

Article

The Intertextuality and Translations of Fine Art and Class in Hip-Hop Culture

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Abstract: Hip-hop culture is structured around key representational elements, each of which is underpinned by the holistic element of knowledge. Hip-hop emerged as a cultural counter position to the socio-politics of the urban condition in 1970s New York City, fuelled by destitution, contextual displacement, and the cultural values of non-white diaspora. Graffiti—as the primary form of hip-hop expression—began as a political act before morphing into an artform which visually supported the music and dance elements of hip-hop. The emerging synergies graffiti shared with the practices of DJing, rap, and B-boying (breakdancing) forged a new form of art which challenged the cultural capital of music and visual and sonic arts. This article explores moments of intertextuality between visual and sonic metaphors in hip-hop culture and the canon of fine art. The tropes of Michelangelo, Warhol, Monet, and O’Keefe are interrogated through the lyrics of Melle Mel, LL Cool J, Rakim, Felt, Action Bronson, Homeboy Sandman and Aesop Rock to reveal hip-hop’s multifarious intertextuality. In conclusion, the article contests the fallacy of hip-hop as mainstream and lowbrow culture and affirms that the use of fine art tropes in hip-hop narratives builds a critical relationship between the previously disparate cultural values of hip-hop and fine art, and challenges conventions of the class system.

Keywords: hip-hop; Bourdieu; cultural capital; class systems; hip-hop studies; graffiti art; hip-hop politics

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted in the hip-hop world that the culture is constructed of four main representational elements—DJing, B-boying, emceeing, and graffiti writing, underpinned with the fifth element of knowledge.¹ Since the embryonic years of hip-hop culture during the 1970s, the already established graffiti movement operated as a complimentary visual practice to hip-hop’s music and dance elements. As a political act first and an artform second, the association of graffiti within hip-hop developed into a recognizable touchstone for those outside the culture as a visual representation of the sound of the inner city. This idea remains most apparent through the sleeve designs of early 1980s vinyl releases such as Malcolm McLaren’s *Duck Rock*, Jellybean’s *Wotupski!?!* , and Schoolly D’s self-titled debut, as well as the efforts of European compilation albums such as Jive’s *Breakdance Fever* and *Rap Attack*, and Charly Records’ *Rap Graffiti*. The visuals that adorn these sleeves embody varying levels of authenticity, and the messages they convey attempt to reaffirm hip-hop’s connection to a

¹ It should be noted that although the four practice elements mentioned above are the common construct of hip-hop culture, additional elements of beatboxing, production, and choreography are among further conceived elements. In the introduction to Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop* (2007), Kool Herc points out there are far more elements than these, and includes more intangible suggestions of language, behavior, and communication.

strong sense of visual communication. The relationship between the music of hip-hop and visual arts is far-reaching and loaded with intertextualities that challenge the social structure of class and the distinction of taste both within and outside the realm of hip-hop culture. One such intertextuality can be explored within hip-hop lyrics. Since the early 1980s, certain emcees have recoded fragments of the histories of high and fine art in their lyrics by using metaphor and narrative. In doing so, these emcees contest the position of high and fine art which in turn strengthen the cultural location of hip-hop and the broader discussion of taste and class.

Despite the international reach and impact that hip-hop culture has achieved over the past 40 years, there remain misjudgments about hip-hop's hierarchical status and position as an artform. While notable artists during the 1970s such as Fab 5 Freddy and Jean-Michel Basquiat explored the intersectionality of emerging hip-hop culture and established art culture, hip-hop became perceived by the mainstream media as a rebellious subculture loaded with negative connotations, hence missing the point of 'art as a political act' which was executed so intelligently by exemplary emcees such as Chuck D and KRS-One. By the turn of the millennium, hip-hop culture globally was operating across multiple liminalities and platitudes and attracting critical interrogations by commentators such as Paul Gilroy which "made it attractive to the art world" (Murray 2004, p. 5), thus generating a form of cultural capital.² Murray states that the currency of hip-hop in terms of art criticism increases due to the "rising tensions between art history and visual studies" (ibid.), which explicitly becomes a question of taste and class. Gans claims that: "Taste cultures are not cohesive value systems" (Gans 2008, p. 94), but I would argue hip-hop's blatant consumer capitalism has eclipsed the deeper values of the culture itself which strongly relate to taste, and therefore it leaves no surprise that hip-hop can be effortlessly disparaged as a trite section of popular culture. However, the sheer girth of hip-hop is not solely built on capitalist consumerism and hip-hop's alternative, subaltern narratives that recode notions of art and restructure the production of cultural capital are the focus of this work.

My intention for this article is threefold. Firstly, I will demonstrate that the methodologies of metaphor-driven narrative in hip-hop lyricism produces a new cultural capital of hip-hop with which to critique high and fine art and progress hip-hop's creativity; secondly, I will attest that these lyricist practices challenge, reveal, and produce intertextualities within the class system and the distinctions of taste; thirdly, I will present a new reading of cultural capital where the creative outputs of hip-hop culture significantly inform those of high and fine art. On this third intention, presenting hip-hop as a politically charged artform—which subverts the accepted cultural capital of high and fine art—is key to this article. At various points in the ensuing discussion I attest the productions of graffiti and rap artists as politically motivated: as subversions of high and fine art and the art of hip-hop itself. This threefold inquiry is led initially by a brief cultural positioning of the visual within hip-hop, which in turn frames an analysis of the recoding of high and fine art motifs and tropes in hip-hop lyrics. This analysis draws upon the lyrics of 'golden era' greats LL Cool J, Rakim and Melle Mel, and more contemporary underground artists Homeboy Sandman, Aesop Rock, Action Bronson, and Felt (Murs and Slug) between the turn of the millennium and 2012. This examination is underpinned by Bourdieu's theories of distinction, class and taste (2010) and modes of cultural production (1993) which subsequently leads to a new way of considering embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital. The article concludes by attesting the use of fine art tropes metaphorically and narratively in emcees' lyrics calls into question the cultural status of hip-hop in the broader creative industry and society, cements a critical relationship between hip-hop and fine art, and signals new directions for the practices of fine art and hip-hop culture.

² Although figures such as Gilroy brought cultural weight to the currency of hip-hop, both the economic capital and cultural framing of rap was already two decades deep due to the critical operations and actions within the culture itself.

2. Another Picasso, Another Michelangelo

Graffiti is the obvious practice that comes to mind when one considers the visual representations of hip-hop. Since its inception at the tail end of the 1960s and first presented in mainstream media during 1971 (TAKI spawns pen pals. *The New York Times*. July 21), graffiti grew from the destitution of Robert Moses' ill-conceived urban planning, cultural displacement, and the strength of non-white diasporas (Mailer et al. 2009; Castleman 1982; Evans 2014) and was at first a political act. When I met graffiti photographer Jon Naar in Trenton, New York during August 2012, he expressed his views on the agenda of graffiti stating that for the past 40 years he had firmly believed it is a political act first, and only an artform second. Poring over Jon's extensive collection of graffiti photographs, we discussed the point at which graffiti became more palpable as art during 1972 when the development of its letters began to fatten out, duo and tri-color schemes were experimented with, and the first hints of characters, landscapes and a sense of depth arrived. Despite this morphing period which resulted in a more recognizable artform, the political act was still very much present through its visual impact; no longer was graffiti purely about tagging. However, it is important to reiterate that even during the primary bombing years up to 1972–1973, the artform of the letter and the number cannot be denied, but this was of secondary importance to the notion of 'getting up'.³ I was enthralled by this and wholeheartedly agreed for two reasons. Firstly, I had recently begun to work on the first chapter I wrote on the subject where I presented graffiti as a spatio-political counterpoint to the failed architecture and displacement experienced in New York City's ghettos (Evans 2014), and; secondly, I began to understand that within graffiti, the synergy between the making of art and the political act of free art and territorial ownership was paramount to its success, a combined quality that, for me, made graffiti more powerful than any contemporaneous examples of fine art.

There is much academic work that suggests how the graffiti pandemic took its historical course and how popular imagery was appropriated by graffiti writers, but little to pinpoint notions of fine art within graffiti culture. In the documentary *Style Wars*, writer DEZ speaks of his protégé TRAP:

He's like a son to me in a way, you know, I look out for him he looks out for me, you know I won't let nothing happen to him, he won't let nothing happen to me, if he can help it, you know. I know from his age, he's 14 now, you know, I'm 16, by the time he gets [to] my age he'll be one of the best people out, if he continues to go on in the years he could be another Picasso. (*Style Wars* 1983)

This is a revealing moment; not only does the tutor-mentor role and a kind of loco parentis become evident (Evans 2014), but DEZ's reference to Picasso within his suggested trajectorial aim for TRAP illustrates an understanding of Picasso as an exemplary art figure. Furthermore, DEZ strongly alludes to a double-edged broader cultural phenomenon here. By stating that "... in the years he could be another Picasso", DEZ predicts both the longevity and worldwide success of graffiti culture and the notion that training as a graffiti writer-artist could prepare one for accomplishment as a professional artist. Additionally, selecting Picasso as a name may imply a closeness between Picasso's work and graffiti. Picasso's Regjeringskvartalet murals in Oslo and his 1939 muralesque *Guernica* share affinity with the top-to-bottom whole cars painted throughout the late 1970s and 1980s by graffiti writers, not only in terms of scale and abstraction, but also in political value. CASE 2, also interviewed in *Style Wars*, "was upstate" (Silver 1983) until late 1972, and noticed the impact of graffiti upon his return to his neighborhood. As he tells the story of his induction into graffiti, he recalls: "So when I got home I seen writing on the train, I said 'what's this stuff here?' you know, 'niggas doin' they names big,' I said 'let me do one of these' you know, 'cause I was down with art already. So, I did me a piece" (ibid.). CASE 2 clearly links his previous experience with art to graffiti, and by doing so the self-proclaimed 'King-of-Style' became a legendary figure in graffiti and hip-hop culture.

³ To 'get up', or 'getting up', is common phraseology in graffiti world meaning to execute graffiti in the public realm.

These dialogues suggest the first inklings of an intertextuality within hip-hop culture where textual references are descriptive, discursive and reinforced by visual translations through spray-can to train. The depth of intertextuality in graffiti is evident through its inclusion of a range of cultural figures which to those outside the culture are placed in varying hierarchies of taste. As much as Picasso and other paradigm-shifting fine artists are referenced, so too is the lowbrow culture of comic books, advertising slogans, and tropes of television: graffiti writers deconstruct and reassemble what Smoodin explains (in the context of comic books) as “a representational system that allows the individual to encounter and interpret his or her social surroundings” (Smoodin 1992, p. 132). Graffiti’s embracing and synergizing of high and low culture and its subsequent placing on a level playing field is salient to point out; as a forerunner to the metaphor-driven intertextual signals in rap music, graffiti assumed an ownership and reframing of high and low culture, in some ways postmodern yet pragmatic in its approach.

Michelangelo is another key figure cited by hip-hop practitioners, although here a kind of intertextual relationship is forged between the great discussion of fine art and lyrics from hip-hop’s golden age. Three celebrated emcees, Melle Mel, LL Cool J, and Rakim (arguable contenders for the title of greatest emcee of all time) all use Michelangelo metaphorically. Melle Mel references Michelangelo in the 1984 film *Beat Street* (1984), in the New Year’s Eve party scene which is also the wake for RAMO, the graffiti protagonist in the movie, who meets his end while pursuing SPIT (RAMO’s nemesis, a writer who persists to write over RAMO’s work) in a subway tunnel. RAMO’s best friend and DJ Kenny ‘Double K’ Kirkland curates the wake which sees him and the Furious Five perform the sharp synth-driven “Beat Street Breakdown”, although the entire lyrics are written and recorded by Melle Mel. The song is exemplary of Melle Mel’s epic lyrical skill (74 bars in verse one, and 46 bars in the second) which contains diverse subject matter from the death of close friends and urban dilapidation to religious genocide, but the line important to this discussion is: “... ‘Cause each and every time you touch a spray-paint can/Michelangelo’s soul controls your hands” (Grandmaster Melle Mel and the Furious Five 1984). Here, Melle Mel speaks to the late RAMO, directly connecting emotional attachment between his untimely passing and the soul of Michelangelo, thus positioning RAMO also as a great artist. RAMO’s death also adds to the perceived value of his work, analogous with increased posthumous capital such as in the work of Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, which Melle Mel’s lament further expresses:

And where murals stand on walls so grand
 As far as the eyes are able to see, ha
 I never knew art till I saw your face
 And there’ll never be one to take your place (ibid.)

Returning to the previous line, Melle Mel’s proposition that Michelangelo’s soul controls RAMO’s hand as he paints, draws connotations with the idea of the masterpiece. In graffiti culture, a masterpiece (commonly abbreviated to ‘piece’) is a flawlessly executed full work which spans and occupies its site wholly, much in the same way Michelangelo’s work at Sistine Chapel fully occupies the length and breadth of the building’s ceiling. As the author of this world-famous early 16th century work, which since has been described as one of the greatest artistic accomplishments of the civilized world (Coughlan 1966; Gardner 1970), Michelangelo is celebrated as one of the greatest artists in history. However, Melle Mel’s choosing of Michelangelo as the actor for his portrayal of RAMO’s graffiti skills connotes with more than the notion of the masterpiece, art fame and the fame sought by graffiti writers. Here, Melle Mel presents graffiti as a powerful counter-point to established high art. By appropriating Michelangelo in the context of “Beat Street Breakdown”, Melle Mel empowers graffiti to outshine the realm of Renaissance classicism. The idea of high art is owned by hip-hop: it becomes educationally potent as its galleries are not white-walled, guarded hierarchical interiors

with privileged access, but are free-running throughout the city, subverting the class systems of high art production and appreciation.⁴

LL Cool J (1987) incorporates Michelangelo into a more traditional hip-hop freestyle braggadocio. On the opening four bars to “My Rhyme Ain’t Done”, LL raps:

The President woke and he called the Pope
 The Pope climbed to heaven on a golden rope
 P.S. the Lord raised Michelangelo from the dead
 So he can make a fresh painting of my head (LL Cool J 1987)

Delivered over raw drum machine patterns, LL places himself as the subject of a piece of work by Michelangelo. As LL pulls other globally significant figures such as the President, the Pope, and the Lord into the narrative he creates a scenario where he locates himself at the apex of a regal-hierarchical structure whereby actors—usually associated with superiority and leadership—are carrying out a series of tasks to produce a mint painting of LL Cool J’s head. Ultimately, the listener can imagine a portrait of LL hanging somewhere in the White House, akin to Michelangelo’s *Tondo Doni*, (his only surviving easel painting) as it hangs in le Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Evidently, Michelangelo made fewer traditional paintings than three-dimensional work which may explain LL’s use of the word ‘head’ rather than face. Additionally, this may hypothetically result in a rarer Michelangelo painting as he seldom painted sole portraits, plus his relief and sculpture work carried strong narratives which LL also weaves into his lyrics.

Rakim uses the Michelangelo reference in a first-person metaphor in “No Omega” (Eric B and Rakim 1990). Rakim introduces himself: “I’m the alpha with no omega . . . ” positioning himself as the cyclical continuum of rap. Four lines after this opening lyric he delivers:

Rhyme everlastin’ there’ll be no part two
 Knowledge is infinite once I start to draw
 A better picture for your third eye if you’re blind
 You know with a mic I’m the Black Michelangelo (ibid.)

Three interrelated points are important here. Firstly, Rakim raps about fine art and hip-hop aligned to knowledge. Secondly, he compares the art of rap with The Renaissance, and thirdly he appropriates the name Michelangelo to position himself as a dialectic Black figure with equivalent standing in hip-hop culture to the perceived high arts of The Renaissance. Here, I will expand on the first point. Since the inception of the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN) in the 1970s, knowledge has been key to hip-hop’s progression, and it is crucial to understand the significance and nuances of knowledge in hip-hop culture. Knowledge underpins and intersects the four representational elements of graffiti, DJing, B-boying, and rap. One can only become an expert in an element if one acquires the knowledge which underpins that element. As the practices of hip-hop are so highly representational, they become at risk of being interpreted as purely skill-based, yet, it is the knowledge about the element in question which is required to learn and progress in one’s chosen element—in turn improving one’s skills and representations; fine tuning one’s art. Knowledge sources in hip-hop are

⁴ This notion of the subverted gallery is further argued in the song “Schlangen Sind Giftig” by Stieber Twins (1999), where, as graffiti writers, they position themselves as “Picassos” in “ . . . Unser Louvre, kostenlos . . . ” (trans. “ . . . Our Louvre, free of charge . . . ”). Additionally, this illustrates how graffiti was considered primarily as a politically-charged artform following its transglobal journey. For further cultural framing of graffiti as art, see *Subway Art* (Cooper and Chalfant 1984); and *Spraycan Art* (Chalfant and Prigoff 1987).

wide-ranging and multifarious and are located in the processes and productions of hip-hop practices such as lyrics, rhythm and scratch sonics, graffiti pieces and lettering styles as well as the more ephemeral dance moves, speech, and body language of B-boying. However, knowledge runs far deeper than simply learning about the elements' history and practical applications. Identified as hip-hop's fifth element by Afrika Bambaataa himself (Gosa 2015), knowledge was initially framed through the UZN's Infinity Lessons as well as Bambaataa's DJ sets where he would drop in sections of speeches by Black visionaries (Chang 2007, pp. 105–6). According to Gosa: "'Knowledge of self' refers to the Afro-diasporic mix of spiritual and political consciousness designed to empower members of oppressed groups" (Gosa 2015, p. 57), and this mix of consciousness relates to both knowledge of self and intertwined sociohistorical upliftment. Keyes argues that understanding the material culture of hip-hop and rap music is located in the urban environment, as: "The streets nurture, shape, and embody the hip-hop music aesthetic" (Keyes 2004, p. 122), and for devotees of hip-hop dwelling outside the realm of the city, critical examinations of hip-hop's artifacts, cultural history, and broader social contexts must be habitually executed to understand one's position in the culture.

The Cultural Capital of Hip-Hop

To frame this discussion within Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, knowledge in hip-hop invariably contains the three facets of embodied (Bourdieu 1993, p. 270, n. 24; Bourdieu 2010, p. 70), objectified (Bourdieu 2010, pp. 69, 172), and institutional cultural capital (ibid., pp. 73–74). Taking these in order, the embodied is the cultural capital of one's background and upbringing, and how this manifests into thoughts and disposition of mind, in turn translated into actions. These accrue as one journeys through hip-hop culture, continually reflecting on one's position in relation to one's actions via engagement and the actions of others: for many lyricists and graffiti writers their experiences of hip-hop culture drove their art to be informed by a self-reflexive metadiegesis. The objectified is the capital of the material object, artifact, or thing; in hip-hop, objectified cultural capital is the output of engagement and action such as a vinyl record or a painted train. Here it can be clearly understood that the embodied relates directly to the objectified where tangible productions provide representations of both consumer and producer of the thing. The practices of hip-hop culture evolve through negotiation and navigation between embodied and objectified forms of cultural capital, but what of the institutional? A key component of institutional capital is that of education where, for example, attending certain academies determine a sense of identity for students, and following graduation they obtain titles or qualifications which deem them appropriate for a particular position of power and authority. As knowledge of self, non-white diasporas, and the social context of America deepened throughout hip-hop culture, a positive rejection of the conventional institution was generated, and a culture-driven form of institutional capital was developed by critically-informed artists. In effect, hip-hop culture, and especially the Universal Zulu Nation, became an ethereal institution.

During the late 1980s, artists like Public Enemy, Poor Righteous Teachers, and Jungle Brothers (1989) made concrete the esoteric notion of institutional hip-hop cultural capital through their narratives. In "Acknowledge Your Own History" (1989), Jungle Brothers anecdotally present their experience of the conventional school institution's lack of Black history education, and in particular the invisibility of Black culture in school text books.⁵ On the subject of heritage, Afrika Baby Bam raps about the wealth and cultural depth of his African forefathers, and follows by confronting the western denial of slavery: "... You ain't gonna find it in your history book/Come here, young blood, and take a look ...", which he continues: "... You look at the pictures and all they show is/AfriKan people

⁵ Further examples include "I Can" by Nas (2002), and "Lyrical Maniac" by Blade (1989), who, whilst not Black, was born in the Armenian quarter of Iran and experienced the effect on his family of the Islamic revolution. In "Lyrical Maniac", he raps: "... Form of intelligence form of knowledge/When I left school I went straight to college/Schoolin' schoolin' teachers never taught me/Never went class but they never caught me/Even in lessons instead of learning/I wrote the lyrics I was aching burning ..." (Blade 1989).

with bones in their noses . . . ” ([Jungle Brothers 1989](#)). Mike G continues this attack on formal American education: “Yeah, I cut class, I got a D/’Cause history meant nothing to me . . . ”, framing the context of class, he continues: “ . . . I’d talk to girls or write a rhyme/’Cause I didn’t know all times are Black man’s times . . . ” ([Jungle Brothers 1989](#)). This is a protest song in essence—a song which eloquently and simultaneously attests the existence of rich African histories and attacks the editing of culture and through the narrative of the western objectified school text book. Through protests like this, the institutional cultural capital of hip-hop as a new culture formed and a concurrent awareness of African art came to fruition, particularly to those hip-hoppers with no previous knowledge of African heritage or culture. In hip-hop, the institutional is not the bricks and mortar of the established academy, but the establishing of the knowledge which underpins the culture. To this end, the vehicles of translation of this institutional capital are the actions, practices and artefacts of hip-hop culture. Whilst the actions and practices can be ephemeral, temporal and fluid—particularly in the case of freestyle rap and scratching, B-boying, and graffiti—when documented as artefact the knowledge value is either evident or signposted within the embodied capital. The recordings of [Jungle Brothers](#) and [X-Clan \(1990\)](#) particularly signpost African arts and their embodied cultural capital, emphasizing their histories hidden by the western world. As “Acknowledge Your Own History” draws to a close, the spoken-word outro asserts: “AfriKa, is the mother of civilization on the planet Earth. AfriKa, where science, cosmetics, knowledge, wisdom and understanding all comes from . . . ” (1989), and similarly in the spoken-word intro to X-Clan’s “Verbs of Power” (1990), Professor X the Overseer states: “We of the Blackwatch now arrest the demonic mind state of mortals for the following crimes: religion, art, sciences, government, writing, mathematics, astrology, philosophy, inventions, culture, sense of reality, speech techniques . . . ”. These are hugely significant statements which aver the value of embodied African cultural capital, and of particular relevance to this article is the weight with which westernized hijacking and siloed categorization of the holistic practices of arts and humanities are exposed and rejected. To this end, it is not any named artist from the canon of western fine art which takes a position in hip-hop, but the universal notion of creative culture itself.

Returning briefly to Rakim, his metaphor as a Black Michelangelo relates to embodied, objectified and institutional cultural capital. His phrasing that, “ . . . Knowledge is infinite . . . ” and reference to, “ . . . your third eye . . . ” (the eye of Horus) demonstrates a conviction that his artform takes listeners to the higher state of consciousness associated with the concept of the third eye ([Darnell 1997](#)), and an infinity of knowledge is triggered once Rakim draws a metaphorical picture. In the lyrics following this, he states that: “ . . . with a mic I’m the Black Michelangelo”, again amplifying the intertextuality inherent in the languages of visual art and hip-hop lyrics, and furthermore juxtaposes the western canonical figure of Michelangelo with African spirituality. The result of this comparison makes clear Rakim’s understanding of cultural attitudes to artforms within the context of hip-hop culture, promoting a heritage-driven form of cultural capital.

3. New School Capital

The new wave of underground hip-hop artists in the new millennium brought both an expansion and reaffirmation of hip-hop’s practices. Aesop Rock, Homeboy Sandman and Felt pushed the envelope of lyrical flow while Action Bronson asserted archetypal hip-hop styles with consistent professionalism, and all these artists continue to contribute to hip-hop’s diversity. Action Bronson’s sluggish vibe radiates through on the Alchemist-produced “Eggs on The Third Floor” (2012), a song of two acts where the first reeks of lackadaisical style before the second slams into skull-snapping boom bap. Spanning these two approaches, Bronson’s lyrics twice refer directly to economic capital through the lines: “ . . . Old money in the bag look like sautéed spinach bitch . . . ” and “ . . . Gravitatin’ towards the money ‘cause it brings me joy . . . ” ([Action Bronson 2012](#)), and throughout the song Bronson delivers in excess of thirty metaphors and several similes. These allegories contain a common theme which is one of extreme subversion, no greater illustrated than in these four bars:

Neidhart, ride dirty in the five sharp

Hand skills, Jean Claude, fine art

Put my head right through the Monet, ole

All the drugs I smoke, my lungs are probably coal grey (ibid.)

Bronson's proposal to rip open a Monet painting with his head may demonstrate—even via the narrative—a seditious disregard for high art, although this is not quite so. The position Action Bronson is in fact promoting is that of the conquering emcee, and in freestyle raps such as this, it is commonplace to destabilize cultural capital through the metaphor. What is of interest here is the way in which Bronson selects a situation, an action, and embodied capital of a Monet painting as the vehicle of communication. Furthermore, Bronson's choice to place Monet as the artist in his lyrics also carries echoes of posthumous capital. Critics and broader society struggled with Monet's works while he was alive considering them sketchy and unfinished (Yilmaz 2009), yet they gained increased cultural and economic value after his death once his influence became evident in the paintings of the post-impressionists (Tucker 2007). A painting cannot be remade by an artist once they are dead; Bronson's act intends to both shock and illustrate the boundaries he is prepared to push as an emcee.

Slug and Murs, both of whom debuted on vinyl in 1997, joined forces as Felt during the noughties and between 2002 and 2005 released three albums, all of which were titled as ironically masculine tributes to famous American female actors: *A Tribute To Christina Ricci*, *A Tribute To Lisa Bonet*, and *A Tribute To Rosie Perez*. The Felt project is partially a diversion from their respective more serious work, yet on "I Shot a Warhol" (Felt 2005) the closing song on *A Tribute To Lisa Bonet*, the lyrics slide into messages of drug fallout and tumbled lifestyles, threaded together by the chorus hook:

I shot a Warhol

Dead with my pistol

When the wind hit the hole

In the canvas it whistled

Beautiful with no frame

A face with no name

Glass full of cold fame

Chased it with slow pain (ibid.)

Whilst the metaphors for a life ruined by hard drugs vibrate strongly here, a more literal reading reveals more than simply a literal translation. These words empower the listener to visualize with great clarity the scenario after a bullet punctures a canvas.⁶ Here, the narrative is not about destabilizing cultural capital like Bronson—but much like Warhol—is about an ironic destabilizing of the broader societal image of mainstream branded cultural icons, a scenario painted through oscillations of metaphor ("... the coke side blinds you ...") and non-metaphor ("Nostrils of cocaine ..."). Simultaneously the song calls into question the values of aesthetic approach and cultural content in Warhol's productions. Although Felt do not directly reference Warhol's *Elvises*, one is reminded immediately of his silkscreen series through Felt's lyrics. One can imagine Murs and Slug standing together in a double-shootout opposing multiple cowboy-dressed Elvises, as Felt challenge the very

⁶ There is also a mediated intertextuality at play here with Bob Marley's "I Shot The Sheriff" (1974), the hook of which was extensively sampled by EPMD on "Strictly Business" (1988) and offers a different translation, as well as Non Phixion's "I Shot Reagan" (Non Phixion 1998) and Warren G's pastiche intertextual cover version of "I Shot The Sheriff" (1997).

essence of ‘Elvisness’. By ‘Elvisness’, I mean the commodified, and replicated processes that led to a structured method of creating economic capital by appropriating the cultural capital of rock n’ roll by media industries, resulting in superstardom for Elvis and beyond; a method that Warhol builds upon, reframes, and makes evident through his own formulaic *Elvises*.

In 1963, Warhol’s silver Elvis paintings were exhibited at the Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles. The Elvis paintings had been shipped to the gallery “singly, doubly, and in multfigured groups” (McCarthy 2006, p. 356), with the intention to install a penetratingly intense show. The images themselves are inconsistently consistent—uneven in tone and detail—the ‘Elvis’ series resonate with Warhol’s earliest films which hold small regard to technical film criteria. McCarthy also observes that: “Warhol’s method of labored production perpetuated the life of a genre given over to repetition and cliché at its inception” (ibid., p. 364), which also draws comment on the tired cowboy film genre and its inherent representations. There is a further idea here resonating with Warhol’s films, the intertextuality of ‘the shot’, and his play on time and speed, as most of his films were “shot at sound speed but shown at slow, silent speed” (Rees 2010, p. 83). By framing Elvis from the 1960 film *Flaming Star* rather than imagery of John Wayne or James Stewart (from the 1962 film *Who Shot Liberty Valance*, for example), Warhol subverts the ideological American masculine; Elvis’ portrayal of a cowboy is less than conventional, and tinted with hints of femininity and campy. Feeney remarks that: “... the movie period is the black hole of Elvis’s career” (Feeney 2001, p. 54), and his performance in *Flaming Star* is no exception, yet it is this portrayal which plays perfectly into the social commentary Warhol seeks.

3.1. Artist as Soup Tin: Branding as Translations of Fine Art and Hip-Hop

So, how do the clichés of gender, American popular culture, masculism, faux confidence, and power that Warhol challenges through his parodic presentation of a fading Elvis relate to Felt’s “I shot a Warhol”? To answer this, I will further dissect the chorus hook. “... When the wind hit the hole/In the canvas it whistled ... ” (Felt 2005) describes the aftermath of puncturing a canvas with absolute precision through the act of the shot. The listener is led to believe the shot was central, materially flawless, and visually impeccable, and one can almost envisage its perfect penetration at slow speed. This is accentuated by the following words “... Beautiful with no frame ... ” (ibid.), which literally deletes Warhol’s suggested precision in his framed prints as much as their social recontextualizations and commentaries. If the frameless becomes beautiful, one may conject that the subject of Warhol’s art is returned to its original state and value, or is somehow revalued. The chorus continues “... A face with no name/Glass full of cold fame ... ” (ibid.), which picks up on Warhol’s alleged comment: “In the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes” (Warhol and Hackett 1983, p. 165). This lyric raises questions about Warhol’s ironic prediction as much as his own fame, and begins to relate the pop art period with the contemporary issues of social networking and status. By considering Felt’s lyrics in the context of present-day society, the attitudes to fame sought by so many through social media platforms resonates with the idea of artist-as-celebrity and the film and music celebrities Warhol chose to portray: Elvis, Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, John Lennon, and James Dean, as well as himself.

By producing work that positions these subjects alongside representations of everyday products such as Campbell’s soup tins, the notion of celebrity-as-brand is revealed. This branding has now seeped into the lives of ordinary citizens, as they redesign themselves as a brand through ephemeral social media representations. Khamis et al. (2017, p.192) point out the problems associated with personalized branding: “Branding an individual raises conceptual, practical and ethical issues, which are either not acknowledged or are simply glossed over by its advocates”. They continue to suggest one of the biggest issues with self-branding is the difficulty in sustaining a high-level of consistency. Are these branded personalities of ordinary citizens a form of fine art or cultural capital? They could be both. Khamis et al., state that:

As 'ordinary' people seek and find fame through practices of micro-celebrity, they redistribute cultural power in both media and marketing: implicitly, micro-celebrity points to the growing agency, enterprise and business acumen of everyday media users. (ibid., p. 197)

I would further this argument to suggest that through the actions of fame-seeking and self-branding, ordinary citizens produce forms of cultural capital which personify ideas of high art and taste. These actions—in the form of social media posts—are constructed of a collection of representations of intention (Bourdieu 2010, p. 53), uploaded to demark one's distinct taste "vis-à-vis lower groups" (ibid.). This personification becomes a subconscious parody of Warhol's work, and, to relate this back to hip-hop, the everyday hip-hopper yearns for a "glass full of cold fame". The ordinary citizen and the hip-hop practitioner—whatever their artistic status—seeks their 15 minutes of fame, and through the social media condition of the post-global world—will have "chased it with slow pain" when its promise of sustained fame inevitably fails. In the wake of the sole global hip-hop superstar, a concept spawned by Tupac and amplified by Kanye West and Jay-Z, those underground hip-hop artists who choose to seek fame through social media platforms engage in the kinds of practices suggested by Khamis et al. However, the very actions of engaging with such practices reveal significant differences between using social media as a platform for self-promotion and using social media as a creative, cultural tool which also inform a creative narrative. As far back as 2002, UK-based artist Blak Twang (2002) cited his own website in the song "On Line", in the mid-noughties Dirty Diggers joked about their number of MySpace followers during live performances, and Task Force (2006) formed a dark narrative surrounding a vindictive engagement through MySpace on the diss song "The Bitches" (2006). Metaizations such as these exploit social media through creativity; the social media platform is consumed by the work of the artist and becomes a platform for artistic translation and metareference. These inventive uses of social media extend the life of the 15 minutes of fame and become artistic practices in their own right, and contemporaneously reframe the comfort afforded by social media as "populist objectivism" (Bourdieu 2010, p. 42). By removing the necessary devices required for the portrayal of a social media presence, the third space of the digital (Soja and Chouinard 1999) becomes devoid and is overtaken by the practices of the artist in making new sonic art.

3.2. *Intertextual Lyrics as Critiques of Hip-Hop and Fine Art*

Homeboy Sandman turns to Georgia O'Keefe on the grimy industrial sound of "Sputnik", where he expands his braggadocio to contain a six-fold metaphor aimed at weaker rappers. Concluding with the line "... All their art screams pussy like Georgia O'Keefe's/Stop it" (Homeboy Sandman 2012), Homeboy Sandman bluntly expresses the overtones of O'Keefe's work, which, as part of the modern world of women's sexual art "... were abstract and ambiguous subconscious manifestations, often denied by the artist herself" (Semmel and Kingsley 1980, p. 1). According to Chicago and Schapiro:

O' Keefe's oeuvre opens up the possibility of human expressiveness heretofore unavailable, particularly to men. Implicit in this is a suggestion that just as women have suffered when measured by male standards, so men might be found lacking when measured by the standards of that work by women which assert softness, vulnerability and self-exposure. (Chicago and Schapiro 2003, p. 41)

Homeboy Sandman slices through the perceived division of fine art and hip-hop with his single mention of O'Keefe amidst more predictable cultural references such as Lacoste, Jean Luc Pickard, and Nintendo's Donkey Kong. By suggesting the art produced by "hard rocks" does nothing more than "scream pussy", Homeboy Sandman draws traditional slang (often appropriated in hip-hop) into the metaphoric assessment of O'Keefe's paintings, and by so doing reflects and inverts Chicago and Schapiro's observations. Sandman's metaphor is double-edged as it critiques O'Keefe's work and the efforts of the hard rocks simultaneously, and whilst he uses the terminology 'pussy' to detriment the hard rocks' art, it is not intended with any disrespect to O'Keefe but rather highlights the

deficiencies in men when considered alongside the assertions of women. Homeboy Sandman's counter phrase "stop it"—which brusquely yet nonchalantly closes the verse, challenges these metaphors and is delivered with an intonation that suggests partial contempt and partial offense—can be interpreted as a commentary on the prevalence of male chauvinism in hip-hop. This small, common two-word phrase is the fulcrum of meaning in this song. Ultimately, this critical lyric from "Sputnik" firmly attests Chicago and Schapiro's claim that O'Keefe's work reveals previously inaccessible possibilities of expressiveness in humankind, and simultaneously proposes that much male hip-hop rhetoric remains a fair way off. "Sputnik" does much to challenge the perceived embroilment of class system and misogyny which coexisted in hip-hop even before its commercialization, although capitalist exploitation of hip-hop's values has amplified these negatively in an attempt to contain the productions of hip-hop as popular, lowbrow culture.

3.3. Reframing the Critique: Art as the Holistic

Aesop Rock's "No Regrets" (2001) explores the notion of visual art holistically. Rather than the multi-layered metaphors of the artists discussed previously, Aesop Rock delivers a narrative following the life of protagonist Lucy from seven years of age to her death 80 years later. The listener learns that from this young age, she would make chalk drawings of everyday people, cityscapes, skyscapes and sunsets on the street, until after a year of drawing " . . . She covered every last inch of the entire sidewalk . . . " (Rock 2001). In verse two, the listener discovers that Lucy is in her late 30s and although lives as a hermit, is in a relationship with another artist but they seldom meet. She continually declines invitations from people in her neighborhood for lunch dates which escalates local gossip about Lucy's behavior, although she is bothered little by this: " . . . 'Cause while they spread their rumours through the street/She'd paint another masterpiece . . . " (ibid.). In the third and final verse, Lucy is "upon her death bed", and prior to this " . . . pinned up a life worth's of pictures on the wall . . . " to which she " . . . blew a kiss to each one of her pictures and she died" (ibid.). The chorus hook, delivered after each verse, is framed moralistically:

1-2-3 that's the speed of the seed

A-B-C that's the speed of the need

You can dream a little dream or you can live a little dream

I'd rather live it 'cause dreamers always chase but never get it (ibid.)

The chronicles of Lucy become a parable of sorts, an allegory for how one chooses to live life. With other cultural cues such as eschewing double Dutch as a child and never switching on her television in the retirement home, the listener is left with the belief that Lucy rejected lowbrow and mainstream culture in favor of spending time making art. Aesop Rock makes a clear distinction between popular culture and the act of drawing, and through the practice of rap a judgement of taste arises but rather than fixated on a tangible object, artifact, or made piece of art, this judgement of taste is about lifestyle choice and art praxis. The cultural capital of Lucy-as-art is what then becomes the metaphor for the song. As Lucy grows her life experience revolves around the making of pictures; these pictures become her surroundings, touchstones and reference points. The value of Lucy's art therefore has contextually embedded value in its idea and making, her upbringing allowed her to experiment at length with chalk drawing in her childhood, developing into a richness of embodied cultural capital. At the dusk of her life, Lucy surrounds herself with the drawings she made throughout her existence—a collection of objectified cultural capital of some distinction—which offers her deep solace. This echoes with Aesop Rock's approach to cultural discourse and also resonates with many hip-hop practitioners, who, since the awakenings of the Universal Zulu Nation to The Native Tongues collective, Public Enemy, KRS-One, X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, and a plethora of other conscious crews during the early 1990s have deepened cultural critique through their art. Since the enlightenment of the late 1980s,

many culturally engaged hip-hop practitioners draw upon metaization as a way to consolidate both their professional praxis and personal position in their respective cultural context. “Meta-referential discourses almost always imply heterogeneous elements mixed unexpectedly” (Arhip 2012, p. 125), and in hip-hop emceeing this self-reflexivity—existing through the metaphors of lyrics—then brings the challenges of the content to the listener.

4. Conclusions: Fine Art and the Future of Hip-Hop

In this article, I have exhibited a snapshot of key fine art metaphors and references within lyricism and graffiti throughout the golden and new school ages of hip-hop culture. The discussion surrounding DEZ, TRAP, and CASE 2 attest to the presence of fine art in graffiti culture through verbal discourse as much as the painted word, revealing these graffiti pioneers considered the political act of graffiti as art. Furthermore, the auto-reflexivity embedded in the praxis of graffiti writers theoretically positions graffiti empathetically with other forms of fine art; the recurring self-referentiality of writers’ names—repetitively painted over the surfaces of the built environment resonate with the fine artist’s absent-present relationship with the gallery. In terms of lyrics, the metaphors and references to canonical members of the fine art establishment do more than merely link the artists of hip-hop with the artists of fine art. As I have demonstrated, the complex structure of rap techniques—as an artform in itself—is a credible vehicle for the production of a twofold counternarrative and cultural critique: challenging both the art of hip-hop and fine art. Hahl et al. argue that: “To be sure, many ‘lowbrow’ cultural products are expressly produced to impress an audience” (Hahl et al. 2017, p. 832), which is dialectical to the search for knowledge of self, sociohistorical upliftment and contestation of high and fine art by hip-hop artists. Critique of high and fine art as well as cultural capital and its framing vis-à-vis lowbrow and mainstream culture is particularly evident in the analysis of Felt and Homeboy Sandman, and the analysis of Aesop Rock’s “Lucy” provides a further testament to the reflective, rigorous appraisals that are a core facet of underground hip-hop’s evolution.

Furthermore, I have revealed that these critical practices confront the status of fine art’s canon by reimagining through lyrical content, and by doing so challenge the assumed judgments of taste and class by and of hip-hop artists. These responses to class system are much more than a riposte and form a judgement of taste which both reframes the productions of underground hip-hop and the productions of fine art—instating hip hop’s cultural capital. One must reflect on the Basquiat-produced “Beat Bop” (Tartown Record Co., 1983) by Rammellzee and K-Rob, complete with Basquiat’s sleeve and label artwork, and remember that originally only 500 copies were printed of this masterpiece which fused underground lyrics, spaced-out experimental rhythms, and fine art. The value inherent in “Beat Bop” foreran the placing of hip-hop in any form of cultural value outside the culture itself. “Beat Bop” as an artefact underpins the visual concepts of Basquiat and Rammellzee and affords a refreshed reading of hip-hop as cultural capital. The absorption of fine art in hip-hop, growing richer since the creation of “Beat Bop”, makes visible the intertextual values in the processes and productions of hip-hop’s products which have previously remained shadowed by the celebrated economic capital gains of artists such as Jay-Z and Kanye West. Although Jay-Z and Beyoncé take ownership of obvious high art culture, not least represented in The Carters’ “Apushit” video (2018) which presents switching scenes of Jay-Z and Beyoncé occupying the interior and exterior of I.M. Pei’s postmodern Louvre Museum in Paris, this suggests temporal economic status rather than a takeover of high art’s cultural capital.

Williams discusses thoroughly the sub-genre of jazz-rap and its functionality as a construction whereby: “... jazz-rap represented the creation of a unique type of high art within the rap music world ... ” (Williams 2010, p. 436), but is keen to point out that here he means “high art” within hip-hop as a term distinctive from its use in the broader cultural domain (ibid.). It is clear that the interpretive codes of jazz, sampled and signposted in jazz-rap draw a sonic intertextuality with the sophistication of jazz, thus legitimizing it as a high art sub-genre of hip-hop. Whilst Williams is absolutely correct in his conclusion, this is disturbing and abandons the larger remaining part of

hip-hop which seemingly exists vacuously. What I have shown in this article is that there survives a range of criticality in hip-hop which contests high and fine art. The future for hip-hop needs to be much more than hip-hop being accepted as art by the high and fine art world, it must be about the perceptions of high art and the practices of fine art being surmountable by hip-hop praxes. Moreover, the embodied capital of knowledge, politics, history, and creative practice that thrives in much of hip-hop culture can and should influence the embodied, objectified and institutional cultural capital of high and fine art. The future of underground hip-hop needs to take advantage of its rich absorption of high and fine art discussed throughout this article and become a placemaker for fine art, forging a conceptual yet tangible space for continuing cultural critique. Within this space—a realm other than those of established hip-hop or fine art—these two seemingly disparate cultures can learn from and inform one another. Furthering discursive exchange in this way will help to address the glaring (mis)representations of bigotry and materialism in hip-hop’s cultural capital, and question the (mis)conventions of status in high and fine art.

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