Inside ‘Neptune’s Lair’:
Drexciya, Dystopia and Afrofuturism

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ABSTRACT:

Identity is not a thing but a process - an experiential process
which is most vividly grasped as music.

Simon Frith, ‘Music and Identity’

In his 1996 essay, ‘Music and Identity’, sociologist and music critic Simon Frith argued that identity was not a thing but a process. That our identities came from the outside, not the inside; subjectivity, a question of doing rather than being. Taking its cue from this short epigraph the purpose of this essay will be to address the conceptual legacy of Afrofuturist music through the hydrophonic frequencies of Drexciya, an electronic music duo from Detroit active during the 1990s and early 2000s. Often referred to as the darker edge of Afrofuturist music, their eponymous neo-nautical mythology and posthuman soundwaves have created a sonic fiction of techno-Afro-becoming that has persisted well beyond their operative years. An aural wormhole, siphoning from past to future and back again. Looking at the work of Paul Gilroy and his seminal work of cultural theory, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), alongside sonic theories of Afrofuturist affect and post-structuralist cultural studies, I wish to underscore Frith’s aforementioned hypothesis: that the production of identity is non-essentialist in character, in so far as Drexciya’s sub-aquatic politics affirm the privileged position of music in constructing new forms of techno-subjectivity in the dystopian realm of late capitalist social hegemony. That Drexciya provide a model for future subject becomings anchored in the dark soul of the present.

Introduction

“Could it be possible for humans to breath underwater?” – so begin the sleeve notes to Drexciya’s inaugural 1997 album The Quest. Emerging in the early 90s alongside figures such as Octave One and Underground Resistance, Drexciya was a second-wave electro duo based in the post-industrial homeland of Detroit techno. Drawing from the history of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Drexciya augmented their visionary sound of electro-techno with a

2 Sleeve Notes to The Quest (1997); Submerge Recordings.
retrofuturist mythology of sunken wormholes, webbed mutants and abyssal planes. The music itself was appropriately fluid. Bass that lurched up-pitch like magma through the ocean floor, damp hi-hats and ambient fogs of austere oceanic depth. During their active years Drexciya released a total of three Studio Albums, nine EPs and three Singles. Since their untimely dissolution following the death of its cofounder James Stinson in 2002, Dutch record label Clone Records has released four Compilation Albums charting their full sonic journey, from the nautical jungle of Drexciya to the ‘Red Hills of Lardossa’ on Mars; even the ‘grava theory’ of their final album release, Grava 4 (2002): a “single, continuous super-field that contains and mediates all energy, mass, space and time.” Following from our inaugural quote, the short textual preface found in The Quest’s sleeve notes continues on to solidify the former and most essential of these speculative visions: the Drexciyan mythology of an underwater cosmos – one which had been slowly building since their first 12” EP release on UR’s label Submerge Records in 1992, Deep Sea Dweller:

Are Drexciyans water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorise us? Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi river basin and on to the great lakes of Michigan? Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us and why do they make their strange music? What is their Quest? Through an assemblage of album and track titles, cover art and sleeve notes, Drexciya is portrayed as an underwater realm deep within the Atlantic Ocean, inhabited by the unborn children of pregnant African women hurled overboard slave ships during “the greatest holocaust the world has ever known.” Populated by a sub-aquatic archipelago of cartographic track listings – ‘Danger Bay’, ‘Positron Island’, ‘Bubble Metropolis’ and so on – the subterranean universe provides a fictional setting for the establishment of a new maritime species: the Drexciyans, a race of amphibian ‘wave jumpers’ strategically poised to invade the shores of American soil in packs of “stingray and barracuda battalions.” Sporadically teaming with agents of Underground Resistance for covert black ops in the “ongoing war against planetary Control,” the eponymous frogmen – armed with tridents, webbed feet and diving masks – are militarized posthuman cyborgs, launching a sub-terrestrial attack on the collapsing beaches of Western modernity (Fig.1). Equally home to the likes of Mutant Gillmen, Lardossans and Darthouven Fish Men, the shadowy waters of Drexciya are a melting pot of synthetic diasporic victims. Forced into a pelagic adaptation of digital technologies and guerrilla warfare, the mutant protagonists of Drexciya’s aqua-theatre are stand-ins for the

4 Notes to The Quest.
5 Ibid.
6 Sleeves Notes to Aquatic Invasion (1995); Underground Resistance.
Figure 1. Drexciya, *Aquatic Invasion* (Underground Resistance, 1995)
anonymity of Drexciya’s real, human faces; twin characters engaged in a perpetual state of what Kodwo Eshun refers to as ‘open secrecy.’

The productions of Drexciya, whilst widely popular and still influential, were never known through their human counterparts. Stinson and cofounder Gerald Donald (now lead member of electro outfit Dopplereffekt) were radically withdrawn from any vehicle of standard media representation. Indignant to interviews during their active years, with those given reading more like cryptic transmissions sent from submerged laboratories or cosmic Beta waves, and with no photographs or live performances, Drexciya obscured any humanistic reading of their music. Any means of concretising, or as Deleuze & Guattari would say, ‘facialising’ the duo was systematically rejected, or at best made into another function of the mytho-poetic machine: “If the face is a politics, dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming-clandestine.” This obfuscation was a sentiment shared by figures in the 90s, such as Underground Resistance and Berlin’s Basic Channel label, with contemporary stars such as DJ Stingray (his name a clear reference of his indebtedness to the work of Drexciya) still wearing his signature balaclava. As Eshun goes on to establish, the function of their practice was not simply music but a sonic fiction. Curtailing usual modes of narrativization common in cultural criticism, this “can be understood as the convergence of the organisation of sound with a fictional system whose fragments gesture towards but fall short of the satisfaction of narrative.”

Thus from an early stage we can see how the apparatus of Drexciya’s Afrofuturist myth is fundamentally concerned with an open-ended means of analysis; the closure of monolithic narratives and essentialist forms is integral to the mode of Drexciyan identity established through the means of its sonic fiction. Furthermore:

By the 1980s, the emergent digital technology of sequencers, samplers, synthesizers, and software applications began to scramble the ability to assign identity and thereby racialize music. [And if] racial identification became intermittent and obscure to the listener, for the musician, a dimension of heteronomy became available.

This is to say, in the words of the late Mark Fisher, that the rise of Detroit techno “was best enjoyed as an anonymous electro-libidinal current that seemed to pass through producers, as a series of affects and FX that were de-linked from authors.”

This anonymity allowed musicians to create sonic fictions where there was no ‘true’ narrative to uncover – no essential ‘being’ behind their subjective enunciations.

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8 Ibid., 36.
10 *Matter Fictions*, 33.
Given this sense of becoming over being, Drexciya are typically seen within a sub-genre of Afrofuturism – an ongoing umbrella term for cultural practices which entwine futurism, liberation and experimentation through a black cultural lens (what Drexciya call the R.E.S.T Principle – Research, Experimentation, Science and Technology). Whether it be the virological endemics of Octavia Butler’s sci-fi novels, the astro-Egyptian jazz of Sun Ra, or the meditative, hybrid fiction of John Akomfrah’s 1996 documentary *The Last Angel of History*, Afrofuturism is concerned with instrumentalising the future into a political technique of the present; a method of preprograming ourselves in the here and now, using the aesthetic power of fiction as its metaphysical force. This cross-temporality brings into question the role of ‘the future’ as such: what formulations this takes under contemporary forms of neoliberal capitalism, what relationship this hybridity has to modernity per se, and what opportunities it thus affords cultural practitioners for the creation of new subjective frameworks. In asserting the role of identity as process, and with music as its mode of enactment *par excellence*, I will argue for an efficacy of Sonic Fiction in the modification and productive constitution of different subject-becomings outside of the logic of what Gilroy describes as black essentialism’s distinct yet symbiotic dual function. That of pan-Afrocentricity and libertarian pluralism; two varieties of the same essentialism: “one ontological, one strategic.” I will argue that in this regard Sonic Fiction is a hyper-tool, beamed from the future and inserted into the cogs of the present social machine, substituting for identity a new technology of the self, limitlessly open to new technical configurations.

**Black Atlantis: The Middle Passage**

Included within *The Quest*’s speculative inner sleeve notes was a series of illustrated maps progressively detailing the migration channels of the Drexciyan’s ‘webbed mutants’ across a series of four diasporic flows: The Slave Trade, Migration Route of Rural Blacks to Northern Cities, Techno Leaves Detroit; Spreads Worldwide, and The Journey Home (Future) (Fig. 2). As the maps systematically evolve, their triangulations become increasingly complex. Beginning with an acute isosceles stretching from Portugal to Africa to Northern America, the following channels chart the subsequent historical migrations of human and cultural bodies across the American states – the Great Migration of African-Americans to northern industrial cities in the 1930s and 40s, and the cultural dispersion of techno from Detroit in the late 80s (at this point their arrowheads projecting far beyond American borders to a global arena). The last image explicating the traverse, directionless flows of ‘homeward’ cultural exchange that will come to register between the great Atlantic divide. Immediately a vast temporality is injected into the Drexciyan mythology. Not only futuristic in sound, they immanently propose the reconfiguration of future migratory patterns into a complex and rapid exchange between diverse cultural and geographical multiplicities.

It is with similar genealogical thrust that in his work of cultural theory, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy opens with a summation of the eponymous bind of black modernity:

Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either
or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. However, where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.¹³

Figure 2. Sleeve Notes to *The Quest* (1997) by Drexciya.

For Gilroy, the history of modernity is inseparable from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Along with the colonisation of the Americas, African slavery provided capitalism with its first transnational trade-route and the primary accumulation of wealth and resources needed for the development of European nation-states. As such, for many post-colonial thinkers the collective trauma of America’s ‘peculiar institution’ was simultaneously the birth of modernity per se. And consequently, the entwined cultural and political hegemonies of Enlightenment reason,

Western industrialism and global capitalism cannot be thought of outside of the legacy and active forces of racialized terror, oppression and political coercion. Following from the work of African-American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, Gilroy cites this inherent paradox as the ‘double consciousness’ of the black diaspora: the forced exteriorisation of an immanent black subject. Central to this thesis is the incapacity of essentialist discourses – be it racial, ethnic and nationalist absolutism, or the anaemia of contemporary liberalism – to account for both the heterogeneity and uniformity of black political struggle. As Gilroy asserts, the collective but varied experience of black politics and modes of black cultural production “make the abstract concept of a changing same a living, familiar reality.”

To underscore the complexity of black diasporic subjects, Gilroy further evokes an origin myth of the ‘Middle Passage’ – the transnational network loosely encapsulated within the trifocal parameters of Drexciya’s first map, ‘The Slave Trade’ (although we may expand its finite points to a more general trade route including North & South America, the Caribbean, Western Europe and Western Africa). Reappropriating the historical designation of forced transatlantic communities, Gilroy strategically places the genealogy and difference of diasporic identities within the rhizomatic ‘metaculture’ of the ‘Black Atlantic’. By doing so he proposes its evaluation as “one single, complex unit of analysis [to] produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” on black identity. Utilising the liminal space of the sea, Gilroy’s Middle Passage conjures an in-between space of intensive flux and openness, translating the forces of abduction, dislocation and migration central to the slave trade into a positive setting for cultural cross-contamination. By inversing typical narratives of African subjects stripped of all cultural heritage and agency, Gilroy – and Drexciya alike – recast the Middle Passage as a Black Atlantis, home to the implicit transformation of subjectivity and identity necessary for a radical politics of Afrofuturist becoming; of identity as process.

Nowhere is this clearer than The Otolith Group’s 2010 art-house film Hydra Decapita. Led by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, the subtle meditation connects Drexciya’s ‘Black Atlantis’ with J.M.W. Turner’s Slave Ship (1840) and the Zong massacre that inspired it – a case of 132 African slaves thrown overboard a British slave ship to die, later to be claimed as inured cargo (itself a proto-form of capitalist financialisation). Emerging from deep within an oceanic cave, Decapita’s enigmatic black waterscapes ripple across the screen with an increasingly abstract and dark aura, whilst floating through the visual abyss an ethereal female voice recites passages from John Ruskin’s essay, ‘Of Water, as Painted by Turner’ (1843), slowly untangling the hermetic seal of the Author’s Drexciya myth (voiced by none other than Gerald Donald, however, credited in his usual fashion as the ‘Remnant of a Hydrogen Particle). The frequent references to Zong in the film are a clear indication of Drexciya’s political edge.

In this sense, Afrofuturism reappropriates the technological overcoming and political self-determination of modernity, turning it against itself. As Eshun elaborates in his text, ‘Further Considerations on Afrofuturism’ (2003), “African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization that philosophers like

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14 Ibid., 106.
15 Ibid., 15.
Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern.” To this extent, Drexciya pick up where Gilroy left off. The Drexciyan mythos captures the historically ambivalent subject of early African slaves and reconfigures their modern characteristics into coordinates for a new vertiginous whirlpool of identity; its limits stretched and morphed by the turbulent waves of the Atlantic. Of course, for Gilroy slavery was nothing more than “capitalism with its clothes off.” However, “recuperating a transnational black modernity that contains within it a utopian impulse” is vital to his strategic refashioning of Enlightenment ‘universalism’ for black liberation. Importantly, this utopianism is directly linked to the anti-capitalist ‘metaculture’ of the Black Atlantic per se: as “for the descendants of slaves, work signifies only servitude, misery, and subordination.”

Figure 3. Slaves are thrown overboard during the Zong massacre – Photo courtesy of e-flux

Thus, for Gilroy the liberatory backbone of a trans-Atlantic, trans-national and inter-cultural black politics is not a question of labour or emancipation through work, but of artistic

16 ‘Further Considerations,’ 288.
17 Black Atlantic, 15.
19 Black Atlantic, 40.
expression. Music, as one such form, is Gilroy’s medium of choice: how for example, “black musical expression has played a role in reproducing [...] a distinctive counterculture of modernity.”

In black musical expression Gilroy sees a way through the socio-political deadlocks of essentialism and pluralism, modernity and barbarism. In his inaugural book, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), he comments on the widespread power of black music to “celebrate non-work activity and the suspension of the time and discipline associated with wage labour. [...] In these cultural traditions, work is sharply counterposed not merely to leisure in general but to a glorification of autonomous desire.”

Through this disavowal, Gilroy’s contention is that black music – from the perpetual jazz revolutions of Miles Davis to the mixture of Jamaican sound-system culture and South Bronx social relations in hip hop – presents a ‘politics of transfiguration’ which seeks emancipation through a form of body-poetics. One which has been present through the entire history of modernity, “created under the nose of the overseer,” existing on “a lower frequency.”

In the following passage, I will consider the implications of this musical transfiguration in the contemporaneous socio-political and material effects of Drexciya; the entwined forces of cultural identification, affect and futurity that constitute their Afrofuturist legacy as a sonic fiction, traversing multiple points of cultural and temporal exchange. How, through their “frontier-effects”, Drexciya continues to provide a locus for cultural debate concerning aesthetics and identity in music, with particular reference to issues of diasporic identity and the ‘chronopolitical’ matrix of contemporary capitalism.

**Music as Process: Identity and the Future**

It is well known that music was a key mechanism for solidarity, pedagogy and artistic expression in Trans-Atlantic slave communities. This was due in part to the high levels of black illiteracy implemented by slave owners for fear of rebellion from an educated black population. As such, diasporic history, culture and tradition were expressed through music and transferred through generations of slave communities as an affective mode of myth-making and storytelling: a “means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation.”

This crucial history of internal communication provides black diasporic music with an expression of political autonomy adjacent to the romantic anti-capitalism of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. As a “non-representational and non-conceptual form” of embodied subjectivity, it operated as an aesthetic counter-narrative to Western rationality and the pseudo-scientific racisms that underpinned its systems of exclusion, racial hierarchy and socio-political control:

20 Ibid., 36.
22 Paul Gilroy, ‘It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at: the dialectics of diasporic identification,’ in *Third Text* (Winter, 1990/1) pp. 11.
24 *Black Atlantic*, 40.
25 Ibid., 76.
the Black Atlantic’s “common exclusion from the promises of the French Enlightenment and from full citizenship in the ideally democratic polities inspired by it.”

Through music, slave communities produced new epistemologies and modes of subjective becoming that pushed beyond their oppressive social infrastructures – in particular, deconstructing the hegemony of post-Cartesian metaphysics and the ocular-centric traditions of aesthetic experience. Critically, sonic forms were marked by their contingent, ephemeral and subjective materiality: as Rey Chow and James Steinstrager explain in their essay, ‘In Pursuit of the Object of Sound’ (2011): “As a visual phenomenon, objects are generally discrete; they have a (sur)face and exteriority. […] Sound, on the other hand, does not appear to stand before us but rather to come to or at us.”

And for Chow and Steinstrager, this dynamic and fleeting experience of music has important aesthetic ramifications: “sonic phenomena are points of diffusion that in listening we attempt to gather. [And] this work of gathering – an effort to unify and make cohere – implies that subjectivity is involved.”

The productive signification of ‘work’ is crucial here – and upon inspection, is exactly where the aesthetic potential of Drexciya lies.

In his introduction to an anthology of essays titled Questions of Cultural Identity (1996), cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall begins by opening the question of identity to a series of fractious provocations. Centred around the “notion of an integral, originary and unified identity”, Hall mobilises a similar configuration of postmodern constructivism used by Gilroy to reassess identity – not as a static entity, but as a process of ‘identification’. He explains:

> the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always in ‘process’. […] Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference. […] Like all signifying practices [it] obeys the logic of more-than-one.

In this sense, Drexciya operate at a multiplicity of subjective identifications. Following from their Afrofuturist precursors, the core sci-fi inspired tenets range from extra-terrestrial cyborgs to mutant amphibians, terraforming aliens to cybernetic robots; a series of posthuman subject positions which inscribe “a subliminally political act, the ramifications of which can be read as both a form of self-empowerment and an identification with otherness, whether

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28 Ibid.


30 Ibid., 2 – 3.
technological or racial.”

Essences which have formerly been ascribed to the ontological character of black bodies – be they alien, objects of sexual desire, or units of industrial capitalist production – are reappropriated as a new form of political power. In his essay, ‘Black Secret Technology’ (2001), writer Ben Williams remarks that these posthuman subjects are “after all, stronger, tougher, and more enduring than mere humans.”

Which, given that “invented histories, invented biologies, invented cultural affinities come with every identity; each is a kind of role that has to be scripted, structured by conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to conform,” provides the Black Atlantic diaspora with a reappropriated power of social alienation: as Eshun iterates, “The cyborg fantasies of the Detroit techno producers […] were used both to alienate themselves from sonic identity and to feel at home in alienation.”

This subjective introversion is a fundamental axis of Afrofuturist identification, substituting historical oppression with a speculative future of technologically enhanced social identities. Thus, as Hall goes on to observe, identity is a “process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.”

A later essay in the anthology, Simon Frith’s ‘Music and Identity’, continues from Hall’s preliminary critique. Linking Hall’s deconstruction of identity to a process of continuous intertextual dialogue, Frith considers how music “creates and constructs an experience - a musical experience, an aesthetic experience - that we can only make sense of by taking on both a subjective and a collective identity.”

Proceeding from Hall, Frith links music’s affective potential to its anti-essentialist materialism: the “necessary consequence of music’s failure to register the separations of body and mind on which such ‘essential’ differences (between black and white, female and male, gay and straight, nation and nation) depend.”

Of course, for Gilroy the ‘collective identity’ invoked through Black Atlantic music is the collective memory of slavery, expressed in a mnemonic solidarity of abduction, forced migration and socio-political alienation in The Middle Passage. And importantly, for a writer such as Gilroy, this deterritorialized socio-cultural bond anchors the ‘Lardossan Cruiser’ of Drexciya’s 1993 single ‘Bubble Metropolis’ to a larger network of socio-aesthetic performances in Black Atlantic music: Parliament-Funkadelic’s “metaphysical mothership”, Sun Ra’s 1972 track, ‘Solar Ship Voyage’, or Nas’ 2002 ‘Warrior Song’ lyrics: “Middle Passage I made it.”

32 Ibid.
34 Further Considerations, 296.
37 Ibid., 122.
38 Gaskins, 70.
Indeed, this traverse factory of soma-aesthetic production is established in the prelude of Drexciya’s aforementioned single, a female voice piercing through the Cruiser’s intercom system with an appropriately aqua-punk vernacular:

*This is Drexciyan Cruise Control Bubble 1 to Lardossan Cruiser 8-203 X. Please decrease your speed to 1.788.4 kilobahn. Unknown turbine engine slows down. Thank you. Lardossan Cruiser 8-203 X please use extra caution as you pass the aqua construction site on the side of the aquabahn. I repeat: Proceed with Caution.*

Figure 5. Cover Art for Aquanauts’ 12” Single *Spawn* (2003) released on Underground Resistance.

The imaginary of an ‘aqua construction site’ is an important reference here, echoing the psychoanalytic provocation of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s work of schizoanalysis, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). Critiquing the then dominant Freudian psychology, which saw the unconscious as an Oedipal theatre of symbolic representation, Deleuze and Guattari saw the unconscious as a machinic factory of production: “The great discovery of psychoanalysis was
that of the production of desire, of the productions of the unconscious.”

Contrary to the Freudian notion of desire as lack (itself with a philosophical trajectory found in Hegel, Lacan and Žižek), Deleuze and Guattari see the role of desire as an active, autonomous force that pre-consciously invests into a given social field. That is to say, that the “object of desire” is not something that the subject lacks; to the contrary, it is what the subject imagines and creates.”

Identities therefore, are constituted through flows of desire which pre-exist and continually destabilise any unitary or static formulation. The question of what one chooses to imagine, what one desires, thus takes on a distinctly material and political dimension, in so far as “desiring-production produces the real.”

For Frith and Hall alike, identity is in this sense a construction – enacted through a series of productive and positive forces of reflexive self-identification; what Frith would term acts of ‘self-recognition’ – moments where we ‘plug in’ to various symbolic and imagined cultural narratives, actively shaping the collective identities we experience. In his larger work, Performing Rites (1996) – a sociological reading of popular music – Frith expands his terminology thusly:

[Music] seems to make possible a new kind of self-recognition, to free us from everyday routines, from the social expectations with which we are encumbered […] Music constructs our sense of identity through the experiences it offers of the body, time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives.

However, where Gilroy had curtailed his account of Black Atlantic music at the moment of hip-hop – a genre which used “recognizable samples that were intended to trigger emotional memories/histories,” and ultimately led Gilroy to question “how a form which flaunts and glories in its own malleability as well as its transnational character becomes interpreted as an expression of some authentic African-American essence?” – Kodwo Eshun similarly doubts purely utopian readings of Afrofuturism’s posthuman identities.

For Eshun, where the “optimistic illusions” of Samuel R. Delaney’s sci-fi novels or DJ Spooky’s ‘Galactic Funk’ (1996) demanded modernity fulfil its pledge to utopian prosperity – a bid very much at home with the writings of Gilroy and Frith – the sub-vocal frequencies of Drexciya’s Roland TR-808 channelled the ‘productive activity’ of social identification into a militarized overload. The cover art and illustrations of Abdul Qadim Haqq, depicting Poseidic

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41 Anti-Oedipus, 380. [my emphasis]
43 Williams, 163.
44 Black Atlantic, 33-34.
warriors akin to cybernetic Navy SEALs, is testament to this aesthetic warfare (Fig. 3). Where, for example, the despotitic reverence of Sun Ra’s Afrofuturist legacy has now congealed into a visual trope of 90s extraterritoriality and space travel, the inherent anonymity of Drexciya and their digital synthesisers has retained a heteronomic potency that moves beyond solely celebratory readings of Afro-posthumanism; which for Eshun, similar to Gilroy and hip-hop, has reached the threshold of its cultural narrative, reinforcing culturally assigned tropes of technological ‘progress’, liberalism’s “simple matter of inserting more black actors into science-fiction narratives”, or the subsequent “colour-blind social formations […] that were made in the European rave scene.”

Eshun’s 2013 exhibition catalogue, titled ‘Stealing One’s Own Corpse: Afrofuturism as a Speculative Heresy’, was a critical turning point in Afrofuturist discourse. Written for the exhibition The Shadows Took Shape, held at The Studio Museum, Harlem, Eshun outlines a key re-reading of ‘futurity’ from a contemporary African perspective; one which questioned the “inherent progressivism of Afrofuturism as an artistic practice.” Central to Eshun’s claim, is that Afrofuturism should sideline its techno-utopian impulse for a consideration of the fact that “Africa increasingly exists as the object of futurist projection” per se. Citing the economic projections, weather predictions and life-expectancy forecasts that the West uses to, on the one hand, economically control future investment into the continent through multinational and nongovernmental organisations, and on the other, demoralise our political will to help it, Eshun reconfigures the question of ‘who controls the future?’ – an proto-manifesto for Afrofuturist and avant-garde movements – in light of what Mark Fisher would call SF (science fiction) capital: “SF capital is the synergy, the positive feedback between future-oriented media and capital.” Given the context of late-capitalism’s technological infrastructure – a world of computer simulations, venture capital, futures and derivatives trading, data surveys and algorithmic perceptions – “it would be naïve to understand science fiction […] as merely prediction into the far future, or as a utopian project for imagining alternative social realities.” For Eshun, something else is needed.

Afro-Pessimism: Dystopia and Affect

In contemporary Leftist discourse, the recent ‘affective turn’ has provided for a resurgence in utopic desire. Theorists, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whilst acknowledging the ambivalence of affect’s social function, speak of how “the power to act” is fundamentally rooted in the concentration of “passion and affect in one common place.”

46 Future Considerations, 298.
49 Future Considerations, 291.
50 Ibid., 290.
51 Ibid.
Sketching out the potential for contemporary revolutionary activity, Hardt and Negri locate this common position in the emergent socialist and global collectivity of the ‘multitude’ – a heterogeneous confederacy of networked workers, migrants, NGOs and social movements – a social form replacing the orthodoxy of the Marxist ‘proletariat’. For these thinkers, as well as those such as Brian Massumi, affect is a fundamentally productive and positive force which is only ever momentarily captured by the forces of Empire: multi-national, neoliberal and late-capitalist social structures. As Massumi explains:

Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect [...] Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them. Their autonomy is the autonomy of affect.53

Regarding the ‘autonomy’ of Afrofuturist utopianism, such is seen in the work of Delaney’s short-story, “Aye, and Gomorrah...” (1967), or John Coney’s 1974 film, Sun Ra: Space is the Place – a trend in Afrofuturist sensibility neatly surmised in the first curated program of this year’s Kinomathek Karlsruhe, Afrofuturism in Film: Black Utopia – the problem arises when the assumption of utopian affect proposes “that this utopia is already here (only momentarily unrecognized).”54 For critic Richard Pope, this assumption becomes all the more pertinent in a system of communicative capitalism which “increasingly relies upon the production and circulation of hopeful affect.”55 A system which collapses the modernist narratives of individual freedom, technological liberation and social equality, into “the sort of happy-go-lucky utopia of social and technological connectedness performed via social networks;” the argument effectively becoming “indiscernible from the logic of contemporary capitalism.”56 Furthermore, given the socio-economic context of Drexciya, emerging from within the post-industrial fallout of Detroit’s failed experiment in post-war capitalist idealism, the horizon for a re-worked modernist desire for utopia becomes harder to sustain.

In place of this, Eshun references the concurrent aesthetic schema of Afro-Pessimism, a conceptual assemblage of radical black thought which finds common ground in the question of capitalism’s inherent relationship to race, troubled by the ambiguity cast over its relation to social death and civic society since the emergence of 90s multiculturalism and ‘post-racial’ perspectives – for example, those found in the euphoric embrace of techno in Europe’s “vulgar uproar for E’d-up mobs: anthemic, cheesily sentimental, unabashedly drug-crazed.”57 Citing again the tragedy of the Zong massacre, Eshun emphasises the shifting narrative of Drexciya’s

55 Ibid., 27.
56 Ibid., 28.
sonic fiction, countering the co-optation of Detroit Techno into the growing culture of global DJ stardom; a culture which has arguably commodified and thus pacified the affective warfare of Electro-outfits such as Drexciya, substituting their whirlpools of personal anonymity and hybrid cultures with a soft wave of liberal hedonism. Referencing Ian Baucom’s *Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005), Eshun re-establishes the relationship between black bodies, capital and futurity:

[Slaves] weren’t any old commodities. They were special commodities, credit-bearing commodities traded on the basis of promises to buy and sell. […] When the captain of the Zong gets back to land, the case is not the question of murder but the question of insurance […] a nexus between death, financialization, abstraction, and exchange. It all seemed to converge on the Zong. And so, the Drexciya mythos which had begun in ’97 as a question of mutation and posthumanity starts to take on these questions of abstraction, finance, and death.58

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It is clear that utopian affect is not the central tenet of Drexciya’s core mission. Instead, where modernity had promised us this desire for utopia as a retrofuturist logic to fight for here, in the present. The work of Drexciya continues to inject a disjunctive temporality into the chronopolitical matrix of contemporary capitalism – siphoning through the affective continuum of abstraction, futurity and capital to redress Afrofuturist politics in uniquely dystopian form: the “affects of survivalism, of having survived, and of thereby being in the present moment.”

Firmly rooted in their persistent anonymity, their complex textual hermeneutic and rigorously antagonistic aesthetic, Drexciya, by re-appropriating the Zong massacre into a fictional origin of sonic ‘esoterrorism’, push the “militancy of the posthuman towards spectrality, haunting and death,” which, in keeping with the Afro-pessimist refusal of utopian affect, made it “Impossible not to see capital as a machine that calculates the future at the point of the death it demands.” A death that continues to haunt black bodies across the Black Atlantic.

**Conclusion**

Given their recordings ceased in 2002, Drexciya have continued to play a major role in the electronic music and Afro-futurist scenes. Their hermeneutic seal of anonymity, coupled with a complex array of artistic and sonic fiction has cemented their brand of nautical warfare as a key example of musical expression which confronts the legacy of slavery and its contemporary manifestations in post-industrial America. Whilst descendants of the Drexciyan shores such as DJ Stingray still cloak themselves in balaclavas and Detroit jerseys, the eponymous duo were, and remain still, instrumental for a model of underground music which refused to wear a face. In this respect, it is often thought that Detroit cognoscenti lament the art form’s corruption in the current wave of techno-globalism and DJ superstars. The purity of the form muddied by its increasing re-territorialisation. As Pope comments, this is true, in so far as “claims of the music’s authenticity are addressed not towards a purity of presence/essence but on the contrary towards the once-effective affective realization of the demise of presence, of logos.”

By fabricating the sonic myth of Drexciya, the militant frequencies delivered resounded through black identities across America and beyond. Reappropriating the massacre of the Zong into an origin myth of cybernetic mutant warriors, on the one hand positively claims the posthuman affects sought after in Afrofuturist identities; the black body as alien, object and machine brings to bare the newly empowered strength of a cyborg nation, launching a guerrilla war against its enemies from unknown worlds. On the other, the particular circumstances of futurity and capital. The contemporary manifestations of SF capital reverberate in the tremble of Drexciya’s 808 kicks, the utopian affect of Afrofuturist soul wraught on the dancefloor with its dystopian present; a sonic reminder that not only the past but the future too comes with an ominous snare.

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59 Pope, 29.
60 ‘Drexciya as Spectre,’ 48.
61 Pope, 27.
Bibliography


—— ‘It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at: the dialectics of diasporic identification’ In Third Text (Winter, 1990/1) pp. 3 – 16.


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