

## **Afrofuturism, Afro-Pessimism and the Politics of Abstraction: A Conversation with Kodwo Eshun<sup>1</sup>**

by Christoph Cox

The Otolith Group's 2010 film *Hydra Decapita* centers on a mythology generated in the 1990s by the Detroit-based electronic music duo Drexciya, who imagined a race of subaquatic aliens descended from Africans drowned during the Atlantic slave trade. Via a series of subtle allusions, the film connects this mythos to the case of the slave ship *Zong*, from which, in 1781, 132 Africans were thrown overboard by the crew and later claimed as insured cargo. Visually, the film is dark and spare, alternating between still shots of the ocean viewed from deep inside a cave, black waterscapes that freeze into obscure symbolic patterns, and brief typescripts from a character calling herself Novaya Zemlya, who struggles to make sense of fragments of the Drexciyan mythos uttered by another character identified only as The Author. The pensive electronic soundtrack is punctuated by transmissions from number stations and by a female voice that elegiacally sings passages from John Ruskin's essay "Of Water, as Painted by Turner," which celebrates J.M.W. Turner's proto-abstract canvas, *The Slave Ship*, inspired by the case of the *Zong*.

In August 2014, I spoke about the film with The Otolith Group's Kodwo Eshun at his home and studio in Stoke Newington, London.

Christoph Cox: *Hydra Decapita* uses the Drexciya mythos to mobilize a network of musical, historical, artistic, and philosophical references. Could you trace the connections among these various elements?

Kodwo Eshun: The obsession with Drexciya began really a long time ago. I think the first lecture I gave on them was in 1997 for Diedrich Diederichsen's conference "Loving the Alien." I bought these EPs and slowly began to grasp what Drexciya were up to, and thought it was deeply compelling. There was this strange kind of void around their work. So that was the first attempt to analyze the kind of mytho-poetic impetus that they were unfolding.

And then I wrote about them in *More Brilliant Than the Sun*.<sup>2</sup> When their compilation CD *The Quest* came out, the text they published alongside it gave a kind of cognitive map to read those EPs. And then, once James Stinson of Drexciya died in 2002, that brought this kind of intense interest on reconstructing the biographical elements of Drexciya. By then

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<sup>1</sup> This conversation was commissioned for inclusion in a catalog documenting the exhibition "AfroSat-2," curated by Anna Schrade and Henriette Gunkel and held at the Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth in 2012. Due to delays, the catalog was never published.

<sup>2</sup> Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998).

there was a lot of interest. Ellen Gallagher worked out a way of elaborating the Drexciya mythos for an art world that was fairly underinformed.

But, for me, what was bizarre was that, by the time Drexciya had come to an end, Afrofuturism had become super-identified with a kind of African-American perspective. I felt that there was a certain kind of narrowing of Afrofuturism which I critiqued quite strongly in the essay I wrote for “The Shadows Took Shape” exhibition at the Studio Museum last year.<sup>3</sup> There’s a kind of search for the virtuous object of Afrofuturism, a search for the obscure and good object that can be archaeologically excavated and affirmed. You could see that in “The Shadows Took Shape,” which included some artists that I was kind of underwhelmed by, to say the least. I argued that Afrofuturism has predatory dimensions, that it’s not inherently virtuous, that Afrofuturism has to be understood as an intervention into a chronopolitical matrix. I was trying to explain how Afrofuturism has no inherent virtue and how the continuous excavatory search is not the most powerful or dynamic aspect of it.

If you cycle back to 2010 when we made *Hydra Decapita*, we’d just come out of this *Otolith* trilogy, and I was really looking to change the visual language that we were working with. It was at that point that we thought, “let’s draw on an old preoccupation, but let’s find this extremely reduced visual language for it.” So that, yes, as you say, the references are there; but our hope was that the film could function in excess of and independently of the specific thinking that informs it. And to do that, we were really trying to come up with different kinds of abstraction. The breakthrough for us in that film is that the Drexciyan mythos is narrated by a second mythos. The whole purpose of *Hydra Decapita* is that there’s this figure who’s struggling to interpret that mythos. The key was never to explicate the mythos as such, but to wrap another layer, to further embed it in a level of hermeticism. And so, to do that, we experimented with this low-budget visual hieroglyphic language. This is the aspect we were most proud of, because it felt to us that we’d found a way to open up the question of the alien and the question of mutation. We’d found a visual register for that. We’d found a way to make it speak, where there’s a confrontation with a certain alien beauty which seems legible but actually isn’t. People continually read letters or equations into it. But they aren’t there. It’s just “the motion of light in water,” to quote Samuel Delany.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of 2010, the question for us is abstraction. Drexciya started to become something like an allegory for how to analyze the financial crisis of ’08. It became a question of how we could analyze this confrontation with a new vocabulary of financial crisis. 2008 confronted us all with the arcane language of “credit derivatives,” “credit default swaps”; and we felt something that we felt again the next year in Fukushima. When you have these infrastructural crises, a huge amount of discursive abduction takes

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<sup>3</sup> Kodwo Eshun, “Stealing One’s Own Corpse: Afrofuturism as a Speculative Heresy,” in *The Shadows Took Shape*, ed. Naima J. Keith and Zoé Whitley (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (New York: Arbor House, 1988).

place in which you can feel citizens exposed to a kind of arcane expertise. So everybody's forced to embark on a kind of accelerated process of trying to educate themselves in economics. Everybody's trying to come up with a language. We started to think we needed a visual language which was as abstract as that of the real abstraction of living through crisis. We also started to think that this was something that had absorbed a number of filmmakers since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Eisenstein struggling to make *Das Kapital*; Brecht and Slatan Dudow's *Kuhle Wampe*, in the final scene where they discuss inflation and the burning of cocoa bean mountains in Brazil. In every decade there was a struggle to understand financialization, to understand capital and to come up with a language for it.

The key book for us was Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic*, which argues that the slave trade was the beginning of a kind of world market, which can be seen in the kinds of naval insurance, the kinds of credit that the slave trade involved, the way in which slaves were effectively credit-bearing bodies.<sup>5</sup> They weren't any old commodities. They were special commodities, credit-bearing commodities traded on the basis of promises to buy and sell. So it was as if you could begin to see the beginnings of the market. And then the case of the *Zong* seemed to collapse this in the most intense form. When the captain of the *Zong* gets back to land, the case is not the question of murder but the question of insurance. It's basically an argument between the Liverpool shareholders who invested in the *Zong* and who were claiming insurance and the marine insurance company which refused to pay. And so this seemed to offer 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 started to take on these questions of abstraction, finance, and death. And that made it current for us.

So we go to Cornwall and we shoot. There are no actors as such. We're shooting landscapes. But we have a strong sense of what it is we want from landscapes. We know we need to shoot a kind of naturally occurring abstraction. But it takes several attempts to do it. We know we want some kind of deserted seascape. But there's no script for that, you know. So the theory – reading Ian Baucom, reading Rediker and Linebaugh's book *The Many-Headed Hydra*, which is where the term *Hydra Decapita* comes from<sup>6</sup> . . . . These texts . . . in fact, we prefer for them not to show up in the film. They are necessary, they're critical. But they can't be illustrated or even demonstrated. The work has to have this excess which isn't directly, legibly readable in a one-to-one sense. Otherwise, you could just read the books for yourself and then start to imagine the films. So then what is the film doing that's in excess? It's as if the theory is primary and the film is secondary, whereas what we want is a kind of relation of intensification, but also a relation that is somewhat enigmatic. So there's a lot of work to do, for the spectator.

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

CC: Despite all these references, the film is visually quite austere. It's literally dark, devoid of bodies or figures of any kind. In comparison, *The Last Angel of History* was visually extravagant. And it was explicitly trying to trace a genealogy of Afrofuturism, whereas your film refuses both these aspects. As such, it makes the reader do more work. It puts the viewer in the position of the Data Thief.

KE: That's what we wanted, this sense of interpretive encounter, a kind of hermeneutic confrontation.

CC: And that's the function of the character called Novaya Zemlya . . .

KE: . . . which means "new earth" in Russian. Novaya Zemlya is one of the most distant islands in the former Soviet Union where they tested one of the largest hydrogen bombs in history. It's a totally irradiated zone. Novaya Zemlya is a text, a figure who dreads the act of reading because people warn her of what happens. She's sort of a low-budget version of a Lovecraftian researcher who is drawn into research, which becomes a porthole that sucks them into something that undoes them and desubjectivizes them. And so she effectively becomes possessed by this act of subvocal speech, by the act of reading silently. So she clearly acts as some kind of acoustic mirror for spectators.

CC: And also as a sort of model that implicitly tells the viewer "this is what you need to do to inhabit and decipher this nexus."

KE: Exactly. She's a kind of a prompt, a figure who seems to be fated to go through the same steps as the audience and has no choice but to. There's a kind of fatality to what she suffers. She's warned of the effects of reading, but she has no option but to read, and, sure enough, she's possessed by the voices that are somehow buried inside of these archives. And that relates to the voice of Gerald Donald, the remaining half of Drexciya.

CC: The voice of "The Author" is Gerald Donald?

KE: Yeah, but he refused to be credited as such. And so, in the film he's given the credit Remnant of a Hydrogen Particle. That's how he wanted to be credited. I spent four days with him; and he said the most fascinating things. He said that he and James Stinson used to imagine themselves in a submersible descending to the bottom of the ocean, the absolute depths of the Mariana Trenches – absolute silence, blackness, crushing pressure, the creaking of metal. He said that they would think themselves into this space and then they would start making music from this perspective of insulation and isolation. We'd talk for hours, but I'd only record an hour a day. And I suddenly thought, "o.k., I'm going to go through the names of every Drexciya composition and I just want you to free associate a response." So that's what I did. And that's where the quotations come from. It's him responding to these track titles. He wouldn't explain them. He would kind of build a science fiction from them in real time. It was truly brilliant. And he also has a very deep, resonant voice. He'd given us all these constraints. We couldn't film him, couldn't film his house. We couldn't use any Drexciya music. In the end, he was like

“you can’t even use my voice.” I was like, “please! Gerald we have to use your voice.” It’s a really good voice. So this was the only thing he let us use. But that was enough.

And so, the big thing was this question of reduction and subtraction. If you could reduce the film enough, then the film could actually open out. We couldn’t evoke Drexciya visually, because on their album covers and EPs, Abdul Haqq had already depicted Drexciya as wave jumpers with fins and aqua-lungs. So, we had to perceive some kind of reduced language. It became something like a waterscape and a study of water and land. Quite a reduced study.

CC: This is the idea of a kind of “alien aquatic” parallel to the Afrofuturist idea that “space is the place.” The ocean as an alien place that more and more threatens to engulf us . . .

KE: Yeah. That was there from the beginning, this notion that the sub-aquatic depths are less explored than the surface of the moon or even the surface of Mars, that it’s more difficult to land a submersible in the Mariana Trenches than it is to land the Sojourner on the surface of Mars. That was there since ’97; but by 2010, that notion of hidden depths had to be evoked with surface. We spent a lot of time discussing how to film water and settled for this notion of filming the surface. It was quite influenced by Roni Horn’s book *Another Water*, in which she photographed the Thames, focusing on the Thames as a graveyard, a liquid graveyard, where there have been a number of suicides.<sup>7</sup> And from her, we got the idea of blocking out the sky. If you block out the sky and the beach, you take away two reference points that allow a kind of metaphorical escape route. If you took those out, the metaphor changes and it becomes more carceral. That notion of the carceral sea then seemed to respond to the writings of people like Derek Walcott and Édouard Glissant.

CC: And this is also a reference to Turner’s famous painting *The Slave Ship*, a proto-abstract painting, though one that is full of light and fire instead of darkness.

KE: Exactly. We started to think about Turner’s attempts to paint water and his struggles with the slave ships throwing slaves overboard after a storm. And both the critiques of that painting and the fact that Ruskin had then seized on the painting, defended it, and also then created a new kind of mimetic art criticism, which stayed as close as possible to the painting and in a sense tried to reinvolve the painting inside of discourse.<sup>8</sup> We read somewhere that William Morris loved the *Modern Painters* volume so much that he would get up after dinner and recite large sections of it. We either read or imagined that Morris used to *sing* the text because he was so entranced by the rhapsodic nature of Ruskin’s prose. So then we thought what if [Otolith Group member] Anjalika [Sagar] *sings* Ruskin?

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<sup>7</sup> Roni Horn, *Another Water (The River Thames, for Example)* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> John Ruskin, “Of Water, as Painted by Turner,” in *Modern Painters, Vol. I* [1843] (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1890), pp. 382-383.

CC: Her voice draws in all those references – Turner, Ruskin, the *Zong* – but does so very economically.

KE: Exactly. They are all compressed like a kind of zip file.

CC: And it draws on the history of abstraction.

KE: There's an essay by Stephen Zepke in which he gives a Badouian analysis of the alien and the difficulty that Hollywood had in representing the alien.<sup>9</sup> They always needed to give the alien a body and a face. Tarkovsky solved this question by making the alien into a question of landscape, and, even more, a question of altered weather, a question of physics, atmosphere, and temperature that effectively made the alien an ecological question, a post-natural question.

For us it was a real breakthrough and a relief to allow ourselves abstraction. It felt at that time that abstraction is a political question, that abstraction is a really existing phenomenon. And if you can visualize it, then you have some way of getting a grasp on the times you live in. The nature of financial abstraction is so ungraspable. The nature of an economy is such that we only receive its effects long after the damage is done. And so, abstraction seemed to us to have a political valence. I think it's something we've tried to continually think about, this question of a confrontation with abstraction and the political valency of it. It's what explains the move into the digital. It's what explains the move into animation.

Really what we were doing was our own attempt at animation. We were trying to understand matter as having morphological tendencies, which can generate its own forms of animation. It was the beginning of our interest in a kind of materialist animism and even a kind of materialist mysticism, which you can see a lot in *The Radiant*. We spent most of this summer trying to work on a project around Roger Caillois' collection of marbles, *The Writing of Stones*, a huge collection of stones sometimes called "picture stones" or "ruin marbles," 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century agates, jaspers, and onyxes, which, when cut, would sometimes reveal a landscape or a face or a church, but also far more abstract imagery.<sup>10</sup> What was interesting was the idea that minerals recapitulated the entire history of art by themselves, that these stones went from figuration to abstraction by themselves. And if a craftsman cut into them, you could see this form of mineral abstraction, this kind of inorganic aesthetic taking form.

It's there in *Anathema*, which is a film I'm really proud of because that's analyzing liquid crystals. It shows you liquid crystals with electric currents being introduced into them so that the crystals start to subdivide and multiply. The idea being that liquid crystals are, next to coltan, one of the main substrates for screens of all kinds, for everything from

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Zepke, "Beyond the Limits: From Invasion to Ecstasy in Alien Sci-Fi," in *Cinema Like Never Before/Kino Wie Noch Nie* (Köln: Walther König, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones*, trans. Barbara Bray (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1985).

cellphones to flat screen televisions to computers. So, showing this liquid crystallization is a way of entering into something like the life of force, a way of showing the life of force of minerals, the form of the force. And then the key is to make a fiction out of this kind of morphological process. It's the idea that *we* know what we want from *these* devices but what do *they* want from *us*. All of our films try to hypothesize that reverse perspective. The mineral is an agency, but it's not a subject. And that's what's fascinating about liquid crystal and about Caillois' marbles and about the water. The water seems to have an agency, but it's clearly not a subject. So, we became more and more fascinated by this.

CC: I'd like to come back to the question of referentiality and abstraction. I know you admire Godard's *Le gai savoir*, a film that's similarly packed with textual references. But, again, by comparison, *Hydra Decapita* is so austere.

KE: I love that film and I think *Otolith III* aspired to that kind of maximalism. But since then, we've really tried almost the reverse, tried for a kind of . . . not *minimalism*, but tried to *bind* things, tried to create a plane of consistency. There's heterogeneous material; but the question is not the heterogeneity, it's the plane of consistency. It's not the *divergence* of the material. The point is to bind it all.

CC: Yet you clearly don't aim to wrap it all up neatly. As you mentioned earlier, there's a *hermetic* – even *mystical* – tendency in your work that resists decoding and competes with the *hermeneutic* tendency to fully understand or “unzip.”

KE: Yeah, the sense of initiation, the sense that the work is initiating you into an enigma so that you become something like a disciple. So, there is something occult.

CC: Not just a reader or interpreter, but a disciple?

KE: Yes. You become part of it, which implies that you're won over by it and that you too will go out and somehow proselytize on behalf of the work and carry it with you so that you're now a kind of card-carrying disciple of this enigmatic experience that you've had. You haven't decoded it. You've accepted that you can't decode it and you've enjoyed that process will take it with you. This initiation is something I really enjoy. Certain kinds of audiovisual experiences are really good at doing that. Certain kinds of films have this capacity to turn you into disciples of them; and this is also the strongest feeling of Drexciyan music itself. So, there's a kind of affirmative dimension to mystification. “Mystification” sounds obfuscatory, like you're mystifying for the sake of it. But I'm interested in “mystification” in the sense of what Marshall McLuhan calls “participation mystique.”<sup>11</sup> If an artistic experience is really working, it's working through this level of you finding yourself participating in a mystery without quite realizing how you got there. The music I love has that dimension.

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<sup>11</sup> The phrase is originally from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* [1910], trans. Lilian A. Clare (London: Allen & Unwin, 1926).

CC: It has to solicit you, in a way.

KE: Exactly. Hermeticism is a term which signals that desire, just that desire to manufacture almost like cult objects which travel by themselves and which people will cherish on that basis.

CC: Afrofuturism today doesn't seem very interested in that hermeticism. It seems satisfied with a set of stock tropes, largely about space and the alien.

KE: I think you're absolutely right. The search for tropes, the tropological search for notions of space, notions of extraterritoriality, notions of identification with the alien, all of that is fine, but it doesn't go far enough. It's not intriguing enough. The artists that I think have this quality – Frohawk Two Feathers, for example – they're not such an easy read. There should be some resistance. The work should push back against you. It shouldn't be quite so legibly transparent. And the question of hermeticism is about that. It's about the work retreating from you when you go towards it.

There's a curator in the States, Valerie Cassel Oliver, who's been excavating African-American abstraction. It's not that it was buried, but for different reasons, certain abstractionists perennially complicate an easy read. Whether it's Norman Lewis or Fred Eversley, these figures are not racially readable. That's all it takes. As soon as the work throws up a dimension of optical fugitivity, in other words, as soon as the work cannot immediately be read as belonging to what people recognize is African-American legibility, then suddenly it disappears, whereas actually it is exactly that work that is most compelling precisely because it blocks legibility so you can't easily read it in terms of the identity of the person who is making it. You have to do *more* work. You have to think of all the *other* things that the work might be about, as well as the identity of the artist. So, with people like Charles Gaines, the African-American Fluxus artist Benjamin Patterson, all these artists, the complexity of their work is not an easy read. So, they tend not to be named when we talk about Afrofuturism. But actually, if they're not Afrofuturists, I don't know who is.

And then parallel to that of course is the last ten years of what's called "Afro-Pessimism," which I find deeply compelling: the writings of Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, and behind them Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Winter, Orlando Patterson, Cedric Robinson.<sup>12</sup> And then, obviously, in a South African context

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011) <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsexton.php>; and Fred Moten, "Blackness

Achille Mbembe. In all these writers, there's this profound philosophical question of what Nahum Chandler calls "the problem of the negro for thought."<sup>13</sup> This whole way of thinking also doesn't seem to have penetrated the overly easy optimism of Afrofuturism in which a search for virtuous objects to be retrieved is somehow this self-congratulatory project. It's an easy affirmation, which hasn't taken any notice either of Cassel Oliver's project of abstraction or of the arguments going on inside of Afro-Pessimism. It seems to be totally separate from those; but it's happening simultaneously. To me, these things need to be brought into alignment with each other in a way that they haven't been so far.

Afrofuturism for me is not *ipso facto* that compelling. There are a few examples of compelling work. But the vast majority of it still feels me introductory, like a bid for the mainstream, which is not interesting. The music I'm listening to now, the new Shabazz Palaces album, *Lese Majesty*, is probably the most compelling Afrofuturist document for quite a while just because the elaboration of its track titles, which sound like Samuel Delany short stories. And then on the other hand, obviously all the things coming out of Chicago with Rashad and Spinn, before Rashad's untimely death. And then in the U.K., you've got a new alternative R&B with this artist FKA Twigs and another artist called Kelela who are reinventing R&B, stretching it out, distending it. This is where I can see Afrofuturism continuing, but it's not what immediately comes to mind. Maybe it's the relief of not having these familiar tropes, the overly familiar tropes of space and extraterritoriality of cyborgs and these very '90s tropes. It's the relief of not having these continually foregrounded. So, there's a search on my part and on a lot of people's part for references that go beyond that and a different kind of cathexis.

CC: For you, Afrofuturism is about affect or desire rather than trope or image.

KE: Exactly. Maybe the art world is bound to visual tropes; and so it settles for that. The art world always congratulates itself on its sense of discovery. But a lot of it feels to me like retreading grounds. I'd like to see a rapprochement between Afrofuturism and Afro-Pessimism. I'd like to see the two meet each other head-on. The kind of exorbitant seriousness of Afro-Pessimism and the same exorbitant seriousness of Accelerationism, the kind of Prometheanism of Accelerationism, which is the aspect I really like very much. Ray Brassier's recent turn to Prometheanism I find totally compelling.<sup>14</sup> And then Afro-Pessimism's struggles with negation and its preference for the ontological, I find all those really, really compelling. And my wish is that both those forces put pressure on Afrofuturism and kind of break it up and disassemble it so that it reforms in unrecognizable shapes, so that, you know, the triumvirate of Sun Ra, Clinton, Perry cannot be easily invoked. That invocation has to be checked. And in that silence, other things can emerge.

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and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 4 (Fall 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Ray Brassier, "Prometheanism and Its Critics," in *#Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2014).

I'm just uneasy when Afrofuturist's becomes so celebratory. It's like, "What are you celebrating, for Christ's sake?" There's actually nothing to celebrate. They should be full of more seething discontent. I can see that in Rammellzee, that kind of totalitarian aesthetic. It's not even dystopian. It's kind of autocratic, an autocratic desire to rewrite language and therefore code systems and symbol systems. His extreme militarizing . . .

CC: That's clearly there in Sun Ra, too, who was a sort of benevolent dictator.

KE: Exactly. He's a despot. That was something I always insisted on in writing about him; but it's amazing how that keeps slipping away. People want to render him as this benevolent, charming old southern queen (though people wouldn't even really call him that). But you *can* have it all. He can be a benevolent queen *and* a despotic monarch. And that's clearly what he aspired to be.

When you get into African Afrofuturism things get complex because their Prometheanism is related to Pan-Africanism. The continental project of a United States of Africa – if that isn't a Promethean project, I don't know what is. George Padmore and Nkrumah – if they're not Prometheans, then I don't know who is. The whole Pan-Africanist project can be rewritten in terms of a Prometheanism. As soon as you have a notion of like a continental project, then immediately what happens is you get confronted by the evil twin of solidarity which is betrayal. I think it would be very difficult to be affirmative about this. So, you'd have to write a more complex Promethean project. I think that's partly why there hasn't been that much African Afrofuturism. There's little to be affirmative about in any straightforward and optimistic way. You have to be complex and say these aspects were wrong, these aspects didn't work, this was blocked, this was flawed. You can't come up with a celebratory reading.

I'm also amazed that there are still no Octavia Butler films. When she died, I wrote her obituary for *The Guardian* predicting that the next decade would be the decade of Octavia Butler films. But nothing yet. Absolutely nothing. Figures like Kahlil Joseph, Abdul Malik Sayeed, Terence Nance, these young African-American auteurs, they're more than capable of making films based on Octavia Butler. But they haven't quite emerged yet. I'm not sure why that is. I mean there are so many things to be done.

In a certain sense, everything the Otolith Group's done – it's like the first decade, really. Part of me feels like we're just gearing up to take on some of these things. After a while, you realize that, if you don't do them, nobody will. So, we'll take them on, although we have no experience of working with actors, and all I see is how I *don't* want to work with them. That's the struggle, how to do it. I spent a long time thinking about it, and you can see that because of the way I avoid it. There are no actors because I'm thinking about it all the time. I haven't solved it yet, but it's got to be done. It's got to be grasped.