

The Blue Marble: science fiction and the visual and performing arts

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Since his death in 2016, one moment in David Bowie's career has become the launchpad of a hundred posts and articles by white British men of a certain age. In fact, it's two moments, conflated by memory into one, but both took place in the summer of 1972. I was around, but at age 3, too young for this moment to cement itself in my memory, or for Ziggy to be 'my Bowie'. On the 15th of June, Bowie and the Spiders from Mars played 'Starman' on ITV's *Lift Off with Ayesha*, a performance that only exists now as home-taped audio, as the video master was accidentally wiped by Granada TV technicians. A couple of weeks later, on the 5th of July, they again played the song but on the flagship BBC pop music programme, *Top of the Pops*, and this tape has survived in glorious colour. Bowie's jumpsuit was ideal for colour transmission. In a quilted one-piece in yellow-green with geometric patterns in red and blue, the red echoing the plumed haircut, even now he leaps from the screen. The jumpsuit was a key artifact in the touring *David Bowie Is* exhibition. Even by the standards of the 1970s, Bowie looks completely different from other rock stars: ecstatic, alien, *queer*.

For many gay young men in Britain in the summer of 1972 Bowie's *Top of the Pops* performance, singing the chorus of 'Starman' with his arm draped around the guitarist Mick Ronson, this was a moment of recognition and interpellation, a liberatory signal that someone on telly *was like them* and was *singing to them*. Bowie would become the great pop artist of alienation as his career developed (excepting his 1980s megastardom) and would use science fiction imagery up to his death. Although 'Space Oddity', his 1969 single (which was not successful at the time) had been rushed into the shops to be available while the Apollo 11 Moon mission was taking place, Bowie's adherence to science fictional ideas and motifs long

outlasted the Space Age. Bowie strategically used sf in order to sing about displacement, otherness, dislocation, and queerness of all kinds, throughout his long career.

Playing Jerome Thomas Newton in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), an alien who comes to Earth in search of help for his dying planet but succumbs to the intoxications of human life and institutionalised power, an iconic image of Bowie shows him reclining on what appears to be a dentist's chair, a wall of tv screens behind him. A sign of a spectacle-saturated and overloaded media culture, the image echoes Nam June Paik's 'TV Bed' from 1972, in which he placed 18 live tv screens in a 3x6 grid, fitted inside an iron bedframe, tilted into a reclining position. Paik's interest in tv and video was already long-standing by 1972; with engineer Shuya Abe, he had just completed a project to create a 'video synthesizer', which mixed and manipulated seven different video feeds in real time. For Paik, video was the way out of the avant-garde conundrum established by Marcel Duchamp: 'In a 1975 interview, Nam June Paik declared, "Marcel Duchamp did everything except video. He made a large front door and a very small exit. That exit is video"' (Joselit, 47). Paik also created 'Waiting for Commercials', a short 16mm film which cut together Japanese tv commercials, to be shown in performance with his collaborator, the cellist Charlotte Moorman. 'Waiting for Commercials' begins with tv footage of Marshall McLuhan, who says 'the age of the spectator has ended in our time. For example, television is an x-ray, not a pictorial, not a visual form: an x-ray'. The conjunction of McLuhan and Paik seems an obvious one fifty years later: the guru of the global village is cited by Paik, the Fluxus artist who brought tv and video into the art realm. The lineaments of our own mediated, specularized, networked forms of capital were beginning to emerge; looking for an exit is a common theme in sound and vision, in 1972.

Bowie came out of the Arts Lab scene that held a crucial place in the late 1960s counter-culture, physical spaces in which all manner of avant-garde performances were

staged and crucial connections forged. JG Ballard, for instance, put on his 'Crashed Cars' exhibition in 1970 at the New Arts Lab in London. By 1972, however, the movement was dissipating, and the centre of gravity for the conjunction of pop music and art practice and theory were the art schools, especially those in large provincial cities. (A late version of the 'Arts Lab' would be Sheffield's Meatwhistle, which in the mid-70s created the conditions for the creation of bands such as Cabaret Voltaire, The Human League and Heaven 17, all of which had sf-influenced or adjacent ideas, often concerned with technology and control.) The 'art rock' band that most personifies this connection is Roxy Music, who will be touring again in 2022. Bryan Ferry, the singer, was at the Newcastle art school in the mid-to-late 1960s and was taught by Richard Hamilton; while there, Hamilton created his own version of Marcel Duchamp's 'Large Glass' and translated the Green Box into a *Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* book (1966). Brian Eno, who was trained at the Ipswich and then Winchester schools of art, brought conceptual 'oblique strategies' to the field of composition and practice which consciously disrupted the traditional ways in which bands 'jammed' songs, which Eno felt often fell into uninteresting recapitulations of blues riffs and progressions. In the summer of 1972, Roxy Music themselves appeared on *Top of the Pops*, playing 'Virginia Plain' from their debut lp, Ferry dominating the camera in black leather trousers, black-and-green sequinned shirt, and with dark hair just a lick less plumed than Bowie's. Their first, self-titled album also featured songs such as 'Ladytron', which suggests a female robot being seduced by Ferry's crooner, and the second Roxy album, *For Your Pleasure* (1973), is yet more ominous and dystopian in its look and feel.

The connection between Ferry and Richard Hamilton indicates that Pop Art was a survival into the conceptual landscape of *pop music* well into the 1970s, when in terms of the art establishment, shows such as 'The New Art' at the Hayward Gallery in London, 'Documenta 5: Questioning Reality' at Kassel in West Germany, and 'Womanhouse' at

CalArts in Fresno, CA pointed towards a different mode of art practice. 'The New Art' was largely comprised of sculptural artists whose works and installations formed environments for audiences to encounter spatially; 'Womanhouse', a series of radical feminist events and installations, was the first major artistic intervention of Judy Chicago, whose crucial feminist work *The Dinner Party* would be exhibited at the end of the decade. However, putting the Pop into pop music was a means by which to embrace yet critique media spectacle, glamour, money, the equations that Andy Warhol – after whom Bowie named a song on 1971's *Hunky Dory* – had iterated throughout the 1960s. The connections had been apparent before – Peter Blake's *Sgt Pepper* cover, The Warhol/ Velvet Underground connection – but now, the musicians themselves understood pop music as an art practice. Bowie and Roxy Music (and later bands and musicians trained in art schools) were unafraid of the connection between art and commerce; for them, in a sense, sf was part of a design package which encompassed performance and record sleeves as well as the music coming out of hi-fi systems and transistor radios.

Hamilton had been part of the International Group in the 1950s, and his collage 'Just What Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?' (1956) is now a classic of what appears as the British form of Pop art, responding to postwar conditions of increased consumerism, spectacle, the rise of television and the imaging power of popular culture, especially American popular culture. In the collages of Eduardo Paolozzi from the same period, we can see the same fascination with the new products of the post war world: bold, even garish colour; exuberant typography; confident, future-oriented product design; a fascination for machines, communication technologies, film and television. The collages, in visual terms, emphasise visual overload, collision, lack of coherence or unity: they reflect and critique an accelerated modernity but give full weight to its seductiveness. The future had already arrived.

Paolozzi's *Bunk!* collages, produced in the early 1950s, were exhibited during 1972, while Paolozzi was in Ipswich working on very large metal sculptures that visually echo another 20th-century artistic reckoning with modernity, Futurism/ Vorticism. Paolozzi's work from the later 1960s has intimate connections to science fiction through his presence on the masthead of *New Worlds* magazine, and his friendship with JG Ballard and others in the *New Worlds* circle, such as Christopher Finch. His edition of *Moonstrips Empire News* (1967) was advertised in *New Worlds*, and further book-like artworks of this period operate on parallel terrain to Ballard's experiments with sf in his *Atrocity Exhibition* stories (as well as experiments in non-linear 'books' such as BS Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969)).

New Worlds' editor, Michael Moorcock, was himself part of a different cultural scene that was centred on Ladbrooke Grove, where Moorcock lived at the time. Bands such as the Pink Fairies and particularly Hawkwind were also survivals of the 1960s, but in another (very different) sense to that of Pop: they were central figures in the free festival scene that developed during the 1970s that would keep alive the spirit of the late-60s counterculture (and indeed, of the Arts Labs) for another decade. Members of Hawkwind appear in cameos in Moorcock's fiction, and *The Time of the Hawklords*, a novel by Michael Butterworth that fictionalised the band in sf terms (with Moorcock's name appended) was published in 1976. Moorcock would himself perform regularly with the band during the 1970s and 1980s and wrote the lyrics to their *Warrior on the Edge of Time* album (1975). Hawkwind's major commercial breakthrough came in 1972, with the release of 'Silver Machine', which made No.3 on the UK singles chart, in the same summer as 'Starman' and 'Virginia Plain'. 'Silver Machine' was based on a live recording Hawkwind made that was included on the 1972 *Greasy Trucker's Party* album, a benefit concert for the Greasy Truckers, an organization who were raising money to build a hostel in Notting Hill.

The imagery of space characterizes Hawkwind's early output, most notably on the live album *Space Ritual*, released in 1973 but recorded at the end of 1972. Pounding long-form guitar workouts, spoken-word pieces, meditative tracks played through primitive synths or tone generators and banks of effects, are crucial to the Hawkwind sound. 'Space' is clearly a metaphor for transcendence, and 'space rock' attempts to take the listener on an *internal* 'interstellar' journey. Modelled on acid/ freakout tropes, space rock in Hawkwind's terms is rhythmic and repetitive, the tension between the on-the-one drums, bass and rhythm guitar, and the expressive whooshes and washes of keyboards, dramatizing the relation between the ritualized dancing body and the mind set free to explore other states. As in the band's commitment to benefits and free festivals, however, there is a distinct communitarian politics that works alongside the transcendent themes, one that abuts Moorcock's own anarchist leanings. In many ways, Hawkwind's utopian practice points towards the more overtly political anarcho-punk inheritors of that scene in the later 1970s, most notably Crass.

Space imagery was even taken up by Elton John's 'Rocket Man' in April 1972, which drew on a Ray Bradbury story as well as 'Space Oddity', but it is in the increasing availability of synthesizers make possible the increasing presence of transcendent, 'cosmic', space music (that works ambiently, without pulses or rhythms) in the early 1970s. Brian Eno, who was to leave Roxy Music in 1973, became the great popularizer and innovator of 'ambient' music in the 1980s, but fellow experimental musicians in West Germany in the 1970s, some of whom Eno was to collaborate with in the mid-1970s, are key to what is now called '*kosmische*' music in Germany, and more problematically in the UK 'Krautrock'. The group Tangerine Dream and one of its early former members, Klaus Schulze (who died in April 2022), are most notable for their overt science fiction and space imagery. Schulze's early albums, in particular 1972's *Irrlicht*, use tape loops and treated recordings of physical instruments in the manner of *musique concrete* (or even Delia Derbyshire) to produce eerie,

minatory soundscapes. With their internal looping mechanisms, the four tracks on *Irrlicht* often have wave-like structures, layering treated sounds over one another to produce music that is somewhat difficult in its rejection of Western classical harmonic and melodic forms, but which has powerful if unsettling effects. Schulze's 1973 album, *Cyborg*, frames the music in more overt sf terms, but there the pieces have a more recognisable tonality. Tangerine Dream have a similar development. Their first album is 1971's *Alpha Centauri*, undeniably 'cosmic' in its mood; here, though, organ and other tone generators, rather than synthesizers, are to the fore. 1972's *Zeit* is similar, using string instruments, organ and mellotron, phase and other effects in creating a tonal space in which the listener is (de-) materialised in a musical space *without recognisable temporality* in terms of song or melodic structures. In ways it anticipates the ambient end of the 'industrial' music to be invented a few years in the future.

In Popul Vuh, *kosmische* music leads in another direction. In 1972, they provided the soundtrack for Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, about a megalomaniac conquistador (played by Klaus Kinski) who, at the end of the film, finds himself adrift on a raft, floating down a river, dreaming of building a thousand-year Reich in the jungle. While notionally a 'historical' film, and its connections to German 20th century history inescapable, *Aguirre* can be read as a form of science fiction. Aguirre is another man who fell to Earth, but a much more malign figure than Bowie's Thomas Jerome Newton. Destructive and murderous, Aguirre ends up marooned and alienated, in a world he cannot conceive of except in terms of domination and expropriation, retreating into fantasy while his raft is invaded by monkeys and his crew expire from illness or starvation. Styling himself the 'Wrath of God', Aguirre is a version of the rapacious and malignant Emperors of pulp sf, who descends with higher technology into an alien world, and finds himself defeated by forces he cannot comprehend or anticipate. Popul Vuh's use of choral patches on synthesizer (or perhaps

Mellotron) lends the film an otherworldly, estranged sound field which complements Herzog's deliberately non-picturesque photography. The opening shots of the film, with a train of Conquistadors moving like ants along a ridge of Machu Pichu in Peru, presents the Earth as another planet, the film as if made by visiting aliens (as we find more explicitly in other Herzog films, in particular *Fata Morgana* (1971), *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005)).

In Herzog's films, the connections between European colonialism, environmental degradation and destruction through resource extraction, and a sense of Nature or cosmos as radically Other, are recurrent. *Kosmische* music, which wants to exchange time for cosmological space, teleologies and histories for *n*-dimensions of the auditory sublime, is a particularly European response to the imperative to find an exit. As Tim Lawrence and Jeremy Gilbert have been mapping in their podcast series *Love Is The Message*, the early 1970s is also the period in which what they have been describing as 'Afro-psychedelia' (rather than Afro- or African-futurism) was developing in the United States, in Africa, and in the Caribbean (notably Jamaica), where a cosmological or science-fictional rhetoric of the *voyage out* takes on a different character. While the Afrofuturist cosmologies of Sun Ra and his Arkestra or George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic are now more extensively mapped (see Mark Bould's essay in this issue), the connections that Lawrence and Gilbert have forged to African and Caribbean music in this period expand that story. In Jamaica, in his Black Ark studios, Lee 'Scratch' Perry would soon be cooking up dubs that expressed a similar science-fictional approach to sound and space: 'I am an extraterrestrial, not from another planet but from heaven', he once said (quoted in Harries, 44). The connections between dub and Afrofuturism are partially activated in the cosmological or outer/ spatial metaphors that surround the sonic experiments of both. As Luke Erlich wrote in 1982,

If reggae is Africa in the New World, then dub must be Africa on the moon [...] The bass and drums conjure up a dark, vast space, a musical portrait of outer space, with sounds suspended like glowing planets or with fragments of instruments careening by, leaving trails like comets and meteors (Erlich, quoted by Harries, 44).

No longer is it just 'Whitey on the Moon', as Gil Scott-Heron sang in 1970. Afro-psychedelic artists' desire for an exit leads not to spatialised sublimity, but to Exodus, the final voyage out: the Mothership Connection, the Black Ark, the Arkestra; Dr Funkenstein and the Mad Professor; dub science, and *Space Is the Place*.

Although she also appears in Mark Bould's essay, this review wouldn't be complete without Alice Coltrane. Though best known for her work on the harp, Alice Coltrane was a multi-instrumentalist, and on 1972's *World Galaxy*, switches from piano to harp to organ, adding harmony and texture to the swirling orchestrations (including a version of 'My Favourite Things'). *World Galaxy* was one of a series of extraordinary albums, including *Journey in Satchidananda* (1970) and *Universal Consciousness* (1971) that invited the listener into this spiritual journey, but moving beyond the meditative spatiality that we would understand by 'ambient' music into something far more active and propulsive. My own favourite of these albums is *Journey in Satchidananda*, whose sonic beauty in its harmonic washes of Coltrane's harp playing is astonishing. Where Tangerine Dream's *Zeit* seems to abandon time for sonic space, *World Galaxy* navigates a trajectory through a harmonic cosmos.

On 14 December, 1972, Harrison 'Jack' Schmitt, the Lunar Module pilot of Apollo 17, stepped off the Moon's regolith for the last time. He and mission Commander Gene Cernan lifted off from the Moon, and rendezvousing with the Command Module piloted by Ronald Evans, the three astronauts left the Moon's orbit and returned to Earth. They were the

last to make that journey. On the way there, on 7 December, the crew had taken a photograph of the Earth, which is now known as ‘The Blue Marble’. One of the most widely-reproduced images in history, this photograph of Earth, as though taken from the perspective of an alien visitor, soon became an iconic image and was widely used by the burgeoning environmental movement. 1972 was the end of the Space Age, but sadly not the beginning of the Age of Aquarius. The transcendent *voyages out* of the late 1960s and early 1970s are often accompanied by minatory and distressing falls back to Earth, in which humanity’s degradation of the ‘Blue Marble’, 50 years later, becomes all too clear.

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