

SCIENCE OR FICTION: IMAGINARY NARRATIVES IN THE WORKS OF LAYLAH ALI, HAMAD BUTT, BASIM MAGDY AND LARISSA SANSOUR

By: Jareh Das

"You still don't understand what you're dealing with, do you? The perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility. I admire its purity. A survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality."

Ash, Alien (1979)

The quote above by Ash, the lead character of Ridley Scott's smash hit, *Alien* (1979), highlights the conflicting nature of man's relationship with the alien. It is one of fear, admiration and reflection of our own place in the universe, as imagined through science fiction.

Science fiction scholars generally agree that the subject of Science fiction was developed from the scientifically - and technologically - inspired stories of classic nineteenth century authors which include, Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1850), H.G. Wells, *War of the Worlds* (1898) and Jules Verne, *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) in Western Europe, and Edgar Allan Poe, *The Unparalleled Adventures of Hans Pfaall* (1835) in the United States. These classic literary texts on science fiction highlight the trope of the alien and alien invasion, although Kurt Vonnegut is credited as the first writer to use the genre of science fiction to describe the horrors of World War II during the Dresden bombings.

Science fiction, as the name implies, merges the 'rational' and 'plausible' nature of science with the 'flexible' and 'creative' nature of fiction, opening up a critical space of engagement. In their book *What is Science Fiction?* which explores the textual geographies of science fiction, Rob Kitchin and James Kneale explore the question in the title. Kitchin and Kneale conclude that science fiction is a discourse which opens up a space in which authors and readers can reflect upon the nature of a wide variety of subjects such as space, nature and material things⁽¹⁾. They go on to argue that because science fiction is a form of 'non-realist' fiction, the relationship that it has with the 'real' gives it its nature as fiction 'compounded'.

Within the book, Kitchin and Kneale pose a flexible space that allows exploration of various topics, and it is no wonder that visual artists have also looked through the lens of science fiction to consider race, conflict, technology and human existence.

In their catalogue essay for the 2006, ICA/inIVA exhibition, *Alien Nation* Gilane Tawadnos and John Gill go further to describe science fiction as a means of articulating deep-seated fears about the rapidly changing world, a world in which humans have little control. For these writers, science fiction

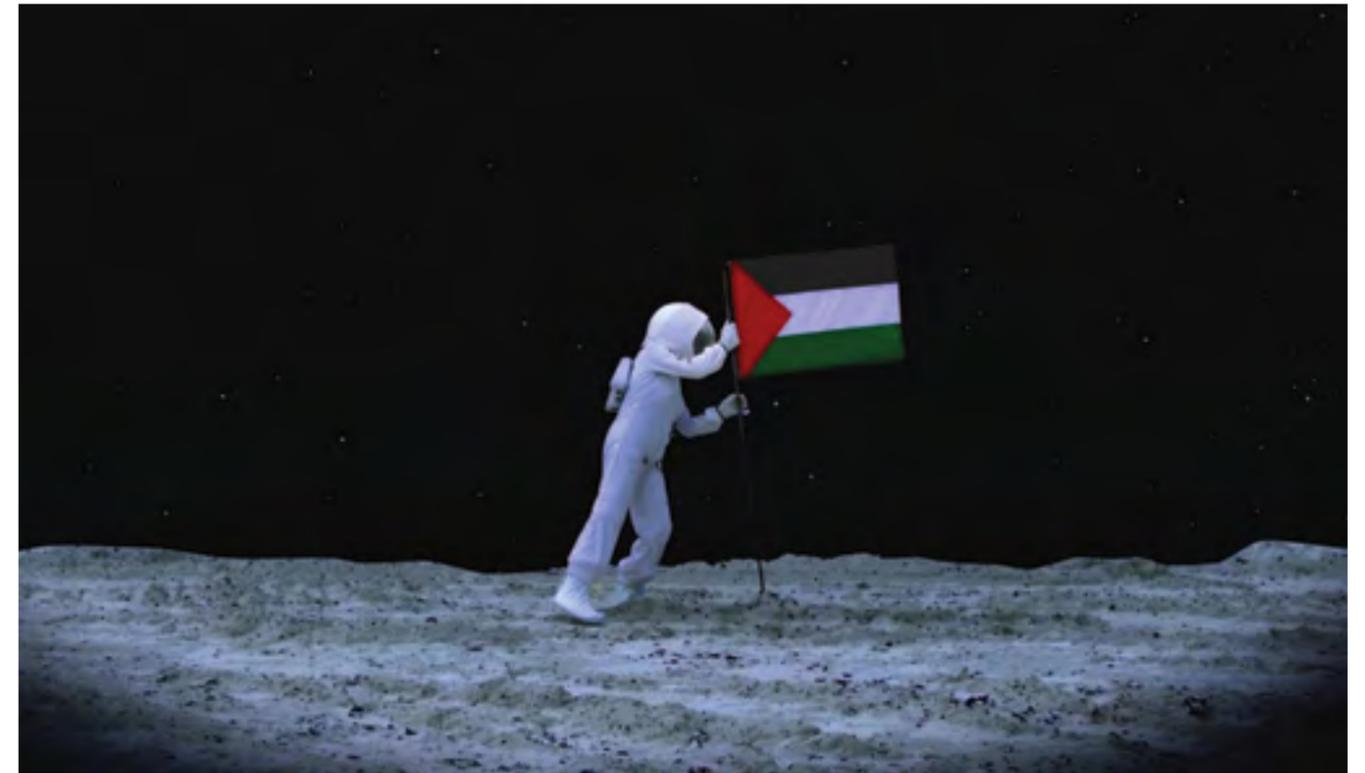
narratives confront 'the perils of the present seen through the prism of an imaginary future'⁽²⁾.

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a shift from the focus of science fiction in literature to the cinematic world. One notices that the popularity of science fiction in Western cinema is fuelled by The Cold War and McCarthyism⁽³⁾. The political events of this period spread mass fear of invasion, communism and a nuclear apocalypse. Artists use science fiction narratives and tropes of the alien to explore and explain ideologies around 'fear of difference', 'threat of invasion' and 'the apocalypse'. During McCarthyism, this fear of difference and the threat of invasion were attributed to beings from another planet or world: I believe that in our current, global conscious, the term 'alien' has been propagated to a fear of invasion from immigrants, asylum seekers and the opinion that outsiders are a grave threat to national stability⁽⁴⁾. Post 9/11, we also observe a slight displacement of the fear of immigrants and asylum seekers, to a fear of terrorists and the 'Islamic other' who could be masked as one of the aforementioned groups.

At present, a generation of contemporary artists explain these themes of 'fear' and 'difference' through the language and iconography used within science fiction. Artists like Ben Rivers and Basim Magdy contemplate post-apocalyptic future landscapes through photographic slides shot on the alien-like landscape of Lanzarote.

Larissa Sansour and Laylah Ali deal with the trope of the alien and individual identity based somewhat on feminist ideologies. We see Sansour placing herself as the star of a futuristic movie about belonging to an imagined Palestine state, whilst Ali resists the constraints of the patriarchal nature of science fiction by depicting beings that could be male/female/human/animal. The late Hamad Butt shifts our perspective through installations that take on a bit of shape-shifting themselves, but work with the principles of alchemy used to further disseminate myth-making and collective fears.

All of these artists use science fiction as a space to open the gap between what is real and imagined, often projecting alternatives to the present. Recently, the term 'Arab Futurism' has been used to describe Middle



1. Larissa S. A Space Exodus

2. Larissa S. Olive Tree

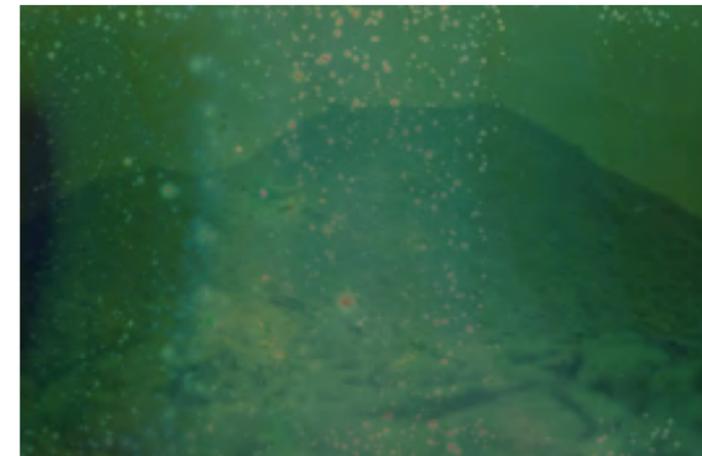
Eastern contemporary art as a critical mode of representing the Middle East. Simultaneously, Afrofuturist scholars are developing Afrofuturism as a coherent mode of critical inquiry. According to some, the task of the Afrofuturist scholar is to "explore futurist themes in black cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of black art and culture" (Nelson & Miller)⁶⁵. The issue with using prefixes such as 'Arab' and 'Afro' is that it can be limiting to the very context they are trying to expand upon. In other words, the prefix acts as a means of latching on or attaching itself to other manifestos. Although the possible problems with the use of these prefixes are worth highlighting, this is not the concern of this essay.

In the 1950s, cinematic science fiction was mainly dominated by fear and anticipation of an apocalypse that was yet to happen. This obsession with the impending apocalypse took varying forms, such as alien attacks, invasions and body snatching. These possible threats were popularized by films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Angry Red Planet* (1959), each of which concluded with human extinction. Today, we are still consumed with the narrative of the earth's fragility; a planet on the brink of extinction⁶⁶. We have lived through natural disasters, conflicts and wars, as well as the threat of cyber warfare associated with the Y2K and, more recently, the obsession of the impending 2012 *apocalypse*, apparently predicted by an ancient Mayan calendar. The popularity of Hollywood blockbusters such as *Alien*, *Armageddon*, *World War Z*, suggest that these concerns with the threat of human extinction are still very much with us. Aside from the silver screen, there are also concerns and portrayals of what will be left behind and our adaptability to this post-apocalyptic world. One artist concerned with future landscapes and such a visualization of the world is Basim Maqdy. His recent slide projection installation, *Investigating the Color Spectrum of a Post-Apocalyptic Future Landscape* (2013), presents a sequence of post-apocalyptic landscape images that propose the phantom existence of a record for a possible future memory.

Shot in the volcanic and arid landscape of Lanzarote, the installation merges old and new visuals. It is old in its nostalgic use of slide projections, which also highlight the phasing out of such technologies, yet new in the sense that the subject matter is dealing with an imagined future landscape yet to happen. Maqdy produces this effect by manipulating the slides and exposing the film to a variety of household chemicals so that they react with one another. This causes fading, drips and different degrees of decay, which also produce a dominant color in each film stock. When going through the slides, the image is recurring but colors such as red, green, blue, purple, yellow etc. dominate each slide. The landscape of the slides, with its somewhat other-worldly appearance, is a result to the volcanic activity on the island of Lanzarote⁶⁷. The grounds resemble images of the moon with its uneven surface filled with craters, which we have become visually accustomed to following photographic and televised moon landings. Since the first moon landings, images of man colonizing the moon have boomed. The current news coverage of space programmes which explore Mars has brought about a similar anticipation of humans colonizing Mars and other planets within in the collective imagination.

Dealing with the trope of the Alien is something that has been a long-standing concern of Laylah Ali. She was born in 1968, the year when the civil rights act became legalized and a period which saw change, invasions, conflicts and assassinations. This historical context would later inform the artist's visual language. Ali's drawings depict humanoid figures that are part-man, part-animal. These ambiguous beings can be described as male-female-alien-human-black-white and she describes them as acting 'Quasi-human'. Her ongoing fascination with the weakling (as opposed to macho superheroes), uniformity, alliance and betrayal, the ambiguous and the curious, led to the production of her *Greenheads* series, which consists of over sixty paintings. These figures are intricately detailed, expressive, long limbed and androgynous.

Ali's *Greenheads* have sparked debates on gender, race, class, and political content in visual art as well as conversations about legitimacy. It is not unusual to hear viewers question the purpose of these paintings and consider what questions the works might be asking. Viewers are left to make up their own minds and look to their own imaginations for answers. Ali is also interested in the hybridity between painting and drawing, and brings the two together in her work. Her absurd armless figures exist post-violence and promote individualism over collectivism. For Ali, being alien is to be separated from a reliable group dynamic, something which is perhaps considered necessary at the present⁶⁸. The *Greenheads* series firmly established as Ali's vocabulary (not sure what you mean). Her most recent works are untitled portraits of imaginary personas instead of actual people, which convey a new narrative. Most of these works intentionally blur the lines between the recognizable and unrecognizable. Their distinct feature being the fact they allude to something familiar but which, upon reflection, is unfamiliar. The paintings contain figures in black and white with intricately detailed patterns and expressions, which are simultaneously as some figures have missing limbs or exaggerated appendages. Her figures look friendly and comfortable in their skin, which brings about the question: what exactly is this 'skin' one sees? McCarthyism portrayed the alien other as one that should be wiped out at all costs. Ali's aliens are bizarre, nonchalant, non-threatening, friendly-looking and perhaps a projection of future humans - if we can allow ourselves to describe them as human. Perhaps Ali is suggesting through these drawings the possibilities of a new humanoid race one the world gets rid of its chaos. Larissa Sansour deals with the Alien through personal biography by drawing on her Palestinian heritage. Her 2008 project, *The Nation Estate*, is a sci-fi film and a photo series which presents a futuristic but humorous approach to the conflicts of the Middle East. Her focus is Palestine, which she has re-imagined as a high-tech sky rise with a glossy landscape that has been rendered with computer generated imagery. Sansour is the lead in this movie which starts with her travelling through a metro train (perhaps symbolic of time travel) and entering into Nation Estate with her suitcase. Nation Estate is a skyscraper which mimics contemporary urban dwellings that boast of 'living the high life' or 'sitting on top of the world'. She cleverly plays with the marketing tools (language, visuals etc.) of these dwellings with which we are familiar. She then juxtaposes them with the contemporary realities of



1. Basim Maqdy, *Investigating the Color Spectrum of a Post-Apocalyptic Future Landscape*, 2013. 80 slides and slide projector ii

2. Basim Maqdy, *Investigating the Color Spectrum of a Post-Apocalyptic Future Landscape*, 2013. 80 slides and slide projector.
3. Basim Maqdy, *Investigating the Color Spectrum of a Post-Apocalyptic Future Landscape*, 2013. 80 slides and slide projector ii

the current lack of a nation state for Palestinians. The film is laced with humour as she wanders through each frame, cumulating with her ascent up the building. As she goes up the elevator, each floor is occupied by different Palestinian cities: Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jerusalem etc. Each floor has a lobby that reenacts iconic squares and landmarks of the historic cities. There are elements within the film that are not as humorous. As Sansour journeys into the estate, security checks have to be approved through computerized check points, suggesting that freedom is not such an actuality, even in this idealized new world. The Palestinian flag appears in different parts, reinstating national identity in discreet (next to the finger print reader) and non-discreet ways (a large tower sized flag in the main lobby). We are reminded that even in this dystopia one has to adhere to the laws of a place which can be seen as a reminder of surveillance through monitoring points of arrival and departure. Science fiction is particularly useful in this project by Sansour as it allows us to think through how we theorise and comprehend a range of subjects such as space, nature, subjectivity and reality⁹.

Hamad Butt's use of science fiction is quite different to the artists mentioned previously. Butt uses everyday found objects, desk lamps, books etc., and morphs them into whimsical but dangerous looking installations. Butt's main concern was with situating art at the intersection of science and technology. *Transmission* (1990) is an installation by the artist which consists of a ring of books with glass pages, each with the same strange figure etched onto it somewhere. Mounted on the wall of the gallery was a glass vitrine containing sugar. Maggots were placed at the bottom of the vitrine which would eventually hatch into flies. This installation has a light beam on it. As the books lay open at different places, and as the viewer looks at the sculpture, a shape emerges at the surface. It becomes evident that¹⁰ there is an outline of a triffid from John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. Butt's use of the triffid is as a metaphor for a deadly epidemic that was capable of generating as much fear as Wyndham's monstrous plants. He was interested in exploring what he described as the 'apprehension of the Triffids of the day', and the response to its present-day equivalent¹¹. Butt isolates

the outline of the triffid and animates it through a spectrum of changing colors. The triffid in this view mutates into an object of beauty and terror. It embodies many of Butt's preoccupations as an artist - the intersection of art and science, alchemy, myths, science fiction, sexuality and death. Another notable work, *Familiars* (c.1992), takes its name from the spirits of the same name which normally accompany witches. They are shape-shifters, which are depicted in the form of animals, with the ability to change physical state at any moment. Their name implies that they can either be friends or enemies. Butt's beings are as peculiar as the ways in which he chooses to present them. This three part installation uses film, sculpture and text to illustrate the moment when science goes wrong, i.e. by capturing the ethos of an impending manmade catastrophe. In his short essay 'Indications', Butt states, "I am interested in a relationship between art and science, particularly the shift from alchemy to science (medicine, chemistry), and more tentatively the process of metachemicals, which might have an equivalent kinship to metaphysics, as chemistry does to physics. What is being considered in the apprehensions that constitutes the extent of our acknowledgment of substance? A speculation that responds to both arenas of science and art"¹².

Science fiction, from the examples we have seen above, is tied firmly in a vocabulary of imagining other worlds by using understandings (or the context) of Earth to reproduce images of an imagined cosmos. Some of these visual representations are situated within a scientifically plausible framework. Some invite the viewer to make sense of these worlds by comparing them to their own and others criticise the representation of science fictional spaces and, in doing so, open up different ways of thinking about new worlds. Ultimately, it is up to the viewer to make their own decisions about what is being represented, opening up opportunities for increased critical thinking. Science fiction, used in this way, acts as points of entry into complex issues inherent in the works produced. Questions of a better alternative to the present are brought to the foreground through the imagination. Imagining the future is a dystopia or a utopia, or shifting back and forth between the two, our never ending fascination with the disintegration of human society appears entwined with an inability to imagine change on a more modest scale of history. As Slavoj Žižek aptly states in his essay *Between trauma and tragedy from The Matrix to V for Vendetta*, "It is easier, at the present historical moment to 'imagine' destruction of the world, than to imagine the end of capitalism"¹³.



Laylah Ali. Untitled. Typology series, 2005. ink and pencil on paper, 35_28cm. Courtesy of the artist and Ellen Miller Gallery.

End Notes

1. James Kneale and Rob Kitchin, eds. *What is Science Fiction?*, in *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, 2005. Continuum, New York, pp 5-10.
2. John Gill, Jens Hoffman and Gilane Tawadros, eds. *We are the Martians, Alien Nation*, 2006. ICA, inIVA and Hatje Kantz, pp 11-13.
3. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, America was overwhelmed with concerns about the threat of communism growing in Eastern Europe and China. Capitalising on those concerns, a young Senator named Joseph McCarthy made a public accusation that more than two hundred "card-carrying" communists had infiltrated the United States government. Though eventually his accusations were proven to be untrue, and he was censured by the Senate for unbecoming conduct, his zealous campaigning ushered in one of the most repressive times in 20th-century American politics. Arthur Miller, *McCarthyism*, PBS, 23 August 2006. internet, accessed 20 August 2013
4. The definition of the word Alien has always meant 'not belonging', 'foreign' or 'not being a national of a certain country'. It refers to a fear of 'the other'.
5. Nelson Alondra, and Paul D. Miller. *About Afrofuturism in Afrofuturism*, June 28, 2006. , accessed 10 August 2013.
6. Current debates also expand to the effect of global warming triggering man made (pollution's effect on the ozone layer) and natural disasters (the effects of fracking on seismic plates triggering earthquakes, tsunamis etc.) that could potentially lead to our extinction.
7. Lanzarote, called 'Conejera' by the islanders, is also known as the island of 100 volcanoes. Its volcanic origin has created a landscape with more than 300 volcanoes. It is the most eastern island of the Canarian archipelago and it is situated very close to the African coast (which is some 125km away) and north of Fuerteventura. The surface of the island measures 846km², and its widest point is some 21km across. To the north of the island, we find a group of small islands, La Graciosa, Alegranza, Montaña Clara, Roque del Este and Roque del Oeste, which form the Chinijo archipelago. The lava fields make up a botanical environment of great importance. Of special note are the lava fields in the National Park of Timanfaya, declared a national park in 1974. The whole island is a great volcanic structure built by successive eruptions on an instable base.
8. Laylah Ali interviewed by Jens Hoffman and quoted in Jens Hoffman, 'The Truth is Out There', *Alien Nation* at ICA and inIVA, London, 2006, p.35.
9. James Kneale and Rob Kitchin go into great detail about the spatial geographies of science fiction, drawing on text and film and highlighting how little geographers have written about the imaginative geographies of science fiction in 'What is Science Fiction?', *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, 2005. Continuum, New York, pp 5-10.
10. *The Day of the Triffids*, published in 1951, expresses many of the political concerns of its time: the Cold War, the fear of biological experimentation and the man-made apocalypse. However, with its terrifyingly believable insights into the genetic modification of plants, the book is more relevant today than ever before. Possibly the 'outcome of a series of ingenious biological meddlings' (1951) and cultivated on an industrial scale in order to extract its valuable oil, the Triffids were tall, large-rooted plants whose venomous sting could blind its victims and feed on their decomposing human flesh. When the majority of people on earth are blinded as a result of witnessing an extraordinary comet display, the Triffids are in a position to take over the planet.
11. John Gill, Jens Hoffman and Gilane Tawadros, eds. 'We are the Martians', *Alien Nation*, 2006. ICA, inIVA and Hatje Kantz, pp 11-13.
12. Clement Page, Hamad Butt: *The art of metachemicals*, *Third Text*, Volume 9, Issue 32, 1995, pages 33- 42, viewed online: 19 August 2013.
13. Slavoj Žižek goes on to speak of the prevalence of images of apocalyptic destruction in contemporary culture that become interconnected with global revelations of vulnerability and new types of affiliations in 'Between trauma and tragedy from *The Matrix* to *V for Vendetta*', Peter Y. Paik, eds. *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*, 2010. University of Minnesota Press, pp 123-182.