



Reflections

"A Glitch in the Matrix": A Reflection on Shabazz Palaces' "Welcome to To Quazarz" or a New Wave of Afrofuturist Music Videos

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In their interview for the Guardian, Shabazz Palaces, a hip-hop duo from Seattle comprising Ishmael Butler--a.k.a. Palaceer Lazaro--and multi-instrumentalist Tendai "Baba" Maraire, indicated that they felt like "aliens" in the contemporary United States (Bakare). Their experimental lyrical style and otherworldly sound palette situate the group somewhere on hip-hop's peripheries. Yet the two have mastered their distinctive style and created their own uncanny universe that most fans of Afrofuturism will probably find captivating.

Shabazz's new video for "Welcome to Quazarz," directed by Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist Nep Sidhu, promotes two concept albums, *Quazarz vs. The Jealous Machines* and *Quazarz: Born on a Gangster Star*, released simultaneously worldwide on 14th July 2017. These two albums tell the story of Quazarz, a visitor from space. "Welcome to Quazarz" is a surrealist collage with noticeable social and political overtones. The glitchy video, featuring kaleidoscopic imagery, is an example of how contemporary Black futurists express their artistic vision within the medium of music video. Shabazz Palaces are known for their imaginary videos, including "#CAKE" (dir. Hiro Murai, 2013), "Forerunner Foray" (animated video by Chad VanGalen, 2015), and "Motion Sickness" (dir. TEAN, 2014), to name just a few. The Quazarz videos

showcase their futuristic aesthetic style, which is in line both with their previous videos and Butler's lyrical style present on the p-funk-inspired, experimental hip-hop albums. The complex imagery follows the pattern provided by the sounds, creating a coherent continuity. These Afrofuturist pieces feature contemporary overtones, including emerging technophobic and anti-Republican messages and the lavish use of computer-generated imagery.

"Welcome to To Quazarz" emphasizes a symbolic synergy between Afro- and Arab-Futurism, manifested in the form of Alex McLoed's golden 3D animations and Nep Sidhu's typography and ornamentation based on medieval Arabic calligraphy. Those two aesthetic styles are glued together by the use of CGI, making this video an example of Internet art of the kind stylized as distorted VHS footage. The video also employs Michael Reynolds's analog optics and seemingly random video streams from Tiona Nekkia McClodden's multimedia installation entitled *Sweet Atlanta Black Simulacrum*. All these ingredients make "Welcome to To Quazarz" unusual, but also, occasionally, painful to look at. On the other hand, I find this highly-colored, glaring imagery the only method of fully embracing the plentitude of inspirations relevant to African futurists and telling a contemporary story.



Reflections

As African storytelling is often non-linear, attempting to outline a sequence of events in the video would make little sense. The piece delivers the narrative not only in a non-linear fashion, but also on multiple levels, as it features split screens and images within images, reflecting the barrage of information in contemporary media. Sometimes the connection between the images is difficult to understand, but they all seem to reflect total information flows in the media: different sources show different vistas, presenting one twisted, incomprehensible, and often unsettling message.

Political and social concerns are present not only in Butler's lyrics, but also in imagery. The political commentary emerging from the lines such as "We post-language, baby/We talk with guns, guns keep us safe" is emphasized, for instance, by a shot of Black women wearing white bandanas, which appears on the screen only a few seconds later. Soon after, Butler raps that "We don't imagine past the image," a statement that reflects Western ocularcentrism but runs against African orality. And it is difficult not to connect "We killed facts" with the arrival of fake news and post-truth politics. In "Welcome to To Quazarz," science fiction meets social justice as both the futuristic video and the experimental song function as a commentary on our current historical moment. Shabazz criticize "jealous machines" that have taken control of human life, which is visible especially in a statement advertising Quazarz: Born on a Gangster Star on Sub Pop's website: "Stay away from your device - your phantom limb - and stay away from your image - your

phantom self." In the character of Quazarz, Butler implies that the internet and social media destroy, rather than facilitate, human interaction. Shabazz Palaces incorporate futuristic aesthetics, but there are, in their work, skeptical, if not technophobic, echoes. Processed through multiple filters and optical effects, the video intentionally strains the eye. Its "glitches" imply fears connected with overdose of new technologies. By presenting a kaleidoscopic, Afro-Surrealist video, the duo serves a smorgasbord of elements, a veritable megatext of contemporary Afrofuturism. VHS-nostalgic filters, throbbing animations connected to African and Arab mysticism, and bleak collages of seemingly unrelated shots presenting Black bodies all infuse the piece, leaving the audience perhaps disoriented but also definitely fascinated by this "alien" transmission.

References

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