

Hip Hop and Environmental Sustainability

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Introduction

Hip Hop music today exists in both a widely misunderstood and paradoxical state. On the one hand there is the orthodox 'mainstream' face of Hip Hop that appears on popular music channels and can be found in the music charts. On the other hand, there is another side of Hip Hop, one that does not appear on MTV or on the radio: 'underground' Hip Hop.

What will be discussed in this essay is the effect of these diametrically opposed sides of Hip Hop music, and the influence of their discourses on ecological sustainability. The argument also includes social, economic, historical and political factors. The essay will focus on the negative effects of the discourse of 'mainstream' Hip Hop, incorporating the views of positive Hip Hop artists and the available academic work on Hip Hop.

Hip Hop Discourse, Manipulation and the Industry

To begin with, mainstream Hip Hop's ability to have an influence must be quantified. As of 10/01/2011, Lil' Wayne's 'Lollipop' has over 65,000,000 views on Youtube (Lil' Wayne, 2008), Young Money's 'Bed Rock' over 53,000,000 (Young Money, 2010) and Tinnie Tempah's 'Pass Out' over 15,000,000 (Tinnie Tempah, 2010). The album sales figures of Lil' Wayne are in excess of 6 million (Young Money Entertainment, 2010), whilst according to Reuters, "hip-hop finished 2010 with 8.3 percent of all U.S. album sales" (Christman, E. 2011). At the time of writing two of the top 5 in the British Top 40 Singles Chart are mainstream Hip Hop acts (BBC, 2010).

From this it should be plain to see that mainstream Hip Hop's discourse has a large enough listening base to have a substantial influence on a large amount of people. The question is then, what is the impact of mainstream Hip Hop's discourse upon environmental sustainability?

Mainstream Hip Hop is closely tied to modern capitalism and globalisation in many aspects, and although at first the connection may not be clear, it is revealed in the discourse: the main focus of mainstream Hip Hop is an almost material worship that manipulates a collective social mind-set, with disastrous by-products for the environment.

I shall give some examples within the discourses, and then explain their impact, using several social, economic and political factors to clarify these points. What is prominent in the vernacular of the mainstream Hip Hop artists is money, or money related lexis, such as: "I keep my mind on my money, money on my mind" (Ludacris, 2006), "We get Arab money" (Busta Rhymes, 2008), "We bring the women and the cars out... I live a very, very, very wild life style, Heidi [Montag]... eat your heart out... I own so many clothes I keep some at my aunt's house" (Tinnie Tempah, 2010), "If you get money from everybody you see, then hang over the wall of VIP" (Lil' Wayne, 2008), "Dolce and Gabbana... might fly to Barbados" (Chipmunk, 2010) and "I wanna be a billionaire, so fucking bad... toss a couple million in the air for the hell of it" (Travie McCoy, 2010).

Lexical fields of wealth and materialism are prominent, for instance the uniform use

of the noun “money” as mentioned, or words coming under the semantic category of 'material wealth', such as cars, jewellery and clothes; this holds together the ideal (ideology) of wealth and materialism being promoted, which as I will demonstrate, feeds into an agenda of capitalism, consumerism and ecologically damaging globalisation. As Butler and Keith (1999) state: “[Ideology means] 'idea words': words used to express abstract ideas which are nevertheless very motivating; ideas of how people should live their lives...”.

In most cases it is common for the rapper to be the agent of the verb, or to encourage the listener to visualise himself in that position. As Butler and Keith (1999) state, “verbs that evaluate, use modals or express existence/possession give further clues to authorial point of view”. For example when Travie McCoy (2010) raps “hold your wallet in the air and sing: I wanna be a billionaire”. Firstly, this associates the rapper's position of authority over his listeners with the principles of wealth and the power and secondly encourages the listener to emulate and aspire to this 'successful' level by using the imperative mood.

An aspect most Hip Hop critics are familiar with is the use of the nouns “bitch” and “hoe”, arguing that they promote sexism. By now, the words have become embedded firmly in the Hip Hop vernacular, appearing in most songs, such as 50 Cent's 'I get Money': “I got new hoes” (2009). An interesting example is in Drake's 'Over', where he raps, “set it off set off in this bitch” (Drake, 2010). Here, the noun “bitch” is not being used to refer to a woman, but rather to a place. This process of semantic widening has seen the words meaning extend beyond the possession of a female (a 'bitch' is traditionally a female dog, which entails a owner-object relationship) into the area of material objects, presumably a party or club in the context of the song. This wide spread use of 'bitch' and words like it again encourages power and ownership, and while subtle, is symptomatic of Hip Hop discourse's function to encourage consumerist thinking, and exists in many other instances.

Another similar feature of Hip Hop discourse is the use of the first person singular pronoun 'I' and auxiliary verbs such 'am', 'did' or 'have' often found together, for instance “I'm stanky rich, I'm die tryna...”(50 cent, 2009) and “I'm the best bitch doin' it, doin' it” (Nicki Minaj, 2010) and “I'm a millionaire” (Lil' Wayne, 2008). For listeners this creates an illusion of self-affirmation that is crucial for the manipulation of its aspiring listeners discussed by King and Clark further on.

The first person possessive pronoun 'my' and the auxiliary verb 'got', are used to again reinforce the idea of ownership already introduced. Examples include “my bad bitches”, (Nicki Minaj, 2010) “that's my bitch” (Lil' Wayne, 2008) and “Show me what you got baby” (Jay Z, 2009). Whether listeners know it or not, they are being drawn into a consumerist-capitalist ideological way of thinking that has severe ecological consequences.

Hip Hop discourse has a strong potential effect on its listeners' consumer activities, and are designed as such, as Eric King Watts (1997) describes: “These narrative strategies [discourses] enter into a pact with American cultural outlets and are selectively enhanced so that urban (and suburban) youth can share in an artist's attempt to "live large" by replicating and consuming the imagery”, to create, “an intensely overblown interactive consumer network”. Several positive Hip Hop artists have picked up on this. Akala (2010) states “[these artists] boasting about their latest garments”, and questions the manufactured discourse of mainstream Hip Hop to encourage consumerism, asking “Is it real?”, whilst Lowkey (2007) comments directly on the same process, stating: “these kids imitate what you're spitting [saying]”.

However, there is another important factor that must be included in this line of argument. Clark (1970), states: “Human beings who are forced to live under ghetto conditions and whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected... begin to doubt their own self-worth.” Clark states that African-Americans in ghetto communities begin to feel themselves inferior, and that he is unable to judge himself

by the “usual standards of personal success and character. It is still the white man's society that governs the Negro's image of himself”. Immortal Technique (2001) arguably the most prominent positive Hip Hop artist, affirms this, stating that: “it's the system that will eventually change you... and I have seen this happen long enough... to know it is a serious problem.”

The mainstream Hip Hop industry today recognises this proposed lack of self-worth among its listeners and creates “interposition of an expanding rap industrial complex into the American culture industry” (King, 1997). The industry employs the alluring discourse analysed previously to reinforce to its listeners that material wealth is an affirmation of self, manipulating their insecurities for sales; as King states: “Jackets, sneakers, jewellery, cars, and women are treated as "trophies"” (Anderson, 1994, p. 88 cited in King, 1997) that demonstrate and create self-worth.” Akala (2010) also supports this line of argument, stating: “Who owns the car you’re driving that you think’s defining who you are? Running from yourself you’ll find there is no hiding”.

Now, combining these factors with the Packaged Facts report (2008) which states “Young Urban Consumers enjoy an aggregate income of \$600 billion, and they love to shop and spend”, and it becomes clear that the brands and products being mentioned by the rappers are enjoying significant profits and sales.

As a preliminary summary, it can be seen how the discourse of the mainstream Hip Hop industry manipulates the thinking of its listeners, by exploiting a sense of devaluation and insecurity and promoting a desire to "live large" through material means to falsely fulfil these needs. It is at the end of this process that the damaging environmental repercussions occur.

The Environmental Impact of Hip Hop

A number of prominent multi-national corporations whose products are mentioned either directly by Hip-Hop artists, such as Dolce and Gabbana, or indirectly when artists refer to broader possessions such as cars or clothes, operate heavily in third world countries. This is a symptom of an expanding 20th century market: as Magdoff (1978) comments, “as one or more of the giant firms [multi-nationals] in a particular industry spread its tentacles abroad, competitors were eventually impelled to do the same”. Additionally, by the late 1990s almost 50 per cent of total world manufacturing jobs were located in developing countries, while in the year 2000 over 65 per cent of developing country exports to the industrialised world were manufactured goods (UNDP, 1998; World Bank, 2002, cited in Held, 2004). What is found is a connection between the producers in the developing companies, and the consumers (in this case the “young urban consumers”) found in rich countries (Oxfam, 2002, cited in Held, 2004).

Whilst this is symptomatic of the manufacturing industry as a whole, companies with significant connections to Hip Hop consumer culture are solidly involved in the global economies, such as Nike, which had, “By 1992... eliminated nearly all of their U.S. work force in favour of low-wage Asian producers” (Third World Traveller, 2011).

The rising utilisation of third world land, with Free Trade Front (2009) showing close to 2000 clothing companies alone exporting from developing Asian regions, driven by the rampant consumer culture in the rich OECD countries, and in this case driven by the discourse of mainstream Hip Hop, leads to destructive ecological consequences. In these countries, corporate regulation is not as strict (Third World Traveller, 2011), allowing them to spread throughout the Third World, feeding on Amazon rain forests, minerals in Central Africa, cheap labour from China to Central America (Third World Traveller, 2011). As has

been the case for a while, “industrial production has increased very rapidly in the absence of an effective planning and regulation system” (Hardoy, Mitlinm, Satterthwaite, 1992). This results in third world cities suffering serious problems of industrial pollution, including toxic waste chemicals such as Benzene and Arsenic and Vinyl Chloride, which are used in the production of the cars Hip Hop artists frequently promote. This toxic waste frequently ends up in sewers and rivers (Hardoy, Mitlinm, Satterthwaite, 1992).

In Cambodia, another of the blighted third world nations, clothing exports provide most of Cambodia's foreign exchange. This does not come without ecological consequences however, as increased industrialisation causes topsoil erosion and flooding to become prevalent (Global Exchange, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been shown how the discourse of mainstream Hip Hop is used to manipulate its listeners into joining, and supporting, a culture-consumer complex that spans worldwide into global economies and capitalist enterprise, and how these mass industries, driven by a manufactured and false want in its consumers, has damaging ecological consequences, jeopardising environmental sustainability.

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