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# CRITIQUE: THE FINE ART OF RAP [PART I]

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In the view of both the culturally elite and the so-called general public, rap music lurks in the underworld of aesthetic respectability. Though it is today's "fastest growing genre of popular music," its claim to artistic status has been drowned under a flood of abusive critique. Rap has not only suffered moral and aesthetic condemnations but also organized censorship, blacklists, arrests, and the police-enforced stopping of concerts. Moreover, on a different level of cultural combat, we find attempts to dilute and undermine rap's ethnic and political content by encouraging and exploiting its most bland, "sanitized," and commercialized forms. None of this should be surprising. For rap's cultural roots and prime following belong to the black underclass of American society; and its militant black pride and thematizing of the ghetto experience represent a threatening siren to that society's complacent status quo. The threat is of course far more audible and urgent for the middle-brow public who not only interact more closely and competitively with the poor black population, but who rely on (and thus compete for) the same mass-media channels of cultural transmission, and who have a greater need to assert their sociocultural (and ultimately political) superiority over black America.

Armed with such powerful political motives for opposing rap, one can readily find aesthetic reasons which seem to discredit it as a legitimate art form. Rap songs are not even sung, only spoken or chanted. They typically employ neither live musicians nor original music; the sound track is instead composed from various cuts (or "samples") of records already made and often well known. Finally, the lyrics seem to be crude and simple-minded, the diction sub-standard, the rhymes raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy. Yet, as my title suggests, these same lyrics insistently claim and extol rap's status as poetry and fine art.

In this paper I wish to examine more closely the



aesthetics of rap or "hip hop" (as the cognoscenti often call it.) Since I enjoy this music, I have a personal stake in defending its aesthetic legitimacy. But the cultural issues are much wider and the aesthetic stakes much higher. For RAP, I believe, IS A POSTMODERN POPULAR ART WHICH CHALLENGES SOME OF OUR MOST DEEPLY ENTRENCHED AESTHETIC CONVENTIONS, conventions which are common not only to modernism as an artistic style and ideology but to the philosophical doctrine of modernity and its differentiation of cultural spheres. By considering rap in the context of postmodern aesthetics, I hope not only to provide academic aestheticians with a better understanding of this much maligned but little studied genre of popular art. I also hope to enhance our understanding of postmodern thought through the concrete analysis of one of its unique cultural forms.

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Postmodernism is a vexingly complex and contested phenomenon whose aesthetic consequently resists clear and unchallengeable definition. Nonetheless, certain themes and stylistic features are widely recognized as characteristically postmodern, which is not to say that they cannot also be found to varying degrees in some modernist art. These characteristics include: recycling appropriation rather than unique origination, the eclectic mixing of styles, the enthusiastic embracing of the new technology and mass culture, the challenging of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and artistic purity, and an emphasis on the localized and temporal rather than the putatively universal and eternal. Whether or not we wish to call these features postmodern, rap not only saliently exemplifies them, but often consciously highlights and thematizes them. Thus, even if we reject the whole category of postmodernism, these features are essential for understanding rap.

### APPROPRIATIVE SAMPLING

Artistic appropriation is the historical source of hip-hop music and still remains the core of its technique and a central feature of its aesthetic form and message. The music derives from selecting and combining parts of prerecorded songs to produce a "new" soundtrack. This soundtrack, produced by the DJ on a multiple turntable, constitutes the musical background for the rap lyrics. These in turn are frequently devoted both to praising the DJ's inimitable virtuosity in sampling and synthesizing the appropriated music, and to boasting of the lyrical and rhyming power of the rapper (called the MC). While the rapper's vaunting self-praise often highlights his sexual desirability, commercial success, and property assets, these signs of status are all presented as secondary to and derivative from his verbal power.

Some whites may find it difficult to imagine that verbal virtuosity is greatly appreciated in the black urban ghetto. But sociological study reveals it is very highly valued there; while anthropological research shows that asserting superior social status through **VERBAL PROWESS IS A DEEPLY ENTRENCHED BLACK TRADITION WHICH GOES BACK TO THE GRIOTS IN WEST AFRICA AND WHICH HAS LONG BEEN SUSTAINED IN THE NEW WORLD THROUGH SUCH CONVENTIONALIZED VERBAL CONTESTS OR GAMES AS "SIGNIFYING" OR "THE DOZENS."** Informed and sympathetic close reading will reveal in many rap songs not only the cleverly potent vernacular expression of keen insights but also forms of linguistic subtlety and

multiple levels of meaning whose polysemic complexity, ambiguity, and intertextuality can sometimes rival that of high art's so-called "open work."

Like its stylized aggressively boasting language, so rap's other most salient feature—its dominant funky beat—can be traced back to African roots, to jungle rhythms which were taken up by rock and disco and then reappropriated by the rap DJ's — **MUSICAL CANNIBALS OF THE URBAN JUNGLE.** But for all its African heritage, hip hop was born in the disco era of the mid-seventies in the grim ghettos of New York, first the Bronx, and then Harlem and Brooklyn. As it appropriated disco sounds and techniques, it undermined and transformed them, much as jazz (an earlier black art of appropriation) had done with the melodies of popular songs. But in contrast to jazz, hip hop did not take mere melodies or musical phrases. Instead it lifted concrete sound-events, prerecorded token performances of such musical patterns. Thus, unlike jazz, its borrowing and trans-figuration did not require skill in playing musical instruments but only in manipulating recording equipment. DJ's in ordinary disco clubs had developed the technique of cutting and blending one record into the next, matching tempos to make a smooth transition without violently disrupting the flow of dancing.

Dissatisfied with the tame sound of disco and commercial pop, self-styled DJ's in the Bronx reapplied this technique of cutting to concentrate and augment those parts of the records which could provide for better dancing. In short, hip hop began explicitly as dance music to be appreciated through movement, not mere listening. It was originally designed only for live performance (at dances held in homes, schools, community centers and parks), where one could admire the dexterity of the DJ and the personality and improvisational skills of the rapper. It was not intended for a mass audience, and for several years remained confined to the New York City area and outside the mass media network. Though rap was often taped informally on cassette and then reproduced and circulated by its growing body of fans and bootleggers, it was only in 1979 that rap had its first radio broadcast and released its first records.

These two singles, "RAPPER'S DELIGHT" and "KING TIM III (Personality Jock)," which were made by groups outside the core rap community but which had connections with the record industry, provoked competitive resentment in the rap world and the incentive and example to get out of the underground and on to disco and radio. However, even when the



groups moved from the street to the studio where they could use live music, the DJ's role of appropriation was not generally abandoned and continued to be thematized in rap lyrics as central to the art.

From the basic techniques of cutting between sampled records hip hop developed three other formal devices which contribute significantly to its sound and aesthetic: "scratch mixing," "punch phrasing," and simple scratching. The first is simply overlaying or mixing certain sounds from one record to those of another already playing. Punch phrasing is a refinement of such mixing, where the DJ moves the needle back and forth over a specific phrase of chords or drum slaps of a record so as to add a powerful percussive effect to the sound of the other record playing all the while on the other turntable. The third device is a wilder and more rapid back and forth scratching of the record, too fast for the recorded music to be recognized but productive of a dramatic scratching sound which has its own intense musical quality and crazed beat.

These devices of cutting, mixing and scratching give rap a variety of forms of appropriation, which seems as versatilely applicable and imaginative as those of high art—as those, say, exemplified by Duchamp's mustache on the Mona Lisa, Rauschenberg's erasure of a De Koonig canvas, and Andy Warhol's multiple representations of prepackaged commercial images. Rap also displays a variety of appropriated content. Not only does it sample from a wide range of popular songs, it feeds on classical music, television theme songs, advertised jingles, and the electronic music of arcade games. It even appropriates nonmusical content, such as media news reports and fragments of speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Though some DJs took pride in appropriating from a very unlikely and arcane sources and sometimes tried to conceal (for fear of competition) the exact records they were sampling, there was never any attempt to conceal the fact that they were working from pre-recorded sounds rather than composing their own original music. On the contrary, they openly celebrated their method of sampling. What is the aesthetic significance of this proud art of appropriation?

First, it challenges the traditional ideal of originality and uniqueness that has long enslaved our conception of art. Romanticism and its cult of genius likened the artist to a divine creator and advocated that his works be altogether new and express his singular personality.

Modernism with its commitment to artistic progress and the avant garde reinforced the dogma that radical novelty was the essence of art. Though artists have always borrowed from each other's works, the fact was generally ignored or implicitly denied through the ideology of originality, which posed a sharp distinction between original creation and derivative borrowing. Postmodern art like rap undermines this dichotomy by creatively deploying and thematizing its appropriation to show that borrowing and creation are not at all incompatible. It further suggests that **THE APPARENTLY ORIGINAL WORK OF ART IS ITSELF ALWAYS A PRODUCT OF UNACKNOWLEDGED BORROWINGS**, the unique and novel text always a tissue of echoes and fragments of earlier texts.

Originality thus loses its absolute ordinary status and is reconceived to include the transfiguring reappropriation and recycling of the old. In this postmodern picture there are no ultimate, untouchable originals, only appropriations and simulacra of simulacra; so creative energy can be liberated to play with familiar creations without fear that it thereby denies itself the opportunity to be truly creative by not producing a totally original work. Rap songs simultaneously celebrate their originality and their borrowing. And as the dichotomy of creation/appropriation is challenged, so is the deep division between creative artist and appropriative audience; transfigurative appreciation can take the form of art.

#### CUTTING AND TEMPORALITY

Rap's sampling style also challenges the work of art's traditional ideal of unity and integrity. Since Aristotle, aestheticians have often viewed the work as an organic whole so perfectly unified that any tampering with its parts would damage the whole. Moreover, the ideologies of romanticism and art for art's sake have reinforced our habit of treating artworks as transcendent and virtually sacred ends in themselves, whose integrity we should respect and never violate. In contrast to an aesthetic of devotional worship of a fixed untouchable work, **HIP HOP OFFERS THE PLEASURES OF DECONSTRUCTIVE ART—THE THRILLING BEAUTY OF DISMEMBERING (AND RAPPING OVER) OLD WORKS TO CREATE NEW ONES, DISMANTLING THE PREPACKAGED AND WEARILY FAMILIAR INTO SOMETHING STIMULATINGLY DIFFERENT.**

*(continued on page 36)*



### *The Fine Art of Rap*

The DJ's sampling and the MC's rap also highlight the fact that the apparent unity of the original artwork is often an artificially constructed one, at least in contemporary popular music where the production process is frequently quite fragmented: an instrumental track recorded in Memphis, combined with a back-up vocal from New York, and a lead voice from Los Angeles. RAP SIMPLY CONTINUES THIS PROCESS OF LAYERED ARTISTIC COMPOSITION BY DECONSTRUCTING AND DIFFERENTLY REASSEMBLING PREPACKAGED MUSICAL PRODUCTS AND THEN SUPERIMPOSING THE MC'S ADDED LAYER OF LYRICS SO AS TO PRODUCE A NEW WORK.

But rap does this without the pretense that its own work is inviolable, that the artistic process is ever final, that there is ever a product which should be so fetishized that it could never be submitted to appropriative transfiguration. IN DEFYING THE FETISHIZED INTEGRITY OF ARTWORKS, RAP ALSO CHALLENGES TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF THEIR MONUMENTALITY, UNIVERSALITY, AND PERMANENCE. In contrast to the standard view that "a poem is forever," rap highlights the artwork's temporality and likely impermanence: not only appropriate deconstructions but by explicitly thematizing its own temporality in its lyrics. For example, several songs by BDP include lines like "Fresh for '88, you suckers" or "Fresh for '89, you suckers." Such declarations of date imply a consequent admission of datedness; what is fresh for '88 is apparently stale by '89, and so superseded by a new freshness of '89 vintage. But, by rap's postmodern aesthetic, the ephemeral freshness of artistic creations does not render them aesthetically unworthy; no more than the ephemeral freshness of cream renders its sweet taste unreal.

By refusing to treat art works as eternal monuments for permanent hands-off devotion, by reworking works to make them work better, rap also questions their assumed universality—the dogma that good art should be able to please all people and all ages by focusing only on universal human themes. Hip hop does treat universal themes like injustice and oppression, but it is proudly localized as "ghetto music," thematizing its commitment to the black urban ghetto and its culture.

While it typically avoids excluding white society (and white artists), rap focuses on features of ghetto life that whites and middle-class blacks would rather

ignore: pimping, prostitution and drug addiction, as well as rampant venereal disease, street killings, and oppressive harassment by white policeman. Most rappers define their local allegiances in quite specific terms, often not simply by city but by neighborhood, like Compton, Harlem, Brooklyn, or the Bronx. EVEN WHEN RAP GOES INTERNATIONAL, IT REMAINS PROUDLY LOCAL; WE FIND IN FRENCH RAP, FOR EXAMPLE, THE SAME TARGETING OF SPECIFIC NEIGHBORHOODS AND CONCENTRATIONS ON LOCAL PROBLEMS.

Though localization is a salient characteristic of the postmodern breakdown of modernism's international style, rap's strong local sense is probably more the product of its origins in neighborhood conflict and competition. As Troop notes, hip hop helped transform violent rivalries between local gangs into musical—verbal contests between rapping crews (RA 14-15, 70-71'). By now it is difficult to point to sharp stylistic differences between the music of the different locales, though more Los Angeles rappers seem less concerned with black militancy and white oppression than their brothers in New York. Of course, local differences are hard to maintain once the music begins circulating through the mass-media system and is subjected to its commercializing pressures. For such reasons, rap lyrics often complain about its commercial expansion just as they celebrate it.

*Part II will be printed in the summer edition of JOR Quarterly.*

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