

How did Hype Williams use Afro-futurism in his directed music videos between 1997-1999 to explore themes of utopia and the future of Black communities?

Introduction

Afro-futurism is a theme described by Ytasha L.Womack as a cultural and artistic practice that dates to ancient African traditions and Egyptian astrology (Womack, 2013). The aesthetic began to be more heavily used in the late 90s, when hip hop and R&B music became more popular. This essay aims to identify how Afro-futurism was used as a tool by director Hype Williams; a music video and film director who was known for adding an Afro-futuristic lens to the videos he produced.



Objective

This study aims to dissect how Afro futurism was used by Hype Williams to display a vision of the future in music videos as well as identify how the tool changed the perceptions of the future for marginalised groups and embrace African culture. I will explore the theme of Afro-futurism by analysing the visuals and connotations that are shown in 4 music videos directed by Williams, between 1997 and 1999. This time period has been selected as it's a within the window of Williams' dominant area, where he was at his greatest demand.

Methodology

Phenomenology, a philosophy which focuses on human experiences, identifying how we experience and interact with the world around us (Merleau-Ponty, 2010). It aims to understand individuals' perceptions and experiences and I will use this approach to understand the emotional and visual responses created by the visual and audio elements of music videos. When analysing the videos I aim to identify "aesthetics, ethics, and semiotics"(Kemple, 2019,p.36) within the videos which Kemple describes to be the normative science which phenomenology must be understood by. The study of aesthetics will focus on colour palettes, lighting, costumes and landscaping, spatial design and how the creative choices Williams made impacted the overall image of the future created.

Analysis

Williams hints to space and time travel through the use of chromatic tunnels which gives connotations of a spaceship. The fisheye lens further creates an outer space environment as the camera technique allows the audience to feel like we are watching Elliot through the window of a spaceship, due to the distortion created.

The extra-terrestrial motifs creates the environment of outer space and is defined by McLeod to be a temporary escape as alien imagery is "temporary transcendence of time and space"(McLeod, 2003, p.351). Which is usually interpreted as being a realm which escapes reality and the injustices that occur on earth, reflecting the displacement African Americans faced due to slavery and like aliens have experienced dislocation.



Conclusion

Overall, Williams played a key role in expanding the visual and thematic dimension of Afrofuturism. His work not only inspired subsequent artists but reenforced the idea that Afrofuturism is a dynamic cultural force, which can shape our imagination of what the future holds.