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No tengo que ir a la luna, porque vengo del sol = : I don't have to go to the moon for I come from the sun) : a distant dream

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No tengo que ir a la luna, porque vengo del sol  
(I don't have to go to the moon for I come from the sun)  
- *A Distant Dream*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Tomas Alberto Villalobos Moreno De-Seligmann

Committee in charge:

Professor Louis Hock, Chair  
Professor Norman Bryson  
Professor Brian Cross  
Professor Page Dubois  
Professor Mariana Wardwell

2014



The Thesis of Tomas Alberto Villalobos Moreno De-Seligmann is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

No tengo que ir a la luna, porque vengo del sol  
(I don't have to go to the moon for I come from the sun)  
- *A Distant Dream*

by

Tomas Alberto Villalobos Moreno De-Seligmann

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Louis Hock, Chair

*DumbSun* explores the relationship between Disney's *Dumbo* (1940) and jazz musician Herman Poole Blount aka Sun Ra. The inception of this inquiry is on an album entitled *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films* (1988) where Sun Ra and his Arkestra play Pink Elephants on Parade – the delirious scene from *Dumbo*. *DumbSun* collided two eras (40's and 80's) along with two pop cultural icons to explore specters of indigenism, notions of labor, the invisible body, and memory through an archeology of populist futurist imaginaries, their tension and political positioning in contemporary art. *DumbSun* is an installation including video, music, sculpture, fake archive, archive, and photographs.

## INTRODUCTION

“No! Dead people don't snore..... or do they?”<sup>1</sup> This uncanny quandary is posed by “The Crows” in Disney’s animated film *Dumbo* (1941) when our dear little elephant has landed in a tree after the painted surrealist chaos entitled the *Pink Elephants on Parade*. This animated sequence is described as “out of time” due to the relationship it contains within the original narrative of *Dumbo*, but also conjuring the specter of an industrial era that would later manifest World War II.

I have this fond memory of playing in my backyard by myself in the trenches of my imagination when I was eight or nine years old. I had watched *Mary Poppins*, as my jazz musician, theatrical composer father loved my sister and I to watch musicals. In our large southern backyard there was a cement walkway from a blue gate that ended half way through the yard. A dirt pathway filled the missing link to a small white and blue woodshop that was filled with furniture parts and old machines. Next to this shack, colossal piles of wood scraps, roof parts, and wood fencing became the domain for my imagination to run wild and to play hide and seek with my *primos* [cousins]. Where this cement walkway stopped, a second beaten-down wood structure with a tin roof, about fourteen feet in height. Underneath it was an old BBQ pit filled with spider webs, cement flooring, tiles and wood piled up on the side. The wood was chopped and used to feed my old 20’s cast iron wood heater in my house during the cold winters.

It was a warm, summer day with the sun in full view, sharing his rays with the *cosmos*. I had a bright inclination to climb up the side of the wood stacks and get on the roof of this canopy like architecture. I remember looking over the edge, which didn’t seem high at the moment. This newfound visual plane that I had never experienced struck me with fright and intrigue. As I took in this new view, I noticed a bush tree about

ten feet in height across from my position that was all of sudden dwarfed by my elevation. This newfound view became a whole new world with a heightened perspective and elevated sense of stature, while this moment of excitement overwhelmed my sense of place and time. A child's logic is never linear and at that moment, I decided I could fly. All I needed was a little running room and I would be on Mars in no time. I inched back to give myself a running start – five steps or so on this tin roof and my legs lifted, arms flailing in the air, I could see the cement sidewalk pass my vision and.... Wham! My ankles hit the ground like weights on the bottom of the sea. My left knee ricocheted up into my face and gave my right cheek a good welcoming kiss from the impact of hitting the ground. I was in utter bewilderment, pain, disillusionment, ecstasy and fear. Tears began rolling down my face as I lay on the ground staring at the sun, being blinded by the pain in my face, astonishment by my dumb thoughts, and reality greeting me with a swift hello. As *Dumbo* would say, "well now...this is what flying is all about."

We inhabit a period in which NASA has halted its space shuttle program; the "death of myth" flourishes in the age of technological reasoning, technocratic polity and inhibited consciousness. *Pink Elephants* are no longer allegorical dissident surrealist specters but cute lullabies to put our children to sleep. I will attempt to circulate a *dispositif* from this surrealist transmogrifying scene in Disney's *Dumbo* to trace the power of alterity and mimesis not only through music (speech) and sub cultural apparatuses, but by also enunciating an allegorical narrative in human consciousness, by tracing the evolution of two timelines: one of Disney's *Dumbo* and Herman Poole Blount aka Sun Ra. This comparative reading will allow a space for contemplation on notions of labor, cultural amnesia, and phantoms that exist behind mass culture.

## CHAPTER 1: *DUMBO* THE CONSPIRACY

The original version, *Dumbo the Flying Elephant* was copyrighted in 1939, as a *Roll-A-Book* by the company of that same name. “Helen Aberson and Hal Pearl who were briefly married long enough to write this classic tale wrote the story in the late 30’s. The registration date (and copies received date) was 4/29/39.”<sup>1</sup> The *Dumbo Roll-A-Book* has been called a "mystery book" that no one seems to have seen since 1939. There is no a physical remnant of it except the first “galley proofs, and Helen Durney's preliminary drawings for the Roll-A-Book's illustrations exist”<sup>2</sup>, which include the original narrative that is a corollary of *The Ugly Duckling*. The original is much simpler and indelicate than Walt Disney’s *Dumbo*.

*Dumbo* "was originally a story by Helen Aberson and Harold Pearl, which the studio was asked to illustrate. Disney read the tale, saw picture possibilities, bought it and proceeded to expand the original idea.”<sup>3</sup> *Dumbo* is part of a classic trio that set Disney’s empire in motion including *Snow White* (1937) and *Pinocchio* (1940). On June 14, 1939, Roll-A-Book Publishers and the Pearls sold *Dumbo, the Flying Elephant* to Walt Disney Productions. There was a *leica reel* that was a short cartoon produced by the Disney studio. Walt Disney's desk diary “shows his first meeting on *Dumbo* as taking place in Joe Grant's Model Department on June 27, 1939—one week after the patent was granted to *Roll-A-Book Publishers, Inc.*, less than two weeks after

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Essays/DumboRollABook/DumboRollABook.html>

<sup>2</sup> Helen Durney was a Syracuse artist who made the original *Dumbo* drawings. These are in Syracuse’s University library, which cannot be published here. Helen and Hal probably wrote the book in Syracuse. They are all that remains of the original *Dumbo* narrative.  
<http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Essays/DumboRollABook/DumboRollABook.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Essays/DumboRollABook/DumboRollABook.html>

the studio bought *Dumbo*, and a little more than two months after the *Dumbo, the Flying Elephant*, *Roll-A-Book* was officially published.”<sup>4</sup>

The 1941 book of *Dumbo* “differs considerably from these 1939 galley proofs, the story having been reshaped to be consistent with what was emerging early storyboards at the Disney studio. The book's illustrations bear obvious similarities to the early sketches reproduced in Robert D. Field’s book *The Art of Walt Disney*. *Dumbo* is a baby elephant in this version, and he causes the collapse of the elephant pyramid and is banished to the clowns. *Dumbo* leaves the circus in disgrace and is befriended by the robin, Red, who takes him to an owl psychiatrist, now called not the "Wise One" but Professor Hoot Owl. When *Dumbo* tells him that he dreams of flying, the owl tells him to go ahead and fly. They climb to the top of a cliff and *Dumbo* flies, with Red's encouragement. Then he surprises everyone at the circus by flying when he leaps from a platform—again with Red's encouragement.”<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1:** Original Sketch *Dumbo the Flying Elephant*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Essays/DumboRollABook/DumboRollABook.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Essays/DumboRollABook/DumboRollABook.html>

Here we can see a possible thread in Enlightenment discourse in the shifts from myth to modernity, and magic to psychoanalysis that lead one to question Disney's underlying narrative. The figure of the *Wise One* never made it to Disney's *Dumbo*, but came from another "native" form. In Pre-Hispanic societies *the wise one* was a person to fear, one who might aid your ills and demonstrate their power over a tribe. The healing materials used by this figure ranged from sage, goats blood, psychedelic mushrooms and peyote dances.

According to Michael Barrier,

The 1941 softcover book, the earliest book version of *Dumbo* in the Disney Archives, is titled *Dumbo the Flying Elephant* and shows Helen Aberson (who had by then dropped Pearl from her name) and Harold Pearl as the authors, with no mention of Disney on the cover. Published by Whitman—that is, by Disney's longtime licensee Western Printing & Lithographing Company—it bears two copyrights: 1939 by The Roll-A-Book Publishers, Inc., and 1941 by Walt Disney Productions; the copyright line is the only mention of Disney in the book.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Walt Disney himself spoke of the story's origins in an interview with the *New York Sun* published on October 21, 1941, just after he had arrived in New York at the end of his South American trip and just before his version of *Dumbo* had its New York premiere on October 23.

Walt Disney had been sent to South America as part of a patriotic covert mission by the United States Department of State to promote antagonism against Nazi and fascist ideology. This "Good Neighbor Policy" administered by Franklin D Roosevelt became the impetus for Walt Disney to engage in Brazilian, Argentinian, Chilean, and Peruvian culture. The Good Neighbor Policy also led to the radio program entitled "Viva

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Essays/DumboRollABook/DumboRollABook.html>

*América*” which was broadcasts of live performances from Juan Arvizu (the Mexican "Tenor with the Silken Voice"); Nestor Chayres (Mexican tenor - aka "El Gitano De México"), Eva Garza (Mexican songstress), and Terig Tucci (Argentine composer/arranger).

In Brazil, Walt Disney and his crew studied vegetation, botanical gardens, animal life, and rural mountain villages. While in Peru they filmed Lake Titicaca, which went on to serve as inspiration for the *Donald Duck* segment in *Saludos Amigos* (1942). LIFE photographer Hart Presto documented this ethnographic narrative and his photos can be seen in the *TIME-LIFE* archive online.

Photograph taken by Hart Presto, 1941, TIME-LIFE Magazine-All rights reserved



**Figure 2:** *Walt Disney filming Lake Titicaca.*

In Incan myth, Lake Titicaca is a sacred destination where the creator-god Viracocha rose up to create the sun, moon, stars and the first human beings. Filming this sacred lake at the beginning of World War II can not only be seen as Walt Disney’s first engagement in anthropological piracy for future inspirations and animation specters, but also a harvesting of Incan culture through innocent curiosity. Here we can see Walt



Disney stealing the magical power of the Incan god Viracocha and subverting its aura into what we now know as the Disney enterprise. As Roberto Fernández Retamar has noted, this *ethnocide* for Disney and his counterparts became the “degraded vision offered by the colonizer of the man he is colonizing”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays* University of Minnesota Press, 1989. P.8

## CHAPTER 2: LABOR

In the beginning of Disney's *Dumbo* (whose real name was Jumbo) before the circus is able to commence, there is a moment when we see human workers or what are called *roustabouts* erect a circus tent. This scene is called *Song of the Roustabouts* (The King's Men). The term *roustabout* in Australia and New Zealand refers to a worker with broad-based, non-specific skills in any industry. Additionally, *roustabouts* generally work on oilrigs, and pipelines. They take on the dangerous jobs to gain experience and they graduate to become "roughnecks" (unskilled labor). So in the hierarchical apparatus of the labor structure a roustabout is truly the lowest on the scale.

In *Dumbo*, these *roustabouts* are faceless with no features, dark black-brown skin as they hammer pegs, and hoist the circus tent with ropes. Immediately after this scene we see a sequence with the elephants (all female except *Dumbo*) who are the only animals laboring. They nail in the pegs, tie ropes, and even push a cart full of sleeping tigers.

I would argue that this sequence of animation is a metaphysical one painted by Disney that negates these *roustabouts* from any agency in the world of animals. *Dumbo*, his mother, the crows, and Timothy the Mouse have distinct features, voice, and yet the *roustabouts* literally cannot speak as their facial features are erased. There is a discontinuity in the speech and labor value between the roustabouts and the elephants. The roustabouts are just labors and the elephants may labor, but they are also an attraction at the circus. The elephants are producers linked with the means of production that the roustabouts cannot conceive.

*Dumbo* is the shortest Disney film released at 64 minutes. Disney's studio's financial problems eventually led, in 1941, to large-scale layoffs. During the film's production, the country went through a hard fought presidential campaign in which Franklin Roosevelt won an unprecedented third term against Wendell Willkie, who had accused Roosevelt of being a warmonger who wanted to drag America into World War II. To cut production cost during *Dumbo*, almost the entire circus workers are faceless. We can see the Marxist relationship of alienation and labor through economy. The animators in Disney's assembly line are faceless. The animators create the movies; use their creativity economy in cubicles all day, and yet were not being compensated for their labor. Walt Disney was taking all the credit and only a small handful of animators earned Walt's respect and friendship.

This roustabouts song is uncanny in the sense that we hear a song which the roustabouts are singing but with no mouth. This phantom, ventriloquist-fascist and slave melodic tone beats the hearts of these roustabouts that narrates the tent rising-labor sequence. This song illustrates the unquestioning of tamed bodies in the roustabouts whose only concern is to work and slave, which precedes our contemporary times. Here we see a portion of the lyrics accompanying an underbelly of World War II and the Jim Crow era.



**Figure 3:** *Disney's Dumbo (1941) – The Roustabout Sequence*

*Song of the Roustabouts*

by Frank Churchill, Oliver Wallace and Ned Washington

“Hike! Ugh! Hike! Ugh! Hike! Ugh! Hike!

We work all day, we work all night

We never learned to read or write

We're happy-hearted roustabouts

Hike! Ugh! Hike! Ugh! Hike! Ugh! Hike!

When other folks have gone to bed

We slave until we're almost dead

We're happy-hearted roustabouts

Muscles achin'

Back near breaking

Eggs and bacon what we need (Yes, sir!)

Boss man houndin'

Keep on poundin'

For your bed and feed

There ain't no let up

Must get set up

Pull that canvas! Drive that stake!

Want to doze off

Get them clothes off

But must keep awake

Hep! Heave! Hep! Heave! Hep! Heave!

Dumbo becomes an outcast and “other” after his mother is locked up in “circus jail” for protecting her son during a circus fiasco. Dumbo’s mother is singing the famous song baby mine, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Song at the 1941 Oscars while holding Dumbo through jail bars from inside a trailer. Hanging outside are signs that read “Danger” and “Mad Elephant”.

An inscription of madness sutures both Sun Ra and Dumbo’s narrative where they leverage their own subjectivity in exchange for the production of a myth – a flying elephant, and flying jazz musician.

The relations of power become a searching foundation for discursive structures in the circus. *Dumbo* suppresses his “gift” of being able to fly in this emotional state. He becomes a clown and this mimesis leads to humiliation. This impossibility of recognition is one that madness can either liberate or coerce one’s body into a dark path or drunken, psychotic stupor. The clowns knowingly propel this alienation - “Elephant ain’t got no feelings, No they’re made of rubber”, that rupture an economic surplus, asking the boss for a pay raise and elevating the death drive making *Dumbo* jump from a higher platform in the next circus act.

“What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body much

more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.”<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 4:** *Disney's Dumbo – Dumbo's Mother Locked in Prison*

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault is being interviewed by Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino in which Foucault admits his skeptical position about power. Paul Rainbow and Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Press, p.61

### CHAPTER 3: PINK SPECTERS AND DELIRIOUS HISTORIES

After we see the clowns run off in a drunken frenzy, *Dumbo* and Timothy the Mouse drink out of a bucket of water mixed with champagne that educes a consternation, which begins the famous Pink Elephants on Parade scene. This scene had largely been questioned and misunderstood as a sequence of animation that is out of time, and becomes the root of my cosmic exploration. Here we see the two characters, *Dumbo* and Timothy start on the ground and end up in a tree full of crows. This scene could be seen as a moral shift that restores *Dumbo* back to society but I digress.

The term Pink Elephants is first recorded by American poet, writer and activist Jack London in 1913, who describes one kind of alcoholic, in the autobiographical John Barleycorn, as "the man whom we all know, stupid, unimaginative, whose brain is bitten numbly by numb maggots; who walks generously with wide-spread, tentative legs, falls frequently in the gutter, and who sees, in the extremity of his ecstasy, blue mice and *pink elephants*."<sup>9</sup> The story John Barleycorn intertwines masculinity and alcohol with life stories of adventure and misfortune. This definition of pink elephants is "contrasted to drinkers such as the narrator, who are possessed of imagination and become drunk more in brain than in body.

Originally, *Dumbo* was to see "the wise one" who's named changed to Dr. Hoot a psychiatric owl. This shift from psychoanalysis to hallucinogenic frightening combustion seem like an illogical choice, but upon closer look we can see a complex of influences that make Disney a surrealist native alien. The *Pink Elephants* scene has been described, as "a difference in imaginative and moral capacity. Thus the transition

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<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seeing\\_pink\\_elephants](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seeing_pink_elephants)

from one world to the other is not merely physical; it is also mental and imaginative. The pink elephants sequence underlines that aspect of the transition.”<sup>10</sup>

*Pink Elephants On Parade*

by Oliver Wallace and Ned Washington

Look out! Look out!

Pink elephants on parade

Here they come!

Hippety hoppety

They're here and there

Pink elephants ev'rywhere

Look out! Look out!

They're walking around the bed

On their head

Clippety cloppety

Arrayed in braid

Pink elephants on parade

What'll I do? What'll I do?

What an unusual view!

I could stand the sight of worms

And look at microscopic germs

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Benzon, *Essay on Dumbo*, 2007.



But Technicolor pachyderms  
 Is really much for me  
 I am not the type to faint  
 When things are odd or things  
 are quaint  
 But seeing things you know that ain't  
 Can certainly give you an awful fright!  
 What a sight!  
 Chase 'em away!  
 Chase 'em away!  
 I'm afraid need your aid  
 Pink elephants on parade!  
 Pink elephants!  
 Pink elephants!

These pink elephants start to play music, which become extensions of their bodies (trunks). “There is no structure in the film-space itself on which those elephants are marching. They’re stepping on the edge of the frame. This is the sort of self-conscious gag that’s as old as animation itself – such trickery was fundamental to Winsor McCay’s work, but also to Disney’s Alice shorts. Those elephants will parade around the entire perimeter of the frame and then they’ll start expanding until they burst.”<sup>11</sup> This scene can be traced back to Sergei Eisenstein’s analysis of “plasmaticness”, and his interest in Disney’s aesthetic. For Eisenstein, these pink

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Benzon, Essay on Dumbo, 2007.

elephants symbolized a departure from oneself and a "rejection of the once-and-forever allotted form" freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form"<sup>12</sup> in which we are all trapped.

Pink elephants explode into a nightmare fascist vision that over takes the screen and we no longer see *Dumbo* or Timothy the Mouse for the rest of the sequence. We see pink elephants flashing their yellow skeletal uniform marching around an upside down hospital psychiatric bed as if this pink elephant has already experienced the horrors of World War II. The bed then suddenly flips on its head and reverses our perception of reality ignoring the limits of our physical reality. The pink elephant in the bed pokes his head out only to duck back under the cover like a scared child frightened of the dark after having read about the boogie man. The bed then lifts off like a spaceship and floats into oblivion.



**Figure 5:** *Disney's Dumbo (1941) – Pink Elephants on Parade*

This main surrealist Alterity sequence comes in the form of the Orient when the music chimes transpose into an exotic rhythm and a mixed-breed elephant-camel begins walking through a dessert with pyramids in the background. This creature

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<sup>12</sup> Justus Nieland, *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life*, University of Illinois Press, 2008, p.93

suddenly morphs into a cobra, then into an occidental harem-girl elephant with a veil covering her face shaking her wide hips, that transforms into an orange sphere resembling a full sun that quickly reveals its eye lashes and green iris becoming a floating eye.

The surrealist scene continues with Elephants emitting lighting from their bodies, doubling through color and shadow, dancing to a melodic salsa and symphonic tune. They multiply filling dance choreography, and then they turn into locomotives such as cars, boats, and trains expounding a hysteric frantic that combusts the pink elephants until they float in midair becoming clouds.

Why Pink Elephants or even animals for that matter? Walt Disney originated animal popularity in animation partly due to an anthropomorphism that can be seen as the disappearance of another *voice* against modernity. The Oxford English Dictionary places the first known usage of the word anthropomorphism in the context of “an injunction against attributing human traits to animals” in the second half of the nineteenth century. (Until this referential shift, the word was used to indicate mistaken attributions of human qualities to deities.

It is during the nineteenth century, with the rise of modernism in literature and art that animals came to occupy the thoughts of a culture in transition. As they disappeared, animals became increasingly the subjects of nostalgic curiosity. When horse-drawn carriages gave way to steam engines, plaster horses were mounted on tramcar fronts in an effort to simulate continuity with the older, animal-driven vehicles. Once considered a metonymy of nature, animals came to be seen as emblems of the

new, industrialized environment. Animals appeared to merge with the new technological bodies replacing them."<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 6:** *Jaguar Hood Ornament*

Thus today we can look a Wells Fargo with its historical colonial image of the horse carriage riding away with our tax dollars, and motor vehicles like the Jaguar, the Ford Mustang and Bronco, the Volkswagen Beetle, the Dodge Ram and the Chevy Corvette Stingray etc. "As cinema developed, indeed embodied animal traits as a gesture of mourning for the disappearing wildlife. The figure of nature in language, animal, was transformed in cinema to the name for movement in technology, animation. And if animals were denied the capacity for language, animals as filmic organisms were themselves turned into languages, or at least, into semiotic facilities."<sup>14</sup>

The pink elephants sequence is an example of real magic, whimsical and at times also a frightening vision of possibility within the human body and soul. Thus, at

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<sup>13</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008, p.186-7

<sup>14</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008, p.196

the end of the sequence when the last of the pink elephants transform into clouds at sunrise, “we’re ready to enter a different moral universe, one with different values. It’s not simply that the crows, as individuals, are more sympathetic to *Dumbo*, but that they live by different values than those status-driven elephants that shunned *Dumbo* and his mother and those clowns who were only interested in exploiting *Dumbo* so they could hit the boss up for a raise.”<sup>15</sup>

The pink elephants dancing with lightning bolts is a clear reference to disciplining of the body through shock therapy and also a reflection on the War of Currents between Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse (Nikola Tesla) involving the death of Topsy the elephant in 1903. Topsy spent her last years at Luna Park on Coney Island, where she was a main attraction while killing three men in three years. One of the trainers was drunk and fed her a lit cigarette. She was executed on January 4<sup>th</sup> 1903 before a crowd of 1500 people and Edison’s film was seen throughout the country.

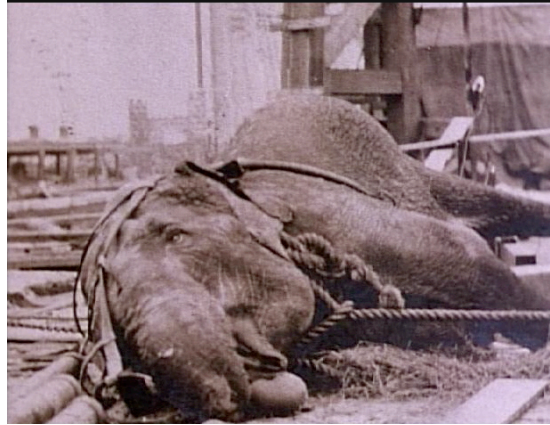
“Topsy’s owners had intended to hang her, but the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to animals objected so strenuously that they sought another way.”<sup>16</sup> Thomas Edison came to their rescue. Edison was in a rivalry with George Westinghouse (who bought Nikola Tesla’s patent) over which kind of electricity should be used to power America. Westinghouse favored alternating current (AC) while Edison favored direct current (DC). Edison argued that DC was the safer technology and demonstrated his point by publicly executing dogs and cats with AC. The execution of Topsy thus was a significant opportunity to publicize his view of the dangers of AC.

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<sup>15</sup> Bill Benzon, Essay on *Dumbo*, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topsy\\_%28elephant%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topsy_%28elephant%29)

“Topsy was fed carrots laced with 460 grams of potassium cyanide before the deadly current from a 6,600-volt AC source was sent coursing through her body. In Edison's film she topples to the ground and is seen to move for several seconds. According to at least one contemporary account she died "without a trumpet or a groan.”<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 7:** *Topsy Dead at Coney Island.*

Edison opposed AC so much that it led to the development of the first electric chair being built in 1890 by Harold P. Brown and designed by Dr. Alfred P. Southwick. Brown was secretly commissioned by Edison to construct the chair while also backed by J.P. Morgan. When the chair was first used, on August 6, 1890, “the technicians on hand misjudged the voltage needed to kill the condemned prisoner, William Kemmler. It took 8 minutes and Westinghouse later commented: They would have done better using an axe.”<sup>18</sup> When Luna Park burned to the ground in 1944 the fire became known as “Topsy’s Revenge”.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topsy\\_%28elephant%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topsy_%28elephant%29)

<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Kemmler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Kemmler)

## CHAPTER 4: Herman Poole “Sonny” Blount – Sun Ra

Herman Poole “Sonny” Blount, aka Le Sony'r Ra, aka Sun Ra was a musician, composer, cosmic philosopher born in Birmingham, Alabama, (birthplace of the Ku-Klux-Klan) on May 22 1914 – a Gemini on a day with a doubled number. Yet he would tell you he was an eternal being from Mars. Birth was a bad word in his lexicon. “One of his "equations of sound-similarity" was B-I-R-T-H = B-E-R-T-H. If you were born, that meant you were going to find your place of B-E-R-T-H — i.e., your final resting place — i.e., the grave.”<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 8:** *Herman Poole “Sonny” Blount*

Sonny’s real name was “inspired by Black Herman, the most famous of many early twentieth century Afrocentric magicians. Claiming a lineage that reached back to Moses, Black Herman was said to be able to raise a woman from the dead at every

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Campbell, Christopher Trent, and Robert Pruter, *From Sonny Blount to Sun Ra: The Chicago Years*, December 31, 2012

show.”<sup>20</sup> His childhood was filled with memories of ridicule and obstruction that led to his myth of being an alien from Mars. “ One spring day Sonny returned from class and found his roommates reading his diary and laughing.... In there I said that these space men contacted me. They wanted me to go to outer space with them. They were looking for somebody who had that type of mind.... And I went up. Now, I call that an energy transformation because I wasn't in human form. I thought I was there, but I could see through myself. The I looked on a planet that I identified as Saturn.”<sup>21</sup>

Sun Ra destroyed his past and recast himself in a series of roles in a drama he spent his life creating. “Files and certificates had been destroyed or disappeared or never existed, photos vanished, and early recording and compositions were lost in fires or deceased musicians attics.”<sup>22</sup>

Sonny became interested in Egyptian society and space when “Sonny was eight years old the tomb of King Tutankhamen was opened at the Luxor.”<sup>23</sup> Sonny began reading esoteric books about Egyptian, Pharaonic societies and “he saw that to the ancient Egyptian death was nothing like the beliefs that so disturbed him in Christianity: they knew secrets which had long been forgotten. “Resurrection” seemed like the wrong word for what Egyptians believed. Even “death” seemed wrong. They were never dead, only asleep.”<sup>24</sup>

This doubling of Space and Time, of Name and Man, seemed to be a way to liberate himself from not only the narratives surrounding African American's in the south during the 40's, but a re-direction to propel a lost mythic time into the future to regain a

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<sup>20</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.4

<sup>21</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place* Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.29

<sup>22</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.5

<sup>23</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.64

<sup>24</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.64



sense of illustrious magnitude within jazz and the African American community. “ I’ve separated myself from everything that in general you call life. I’ve concentrated entirely on the music, and I’m preoccupied with the planet....it is important to liberate oneself from the obligation of being born, because this experience doesn’t help us at all. It is important for the planet that its inhabitants do not believe in being born, because whoever is born has to die.”<sup>25</sup> This specter of Egyptian and Mayan alien narrative (which Sun Ra would later protrude) creates this haunting native aesthetic mixed with the cosmos and space.

This myth performs a spiritual re-birth, for Sun Ra an empowering astro-black mythology could replace a history of black enslavement and oppression.”<sup>26</sup> As we shall continue, death and madness become the impetus for not only *Dumbo*’s experience of flying, but also Sun Ra’s radical transformation into the living myth.

### This World Is Not My Home

by Sun Ra

Is this a planet of life?

Then why do people die?

This is no life, this is death.

Can’t you understand?

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<sup>25</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.6

<sup>26</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.33

You're only dreaming.

You're not real here.

You're only dreaming.

you did all the things

you before you died.

“ Soul affirms the Human. Ra is disgusted with the Human. He desires to be alien, by emphasizing Egypt over Israel, the alien over human, the future of the past. In his Myth Science systems, Ancient Africans are alien Gods from a despotic future. Sun Ra is the End of Soul, the replacement of God by a Pharaonic Pantheon.”<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 9:** *Promotional photo from Space is the Place 1974*

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<sup>27</sup> Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Quartet Books 1999, p155

Sonny became entrenched in the narratives of African Americans and their ties to an ancient Egyptian past. The literature of that moment from W.E.B. Dubois and other black nationalist Marcus Garvey was not scarce. Sonny wanted to transcend the future and move past the objectivity and subjectivity to try to answer the unanswerable questions of the cosmos. He changed his name to Sun Ra after the Egyptian Sun God, and “ra” also being the flattened form of the second note of the scale”. Sun Ra also said “ it also expresses that I don’t feel at home here... Ra is my spirit name. You receive an everyday name from your parents, a materialistic name, but you also have a spirit name. Ra [Reh?], means evil in Hebrew.”<sup>28</sup> Sun Ra was later ridiculed for this name and jazz clubs would instead badger him as Sonny Ray.

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<sup>28</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.85

## CHAPTER 5: Sonny's Pain

When Sun Ra reached adolescence “ various physical problems began to plague him, especially a severe hernia associated with problems of testicle development, cryptorchidism, and affliction whose name alone was a scourge.”<sup>29</sup> This lifetime illness would seclude him from others, never sleeping, as Sun Ra thought sleep was akin to death, and so thus his illness became the gift of the curse. This ailment also forced him into a lifetime of celibacy that would later result in rumors of Sun Ra being homosexual. It made him an invisible clown and sideshow that alienated him from his own desires and led to a lifetime of constant friction. He was isolated from the inception of his maturation and in the midst of his shame he used knowledge and music as his guiding light past prejudices, and naysayers.

Shame is a prison where the liminal battle of inside-outside, unconscious and conscious revels to lock the keys of our desires. The psychological regression that encompasses the mind, which takes over the function of the body, illuminates a discursive Cartesian ideology. When shame imprisons the mind, the body can't bear show its shadow to the sun. We run around in circles in our mind, having accomplished nothing in the sleepless nights of worry. However when the body is forced into the circumstances of shock and confinement it either collapses under the weight the mind, or it can't bear any more pain and the body ceases to pump blood into the veins of a wailing heart resulting in death. We have but two ways to death, either the mind dissolves into an abyss forgetting all that we are or our body whispers in our ear it no longer will serve our simplest commands, like breathing or blinking.

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<sup>29</sup> Sun Ra was not the only objector to World War II. He and a small number of African Americans choose this position, including C.L.R. James, A. Phillip Randolph, and many members of the Nation of Islam. John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.10

In 1941 “Herman P. Blount was granted an E-4 classification as a conscientious objector opposed to both combatant and noncombatant military service.”<sup>30</sup> Sonny was placed in a civilian public service camp where he wrote

At the present my whole left side from my head to foot is burning and aching. I am subject to attacks without warning. Do you know how it feels to be numb from head to foot? Have you ever been awake all night in too much pain to lie down, too much pain to walk and as a result could only sit and wait until dawn? I know how it feels... I’ve never been able to think of sex as part of my life though I have tried to but just wasn’t interested. Music to me is the only worthwhile thing in the world, and I think of it as a full compensation for any handicaps I have<sup>31</sup>

January 1943 a letter to the U.S. Marshall,

“I am so unhappy and bewildered that I am almost crazed. If there ever was a person who had reason to commit suicide, I feel that I am that person. A month ago I had my music and a good name.” This stress in institutional living, of being under control and life without art lead Sun Ra to write, This morning I took a razor and started to slash my wrists or mutilate the one testical I have, but I thought of the wrong of murder in any form and hesitated. Yet some things are worse than death. I dread tonight and the days are so lonely; being musicless. Sincerely Herman Blount

P.S.

Probably my physical condition is aggravated by easily excited nerves or worry because this morning my whole left side seemed to have been paralyzed and my heart beat so that it seemed to shake the bend. It would probably be more merciful to be killed than to be as I am.<sup>32</sup>

There is a relationship with pain, madness, the handshake with death that de-alienates the body and soul to birth a creative necessity to transcend the cards life has dealt. Surviving this threshold becomes a self-conscious affirmation of ones abilities and magical powers. Sun Ra would later play at a psychotic ward, where his manager and longtime friend Alton Abraham said

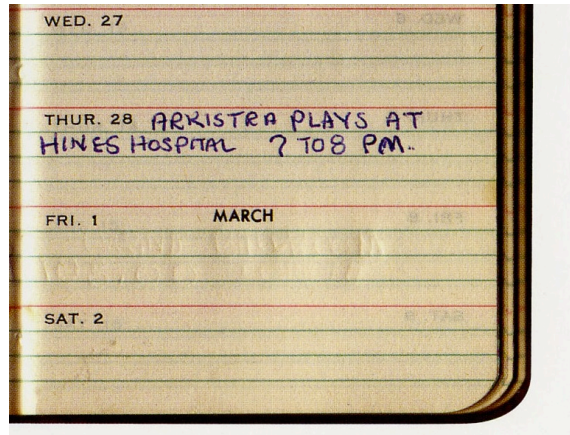
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<sup>30</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.40

<sup>31</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.41

<sup>32</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p. 44-45

A catatonic woman who hadn't spoken in years burst forth at the end of the performance with "You call that music?"<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 10:** Alton Abraham's datebook listing Ra's performance

*Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library*

With music he would reach across the border of reality into myth; with music he could build a bridge to another dimension, to something better; dance halls, clubs, and theaters could be turned into sacred shrines, the sites of dramas and rituals, and though people would be drawn to hear the music, it was they who would become the instrument on which it would resonate, on which he would create the sound of silhouettes, the images and forecasts of tomorrow...all of it disguised as jazz.<sup>34</sup>

Sonny's band changed names many times much like his own in his lifetime. His band went from The Modern Jazz Band, to the 8 Rays of Jazz, to Sun Ra and in between The Myth Science Arkestra, the Solar Arkestra, the Intergalactic Research Arkestra, etc.

<sup>33</sup> The music that was played at Hines Hospital would later become Sun Ra's Mental Therapy. This is specifically noted due to the spelling of "Arkistra" and not "Arkestra" in Alton Abraham's datebook. John Corbett, Anthony Elms, and Terri Kapsalis, *Traveling The Spaceways Sun-Ra The Astro Black and Other Solar Myths*, White-Walls Inc., 2010, p41

<sup>34</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.109

Sun Ra not only embodied a sense of psychological and physical pain for his entire life, but also a deep madness of how Europeans and African Americans viewed the world. He embodied hostility towards the black church and when the 60's black liberation movement came he was despised. In 1971 he "was expelled from a house in Oakland, California owned by the Black Panther Party."<sup>35</sup> Like *Dumbo* he became an orphan with no mother, no subjectivity, and alienated from his identification becoming *other*. Sun Ra, and *Dumbo* became orphans in the symbolic sense but also in narratives of mythopoeia.

Sun Ra founded Saturn Records in 1956 creating autonomy for distributing his music and a center for his cosmic teaching for those willing to learn his space methods. This was later known as his Chicago period. He also spent time in Oakland, and Philadelphia. Sun Ra produced singles entitled *Medicine for Nightmares*, *A Call for All Demons*, *Earth Primitive Earth*, *Space in a Pleasant Mood*, etc. He was also the first jazz musician to use an electronic keyboard. Ra was after a deep disturbance of temporal-historical relationships aided by a dis-organized jazz band and business. Ra's Arkestra constantly changed members due to his erratic rehearsal structures, although a core nucleus exists including June Tyson, Marshall Allen, and John Gilmore.

When members of the Arkestra, were called upon by Ra sometimes they would rehearse 6-8 hours, every day. Sun Ra was known for falling asleep in the middle of his instructions and 5 minutes later waking back up like nothing happened. People who purchased mail orders from Saturn Records wouldn't receive their records until months after their checks had been cashed. Sun Ra thought myth demanded another type of

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<sup>35</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.300

music and so did its distribution. His Arkestra was as much a performance and theatrical event, with elaborate costumes, and visuals.

*Space Is The Place* (1974) was a film written by Sun Ra that is a half Blaxploitation, half star trek, part documentary film. This film went quickly into obscurity but recently in the last thirty years has become a cult-classic.

Sun Ra--space-age prophet, Pharaonic jester, shaman-philosopher and avant-jazz keyboardist/bandleader--land his spaceship in Oakland, having been presumed lost in space for a few years. With Black Power on the rise, Ra disembarks and proclaims himself "the alter-destiny." He holds a myth vs. reality rap session with black inner-city youth at a rec center, threatening "to chain you up and take you with me, like they did you in Africa" if they resist his plea to go to outer space. He duels at cards with The Overseer, a satanic overlord, with the fate of the black race at stake. Ra wins the right to a world concert, which features great performance footage of the Arkestra. Agents sent by the Overseer attempt to assassinate Ra, but he vanishes, rescues his people, and departs in his spaceship from the exploding planet Earth.<sup>36</sup>

The opening scene of *Space is Place* is Le' Sonny Ra playing in a club when burlesque dancers come out dancing to the tune of a boggie melody. Women in the crowd are serving cigars, and liquor. Men are happily being pampered and Sun Ra furiously begins banging on the piano keys as if the pain is rushing from his hernia to his fingertips through the piano keys. The crowd's drinks shatter into pieces, people clothes rip off their bodies, the piano starts smoking and there is a frantic rush to the exit as if a drive-by shooting were occurring inside the club. Sun Ra stays on the piano

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<sup>36</sup> Written by [Jim Newman <jnew@sirius.com>](mailto:jnew@sirius.com)



creating a cacophonous frequency in relation to the violence he is causing, while screams are heard, a chandelier breaks. As his piano tones become a typhoon sweeping away remnants of exploitation and evil out of the club and into the streets from whence they came. You can see the polyrhythms and syncopation are taking flight in the form of bullets. The piano slide away and Sun Ra is left sitting with The Overseer smoking a cigar.

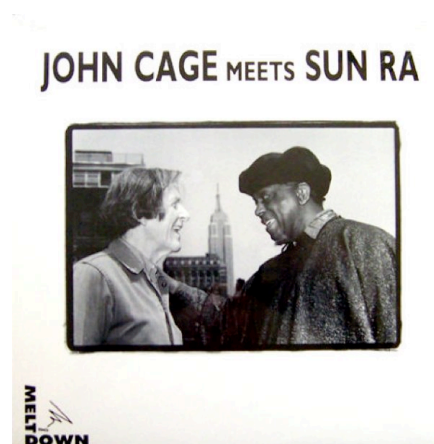
Sun Ra produced immense intersubjectivity, de-alienation, and at times a frightening cosmos of unquestionable rupture and continuity that made phantoms speak through his music. Perhaps that is why the Black Panthers didn't want Sun Ra around in Oakland while filming *Space is the Place*. His violence was too pure, his truth too far in the future, asking for a spiritual revolution and not a Marxist liberation. Sun Ra's lectures at the University of California Berkeley were asking for a disciplined submission to the cosmic forces, which became his Astro-Black mythology. The Black Panthers were developing their own legacy not cognizant of outer space or Egyptian history.

## CHAPTER 6: Fluxus – Sun Ra

Sun Ra and John Cage recorded a live concert in 1986 at Sideshows by the Sea, Coney Island NY. Here we follow the thread of this double bind haunting of Topsy, Sun-Ra, Fluxus, and the violence protruding through Sun Ra’s and John Cage’s instruments. During the concert Sun Ra “manages to jump from the most beautiful chords to the most dissonance in a matter of seconds.... Just when his playing couldn’t get any darker, he spends most of the second half making ambient, creepy noises.”<sup>37</sup>

On the back cover of this obscure release, which is supposedly only pressed in a limited amounts, reads “Ra accepts “mistakes” because they don’t impede on the momentum of the truthful expression (hear the exhilarating if sloppy air checks of his mentor Fletcher Henderson’s big band); indeed, they’re truthful too.”

Unedited Live recording at Sideshows by the Sea Coney Island, June 8, 1986 in Coney Island, NY –Meltdown Records



**Figure 11:** *Record Cover: John Cage Meets Sun Ra*

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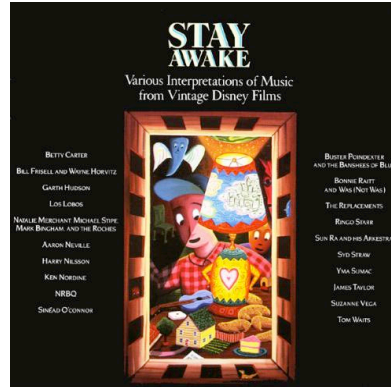
<sup>37</sup> Tyler Fisher Album review, Sputnik Music, 2006.

Hal Willner is well known for production tribute albums to that of William Burroughs, Edgar Allen Poe, Lou Reed, Charles Mingus and in 1998 produced a *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films* on which track number 9 a) you can listen to Pink Elephants on Parade from *Dumbo* 4:48 performed by the one and only Sun Ra & His Arkestra. Sun Ra went into the studio with Willner's arrangement and "said it was all wrong and began re-writing it." Sun Ra identified with the themes of the surrealist alien sequence and as he himself was considered a freak it was only natural that *Dumbo* was close to his heart. A film critic J. Hoberman wrote, "A near normal arrangement of the ditty heralding *Dumbo's* psychedelic freak-out, it is sung with such falsetto enthusiasm that it might almost be about something - like maybe the segment of the population you don't see on Soul Train."<sup>38</sup>

We can even see a dissident Surrealist-Disney aesthetic on the cover, which could be a reference to Salvador Dali, but not quite as slick and refined. The cover shows a half child-half pink elephant, next to a lamp emanating light horizontally onto the world above and the world below. This painted myth is framed, referencing a world once known yet erased from the space of enunciation. Here we can listen to Sun Ra and his Arkestra give birth and revive the haunting of pink dissident elephants upgraded with a mellow tone elongated from the original. This length hypnotizes the listener into a daze that is in stark contrast with the original Spanish rumba. Ra's version is not aggressive, nor does the end burst into explosive colors. These sounds linger, echoing into a soft lullaby, connecting our heartbeat with a trumpet horn that agonizes into a faint darkness.

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<sup>38</sup> John F Szwed, *Space is the Place*, Pantheon Books New York 1997, p.361



**Figure 10:** *Stay Awake Record Cover -1998*

“Music is the science of playing human nervous systems, orchestrating sensory mixes of electronic emotions: the music of yourself in dissonance. Ra hears humans as instruments, sound generators played by the music they listen to. Ra abstracts the sound machine into a social machine: I’m an instrument. But man is an instrument too. The people are an instrument.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Quartet Books 1999, p161

## Conclusion

After failing to “fly” in my backyard, I wiped the tears away from my eyes, and as the pain dissipated from my fall, an immediate fear came over me. I thought to myself, if my father finds out about this incident he’ll kill me! I’ll never get to play outside by myself again. I rushed inside my house to the bathroom, washed my face and hands, only to realize my father was preoccupied with composing music in the front living room and never took notice. All my limbs were intact and my face was a hint of red, which I could play off as the effects of the summer Texas heat. I realized, the imagination is a dangerous place that can come smashing down on you during any given moment.

Dumbo remains a classic Disney film while being out of touch with the current generation who are not haunted by the fear of war, while the hallucinations of our unconscious have been given a panacea by pharmaceutical companies, and our possibilities of flight retain a sense of nostalgia in relation to the speed of our technology. I layout to you a *kosmos* that embeds splintered directions, where many more connections remain and can be brought to the surface. I’m constructing a *system* in how popular culture and mass culture can provide a launching pad to transcribe this complex grid that exists in-between the cultural production of animation and a small history of jazz music. So today, I leave you not like famous Disney films, for there are more connections to be created, and splintering’s to be excavated.

Sun Ra is still marginalized in the historical framework of jazz, but continues influencing current musicians, creating echoes and quotes of his haunting melodies and teachings in various tempos and octaves. It is said that a sound lingers forever and that every sound produced- exists as a ghost, which only the lucky few are capable of hearing. Sound becomes a teleportation device, and also a visual theater taking us

inside moments we re-remember constituting the recreation of memory and history. In today's current afro-futurist discourse Herman Poole Blount's history is forgotten, rejected, and dismissed. Sun Ra's myth and legendary status holds more cultural value than the pain and suffering Herman endured. This path of creativity is the result that only a few stoic individuals are capable of travelling.

So today, I encourage you to search the past and be in the present. Be stoic on your journey through life's tribulations and achievements. The sun will rise, and the melodies of yesteryear will be heard again. At best, it is the understanding of our limits that produce the fiction and myth we desire to live.

"The voyage will not teach you anything if you do not accord it the right to destroy you - a rule as old as the world itself. A voyage is like a shipwreck, and those whose boat has never sunk will never know anything about the sea. The rest is skating or tourism." – Nicloas Bouvier

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