

SUN RA at the Diamond October 2, 1987

Sun Ra's recent visit to Toronto has pushed me to think again about the breakdown of the classical avant-garde and the sometimes confusing and unhelpful uses of the term "post-modern" to explain this development. (The valuable exception to this concept is Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"). In more specific terms, whether we are talking about the novel or about music, why is it that artists cannot simply continue to write and or produce their works using traditional forms? Or, to put it another way, why do some artists feel that they cannot continue to produce such works, and why are others able to reproduce over and over again the same stale formulaic works.

In the case of jazz since the second world war, and I am simplifying enormously, the establishment of a certain traditional newness, which today stands as a "classical" avant garde, is usually associated with the names of Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane. In that music, intensity and improvisation came to the fore in the increasingly freer reinterpretations of the class, until much jazz playing cut itself free from any relation to recognizable standards, passing from reinterpretation through quotation to something which the French refer to as "écriture": a stream of consciousness which arises not from consciousness, but from some potentially endless chain of signifiers.

In contrast to such free flowing "écriture", there have been instances too of more "deconstructive" styles, an especially extreme form of reinterpretation of standards — as in much of the work of Anthony Braxton. In opposition to an avant-garde like that of the experimental writing of the Tel Quel group in France (particularly Philippe Sollers), there was an important political dimension to the jazz of Coltrane and his followers, for these artists were black, and the violent rejection of tone and melody was readily and increasingly associated

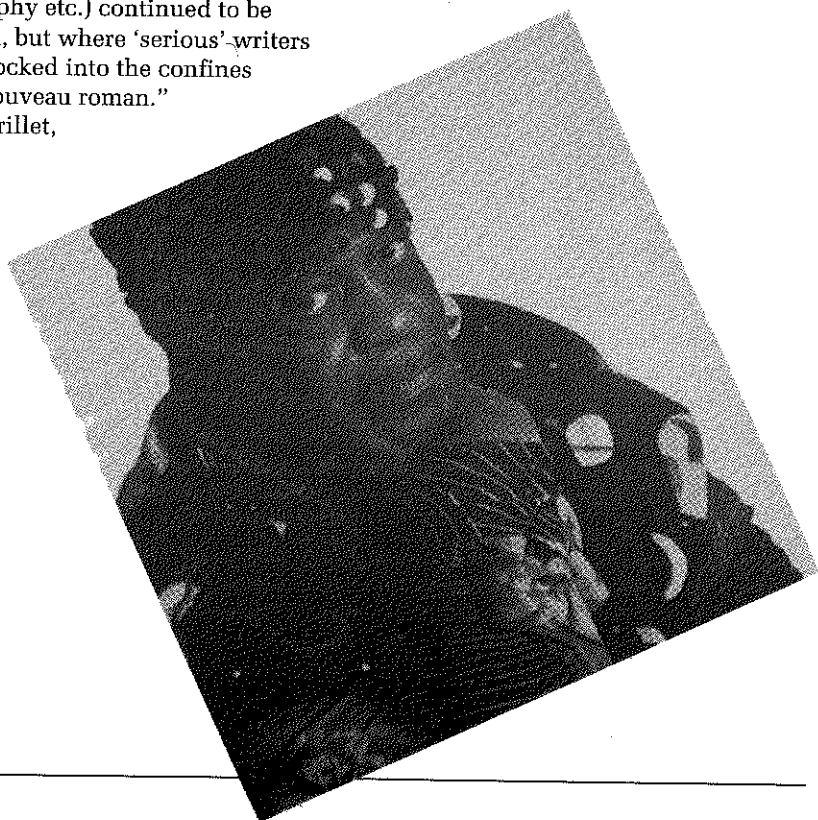
with black militancy in the 60s and 70s (best exemplified by Archie Shepp). But this was, finally, a formal or content-free politics, then, which is why I made the analogy with Tel Quel. For despite the revolutionary claims of Tel Quel during the 1960s, this was a politics with no real or final political consequences (as opposed to the Surrealists — although I am in no way reducing the struggles of blacks in the US with the *angst* of some Parisian intellectuals who, in the words of one critic, set out for China only to find themselves on the beach in California).

So what do we have? On the one hand, an ongoing mainstream jazz tradition (the playing of Dexter Gordon in the Tavernier film, *Round Midnight*) with its part of nostalgia (listeners whose taste stopped changing at a particular point), as in ragtime or dixieland; a mainstream which continues to grow and evolve, but whose ballad and melodies are nonetheless recognizable as such and whose survival could be equated to that of the traditional novel. And, on the other, an avant-garde which keeps developing into more and more abstraction and rigour (Braxton, Cecil Taylor, or spinning off and overlapping with more popular forms (Miles Davis's interest in rock — like Bob Dylan's celebrated switch from acoustic to electric so many years ago). This was the situation until recently, and the equivalent would be fiction writing in France where traditional fiction (not to mention minor genres like science fiction, mystery, harlequin, pornography etc.) continued to be produced, but where 'serious' writers seemed locked into the confines of the "nouveau roman."

(Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Simon, Duras)

Let's return to the Sun Ra concert. Imagine fifteen black jazz musicians on stage, dressed in something between African traditional dress and Shriners' costumes. But these musicians were from Philadelphia, while the music they played had little to do with contemporary African music (King Sunny Ade, Fela Kuti). Sun Ra and his "Arkestra" is a blend of put-on and various jazz traditions which has been around for some time, but it is an interesting example of a new esthetics beyond the impasse of the traditional avant garde (as outlined using the New York and Paris art scenes in Guy Scarpetta's recent *L'Impureté*), one which can immediately be distinguished from the more avant-garde use of African dress and black music traditions by a group like the Chicago Art Ensemble.

The music included some instances of free jazz, but hammed up (the players standing on their chairs to play solos), some classics sung by different members of the band, in often very modern readings. But how do I — a white man nervous perhaps about "correct" politics — react to a group of costumed blacks hamming it up in ways which explicitly recall the racist stereotypes of twenty or thirty years ago? How do we — an audience with certain preconceptions about the separateness of serious jazz and jokes and bad taste — react to some of Sun Ra's original tunes like my favorite, "This earth is not my home"?



Or his whole scienc... outer space schtick... complaint — to the... music. There are se... readings of the clas... solos in both tradit... and most of all, it's... end of the first set... off stage and throu... singing over and ov... of "Slumming and P... humorous and enth... of their own visit t... North? And this is... That the traditiona... reached a certain in... breakdown of barrie... historical breaks an... increasing; and tha... kinds of music "po... nizes that music ha... stage of modernism... begs the question o... explaining what is... makes the relative t... which Sun Ra inter... different and "acce... and perhaps even "... Barthes's distinctio... posed to writing su... even playing the sta...

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Or his whole science fiction/band from outer space schtick? This is not a complaint — to the contrary. I love the music. There are some wonderful readings of the classics, some great solos in both traditional and free veins, and most of all, it's a lot of fun, as at the end of the first set when they paraded off stage and through the audience singing over and over again the verses of "Slumming on Park Avenue," a humorous and enthusiastic "acting out" of their own visit to the posh white North? And this is I suppose the point. That the traditional avant-garde has reached a certain impasse. That the breakdown of barriers, genres, forms, historical breaks and divisions is increasing; and that to label these new kinds of music "post-modern" recognizes that music has moved beyond the stage of modernism even as it evades or begs the question of describing and explaining what is happening; what makes the relative traditionalism with which Sun Ra interprets a classic different and "acceptable" ("readable" and perhaps even "writable" to use Barthes's distinction in *S/Z*), as opposed to writing such music today, or even playing the standards "straight."

The first reason why many artists cannot continue to churn out the same old standards, to answer the question with which I began, lies with the artist's own dilemma and choice, (spelled out by Barthes in his *Writing Degree Zero*, itself written as a gloss on Sartre's *What is Literature?*) The language, the form that the artist chooses is not neutral. Those forms are already caught up in various socially inscribed meanings; they have a history, and the artist — whatever his or her intentions — does not come to this material, these instruments, these sounds, as innocent raw materials. To choose to simply redo the same old classics is to choose not to see, not to know, to acquiesce to the status quo. As the music is played and repeated, the style or approach accumulates a layer of interpretation and meaning which remains, and which buries those new intentions under their historically accumulated meanings, pushing all the artist's anger and hope, the questions about music and its traditions, or about the world in which the musician is inscribed, towards commoditification and cliché, towards pre-packaged answers which erase and conceal whatever disturbing questions the artist originally intended. This is our modernity, the post-modern condition if you prefer, (a moment for

which John Schaefer's *New Sounds* provides not an analysis but a discography): the ever widening circles of exploration (the limits of traditional instruments, like playing the piano directly on the strings; other non-western musical traditions etc), as well as a quickening pace of cannibalizing and quoting, and an increasing disregard for seriousness. All this could be seen and heard on stage at the Diamond; all this should be understood, even if I have only begun to understand or explain it, as an attempt to resolve the impasse into which the classical avant-garde finds itself.

To answer and push deeper these questions, one does not have to go to New York. A few weeks spent following Toronto's own various jazz scenes, where George's and The Music Gallery might stand in, retrospectively (and only some of the time), for the mainstream and the classical avant-garde; and this other, alternate track — given so much

play by CKLN, our "alternate" radio station — may be seen in a number of Toronto bands, from the zany hipster pose and antics of the Shuffle Demons through Gothic City, Thin Men, Paul Cram Orchestra, Not King Fudge or White Noise. All this would provide more than enough raw material for a more complete and thorough study of jazz than the quick sketch I have made here.

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Toronto, 1973 [French edition 1957].
 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-92.
 Guy Scarpetta, *L'Impureté*. Paris, 1985.
 John Schaefer, *New Sounds*. NYC, 1987.

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