

Discuss the 'four elements' of hip hop. In what ways can they be said to constitute epistemologies?

Hip hop is the term for urban-based creativity and expression of culture. Since its beginning in the early seventies hip hop has been more than just a genre of music that people most commonly associate it with. Hip hop is a street culture with elements that promote self expression and participation.

Hip-hop's four elements include; deejaying, break dancing, graffiti and emceeing (what was originally known as emcee, is today known as rap). The motivations behind the creation of this culture are reflected through the nature of these elements. Hip hop began to take a hold over black youths in America so all the elements are unintentionally performed in a way to reflect a culture of rebellion and independence.

These four elements are a reflection upon the environments that the people who have adopted the form are surrounded by. By using not only stories and statements for graffiti and rapping but also performance techniques like break dancing and deejaying they present a sound and style to identify with and a voice to be heard.

The hip hop world began in the Bronx in 1971. The founder of hip-hop was rapper and first break-beat deejay Kool Herc. Soon after, Grandmaster Flash invented scratching; spinning a record back and forth creating a scratching sound. These innovations made by Kool Herc, Grand Wizard Theodore, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa and other like-minded DJs of the era were the spearhead of an underground cultural movement that is now recognized as hip-hop.

Just like for graffiti artists, tagging walls wasn't about being self-consciously postmodern, for DJs, breaking wasn't some departure from the norms of soul music, for all for these innovators it was an accidental, off-hand discovery of a way to distinguish themselves in a very direct, self-contained, and controllable way. The ideas that form this expression were accidental, but one can show that this element of hip hop allows artists to possess control over a track, dismantling it by the seams symbolising destruction and rebellion. These symbols again reflect the hip hop cultures infatuation with violence and independence showing how Deejaying unintentionally constituted epistemological meaning and characteristic that are relevant to this culture. The turntable gave Hip hoppers a "simple tool to make their art and they made their own decisions about made it good" (Byi: 1998, p.26).

Hip hop is the term for urban based creativity and expression of culture, the turntables enabled artists to be creative with musical sounds. The turntable is an instrument that gives artists control over mainstream music, constituting a sense of rebellion through scratching and distorting a track. Not only does djjng give artists a sense of upheaval but also liberation and freedom, Q-Bert says that "the art of scratching is like a miracle- how you grab any recorded sound and manipulate it to say whatever you want...I wanted to speak the universal language of music, so I chose the musical instrument of the future: the turntable" (Byi: 1998, p.26)

Kool Herc and company began dedicating specific “breaks” for the dancers whose moves grew more and more innovative and complex. Competition between dancers became fierce and soon the moves were accentuated by acrobatic flips and twists, giving way to head back spins. This became known as the international phenomenon break dancing. Breaker Pee Wee Dance says “Dancing is a way of being heard. It’s a form of expression.” (Byi: 1998, p.27)

“Hip hop is like the essence or soul force behind your breaking, it is the reason why you do it” (Rush: 2003, p.26).

Breakdancing is the physical manifestation of hip hop culture. Many of the moves imitated commonly explored epistemologies of sex and violence prevalent in other elements of hip hop. For example, breakers often adopted freeze poses, which might include presenting one’s behind to an opponent, holding one’s nose or grabbing one’s genitals to suggest bad odour or sexual domination.

Much like graffiti, break dancing developed a contradictory relationship to dominant culture. In January 1980, one of the first published articles on breakdancing covered a group of break dancers who were detained by the police for fighting and causing a disturbance in a Washington Heights area subway station. Once the police were convinced it was “just a dance”, the breakers were let go (Black Noise: 1994, p.50). As it is an unsanctioned public dance and public occupation of space, particularly by Black and Puerto Rican youths, breaking continued to draw the attention of the police again highlighting a rebellious embodiment of this culture.

Deejays often used a microphone to engage the crowd. Over time, individuals other than the Deejay joined in, delivering a message in a catchy rhyme form. By drawing attention not only to the message itself, but also how the message was conveyed, these individuals became performers in their own right, taking a place alongside Deejays and B-Boys; the emcee was born.

America has long been drawn to the symbiosis between criminal life and pop culture. This was the driving force behind the art form adopted by many hip hop emcees called “Gangsta rap.” Gangsta rap explores the epistemological ideas of war and battle in rap music. From Nat Turner to Marcus Garvey, the idea of a black revolutionary army has a long history in America. In the modern era, black insurrectionaries like Malcolm X and Huey Newton embraced a radical agenda without hiding their criminal pasts the implications being that a “gangsta was just a soldier who hadn’t been to boot camp” (Sanneh, *The Art of War*: 2002) and that African American criminals could be transformed from a liability into an asset.

The violence and sexual materialism that characterise some rap songs are as deeply American as the hokey music that rappers appropriate. The fact is, Americans were in love with outlaws and violence long before hip hop- think of Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde as well as Scar face and the God Father series.

The fantasy of a black America disciplined, powerful and triumphant seemed to have died when the Panthers imploded in the early seventies, but it resurfaced in the late

1980s, when hip hop turned political, a major factor being the introduction of Gangsta rap. The African American radical army has been more a rhetorical tool than a practical reality with artists like NWA exploring the fine line between criminal violence and righteous militance in their music.

Sanneh says that today many hip hop artists are “less interested in the fantasy of a unified black planet than in the aesthetic appeal of military culture itself” (Sanneh, *The Art of War*: 2002). This idea raises epistemologies of what makes a true hip hop emcee, many of whom are accused of being too square, too clean-cut, too be true hip hop icons.

The importance of the messages delivered by an emcees is epitomised in the quote by Farley in his article ‘Hip hop Nation’, “hip hop is where the voice of protest is going in the inner city and possibly far beyond” (Farley: 1999, p.53).

Raps verbal texture makes it an ideal vessel to communicate ideas whether satirical, personal or political. However, as America’s infatuation with rap has increased, the genres political content has withered. Earlier artists attacked white racism and challenged listeners to “fight the power”. But many new acts are focused almost entirely on pathologies within the black community. They rap about shooting other blacks but almost never about challenging government authority or encouraging social activism.

Wu-Tang Clans producer-rapper believes many performers are embracing the genres style-rapping- but missing its essence, the culture of hip-hop. “I don’t think the creativity has been big. I think the sales have been big and the exposure has been big...it’s been a big year for rap. It’s been a poor year for hip hop” (Farley: 1999, p.55). Even Farley raises the question “Is gangsta mythologizing for people already living under the gun a form of release or cultural imprisonment.” (Farley: 1999, p.55)

Hip hop got its starts in black America but now more than seventy per cent of hip hop albums are purchased by whites. White performers, such as Eminem, are releasing hip hop tracks that are accepted and enjoyed by both African American and non- African American supporters. The largest volume of hip hop albums has been sold to suburban kids (Farley: 1999). It is interesting that while Gangsta rap is primarily identified with a segment of society of young black males that is particularly ravaged by crime is most often purchased by suburban whites.

Doug Century says “It’s possible that in 15 years all hip-hop will be white... black youth culture will have to form itself again” (Farley: 1999, p.24).

Graffiti and rap were especially aggressive public displays of counter presence and voice. Each asserted the right to write-“to inscribe ones identity on an environment that seemed Teflon resistant to its young people of colour” (Rose: 1999, p. 60).

Graffiti was the voice of kids using spray paint and Magic Markers to scream for attention and make art. In the gang-ridden cities of America today, warnings about turf and threats of violence are communicated via graffiti. Eventually, the subways become the ideal forum for getting one’s name known. Simple “tags” give way to elaborate “pieces” and aerosol art takes its place in hip-hop history. Graffiti began to develop elaborate individual styles, themes, formats and techniques, most of which were designed to increase visibility, individual identity, and status.

Some of the most meaningful postmodern ideas come from graffiti, for example “the only limitations come from our imagination” (seen on a subway in Sydney 2003).

Train facades are central to graffiti style because graffiti artists are “guerilla outlaws who thrive on risk as a facet of one’s skill” (Rose: 1999, p.43) - the element of surprise and eluding authority among writers again creating a sense of cultural rebellion.

By the mid 1970s, graffiti emerged as a central example of the extent of urban decay and heightened already existing fears over a loss of control of the urban landscape. “If the city could not stop these young outlaws from writing all over trains and walls, some political leaders feared, then what could the city manage?” (Rose: 1999, p.45).

Graffiti is now an international phenomenon and has been adopted by many artists worldwide as a way to attract the inner city youths, and often present positive and inspirational messages. Unfortunately, the overuse of graffiti style in advertising has drained the expression of its immediacy; “hip hop did not start as a career move but as a way of announcing one’s existence to the world” (George: 1998, p.14).

All four elements of the hip-hop culture still exist today and are forever evolving to new levels. Hip hop is a cultural revolution that bridges people together thus it is a continuously growing culture that is almost impossible to stop.

While it is these four elements that come together to form what is formally known as the hip hop culture, one can question whether it is merely the nature of these art forms that create this culture or is hip hop based more on the cultural epistemologies that motivate and seduce its followers. These four elements make up the name but the culture is driven by a seduction of violence and a youth culture that want their voices heard.

Rush, a participant of a breaking group in Sydney says; “To me hip hop has nothing to do with the four elements. Hip hop to me is meant to be a street culture and if your interests neglect the interests of the streets then it really isn’t hip hop, so all that stuff that you see on TV that does not give anything back to street isn’t really hip hop it is just entertainment... People think you have to be an MC or a rapper or a break dancer or a graffiti artist or a DJ to be ‘hip hop’ but you don’t have to do any of them and you can still be hip hop” (Rush: 2003). However, it is important to realise that these four elements were created to provide a physical representation and foundation used to fulfill people’s desire to be seen and heard. This fact is epitomised by Davey D who says “Initially all of hip hop’s major facets were forms of self expression. The driving force behind all these activities was people’s desire to be seen and heard” (Davey D, The history of Hip hop: 1998).

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