton 2006). Notwithstanding, with time,

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

the film evolved into a cult film. This significant transformation was motivated by "its release on both video and DVD in 1993 and 2003 by Rhapsody and Plexifilm respectively" (Sexton 2006, 194). But specifically after Mark Dery's conceptualisation of Afrofuturism in 1994, *Space is the Place* has reached a level of public recognition that it had never had before.

On a general level, *Space is the Place* depicts the ambiguities of American society in relation to the notion of modern technology as a panacea that can alleviate societal inequalities. When the film was created, for most black people and in many black communities, the idea of technological progress was only an illusion. Consequently, the film suggests exploring the Luddite[3] narrative of blackness in which black people are portrayed as backward and lacking the capacity to keep up with technological progress, against the backdrop of the notion of technological utopia, which proposes that life will inevitably improve through technological development. *Space is the place* sought to examine the promise of freedom as a consequence of technological advancement in the context of increasing segregation, alienation, abjection, and exploitation that many African descendants were facing in America. Black people were perceived as anachronistic to technological advancement and not capable of solving their own problems. This idea is illustrated in the film when the FBI finds Sun Ra's space agency and space age project to be extremely dangerous to American society and orders his arrest due to the perception that Black people lack the capacity to pursue and comprehend technology. Ra's space age project was therefore seen as illegitimate and unsafe. The reaction of the FBI is, therefore, included in the narrative to demonstrate the myth of Blacks as technologically unfit or inept.

2. Sun Ra as a representative of an Intersection of Spaces

Given that Sun Ra is its main character and that *Space is the Place* centres a fictional narrative firmly around his own mythos and way of life, a brief journey into his

[3] The luddites were skilled British artisans and craftsmen who were experts in the technology of their time. They fought to protect their livelihoods and their right to their technology which was being taken over by machines and specifically unprofessional machine operators. A couple of centuries later, Luddite was stripped of its meaning. Nowadays, it is used to describe, albeit pejoratively, people with aversion towards modern technology and showing ineptitude to technological progress, antithetical to the Luddites' aspiration (see Jones, Steven E. 2006. *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism*. New York: Routledge.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

unique beliefs and experiences is relevant to our analysis. Originally born in Alabama in 1943 as Herman Poole Blount, Sun Ra carved a niche career for himself as an artist, composer, poet, and, most significantly, as the leader of his Myth-Science Intergalactic Solar Arkestra band. For the most part of his real life, he considered himself an alien and a messenger sent from the planet Saturn to the American black community. David A. Martinelli described Sun Ra as "some type of personification of particular sociocultural conditions or constraints" (Martenelli 1991, 3). The early years of post-World War II were marked by the incorporation of African Americans into the capitalist system through the commercialization of black lives and cultures. At the same time Black people faced increasing enormity of subordination through degradation and marginalization. In his contribution to the efforts to challenge the catastrophic degradation of black identity and culture, Sun Ra developed a heterodox approach to culture in which he combined scientific, fictional, and historical writings to form his own conception of reality based on the knowledge he derived from esoteric and populist texts. His affiliation with various black activist groups like the Moorish Science Temple, Thmei Research, the Nation of Islam, and his interactions with people like his manager Alton Abraham contributed to the development of his eccentric beliefs, which were reflected in both his personal behaviour and his work as artist. His music and performances were often inundated with notions of the pursuit of better worlds. Ra's unique performances and musical style "arose in response to (…) the brutally segregated world of mid-twentieth-century America" (Youngquist 2016, 12). Sun Ra's identity and philosophy are influenced, in some ways, by the harsh demands imposed on American youth, particularly the black youth, as a result of the Vietnam war, which contributed to exacerbating his feelings of subjugation and alienation. Paul Youngquist argues that the segregation in Chicago and the pop culture of the space age were two primary social conditions that shaped Sun Ra's art and clearly distinguished it as a counteracting force to the existing political system. Sun Ra had a great passion for new technologies and "stressed the importance of becoming proficient in a range of new technologies so that African Americans could play a part in engineering their own futures" (Sexton 2006, 200). For instance, the Black Panther Party, a radical African American group that embraced political means to achieve its goals, including the demand for equality for Black people, initially embraced Sun Ra's libertarian philosophical tenets. In the early 1970s, they hosted

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

Ra and his Arkestra band by providing shelter for them at their Oakland residence. Nevertheless, that gesture was short-lived because in contrast to Sun Ra's optimistic and aspirational view of space travel, the Black Panther Party saw it as a continuation of colonial expansion driven by capitalist greed and subsequently evicted Ra and his band (Kreiss 2008). This contributes to the general controversy surrounding his figure.

Sun Ra made innovative use of technology and often improvised with sonic and electronic technology, creating peculiar and otherworldly sounds for his music and performances using his personalised Minimoog[4]. William Echard, in his seminal *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Music Topic Theory,* indicated that electronic sound was a significant component of science fiction scores mostly used as a soundtrack and that, in a broader sense, "space topics and electronic music share a common connection with technology" (Echard 2017, 707). Sun Ra's knowledge and interest in science, myth, and science fiction is sufficiently displayed in the film and significantly tells of his orientation that has influenced future Afrofuturist imagining. As a result, this context underscores Afrofuturism as a sufficient concept for articulating and comprehending the film.

3. Apocalypse in Black Imagination and the dialectics of the plot

Let us yet again review the beginning of the film. It begins with a scene depicting a yellowish pod-like spaceship flying through space. Afterwards, we hear one of the Arkestra singers, June Tyson, saying: "It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?" As already mentioned, we then see a close-up of the protagonist Sun Ra, clad in pharaonic costumes, wandering in the middle of what appears to be a forest with some alien beings amid other soaring creatures. Sun Ra's narration in the film identifies the place as a psychedelic planet in outer space where he intends to relocate all Black people. The shot seems to draw our attention to the image of blackness as alienation and reinforces the stereotype of blackness as close to nature and uncivilised. As already mentioned, this enhances the Luddite narrative that generally depicts blackness as hostile to progress and technology. The idea that only

[4] Minimoog – a portable keyboard synthesiser designed and produced by Robert Moog in 1969 and introduced in 1970, a decade which realised a rapid development of music technology. Sun Ra was the first to use the Minimoog in 1969 before it was introduced. The instrument was a significant component of his repertoire of keyboards which he used to improvise uniquely bizarre and otherworldly soundscapes (See Morrison, John. 2020. "Sun Ra's Cosmic Keys." *Reverb*. November 9. URL: https://reverb.com/news/sun-ras-cosmic-keys. Accessed May 22, 2023.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

black people would be transported to this new planet embeds the notion of segregation and a raceless society that the film purports to critique. This is because the contrast between Sun Ra's new planet in outer space and planet Earth is not nearly as sharp as we would expect and seems to contradict the film's thematic object, which proposes identity reconstruction and critique. As a result, the idea of the film to reclaim Africa's past glory in the construction of a new narrative of identity and also to counter the antithesis of blackness as "antitechnological" appears to be somehow compromised.

Nevertheless, the film reveals a dialectical relationship between utopia and dystopia. Sun Ra's costuming depicts the splendor of ancient Egypt in celebration of African civilisation, while his spaceship flying among the galaxies is telling of the endless liberty that outer space seems to offer to blackness. By fusing aspects of ancient civilization and space age technology, *Space is the Place* portrays unique possibilities available to black futures.

In the film, when June Tyson reverberates the sentence "It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?", she signals the possibility of both the disappearance of the former world by some means, in this case catastrophic, and the coming into being of another better world. Tyson's repeated intonation, in combination with the portrayal of Sun Ra and the aliens in the middle of an imaginary forest, respectively, symbolise the post-apocalyptic condition[5]. Ra's post-apocalyptic world contrasts dramatically with Earth and is better suited for the community. In his description, the new world's music and vibrations are unlike that of planet Earth, which he describes as the sound of violence and frustration. This signals the experience of exclusion that characterised the lives of the members of the black community. To populate this planet, Ra's character tries to convince younger people to follow him and with that motivation he visits a youth centre on Earth to spread his message of black liberation. But instead, members of the youth centre question his message and mock his costume. They pose questions such as "How do we know you are real?" To which Ra responds in a defiant way: "How do you know I am real? I am not real; I am just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people would not be seeking equal rights." For Ra, being in the

[5] The post-apocalyptic in this context involves a new system and a dimension of interaction that dissolves dichotomies such as culture and nature, modern and indigenous, human and nonhuman, male and female and sets these into conversation with each other.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

world presupposes possessing the basis for existence – equal rights. Not seeking them means having them. In this powerful scene, Ra confronts the youth by exposing and blurring the relationship between reality and myth. The invitation to join him on what seems at first glance an imaginary mythic planet is in fact an invitation to step into reality, where members of the community can exist and have equal rights.

In order to populate this planet, Sun Ra performs a concert at the end of the film, during which the black audience members begin to disappear one by one, only to reappear on his spaceship that is flying towards their new destination where the black community will thrive in freedom. This is Sun Ra's way of establishing a black utopian colony in a post-apocalyptic world. In an earlier scene, the overseer[6] , a Black man in a suit who enjoys abusing women and forcing the commodification of the female body for the pleasure of both his black and white counterparts, meets Sun Ra in a game of chess, symbolising the battle for the souls of the Black people.[7] Ra must win this battle in order to leave with them to outer space.

These scenes aim to position *Space is the Place* in the context of the apocalypse, which in Christian eschatology is a metaphor for the end of the world. The end of the world seems to be a necessary precondition for the establishment of Sun Ra's psychedelic black colony in space. African American visual art, music, and literature usually feature the apocalypse, but in a way that differs from the more common understanding (Montgomery 1996). In the biblical sense, the apocalypse is a dystopian ideal of the future, but in black science fiction, like the one depicted in the film by Sun Ra, the end of the world has already arrived in the form of a utopian black colony. The apocalypse represents a pathway to outer space, the latter symbolising freedom. Derived from Public Enemy's (PE) album titled *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back* (1988), Mark Sinker (1992) described the experience of slavery and contemporary black realities as the effects of Armageddon. PE claims that Armageddon has been in effect, using it as a metaphor to describe the apocalypse. According to Tobias van Veen, "the "Armageddon effect" signifies the persistent effects of slavery in rendering contemporary

[6] In Space is the place, the character of the overseer is played by Ray Johnson. The overseer is a representative of the dominant culture who enforces the interest of the establishment. (For further details on the notion of overseer in the context of plantation slavery, see Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 2011. *The Right to Look.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.)

[7] The battle symbolises the combat against the conflict between black people's social and mental alienation and their psychological and social transformation.

conditions dystopic" (van Veen 2016, 72). The apocalypse, therefore, represents "the Afrofuturist undoing of slave consciousness", inequality, exploitation/commodification of black culture, and hierarchical tendencies as depicted by the battle between Sun Ra and the overseer for the souls of the black community (van Veen 2016, 72).

The Armageddon effect is reinforced by the narrative introduction of an antagonistic relationship between Sun Ra and the character of the overseer in *Space is the Place*. In this context, the overseer is a metaphor for the system and the establishment - the kind of forcefield that prevents African Americans from moving past the history of slavery and the social ills it spawned, such as drug abuse, cheap sexual exploitation, alcoholism, and misogyny. The film employs the speculative trope of postapocalyptic black space to elucidate a path forward beyond the prevailing tensions of inequality, segregation, and violence that still plagued African Americans in the wake of slavery and Jim Crow[8]. In other words, Sun Ra's imagination of a postapocalyptic black colony allows him to explore a truly postcolonial America, free of violent segregation and inequity. Most black people believe their dignity, status, and freedom as individuals are contingent on the apocalypse descending upon a corrupt and oppressive system. As a result, the end of the world implies the end of all forms of oppression and symbolises the beginning of a new era of equality (Montgomery 1996).

4. Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and Psychedelia

Sun Ra's psychedelic planet is part of a post-apocalyptic future. The aesthetics of psychedelia are constructed through the inclusion of such elements as the setting of the wild forest, the colourful spaceship, and Sun Ra and his team's fantastic costumes, among others. All these elements are in contrast with the depiction of the overseer, a categorically modern black man in a suit, who derives his identity from Western ideals of masculinity and yet is denied the status of human. Nonetheless, the representation of the overseer's persona, especially his habit of sexually exploiting women, when juxtaposed with Sun Ra's concept of the psychedelic

[8] Usually known as the Jim Crow laws, it names policies formally enforcing racial segregation. It began in the 1870s in the Southern states of the United States of America and gradually trickled down into the entire society until the 1965. It was particularly targeted at African Americans and was meant to disenfranchise them from economic prosperity and political progress. (See Fremon, David K. 2000. *The Jim Crow Laws and Racism in American History*. Berkeley Heights NJ: Enslow.)

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

forest planet with rich flora and fauna, work together to suggest the stereotype of nature as the essence of both embodied and disembodied blackness and, at the same time, these contribute to the notion of blackness as overtly violent and sexual.

During one of the scenes,we find Sun Ra playing the piano in a bar in Chicago in 1943. People are drinking and smoking in this bar, with a few women dancing to the tunes from Sun Ra's piano. When the overseer appears in the bar flanked by several women and smoking his cigar, he tells the bar manager to ask Sun Ra to stop playing the music. Sun Ra ignores the order from the overseer and continues playing his music. The overseer is angered by Ra's reaction and the scene quickly escalates to violent chaos that leads to the destruction of the premises and injuries. The overseer's reaction constitutes a form of self-hate that plagues the capacity of blacks to form social bonds imperative to social uplift and progress. Sun Ra is typically deemed an unusual choice for the main character in a blaxploitation film because, in keeping with his moral compass, he insisted on the removal of the film's nudity and explicit violence. Sun Ra did not want the film to portray these images because such scenes in black films reproduce the age-old discourse that marked black as symbolic of violence and evil. The juxtaposition of this scene at the bar with the image of the forest contextualises the representation of blackness as close to nature, reminding us how it is often deployed as a pretext for the subordination and subjugation of blackness.

Sun Ra in the real world and his character in the film share the same attitude of a strict disciplinarian who encouraged his bandmates to avoid drugs, alcohol, and women. As a result, the question of psychedelia in the film appears paradoxical at the beginning. In the 1960s and 1970s, psychedelia significantly influenced the works of Afro-American artists and musicians. While it is interesting to note that "science fiction and psychedelia had a marked impact on the work of Sun Ra" (Hayward 2004, 14), it is also imperative to note that psychedelia connotes an altered state of consciousness strongly associated with drug use.

When British psychologist Humphry Osmond coined the term Psychedelia, he referred to a type of "mind manifesting" that occurred after taking LSD drugs. Nonetheless, William Echard (2017) has argued that the position held by many authors is that psychedelia can include any form of art or practice that is explicitly concerned with the expansion of consciousness. In addition, he asserts that the psychedelic movement that flourished in the 1960s was not a monoculture but rather

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

involved different groups that could be identified according to the specific goals they sought to achieve through drug use. There were groups that viewed drug consumption along the lines of humanistic (self-improvement, enlightenment), hedonistic (sensation as an end in itself), and political philosophies (social disruption as a tool for change) (Echard 2017, 33). Sun Ra's persona epitomised the humanistic and political aspects of psychedelia, considering that he was an autodidact and used his knowledge and beliefs to develop an identity that distinguished him as a political subject. In the film, by mentioning scientific terms like teleportation, transmolecularization, and isotopes as the various means to send black people to space, Sun Ra showcases his literacy in science and technology.

Jeremy Gilbert (2017) identified psychedelia as a coping mechanism as well as an identity phenomenon in his exposition of Mark Fisher's proposed concept of "Acid Consumerism". On the one hand, while psychedelia as a coping mechanism is solely concerned with enabling individuals to cope with aggravating circumstances of alienation and exploitation, it never addresses the root causes of these problems. On the other hand, psychedelia as an identitarian practice is concerned with raising political awareness and challenging entrenched assumptions of capitalist culture, allowing people to overcome their individualism and form powerful and creative collectives. In *Space is the Place*, both of these layers of psychedelia are equally implicit. The overseer's character and the atmosphere in the Chicago bar represent the use of psychedelia as a coping mechanism, while Sun Ra's character, identity, costumes, spaceship, and music serve as alternatives of a better world and symbolise psychedelia as a way of transforming one's identity to provoke political consciousness. The overseer's persona is marked by violence, excessive smoking, alcoholism, as well as misogyny. Although part of the black community perceived these vices as a form of solace often used to manage the harsh conditions of alienation and segregation imposed upon them due to slavery and Jim Crow, these vices could not take them to a better world but rather aggravated their conditions as evidenced by the atmosphere played out in the Chicago bar at the beginning of the film.

In contrast, Sun Ra rejects every idea of uplift from an imperialist perspective that the coping mechanism of psychedelia seems to perpetuate. Beginning with the young people at the youth center, he urges them to reconsider their relationship with the dominant society and institutions in which they are obliged to perform

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

circumscribed cultural identities which are characterized by exclusion and abjection. Instead of the common trope of drugs used in psychedelic media as a pathway to access better worlds, Ra offers music as an alternative to enter better worlds. He proposes a psychedelic utopian vision of a musically harmonious place in outer space at the climax of the film. In this way, Sun Ra positions psychedelia as a means of transcendence to better realms through social and psychological transformation, that is, beyond slavery and colonial mentalities.

Psychedelia served as a platform for the African American community to defy repressive musical fashion and behavioural codes and constituted a form of resistance to domination as a defence of one's identity. Here, in *Space is the place,* Sun Ra and his space crew adorned themselves in psychedelic fashion. His Spaceship is also colourful and quite unusual. Costumes are an integral part of the psychedelic experience. From the Afrodiasporic perspective costume is a vehicle of resistance (Womack 2013). Costumes are infused with imaginative power capable of transporting its wearer into different realms (Rahman, Wing-sun, and Cheung 2012). They are a vehicle of transcendence that allows movement beyond the obvious, the mundane and the real. Thus, Sun Ra's garb and spaceship allow him to at once tread the historical realm of ancient Egypt and the futuristic realm of outer space as an alien in the present. In this context, costume constitutes a technology of identity transformation that enhances the capacity of an individual to go places and do things they cannot usually do.

Space is vital in African American cosmology. But the concept of an exclusive black colony in outer space conveys a twist and appears to be very much out of sync with the goal of the film. In a sense it appears to endorse segregation, which was a central obstacle faced by African Americans in their quest to attain equal rights. *Space is the Place* reflects what Tiffany Lethabo King (2017) describes as "postures of suspicion— "misanthropy"" that outrightly refuse a Western conception of humanity which erases blackness from both the past and the future (King 2017, 162).

Afrofuturism rejects the idea that (normative/white and male) humanism is necessary and inevitable from an ontological standpoint (van Veen 2016). Hence, instead of merely reversing stereotypes, the Afrofuturists seek to forge a new idea of identity that includes black cultural origins in both modern and indigenous or traditional categories. Thus, the idea of segregation and an exclusively black colony

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

among others, feel different when viewed through the lens of Afrofuturism, which focuses on the negation of stereotypes and the construction of alternative futures. In that sense, the film's conception of an exclusive black colony in space prefigures Paul Gilroy's (1993) concept of the "Black Atlantic," which constitutes a kind of impure mixedness perceived as the foundational characteristic of Afrofuturism. As a transhistorical, transcultural, and transnational phenomenon, Afrofuturism is less concerned with preventing the destruction of an 'authentic' black culture, which itself is an illusion. Rather it is concerned with the "synthesis of past revisionism and science fictional futurism," as demonstrated by Sun Ra's identities as at once a Pharaoh and an alien, an ancient Kemetian deity[9] and a futuristic space traveler (van Veen 2016, 82).

As an Afrofuturist film, *Space is the Place* constitutes an aesthetic resistance to segregation and alienation of people historically dislocated by Western ideals of progress through the reclamation of past histories and the use of technoscience. In working with the social and historical experiences of the Afrodiasporic, Afrofuturism repositions black culture in a high-tech environment as a response to the transformation of humanity brought about by technological development. The black experience, particularly the issue of double consciousness that prevailed against blackness[10], is positively transformed by this notion of humanity with its emphasis on networks and hybrid mixtures. Afrofuturism relies heavily on science fiction because it is a subversive phenomenon that helps us make sense of the interplay between our fictional and reality representations in our futuristic imaginations, a future commonly referred to as the singularity because of its emphasis on technological advancement, transformation, and progress. By blurring the lines between reality and fiction, Afrofuturist science fiction frees us to think beyond the obvious and mundane. Sun Ra's constant references to ancient Egypt, outer space, and technology create an intersection in which the projection of space

[9] Kemetian deity refers to the supreme being of Kemetism, a derivative of ancient Egyptian religion and cosmos. Ancient Egyptian deities were not confined by space, time, and reason. Rather they traversed spaces and could inhabit multiple identities at once. (*See Magic and Religion in ancient Egypt* by Sjef Willockx, 2005).

[10] The term "double consciousness" refers to the twoness, the Africaness and the Americanness, that black identity, particularly the African American encapsulates. The phenomenon developed as a result of the social historical experiences of slavery and segregation. W.E.B. Du Bois coined and introduced this dimension of double conciouness in his work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

in the film dissolves hierarchies and dichotomies associated with the dominant society, against which he proposes an alternative.

In connection with the above, Donna Haraway (2016) has argued that the capacity to see one's way out of oppression and into new possibilities is a prerequisite for freedom. According to Haraway, the cyborg embodies the entanglement of our realities and fictions. In his seminal *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction*, Suvin (1979) conceptualised the interactive phenomenon between the real and the imaginative as cognitive estrangement and the *novum*.These elements are what ground a story within the genre of science fiction. Hence the author of a science fiction story is supposed to create and work within a world that is simultaneously similar and different from his empirical world. It is the combination of these two elements, cognition and estrangement that produces the *novum*, the uncanny which according to Botting (2005, 112) poses as a threat to the old. This idea of estrangement, or alienation as Csicsery-Ronay (2003) argues, is political and causes us (the viewers) to understand our real world as an illusion, thus provoking us to think of other ways or forms of a better life. Estrangement takes the individual beyond the obvious and allows an innovative comprehension and response to the mundane.

The 1960s and 1970s are marked by the African American community's struggle for equal civil rights. These two decades saw the proliferation of several black movements, such as the Black Power movement, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Panther Party, which advocated for equality for Black people as well as for the creation of a separate black nation in the Americas, along with Garveyism[11] which pursued the possible return of blacks to Africa. So, the separatist ideal pervaded discourses of emancipation among black movements at the time. As an Afrofuturist science fiction film, it is not surprising that *Space is the Place* touches on such issues together with the space age because Afrofuturism interweaves the past, present, and future.

[11] Garveyism represents the separatist ideology of The Universal Negro Improvement Association which emphasised that equality for black people is only attainable through an exclusive black nation. The movement proposed the return of the African diaspora to Africa. Garveyism is named after its leader Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican American. See ("Marcus Garvey: Aims and Object of Movement for Solution of Negro Problem") https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/segregation/text1/marcusgarvey.pdf

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

Differently, the film's inclusion of a forest setting raises the issue of whether or not nature is fundamental to the advancement of technology, challenging stereotypical representations that are dichotomous and polarised. In other words, the scene of Sun Ra wandering through the forest filled with alien creatures represents diversity in space and appears to undermine the idea of segregation and endorse diversity, which as we have seen defines Afrofuturism in opposition to mainstream science-fiction. It should also be mentioned that the idea of the otherworld(s) has long been an integral part of the Afrodiasporic cultural life,. According to Grace Gipson (2019), Afrofuturists, "from Sun Ra's use of Egyptian iconography to imagine leaving Oakland, California for a future destination in Saturn (in *Space is the Place*); to musical artists like Parliament and Outkast taking us on the 'mothership' experience; to writers and scholars Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Walidah Imarisha," have been constructing bridges from space to America to Africa and the rest of the world (Gipson, 458–459). In this sense, the forest constitutes a metaphor that reflects the film's theme of spatiality and temporality.

According to Emily Lordi (2022), Afrofuturists are more inclined to the future and other worlds, whereas psychedelic movements are specifically concerned with the here and now. Arun Saldanha (2007) stated a similar sentiment, claiming that psychedelia is neither purified, nor devoid of the social. Instead, "it seriously plays around with what the environment has to offer" (Saldanha 2007, 15). While the idea of segregation has been a serious obstacle for black life on planet Earth, the forest is a metaphor for Earth. Echard observed that "the countercultures of the 1960s not only challenged but also re-inscribed hegemonic values" (Echard 2017, 64). The motivation behind these two disparate concepts—the representation of the forest and the idea of segregation on this brand-new planet in space —allows the blurring of the boundary between the real world and the fantasy world, a concept that serves as a metaphor for contemporary black identities that Sun Ra represents and reflects in the film. The forest and segregation in outer space represent the entanglement between the old and the new or the interplay of the past and the future within the present.

Erik Steinskog, in his book *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come,* conceptualized the entanglement between the old and the new as "the changing same", which he defined as a "paradoxical

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

relationship between difference and repetition, of continuity and change of the same and something else, as inherently interrelated, and involves keeping a core within this changing environment" (Steinskog 2018, 49). The forest and the idea of segregation are core to *Space is the Place* even in the light of the transformation in black identity that it appears to portray. In *Dark Matter*, Sheree R. Thomas (2004) identified this repetition and continuity phenomena as a "two-headed" vision characterised by process of "looking forward as much as looking back" (Thomas 2004, 1). Similarly, Kwadwo Eshun (2003) in his article "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism", characterised the phenomenon as Afrofuturist chronopolitics, which entails concurrently gazing through the present from the past to project into the future.

The film adequately subverts the stereotype of blackness as uncivilised and and blackness as the antithesis of technology. Sun Ra's journey to outer space mirrors the space age technology while his use of scientific clichés of time travel such as teleportation, transmoleculization, transliquidation, and isotopes, mirrors the technocultural language germane to contemporary science fiction. In addition, Egypt is seen as a technological civilisation with architectural marvels that required sophisticated technology to build, such as the pyramids, dams, and other structures. *Space is the Place* uses the metaphor of Egypt to signify that black techno-civilisation existed long ago and that blackness is technological, with the understanding that Egypt is Africa and that Africa is the cradle of civilisation. The film positions Afrofuturism as both a technocultural phenomenon and a counterculture of technology. In other words, the film, through its references to ancient Egyptian civilisation, does not only resist the Western normative ideal of technology but also offers an alternative which works to expand the meaning and scope of technology. Thus, *Space is the Place* employs a combination of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, and Afrocentrism which works to denature science fiction from its traditional characteristic as an exclusive framework.

Apart from showcasing Sun Ra's interest in technology, the film also addresses the zeitgeist of the day. Many works of art and music from the 1960s and 1970s, including rock, psychedelic funk, electronic music, science fiction soundtracks, and album covers, are heavily incorporated into the film, together with the theme of space exploration and the impact of technology on the environment. In *Space is the Place*, the concept of space signals freedom not only because of the

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

embedded notion of the uninhibited movements in between the spaces of the fantastic world and the real world, as well as between the past-present-future temporalities, but also because of the promise of freedom and equality that technology purported to offer. The image of the forest emphasises claims to conviviality as a frame to collectively live and flourish in mutual respect with human and non-human environments and reinforces the imperative of a harmonious interaction among humans, nonhumans, and technology even in the phase of technological advancements. Sun Ra's thoughts on music's ability to transport people to better worlds conceptualises music as at once a vehicle of harmony and transcendence that unsettles and yet reproduces new forms of harmonious existence. In this way Sun Ra posits music as a form of technology and by doing so interrogates and positions technology as a vehicle of transformation, rather than for exploitation, subordination and objectification which had been the lot of many Black people and specifically African Americans since their encounter with modern technology.

5. Music and the Flight to Space

Sun Ra's creation of a psychedelic planet demonstrates his transcendental way of thinking and stands for the psychological liberation of Black people from alienation and the trauma of double consciousness, which is a term coined by William Du Bois (1903) in his book *The Souls of the Black Folk*. Dubois defines it as the feeling of twoness, of disparate competing selves: one American and one Negro. Two very significant elements are core to the music score of *Space is the Place*, which consists entirely of space age songs[12]: music as a historical archive and music as a liberatory phenomenon. The score of *Space is the Place*, which forms an elemental aspect of the entire narrative of the plot, is composed of space-themed lyrics, and the "interplanetary" tonalities that Sun Ra originally created and performed together with his band. One major thing that is ubiquitous in the film's score is the function of music in African American culture. Ra's space-age songs situates him at the centre of subversive and liberatory activity. At the same time, they unsettle the

[12] Space age songs are musical compositions from the 1950s and 1960s that were inspired by optimism of space technology and embed the excitement about space exploration. It involves otherworldly sounds that produce futuristic soundscapes. It is significantly influenced by the concept of outer space.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

matrix of modern science fiction, which hitherto has been characterised by blackness' invisibility and unethical representation of people of African descent.

In her analyses of the important uses of music in French feminist and African American criticism and theory, Jacquelyn A. Fox-Good (2000) indicates that "African American music through imagined immersion in and expression of suffering, both enables and signifies transcendence of and liberation from suffering and its material causes including slavery, degradation, humiliation, and other forms of loss and dispossession" in ways that historical records cannot depict (Fox-Good, 2000, 2). The tempo of the space age songs in *Space is the Place* recalls the marginalisation and exclusion felt by African Americans as a result of slavery and colonialism and questions the utopian ideal of freedom through technological progress. For Sun Ra, music became his shield against a hostile world, including a dysfunctional family background. According to Paul Youngquist (2016), 13) Sun Ra was possessed by "an unwavering belief that music can take its players and listeners to better worlds—better, at least, by the measure of joyous sounds" (Youngquist 2016, 13).

As mentioned earlier, in *Space is the* Place there is a scene in which Sun Ra is at a youth centre on Earth and attempting to rally the youth to his cause. He is met with opposition from the young people, who mock his costume and find his message too bizarre to comprehend. What is worth noting is that, although Sun Ra's suggestion is met with opposition, he still proceeds to forcefully implement his plan. At the film's climax, we see a massive disappearance of black audience members during his musical concert. They are teleported into his spaceship bound for the psychedelic planet. This act of teleportation is enabled through the power of jazz music. Sun Ra was a jazz musician and for him jazz carried a special meaning. As Simawe (2000) asserts, jazz music in particular connects African American memories across generations because jazz musicians encode more than just individual memories in their musical performance. Through improvisation, musicians frequently use tunes familiar from the jazz repertoire, turning them inside out and creating new sounds and meanings from old material, a phenomenon reminiscent of Afrofuturism's critical practice of transforming historical phenomena and making them relevant to the present, as well as connecting them to the future in a more positive sense, thus rendering historical facts into progressive phenomena.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

6. Using Science Fiction as Method in *Space is the Place*

From my analysis of the film *Space is the Place*, I concur with David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith who posit that "a film coaxes us to connect sequences into a larger whole" (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2020, 52). According to these authors, we cannot just pick out one important part of a film and use it to determine the entire meaning of the film. For instance, as mentioned before, in *Space is the Place* Sun Ra names teleportation, transmoleculization, transliquidation, and isotopes as the possible means by which he will transport black people to outer space. By themselves, these terms constitute mere scientific *clichés*. However, in the context of the film, they work together to convey a different meaning. Combined with the futuristic musical score composed by The Sun Ra Arkestra, these terms are used together with the other cinematic elements (such as the forest setting, for example) to highlight the eclectic yet harmonious characteristic that is imperative to the films' context and the genre it inaugurates.

The forest here can be seen as the thematic element that connects the real to the fantastic. It blurs the boundaries between the real world and the fantasy world. One of the different ways of evaluating films, as Bordwell, Thompson and Smith indicate, is on the basis of its realistic criteria. And yet, these authors move on to emphasise that films like "artworks often violate laws of reality and operate by their own conventions and internal rules" (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2020, 61). Arguing in a similar direction, Timothy Corrigan (2015), asserts that, "every mode of cinema has its own form or mode of dramaturgy distinct to it and its performance style" (Corrigan 2015, 28). In any case, the analysis of science fiction narration often diverges from this approach. Whilst we cannot define science fiction through its textual properties alone, it is apparently dependent on an exploration of both the differences and similarities between a certain fictional world and the real world.

Although I have aimed from the outset to read the film as within the context of science fiction, *Space is the Place* is neither generic nor monolithic. It is simultaneously one and many things. Based on my analysis of the film, it becomes obvious that, on the one hand, *Space is the Place* defies easy categorisation, thus evading Derrida's (1980) ironic "law of genre", which at the onset proposes that "[g]enres are not to be mixed" (Derrida 1980, 203). Derrida insists, "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (Derrida 1980, 212). *Space is the Place* conflates several genres including science fiction, documentary, Blaxploitation, revisionist biblical as well as musical, and urban youth film. These genres are merged and cemented together through the concept of Afrofuturism. In this context, science fiction becomes synonymous with Afrofuturism.

David Seed (2011) posits that science fiction from Hugo Gernsback through Robert Heinlein and Darko Suvin "has variously been explained it as a combination of romance, science, and prophecy [Hugo Gernsback], 'realistic speculation about future events' (Robert Heinlein), and a genre based on an imagined alternative to the reader's environment (Dark Suvin)" (Seed 2011, 1). From this point of view, albeit science fiction is central to Afrofuturism, to locate the film within a particular genre constitutes a form of restriction and an act of reducibility because Afrofuturism itself is irreducible to science fiction. Because many works of science fiction are themselves hybrids, Seed argues that it is necessary to consider it as a mode rather than a genre.

Certain films have been labelled as science fiction for easy identification and access by the audience, and for marketing purposes. Albeit *Space is the Place* bears the characteristics of a science fiction film in terms of content, it had barely enjoyed the attention of fandom attributable to science fiction films in the 1970s. *Space is the Place* does not succumb to easy categorization in a generic sense. Although the film has a futurist theme at its core, and contains tropes such as spaceships and space travel, its content and form transcend the specificities of the science fiction genre. The phenomenon invites us to interrogate the adequacy of generic categorization as a sufficient method for analysing this particular film. In my point of view gathered from this analysis, *Space is the Place* positions science fiction as a mode because it employs it as a narrative technique that at once subverts and transcends generic conventions and boundaries. In other words, the film works within and against the genre of science fiction. According to Seed, science fiction can be seen as a platform that enables the intersection of different genres. This idea is synonymous with how a film can be analysed. Film analysis constitutes an interdisciplinary phenomenon. In the particular case of *Space is the Place*, any analysis that relies solely on the film's identity in terms of its generic category

without recourse to the friendly donor styles[13] embedded within it, risks misrepresenting the film.

Effectively, Christine Cornea asserts that, in the scholarly domain, film academics have studied films by examining

> a particular genre in terms of its structures, themes, narrative strategies, and repeated visual iconography in order to offer up informed criticism and exposure of a genre's underlying conventions and codes. Besides, film academics have also studied the response of spectators to genres in order to understand the specific relationship between a film text and its audience. (Cornea 2007, 5)

For instance, Sexton (2006) has analysed *Space is the Place* from the perspective of form and reception to determine that it is not only a cult film but a cult proxy. Zuberi (2004), on the other hand, approached this same film from a special effects angle. Thus, the theoretical approach to analysing films in terms of method varies significantly and is produced by the dialogic interaction between the reader and the film based on the specific interest and object of the reader and the unique characteristic of the film. *Space is the Place*, as a science fiction film, "has proven difficult to pin down using genre theory," and "the genre's purported boundaries remain elusive and difficult to define" (Cornea 2007, 5). However, based on my experience, viewing *Space is the Place* through an Afrofuturist lens within the context of science fiction serves as a springboard for the revelation and rediscovery of other dimensions of the film, which collectively recreate and contribute to the film's evolving identity.

7. Conclusion

In *Space is the Place*, when Sun Ra proposed to establish an exclusive black colony in space, the idea appeared to convey a twist on and almost seemed like a perpetuation of old and familiar experiences into a new space. This idea complicates the notion of apocalypse which implies the destruction of old ways of being. Yet, what Sun Ra was proposing was a space of play for Black people. A space where black people could imagine other possible ways of being. *Space is the Place* represents an intersection between Afrofuturism and science fiction that allows a

[13] Donor style in the context of this article refers to the characteristics of the film that are drawn from other genres but do not form an overarching framework of the film. William Echard (2017) defined the idea of donor style in his book Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Music Topic Theory in relation to the psychedelic music theory.

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°6 - 2nd Series // July 2023 DOI [10.34632/diffractions.2023.11473]

rewriting of blackness into history and into the future as depicted in the film by Sun Ra who at once represents an ancient Egyptian Pharoah and a contemporary space traveler.

Despite Sun Ra's idea of establishing an exclusive black colony in space, as Sinker (1992) argues, in the film the apocalypse has already happened and there is no normality to return to, which means that any allusion to authentic black identity is a mere illusion. Nevertheless, the film does well in denaturing black identity from its social historical heritage of exclusion, marginalisation, and unethical representation by depicting what technology means and what it could possibly be. In the context of Afrofuturism, *Space is the Place* represents a personal as well as a collective odyssey to realise the full potential of one's bicultural identity as an African American through the depiction of a dialogic interaction between historical space and the actual physical space "within which (...) [the] African past and the utopian sci-fi future could be fleetingly experienced as one" (Echard, 728). Blackness is science fiction in and of itself. The Black experience of abduction produced a form of alienation, while exclusion and marginalisation, which are a result of the segregation that followed, are also synonymous with science fiction's traditional treatment of blackness. Again, Afrofuturist science fiction blurs boundaries and makes it impossible to categorically distinguish the reality of blackness from its fiction and significantly categorises the black experience as science fictional.

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