JOR

QUARTERLY

Vol. 2, No. 4 Fall 1992 $3.50

THE FINE ART OF RAP
PART II

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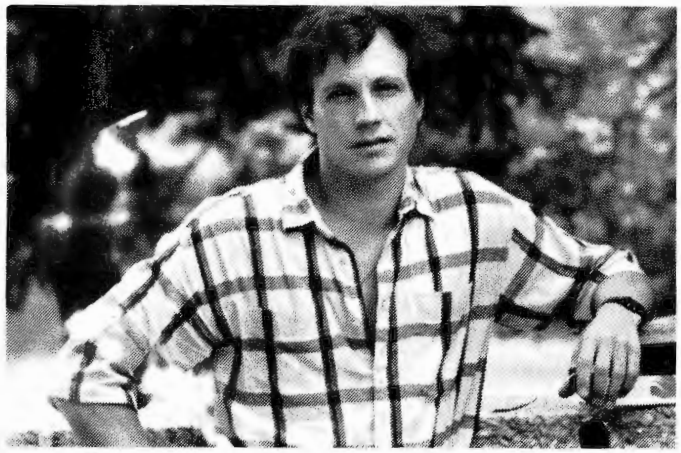
TECHNOLOGY AND MASS-MEDIA CULTURE

Rap's complex attitude toward mass circulation and commercialization reflects another central feature of postmodernism: it's fascinated and overwhelming absorption of contemporary technology, particularly that of the mass media. While the commercial products of this technology seem so simple and fruitful to use, both the actual complexities of technological production and its intricate relations to the sustaining socioeconomic system are, for the consumer public, frighteningly unfathomable and unmanageable. Mesmerized by the powers technology provides us, we postmoderns are also vaguely disturbed by the great power it has over us, as the all-pervasive but increasingly incomprehensible medium of our lives. But fascination with its awesome power can afford us the further (perhaps illusory) thrill that in effectively employing technology, we prove ourselves its master. Such thrills are characteristic of what Fredric Jameson dubs the "hallucinatory exhilaration" of the "postmodern or technological sublime" (NLR 76, 79).



Hip hop powerfully displays this syndrome, enthusiastically embracing and masterfully appropriating mass-media technology, but still remaining unhappily oppressed and appropriated by that same technological system and its sustaining society. Rap was born of commercial mass-media technology: Records and turntables, amplifiers and mixers. Its technological character allowed its artists to create music they could not otherwise make, either because they could not afford the musical instruments required or because they lacked the musical training to play them (RA 151). Technology constituted its DJs as artists rather than consumers or mere executant technicians. "Run DMC first said a deejay could be a band / Stand on its own feet, get you out your seat," exclaims a rap by Public Enemy. But without commercial mass-media technology, the DJ band would have had nothing to stand on.

The creative virtuosity with which rap artists have appropriated new technology is indeed astounding and exhilarating, and it is often acclaimed in rap lyrics. Ny acrobatically juggling the cutting and changing of many records on multiple turntables, skillful DJs showed their physical as well as artistic mastery of commercial music and its technology. From the initial disco equipment, rap artists have gone on to adopt more (and more advanced) technologies: electronic drums, synthesizers, sounds from calculators and touchtone phones, and sometimes computers which scan entire ranges of possible sounds and then can replicate and synthesize the desired ones.

Mass-media technology has also been crucial to rap's impressively growing popularity. As a product of black culture, an essentially oral rather than written culture, rap needs to be heard and felt immediately, through its energetically moving sound, in order to be properly appreciated. No notational score could transmit its crazy collage of music, and even the lyrics cannot be adequately conveyed in mere written form, divorced from their expressive rhythm, intonation, and surging stress and flow. Only mass-media technology allows for the wide dissemination and preservation of such oral performance events. Both through radio and television broadcasting and through the recording media of records, tapes and compact discs, rap has been able to reach out beyond its original ghetto audience and thus give its music and message a real hearing, even in white America and Europe. Only through the mass media could hip hop become a very audible voice in our popular culture, one which middle America would like to suppress since it often stridently expresses the frustrating oppression of ghetto life and the proud and pressing desire for social resistance and change. Without such systems rap could not have achieved its

"penetration to the core of the nation" (Ice-T) or its opportunity to "teach the bourgeois" (Public Enemy). Similarly, only through the mass media could hip hop have achieved artistic fame and fortune, it's commercial success enabling renewed artistic investment and serving as an undeniable source of black cultural pride.

Rap not only relies on mass-media techniques and technologies, it derives much of its content and imagery from mass culture. Television shows, sports personalities, arcade games, and familiar name-brand commercial products (for example, Adidas sneakers) are frequently referred to in the lyrics, and their musical themes or jingles are sometimes sampled; a whole series of rap records was based on the Smurf cartoons. Such items of mass-media culture help provide the common cultural background necessary for artistic creation and communication in a society where the tradition of high culture is largely unknown or unappealing, if not also oppressively alien and exclusionary.

But for all its acknowledged gifts, the mass media is not a trusted and unambiguous ally. It is simultaneously the focus of deep suspicion and angry critique. Rappers inveigh against its false and superficial fare, its commercially standardized and sanitized but unreal and mindless content. "False media, we don't need it, do we? It's fake," urge Public Enemy, who also lament (in "She Watch Channel Zero") how standard television shows undermine the intelligence, responsibilities, and cultural roots of black women. Rappers are constantly attacking the radio for refusing to broadcast their more politically potent or sexually explicit rap condemning the radio and the FCC for a censorship which denies both freedom of expression and the hard realities of life so as to insure the continuous media fare of "nothin but commercial junk." Scorning the option of a sell-out," Ice-T raises (and answers) the crucial "media-question" troubling all progressive rap: "Can the radio handle the truth? Nope." But he also asserts the reassurance that even with a radio ban he can reach and make millions through the medium of tapes, suggesting that the media provides its own way of subverting attempts at regulatory control: "They're makin' radio wack, people have to escape / But even if I'm banned, I'll sell a million tapes."

Finally, apart from their false, superficial content and repressive censorship, the media are linked to a global commercial system and society which callously exploits and oppresses hip hop's primary audience. Recognizing that those who govern and speak for the dominating technological-commercial complex are indifferent to the enduring woes of the black underclass ("Here is a land that never gave a damn about a brother like me ... but the suckers had authority"), rappers protest how our capitalist society exploits the disenfranchised blacks both to preserve its sociopolitical stability (through their service in the military and police) and to increase its profits by increasing their demand for unnecessary consumer goods. One very prominent theme of hip hop is how the advertised ideal of consumption—luxury cars, clothes, and high-tech appliances—lures many ghetto youth to a life of crime, a life which promises the quick attainment of such commodities but typically ends in death, jail or destitution, thus reinforcing the ghetto cycle of poverty and despair.

It is one of the postmodern paradoxes of hip hop that rappers extol their own achievement of consumerist luxury while simultaneously condemning its uncritical idealization and quest as misguided and dangerous for their audience in the ghetto community to which they ardently avow their solidarity and allegiance. In the same way, self-declared "underground" rappers at once denigrate commercialism as an artistic and political sell-out, but nonetheless glorify their own commercial success, often even regarding it as indicative of their artistic power. Such contradictions are perhaps expressive of the postmodern fragmentation of the self into inconsistent personae, but they may be equally expressive of more fundamental contradictions in the sociocultural fields of ghetto life and so-called noncommercial art. Certainly there is a very deep connection in Afro-American culture between independent expression and economic achievement, which would impel even noncommercial rappers to tout their commercial success and property. For, as Houston Baker so well demonstrates, Afro-American artists must always, consciously or unconsciously, come to terms with the history of slavery and commercial exploitation which forms the ground of black experience and expression. As slaves were converted from independent humans to property, their way to regain independence was to achieve sufficient property of their own so as to buy their manumission (as in the traditional liberation narrative of Frederick Douglass). Having long been denied a voice because they were property, Afro-Americans could reasonably conclude "that *only* properly enables expression." For underground rappers, then, commercial success and its luxury trappings may function essentially as signs of an economic independence which enables free artistic and political expression, and which is conversely also enabled by such expression. A major dimension of this celebrated economic independence is its independence from crime."

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FINE ART OF RAP *(Continued)*

ECLECTICISM, HISTORY AND AUTONOMY

I have already mentioned the wide-ranging eclecticism of rap's appropriative sampling, which extends even to nonmusical sources. Its plundering and mixing of past sources has no respect for period, genre, and style distinctions; it cannibalizes and combines what it wants with no concern to preserve the formal integrity, aesthetic intention, or historical context of the records it plunders, absorbing and trans-forming everything it cuts and takes into its funky collage. Rap historian David Troop gives a sense of this wild eclecticism: "Bambaataa mixed up calypso, European and Japanese electronic music, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and rock groups like Mountain; Kook DJ Herc spun the Doobie Brothers back to back with the Isley Brothers; Grandmaster Flash overplayed speech records and sound effects with The Last Poets; Symphonic B Boys Mixx cut up classical music on five turntables" (RA 105; see also 149, 153).

Perhaps more than any other contemporary art form, rap not only exemplifies but proudly thematizes the eclectic pastiche and cannibalization of past styles that is central to the postmodern. Some, like Jameson, regret this "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" and its unprincipled "play of random stylistic allusion" for its disintegration and derealization of a coherent and real past, one which might otherwise be retrieved to help us better understand our problematic present and guide us toward a more liberated future. For Jameson, postmodernism's eclectic "historicism effaces history." Instead of "real history" and "genuine historicity," the organic reconstruction of "some putative real world", we are supplied with nostalgia, a jumble of stereotypical images from an imagined past. We are thus confined to the prisonhouse of ideological representations, "condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" and hence unavailable as a source for political critique and liberation.

But the whole idea of real history, the one true account of a fully determinate past whose structure, content, and meaning are fixed and unrevisable, is itself a repressive ideological construction and a vestige of absolute realism which cannot compel much conviction in our age of postfoundationalist philosophy. Neither the past nor the present is ever purely given or reported; they are always selectively represented and shaped by discursive structures reflecting dominant interests and values, which are often simply those of the politically dominant. In being historicized, history is not so much lost but pluralized and openly politicized, instead of having its implicit political agenda concealed under the guise of neutral objectivity where it cannot be challenged or even recognized as political. History, objectively and unequivocally conceived, is a metaphysical naturalization of *his*-tory, the story of "The Man" — the term black culture uses to denote ont only the police but the dominating, oppressive white male society which controls and polices the institutions of cultural legitimacy, including the writing and teaching of history," A fascinating feature of much underground rap is its acute recognition of the politics of culture; its challenge of the univocal claims of white history and education; and its attempt to provide alternative black historical narratives which can stimulate black pride and foster emancipatory impulses. Such alternative narratives extend from biblical history to the history of hip hop itself, which is thus constituted and valorized as a phenomenon worthy of historical testimony and documentations.

If rap's free-wheeling eclectic cannibalism violates high modernist conventions of aesthetic purity and integrity, its belligerent insistence on the deeply political dimension of culture challenges one of the most fundamental artistic conventions of modernity: aesthetic autonomy. Modernity, according to Weber and others, was bound up with the project of occidental rationalization, secularization, and differentiation which disenchanted the traditional religious world-view and carved up its organic domain into three separate and autonomous spheres of secular culture: science, art, and morality, each governed by its own inner logic of theoretical, aesthetic, or moral-practical judgment. This tripartite division was of course powerfully reflected and reinforced by Kant's critical analysis of human thinking in terms of pure reason, practical reason, and aesthetic judgment.

In this division of cultural spheres, art was distinguished from science as not being concerned with the formulation or dissemination of knowledge, since its aesthetic judgment was essentially nonconceptual and subjective. It was also sharply differentiated from the practical activity of the realm of ethics and politics, which involved real interests and appetitive will (as well as conceptual thinking). Instead, art was consigned to a disinterested, imaginative realm which Schiller later described as the realm of play and semblance. As the aesthetic was distinguished from the more rational realms of knowledge and action, it was also firmly differentiated from the more sensate and appetitive

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gratifications of embodied human nature—aesthetic pleasure residing, rather, in distanced, disinterested contemplation of formal properties.

Hip hop's genre of "knowledge rap" (or "message rap") is dedicated to the defiant violation of this compartmentalized, trivializing, and eviscerating view of art and the aesthetic. Such rappers repeatedly insist that their role as artists and poets is inseparable from their role as insightful inquirers into reality and teachers of truth, particularly those aspects of reality and truth which get neglected or distorted by establishment history books and contemporary media coverage. KRS-One of BDP claims to be not only "a teacher and artist, startin' new concepts at their hardest," but a philosopher (indeed, according to the jacket notes on the Ghetto Music album, a "metaphysician") and also a scientist ("I don't drop science, I teach it. Correct?"). In contrast to the media's political whitewash, stereotypes, and empty escapist entertainment, he proudly claims:

I'm tryin' not to escape,
but hit the problem head on
By bringing out the truth in a song.
...

It's simple; BDP will teach reality
No beatin' around the bush, straight up; just like the beat is free.
So now you know a poet's job is never done.
But I'm never overworked, cause I'm number one.

Of course, the realities and truths which hip hop reveals are not the transcendental eternal verities of traditional philosophy, but rather the mutable but coercive facts and patterns of the material, sociohistorical world. Yet this emphasis on the temporally changing and malleable nature of the real (reflected in rap's frequent time tags and its popular idiom of "knowing what time it is") constitutes a respectably tenable metaphysical position associated with American pragmatism. Though few may know it, rap philosophers are really "down with" Dewey, not merely in metaphysics but in a noncompartmentalized aesthetics which highlights social function, process, and embodied experience.

For knowledge rap not only insists on uniting the aesthetic and the cognitive, but equally stresses that practical functionality can form part of artistic meaning and value. Many rap songs are explicitly devoted to raising black political consciousness, pride, and revolutionary impulses; some make the powerful point that aesthetic judgments, and particularly the question of what counts as art, involve political issues of legitimation and social struggle in which rap is engaged as progressive praxis and which it advances by its very self-assertion as art. Other raps function as street-smart moral fables, offering cautionary narratives and practice advice on problems of crime, drugs, and sexual hygiene (for example, Ice-T's "Drama" and "High Rollers," Kool Moe Dee's "Monster Crack" and "Go See the Doctor," BDP's "Stop the Violence" and "Jimmy"). Finally, we should note that rap has been used effectively to teach writing and reading skills and black history in the ghetto classroom.

Since postmodernism dissolves the relative autonomy of the artistic sphere crucial to the differentiating project of modernity and equally crucial to the high modernist aesthetic which refused contamination by the impurities of practical life, politics, and the common vulgarities of mass culture, Jameson suggests that its disintegration of traditional modernist boundaries could provide the redemptive option of "a new radical cultural politics" (NLR 89), a post modern aesthetic which "foregrounds the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of political art and culture" (NLR 89). Jameson regards this new culture form as still "hypothetical" (NLR 89), but I submit that it can be found in rap, whose artists explicitly aim and succeed at teaching and political activism, just as they seek to undermine the socially oppressive dichotomy between legitimate (that is, high) art and popular entertainment by simultaneously asserting the popular and the artistic status of hip hop.

Like most culture critics, Jameson is worried about the potential of post-modernist art to provide effective social criticism and political protest, because of its "abolition of critical distance" (NLR 85). Having undermined the fortress of artistic autonomy and enthusiastically appropriated the content of workaday and commercial living, post-modern art seems to lack the "minimal aesthetic distance" (NLR 87) necessary for art to stand "outside the massive Being of capital" (NLR 87) and thus represent an alternative to (and hence critique of) what Adorno called "the ungodly reality." Though anyone tuned in to the sound of Public Enemy, BDP, or Ice-T can hardly doubt the authenticity and power of their oppositional energy, the charge that all contemporary "forms of cultural resistance are secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might be considered a part" (NLR 87) might well be directed at rap. For while it condemns media stereotypes, violence, and the quest for luxurious living, rap just as often exploits or glorifies them to make its points. While denouncing commercialism and the capitalist system,

rap's lyrics are simultaneously celebrating its commercial success and business histories; some songs, for example, describe and justify the rapper's change of record company for commercial reasons.

Hip hop surely does not lie wholly outside what Jameson regards as the "global and totalizing space of the new world system" (NLR 88) of multinational capitalism, as if the congeries of contingent events and chaotic processes which help make up what we call the world could ever be fully totalized in one space or system. But granting for the moment that there is this all-embracing system, why should rap's profitable connection with some of its features void the power of its social critique? Do we need to be fully outside something in order to criticize it effectively? Does not the postmodern and post-structuralist decentering critique of definitive, otologically grounded boundaries put the whole notion of being "fully outside" seriously into question.

With this challenging of a clear inside/outside dichotomy we should similarly ask, why does proper aesthetic response traditionally require distanced contemplation by a putatively transcendent and cooley disinterested subject? This assumption of the necessity of distance is yet another manifestation of the modernist convention of artistic purity and autonomy which hip hop repudiates. Indeed, rather than an aesthetic of distanced, disengaged, formalist judgment, rappers urge an aesthetic of deeply embodied participatory involvement, with content as well as form. They want to be appreciated primarily through energetic and impassioned dance, not through immobile contemplation and dispassionate study. Queen Latifah, for example, insistently commands her listeners, "I order you to dance for me." For, as Ice-T explains, the rapper "won't be happy till the dancers are wet" with sweat, "out of control" and wildly "possessed" by the beat, as indeed the captivating rapper should himself be possessed so as to rock his audience with his God-given gift to rhyme. This aesthetic of divine yet bodily possession is strikingly similar to Plato's account of poetry and its appreciation as a chain of divine madness extending from the Muse through the artists and performers to the audience, a seizure which for all its divinity was criticized as regrettably irrational and inferior to true knowledge. More importantly, the spiritual ecstacy of divine bodily possession should remind us of Voodun and the metaphysics of African religion to which the aesthetics of Afro-American music has indeed been traced.

What could be further from modernity's project of rationalization and secularization, what more inimical to modernism's rationalized, disembodied, and formalized aesthetic? No wonder the established modernist aesthetic is so hostile to rap and to rock music in general. If there is a viable space between the modern rationalized aesthetic and an altogether irrational one whose rapid Dionysian excess must vitiate its cognitive, didactic, and political claims, this is the space for a postmodern aesthetic. I think the fine art of rap inhabits that space, and I hope it will continue to thrive there. ■

MILLICENT SHELTON (Continued)

Picture yourself as an aspiring filmmaker. Your goal would probably be to work your way up to dealing with some big names in the business, eventually. But suppose the first people you start working with, almost immediately, are Spike Lee and Bill Cosby?

"A week after graduation," Shelton says, "I called Forty Acres And A Mule (Spike Lee's film company) and asked to speak with Spike, and they put him on the phone.

"I set up an interview with him, talked to him at the end of the interview, and he offered me a job (production assistant and wardrobe) on 'Do The Right Thing.' He gave me a break, based on nothing."

And with Cosby? "When I was working on that set (Lee's), I got a call from 'The Cosby Show,' 'cause there was another company I sent a couple of letters and resumes to, and they had called my home, and my mom said, 'Oh, she's working with Spike.' So they were immediately interested."

So she did a whole season of "The Cosby Show," from 1988 to '89 under the same title (production assistant & wardrobe); went from there to doing assistant camera work (she got training for it of course); then worked with Ernest Dickerson on his "Too Hype" shoot for Kid 'N Play.

That's when she met her current partner, record producer and manager, Hurby "Luv Bug" Azor, the man behind the hits of Kid 'N Play and Salt 'N Pepa. "He was interested in writing some movies together, because he has a lot of ideas, but he's not a writer," she says. "So we started working on a collaboration, and at one point he asked to see some of my work. And I showed him a short film I did. And he was the one who said, 'Oh, I should let you direct Salt 'N Pepa's new video." *(Continued on next page)*