

# THAT'S THE JOINT!

The Hip-Hop Studies Reader



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EDITORS

## Commercialization of the Rap Music Youth Subculture

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Rap music, with its boastful rhymes and synthesizer-created claps and pops, has moved out of the inner cities and into the mainstream of popular culture. Mass media advertisers have recognized the value of using rap to sell their products, even though they do not always have a thorough understanding of the subculture from which it came. Pepsi-Cola, Coca-Cola, and British Knights footwear company have all signed popular rap artists to promote their products. While there are a few rappers who have greatly benefited from this level of commercial success, others are concerned that as rap moves into the mainstream, they will not be given the appropriate credit and compensation. In his introduction to *The Rap Attack*, Tony Van Der Meer states the problem with the commercialization of rap music:

There is nothing wrong with one community learning the cultural forms produced by another, if it respects their specific shapes and meanings. There is something horribly wrong with a dominant community repeatedly co-opting the cultural forms of oppressed communities, stripping them of their vitality and form, the heritage of their creators and then popularizing them. The result is bleached Pepsi culture masquerading as the real thing. This is what threatens to dilute the real feeling and attitude of hip hop preventing its genuine forms the freedom to fully develop. The expression of Black people is transformed when it is repackaged without any evidence remaining of the Black historical experience. (1984, 4-5)

Black artists may have good reason for concern. Historically, blacks have not been able to reap the financial rewards from the musical forms that were uniquely theirs. The blues, jazz, gospel, soul, funk and rap are all musical styles that originated within the black community. In the 1950s and early 1960s, most major record producers were interested in promoting only white artists, such as Elvis Presley, to perform rock and roll music that had previously been recorded by black artists. The white performer was instrumental in promoting the acceptance of the musical style among mainstream audiences. According to Peterson and Berger, black rhythm and blues performers were most often the victims of the "cover tactic," where major "white" companies would quickly record and market a version of a fast-selling song recorded by a smaller independent "black" company (162). The development and acceptance of rock and roll was in many ways similar to the development of rap in the late 1980s and the development of jazz in the 1920s. Some of the first rap concerts, like some of the first rock and roll concerts, were plagued by riots, leading people to believe that this new music was corrupting today's youth. These public reactions parallel the moralistic reaction against jazz in the 1920s.

According to Peterson and Berger, this controversy indicates that the music was viewed as important and radically different from the music that preceded it (166).

How does a subcultural phenomenon such as rap become integrated into the mainstream of mass culture? In the past, a number of other youth subcultures have gained some level of notoriety (e.g., punk rock subculture), but few have achieved the same level of commercial success that has been achieved by the rap subculture. What is it about rap that has captured the interest and dollars of so many people? What meaning does it have for them?

Youth subcultures have been often organized around music. For example, there was the punk rock subculture, which originated in England in the 1970s. The quintessential punk event involved gathering together to hear a live band, while slamming into other dancers, jumping up and down or jumping off the stage into the audience. Rude and antisocial behavior was highly encouraged, so that this music would remain more meaningful as an expression of rebellion than overly-commercialized pop music. The heavy metal subculture also provided an identity and haven for young people who were disenchanted with home, school, jobs and churches, the acceptable institutions of their parents. Lull called these types of movements (including rap) "oppositional" subcultures, because they represent loosely organized resistance to social institutions, values and practices (29). There develops a common bond between performer and listener through shared meanings, not only in the lyrics but also in the style and sound of the music itself. In the 1950s, sociologist David Riesman observed that young people were using popular music to create socially shared meanings and common states of awareness. The popular music was a primary source of conversation and predicting the next hit became a way of maintaining status within one's peer group (Lewis 138). These subcultures develop their own distinct values and fashions that serve as the price of entry into the particular group.

Historically, much subcultural music has come from oppressed groups defined by socioeconomic class (Lull 6). For example, folk singers like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger were banned from the mainstream media because they reflected interests of the poor. For many minority youngsters, rap has become a voice reflecting not only rebellion against adults but alienation from the majority culture. Some rap reflects a youth rebellion against all attempts to control black masculinity in the street and home. Since most children in the inner city grow up with a single female parent, some male rappers may oppress women to make themselves feel more powerful (Hanna 190).

Behind each style of music there is a local scene where involvement with the music and its accompanying fashions becomes an important part of the lives of the fans. Rap music originated in the Southeast Bronx of New York City, where some street gangs decided to put their energies into creative pursuits. Rap started as a verbal competition and is related to the African-American tradition of word battles such as "playing the dozens." Rap developed in the Bronx as part of the hip hop subculture, along with breakdancing and graffiti art. Hip hop parties (known as "house parties") usually included a show provided by a disc jockey, rappers, dancers and graffiti artists, who provided the decor. The first rap music was happy party music and often involved nonsensical bragging between males.

Since about 1945, technological advances have played an important part in determining what type of popular music is recorded and promoted by the mass media. For example, the initial popularity of rock and roll was largely due to the rapid diffusion of radio and television. Shows like *American Bandstand* promoted the music, and radios became commonplace in the teenagers' cars and bedrooms (Wicke 35). Rap music also developed and became popular largely because of recent advances in recording and computing technology, which allows the relatively easy manipulation of musical sounds. In some ways, rap music is the ultimate commercial product, because its main features have often been borrowed from other, fully tried-and-true products (Goodwin 85). Initially, rap music involved competition DJs to develop the most creative sampling of records. Old Monkees tunes, TV themes

such as *Gilligan's Island*) as well as funk and rhythm-and-blues classics were all borrowed and sampled in unusual ways. Often the original tune was unidentifiable because DJs would alternate between two different turntables, repeating the drum sequence from each record a number of times.

Because of its emphasis on borrowing previous hits and altering them to fit the rap style, it is not surprising that the first widely-successful national rap hit was a remake of a popular rock tune. This introduction of rap into the mainstream was accomplished by a three-man group known as Run-DMC. Their interpretation of the song "Walk This Way," originally a hit for the white rock group Aerosmith, sold 3.3 million copies, and demonstrated to both artists and producers that rap was not just a passing phase (McKinney 66). Since that time, rap has diversified considerably and much of the recent rap music could be described as a crossover between rap and some other style, such as pop, funk or rhythm-and-blues.

Rap has moved off the East coast and prominent rappers are popping up all over the country. Though originally a male phenomenon, many prominent female rappers are now expressing their unique points of view (DiPrima 32). The most important development in recent rap music is that it has become more political, and serious intelligent messages about life in urban black neighborhoods have replaced the emphasis on nonsensical party-type lyrics (Adler 56-59).

The criticism that rap has become too commercialized stems from a similar criticism that has often been expressed about all types of popular music. To some, the industrialization of music means a shift from active musical production to passive pop consumption, the decline of cultural traditions and community. Pop music is a classic case of what Marx called alienation; when something human is taken from us and is returned in the form of a commodity. Pop stars are made magical, such that we can only possess them via cash transactions in the marketplace (Frith 50).

Since the 1970s, several sociologists have proposed that Marxian hegemony theory provides a good explanation of how a subcultural trend, such as rap, becomes popular and is then commercialized by the mass media. The concept of hegemony means the way in which an entire ideological complex of beliefs, values and attitudes that function for the sustenance of the ruling class comes to dominate every aspect of society. Though originally proposed by Karl Marx in *The German Ideology*, the idea was further elaborated by the Italian theoretician Antonio Gramsci. He viewed hegemony as a process where the dominant class uses its privileged access to ideological institutions of that society, such as religion, education, and the media to propagate its values and reinforce its position (Sallach 41). Gramsci believed that the most effective aspect of hegemony is found in the suppression of alternative views through the establishment of parameters that define what is legitimate, reasonable, sane, practical, good, true and beautiful. A consequence of the hegemonic process is that groups who do not benefit from the dominant view, that are farthest outside the mainstream, tend to have value systems that are fragmented, inconsistent and confused. This tendency for views to become increasingly fragmented as one descends the class structure is due to the fact that their "alternative" viewpoints are suppressed by forces in the dominant ideology.

Domhoff suggests that the upper class exerts a predominant, yet indirect, influence on the mass media through corporate advertising (44). The power of corporate advertisers is both ideological and economic. For example, advertisers are often hesitant to support a program which contains controversial viewpoints or when viewers are considered to be less wealthy. The TV show *Guns, Smokes* was canceled when it was in the top ten of the Nielson ratings because the audience was older, rural and down-scale (Gitlin 254).

Gottdiener proposed a model of mass culture that is inspired by Marxian hegemony theory, but is at the same time critical of that theory. He suggests a semiotic approach for explaining the influence of various subcultures, particularly youth subcultures associated with certain musical styles, on the mass culture. Hegemonists believe that consciousness of the masses is either "false"

(they perceive illusion and not reality) or “contradictory” (they are confused and their judgment is fragmented). According to hegemony theory, the abilities of the lower classes to realize their own oppression are short-circuited because of the industrial control of consciousness by the ruling class. However, this assertion commits the fallacy of idealism by implying that the mental activity of individuals can be separated so easily from the material conditions of their existence that consciousness can be false (Gottdiener 983). Gottdiener perceives his view to be opposed to the false consciousness theory. The semiotic approach assumes that the production of meaning takes place by virtue of a social relation, such as reciprocal linkages between producers and users as mediated through mass cultural objects. By focusing explicitly on symbols and their exchange, the model can specify where meaning is created, communicated and received. This model assumes that social groups of all kinds including powerful as well as less powerful groups are understood to be bearers of meaning. “Mass” culture is made up of various individual subcultures, which vary in the extent to which they interact with the dominant ideology in society. Before there is a “mass” culture there must be “culture,” meaning the conceptual forms and accumulated knowledge by which social groups organize everyday experience. The “mass” culture develops as a result of dynamic meaning creation from groups that may or may not be closely allied with the dominant ideology.

Gottdiener visualized the production and control of ideological meanings as operating in three separate stages. In the first stage, producers produce objects for their exchange value, whereas purchasers of these objects desire them for their use value. The link between the producers and consumers occurs when the producers communicate an image for the product, usually through advertising. Products are surrounded with a web of social significance from the outset through advertising as a further inducement to purchase, creating value above and beyond the basic utility of the product. For example, a pair of trousers is no longer just an article of clothing, but also a social symbol, promising the wearer youthfulness, sportiness, or an exotic aura, making him look like a “man of the world” or whatever else the imaginative variations of the advertising experts on the theme of trousers might be (Wicke 78–79). Successful transfunctionalization of goods from exchange value to desirable use-value status has been achieved by several large sporting goods companies. The manufacturers of Reebok, Puma, Nike and Adidas sneakers are making huge profits because their shoes have become accepted not only as the most technologically advanced, but also as stylish and prestigious. These manufacturers did not intentionally market these products to appeal to the rap subculture, but their products were subsequently adopted by this group, becoming part of its identifiable look.

In the second stage, users modify objects of mass consumption in order to express certain cultural symbols, or in connection with specific group practices, or for use in subcultural activities. This is when culture is actually created by the users of the object. The primary use value of the object is transformed, so that the object becomes a sign of belonging to a subculture. In some cases, the commodity may have become so personalized that it is no longer effective in its primary function. Throughout the history of popular music, youth subcultures have used insignificant everyday objects to develop a material context of cultural behavior that is stable enough to allow those meanings and values which the music embodies for them to be projected onto these material possessions (Wicke 80). The meanings are often class specific and are based upon the particular experiences of the interpreter. It is for this reason that commercial entities cannot completely exploit and manipulate consumers. Even though advertisers have been accused of controlling the consciousness of the purchaser, most advertisers would testify that their efforts to “control” consumers are often unsuccessful. The youth subcultures transform everyday objects to show that they are different from the mainstream, using clothing and hairstyles as weapons or visible insults in a cultural war (80).

Wicke describes the Mod subculture during the 1960s in Great Britain to show how youth subcultural trends are often tied to social class frustrations. The Mods were primarily working-class youth who grew up during a time when there was increased prosperity for their parents but little hope of them being able to achieve the same level of affluence. The Mods

reacted to their frustration in achieving this level of affluence by consuming in excess. Their outward appearance matched that of mannequins in the department store windows. They hung out in nightclubs that were usually reserved only for the high society in-crowd. Their cultural form parodied the ideology of the consumer society and at the same time expressed the hopelessness of achieving that level of prosperity and social class. Their cult bands were the Who, the Kinks, and the Rolling Stones, as well as some lesser known groups. When the Who sang "My Generation," the line "Hope I die before I get old" was seen by the Mods as one way to escape the clutches of the bourgeois ideology (Wicke 85).

Rap music also expresses the economic and social frustration of many young people from the inner city. Originally, rappers borrowed the dance beat from the disco music of the 1970s to create their own style of party music. It has been observed that dancing is one arena in which blacks confront whites and win. Many blacks see dance as their province and are threatened when whites try to challenge their territory by "dancing black" (Hanna 85).

Rap is possibly the commercial equivalent of what the Marxist writer Adorno called part-interchangability or pseudo-individualization, two methods of capitalist production (Goodwin 76). Part-interchangability is when mass-produced parts from one product line are used in another "different" product. In rap music, this process occurred when the disc jockey took old recordings from a number of artists ranging from James Brown to the Rolling Stones, pieced them together and extended the drum break to form a new instrumental composition. Pseudo-individualization is when the "same" products are made to seem different by the use of individual gimmicks, such as promoting a particular "star" image or adding some guitar licks or drum riffs that are characteristic of a particular performer.

During the third stage of Gottdiener's model, the producers of mass culture decide to capitalize on these subcultural trends. The transfunctionalized objects produced by the subculture become the raw material for cultural production by the mass culture industries. During this process, subcultural meanings are changed by mass producers (such as advertisers) into more marketable, less radical meanings. A rather pessimistic Marxist would probably view this third stage as being extremely important to the process of ideological control, the ideology that benefits capitalist production. It is evident that big business is making big money from the impact and influence of the rap culture. Major record companies have signed popular rap artists and advertisers are using these stars and their music to promote products. Two Saturday-morning cartoons, "Hammerman" and "Kid N Play," feature animated characterizations of rap stars Hammer and Kid N Play. There is an M.C. Hammer doll and a Vanilla Ice doll. Middle-class rapper Will Smith (aka the Fresh Prince) has his own prime-time comedy series, *The Fresh Prince of Belair*, and rapper Ice T has starred in several major motion pictures.

The history of popular music tells us that once a subcultural form is totally removed from its original context, that subculture ceases to exist. Wicke relates how the enormously popular British television series *Ready, Steady, GO!* led to the end of the Mod subculture. The show was part of a vast publicity machine that ensured a profit for mod-style goods (Wicke 88-89). The Mod style no longer said "I'm different from the mainstream" and soon a new teenage subculture, known as the Rockers, emerged from the underprivileged strata of working-class Britain.

Gottdiener concludes that Marxist theorists who advocate ideological domination fail to appreciate the importance of the relative autonomy of subcultural life. It is true that the consumption habits of individuals are so manipulated by the mass culture industries as to transform the production of meaning by subcultures into a managed market purchase. But this does not always happen because consciousness itself cannot be controlled. There are no two people in the world who will perceive any given stimulus musical or otherwise in exactly the same way. Fortunately, there will always be groups who desire to distinguish themselves from the mainstream and produce meanings for cultural objects that are independent of the logic of exchange value and dominant cultural sensibilities. Interestingly, these two sources of cultural production (mass-producers and subcultures) are dependent on each other.

Television advertising provides an excellent medium for examining the influence of rap on the mainstream audience. Because children and teens are the major consumers of rap music, as well as products associated with its identifiable look, it is only logical that rap would be used to promote products to these age groups. Nine hours of children's Saturday morning television were collected in both October of 1990 and October of 1991. The programming and ads were videotaped on three consecutive Saturdays from the three major networks. All the ads were examined carefully to determine whether or not rap was used. In the first year (October 1990), there were 11 commercials judged by the author to contain rap. To be considered as rap music, words had to be spoken in rhythm and not sung to a melody. Rap music was usually accompanied by typical rap fashion and behaviors, such as wearing sneakers, baseball caps and workout suits, speaking into microphones and breakdancing.

Two of the rap ads promoted products within the "Barbie doll" line and are considered by the author to be the least true to the typical rap style, in comparison to the other rap ads in the sample. For instance, rap is predominantly a black male expression, while each of the characters in these two commercials is a white female. The products advertised, Barbie Trading Cards and the "Cool Tops" Skipper doll, seem totally incompatible with the rap meanings of rebellion and socio-economic deprivation. Barbie has traditionally been very materialistic, upscale and white in her image. The little girls who appeared in the ad were shown dancing together and mouthing the words to the rap song. Their style of dance and clothing is more disco-like than hip hop.

Interestingly, all of the white male rappers to appear in the sample were cartoon characters. "Barney Rubble" was a rappin' detective who plays a joke on his old pal Fred Flintstone, who is led to believe that someone is stealing his Pebbles cereal. Once again, the characters of Barney Rubble and Fred Flintstone are incompatible with the values and meanings inherent in rap. They are both lovable family men and can be considered as the cartoon versions of Ralph Cramden and Ed Norton from the old *Honeymooners* TV show. They were originally portrayed as working class men with traditional 1950s values.

The second white male rapper in the sample shared the spotlight with a rapping teddy bear. In this cartoon ad, a "Campbell Kid" and a rapping Teddy Bear take turns doing the rap for Teddy Bear soup. Although the ad is clever, kids may feel that they are being insulted or manipulated by advertisers who are trying just a bit too hard to be "cool" and do not quite make it. Both characters in the ad have the reputation of being cuddly, child-like and All-American, like Mom, hot dogs and apple pie. Kids would not naturally associate these two cultural symbols with rap music.

The third white male rapper was "Punchy" from Hawaiian Punch, who looks like a little Hawaiian tourist. Hawaiian Punch does not have a very strong symbolic meaning for most people, so a rap approach in this case may be as good as any. Rap definitely is not Hawaiian, but maybe it is not incompatible with the punch part, since "Punchy" usually hits his pal in the nose when he asks him for a drink.

The most unusual rapper in the sample was the "Chicken McNuggets" from McDonald's, which looked like little brown puppets with baseball caps. In this hilariously ridiculous ad, Ronald McDonald is shown doing a few breakdancing moves. I'm afraid that even small children would consider this to be either stupid or insulting. Ronald McDonald is usually portrayed as being extremely kind, light-hearted and child-like. The macho image of the rapper and breakdancer is highly incompatible with these McDonaldland characters.

The next four ads were from a related line of Lego's products for boys. These four commercials were very similar, except that they advertised different toys (pirate ship, spaceship, etc.). These ads were the most true to the original rap style. Three boys were shown playing with the toy and then dancing and rapping at the end of the ad. The boy leading the group and mouthing the words to the rap is black and he has two white boys on each side of him who



appear to be backup singers. These ads are fairly compatible with the use of rap for several reasons. First, it is a product for boys and so the macho image of rap is probably appealing to the target audience. Second, since characters like pirates are supposed to be nasty and rebellious, this type of image probably does not hurt the product either. Third, a black male is used as the rapper, which is typical in the original rap style.

The last commercial, which advertises the Hot Wheels Racer, is very similar to the format of the previously discussed Lego ads. A black boy is shown rapping about the toy car, while two white boys in the background are playing with the cars and watching the rapper. The use of rap is probably fairly effective here, because the product is for boys, a black male is used, and the rap is intelligently presented.

The sample of ads from one year later showed that rap was used much less frequently and seemingly more discriminantly than the year before. There were three ads that clearly used rap and one that used a style of music that might be considered a combination of pop and rap. Apparently, the Lego ads were successful because the Pirate collection was still being advertised, using exactly the same commercial. A second, but new, Lego ad was also being aired, using the same approach (the "Blacktron" collection). The third rap ad appeared only once in the entire nine hours of programming, and was promoting Hershey's chocolate bars. This ad is beautifully executed and is quite a tribute to the rap style. The main slogan in the ad is "Pure milk chocolate . . . Can you handle it?" There is a black boy wearing a headset mike, who is leading the rap in an imaginary chocolate factory. The camera on occasion switches to a disc jockey surrounded by a space-age turntable console, who scratches the record to the beat. Near the rapper are several children breakdancing on an assembly line and providing some "backup" rapping. These dancers include boys and girls, both black and white. It seems that this commercial would be quite effective. It is so catchy and attractive that it makes chocolate seem hip, cool and fun. It is hard to believe that this ad was only shown once, perhaps to keep the concept from wearing thin. The fourth ad utilized a combination of rock and rap, and was used to advertise Campbell's Dinosaur soup. All of the characters are cartoons, either Campbell kids or dinosaurs. The dinosaurs are playing musical instruments in rock music style as the Campbell kids dance to the beat. There is a break in the song and one of the dinosaurs raps to the beat, holding a microphone. The final shot of the dancers features the entrance of a black Campbell kid who does a few breakdancing moves as several white Campbell kids dance in the background. This ad is entertaining and clever. It features a danceable beat that would facilitate memory of the ad and encourage children to join in the fun. Because this ad does not strictly emphasize rap, it avoids taking on the harshness of the true rap style, and does so in an effective way.

## Conclusion

Evidence indicates that rap music has moved into the third stage of Gottdiener's model, in which a subcultural trend is sanitized by the producers of the mass culture. In October of 1990, advertisers seemed to believe that because rap was popular, kids would like any message in which rap was used. However, in 1991, it appears that advertisers have learned that rap may not be appropriate for all children's products and that rap must be presented in a "cool" or "hip" way. It is less compatible with characters that are nice, child-like, family-oriented or All-American.

These findings are consistent with the evidence that indicates that producers of mass culture have only limited control in their attempted "manipulation" of consumers. This has been the general conclusion of several researchers who have examined the usefulness of hegemony theory in a contemporary, free-market society. In his analysis of the hegemonic process in television entertainment, Gitlin says " . . . capitalism implies a certain sensitivity to audience



taste, taste which is never wholly manufactured. Shows are made by guessing at audience desires and tolerances. ...” Alternative material is routinely incorporated into the dominant body of cultural production (Gitlin 263). Vallas examined occupational worker classes in order to come to the following conclusion: “... members of subordinate classes have not uncritically embraced the tenets of the dominant ideology; rather they regard its premises with great skepticism ... members of privileged classes commonly believe that both the normative and empirical statements in the dominant ideology are true, most of the lower classes do not” (64). Even the popular music industry has resisted total domination by corporate interests, such that many successful products have been the ones that give more control to the consumer. Home taping and cassette recorders have given fans a new means of control over their sounds and have been the thorn in the side of the recording industry ever since. Sampling of records in hip hop music has undermined the status of the record as a finished product and has created a legal nightmare in terms of challenges to previously existing copyright laws (Frith 69–70).

Nevertheless, there is also evidence that the mass-culture industries are presenting rap in ways that they expect to be more acceptable to mainstream audiences. It is somewhat unfortunate that the mass culture industries have the power to dominate the development and diffusion of rap music, because most of the producers have little understanding about the subculture from which it originates. For most Americans, exposure to the life and cultural of others takes place through the agency of mass culture. This is the most unfortunate outcome for a subculture in which many young people hoped that rap would be a “way out” for disadvantaged youth and a chance that others might listen to what they have to say.

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