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TRAJECTORIES AND TRAPS: THE VISUALIZATION OF URBAN LANDSCAPES IN HIP-HOP FILMS

Abstract:
Beyond a cultural phenomenon and a movement, hip-hop is an art form – a paradigmatic art form for the postmodern age. Broadly defined the hip-hop film can be thought of as new African-American-themed cinema. Hip-hop films display the aesthetics and culture of hip-hop while also featuring hip-hop music as a score. Hip-hop artists commonly appear as lead actors in these productions and the films are concerned with urban stories about and related to African-American youth of the post-Blaxploitation/post-civil rights era: the hip-hop generation. The city as concept, calculated by a "strategy" that emanates from institutes of power, sets the stage for the dramatic conflict of the hip-hop film. The hip-hop film and the plight of its characters are inextricably linked to urban spaces, both visually and thematically. This space codes and shapes the structures of urban existence in tangible and intangible ways and these codes often become a fatalistic concern for the ones who must navigate them. This objective correlative – the urban city – is key to an understanding of hip-hop culture, to an understanding of the condition of the "expatriates" surviving in the treacherous inner-city.

Key words: hip-hop, film, African-American, city, urban, culture

To the question "What is hip-hop?" I believe the first answer should be, "A unique American cultural force." "As a form of culture with literally millions of participants across the globe…[hip-hop is] the best aesthetic gauge of the consciousness of the masses of people throughout the world and it expresses not only all that is ugly about them, but all that is beautiful and all that yearns to be free."[1] These words were written by General Baker and C. L. R. Odell as part of their *Theses on hip-hop* in an attempt to map the various effects of the culture. Most pertinent for this particular essay is their conception of hip-hop as an aesthetic gauge. Beyond a cultural phenomenon and a movement, hip-hop is an art form – a paradigmatic art form for the postmodern age. Hip-hop is a versatile arrangement that cuts across and synthesizes four of the fine arts: music, dance, painting, poetry… and now, cinema.

Hip-hop films represent the birth of a new Hollywood genre, first manifested in 1983 with the release of the defining *Wild Style* by Charlie Ahearn and coinciding with the onset of the golden age of hip-hop culture (marked by the introduction of the wildly-successful and influential group Run – D. M. C. in 1983). Historically – important hip-hop films were made throughout the 80s like the documentary *Style Wars* (1983) by Tony Silver, the semi-musical *Beat Street* (1984) by Stan Lathan, and the policier *Colors* (1988) by Dennis Hopper. However, films like *Breakin'* (1984) by Joel Silberg and *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984) by Sam Firstenberg along with others of the decade were not always proficient in form or profound in outlook. Some of these films meant to capitalize on the burgeoning popularity of hip-hop culture as an end and not necessarily to engage with that culture in a meaningful or transformative way.

The hip-hop film matured artistically in the 90s, sparked by the appearance of its first masterpiece: *Do the Right Thing* (1989) by Spike Lee, which many would label a race-based drama but I would argue is steeped in hip-hop culture as an approach to both life and (film) art. Among other things Lee aestheticized the hip-hop film, simultaneously turning it into a serious art form while also paving the way for a new (hip-hop) generation of Hollywood filmmakers. Immediately after Lee's film a steady flow of aesthetically-advanced hip-hop films by a diverse array of auteurs emerged: *King of New York* (1990) by Abel Ferrara, *House Party* (1990) by Reginald Hudlin, and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) by John Singleton to name a few.

Broadly defined the hip-hop film can be thought of as new African-American-themed cinema, which makes hip-hop films the inheritors and successors of the style, content and concerns of the Blaxploitation film in Hollywood of the 70s. Blaxploitation films were notable for being low-budget crime films with violent and sexualized imagery featuring African-American characters in urban settings, usually with a prominent soul music score. Therefore, hip-hop films can be considered as the second wave of the expression of aesthetics and ideals in cinema related specifically to African-Americans and African-American culture, while also introducing a large number of African-American directors to the world of cinema (as did Blaxploitation films). Todd Boyd, writer on hip-hop culture and politics, notes that, "Hip-hop offers new ways of seeing and understanding what it means to be Black at this pivotal time in history."[2]

This lens is given an additional level of clarity and power through the dynamic visual art of the hip-hop film.

Hip-hop films display the aesthetics and culture of hip-hop while also featuring hip-hop music as a score. Hip-hop artists commonly appear as lead actors in these productions and the films are concerned with urban stories about and related to African-American youth of the post-Blaxploitation/post-civil rights era: the hip-hop generation. Tricia Rose, writer on African-American culture and politics, observes that, "Rap's stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture."[3] These urban stories of the hip-hop generation are laced with social significance within the power structures of America – an implicit commentary on dis-empowerment is present in the texts.

Genres often are most immediately and accurately defined by setting and conflict. As such the hip-hop film is set in the urban inner-city and the conflict is between African-Americans – with each other, within themselves and with society at large. The city is one of the dominant icons of the hip-hop film and those cities that feature most prominently in the genre are the same cities that have been prominent contributors to the development of hip-hop culture over the years: New York City (the birthplace of the culture), Los Angeles and others. Besides being linked through their shared hip-hop narratives these cities also have in common the fact that they are the largest urban metropolises in America with the largest multi-cultural populations. The hip-hop film has rarely ventured into small-town America or even mid-sized urban centers, though this is likely to change due to hip-hop's increasing regionalization since the turn of the century.[4]

Just as Michel de Certeau described the city in general, the hip-hop city is a "concept." As a concept it stands for something that expresses identity, as locale is terribly important in hip-hop culture. Over time hip-hop has championed a common maxim in both of its inverses: "It's not where you're from, it's where you're at/It's not where you're at, it's where you're from."[5] Both are equally crucial in hip-hop culture as both define the codes that not only express one's identity but also affect it from an external position. Not only that but, within hip-hop culture, depending on what city you are from or what section of a particular city and being able to be identified with it can potentially put one within a life and death struggle for survival. These are the stakes that hip-hop citizens often play for on a daily basis.[6]

De Certeau differentiates the contemporary city denizen as "user" instead of "consumer," the former being a more appropriate term to describe how urban residents interface with their everyday reality. If so the hip-hop citizen is a user *par excellence* as the entire culture of hip-hop is founded on "poaching" on the property of others in countless ways. That property includes the city structure itself, which hip-hop users subvert to engender their own ends. The city as concept, calculated by a "strategy" that emanates from institutes of power, sets the stage for the dramatic conflict of the hip-hop film. The hip-hop film and the plight of its characters are inextricably linked to urban spaces, both visually and thematically. This space codes and

HIGH-ANGLE VIEW OF THE CITY SKYLINE - *NEW JACK CITY* (1991)

shapes the structures of urban existence in tangible and intangible ways and these codes often become a fatalistic concern for the ones who must navigate them. The hip-hop film offers clues to understanding this dastardly predicament in its unique evocation and incarnation of the urban space. The city is a character in these films – an assertion which now warrants a turn towards a discussion of its characteristics.

The city in hip-hop films is an urban dystopia in which demonic imagery reigns supreme. The city presents a hellish nightmare, of which one of the stronger examples is depicted in the gangster film *New Jack City* (1991) by Mario Van Peebles. In this film New York City is shown to be suffering under various plagues such as crack cocaine, AIDS, murder and other deadly scourges. The film opens by descending into the city – mirroring a decent into hell – with Van Peebles' camera craning past a graffiti-covered wall that depicts a biblical quote[7] down into the smoke and flames of an abandoned yard inhabited by drug abusers and dealers.

The evocation of this plagued city space foreshadows another one, where crime boss Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) engages in a bit of his own strategic city planning by taking over a housing project named "The Carter" and turning it into a drug sales/processing factory which also doubles as a recreational center for users. The building courtyard is populated by soulless zombies aimlessly wandering around in a state of shock, in an incessant search for their next hit. The artist Chuck D from the notorious group Public Enemy previously evoked this nightmarish cityscape (also referencing horror film culture) in the brilliant song "Night of the Living Baseheads"[8] which was released in 1988. The wildly-satirical and self-reflexive video for this song opens with a shot of the group standing over the gravestone of a "basehead" and is further populated by visions of addicts in a stupor, "shriveled to the bone" like skeletons, stumbling helplessly through an indefinite zone "like comatose walking around" which is akin to a living death.[9] The Carter becomes a graveyard – better yet, a purgatory for condemned spirits, or as the writer Vilém Flusser would say, an "alternative city" inhabited by "expatriates." When the police raid The Carter the criminal gang sets it on fire and the whole place goes up in smoke and flames, creating a small apoc-

alypse that metaphorically evokes the multiple deaths that the urban city undergoes as a result of its dangerous street corners.

Those dangerous city street corners become a trap, as recent hip-hop slang literalizes it – a diabolical trap from which there is no escape.[10] In this sense the city space is an enclosed space in hip-hop films and their appearances in the opening credit sequences of these films not only sets the dramatic stage but also delineates the urban boundaries that cannot be transgressed by the hip-hop citizens. Flusser writes that, "We were thrown into civilization […] without anyone asking us for our permission."[11] This concept exemplifies the fate of so many inner-city urban residents, particularly those of the hip-hop generation and their struggle with forces beyond their control, their struggle against the supra-structure foisted upon them by institutions of power. This is why the hip-hop citizen "poaches," why his existence is governed by "tactics" for survival, and why he is categorized as the (dangerous) "other." As de Certeau notes, "Increasingly constrained, yet less and less concerned with these vast frameworks, the individual detaches himself from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover, within an electronicized and computerized megalopolis, the 'art' of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days."[12] Hip-hop culture can be said to practice this "art."

Though the urban city is an expansive space (among America's largest, in hip-hop films) ironically, it still functions as an effective trap. Writing on "non-places" Marc Augé elaborates this point by stating, "We could start by saying – again somewhat paradoxically – that the excess of space is correlative with the shrinking of the planet."[13] This paradox lies at the core of the trap that the hip-hop citizen finds himself enclosed in. Again, relating this idea to the notion of a trap, Augé writes, "This spatial overabundance works like a decoy, but a decoy whose manipulator would be very hard to identify (there is nobody pulling the strings)."[14] But of course someone is always pulling the strings as one cannot be prey without a hunter and vice versa. If the hip-hop citizen is trapped in the urban space, like a rat in a maze, from the ground level it is very difficult indeed to ascertain the identity of the trapper, as Augé notes. In a larger sense this is where hip-hop has gone astray – by focusing its energy on trying to outwit the framework rather than leveling an attack on those who set its parameters, be that as it may that they are difficult to flush out. This search for the door – not to the exit of the trap but rather its very control room – will make hip-hop a really revolutionary method.

As the most representative icon of the city space the city skyline appears repeatedly in the opening credit sequences of hip-hop films, reiterating the importance of the city as a concept and also as a character. *Wild Style* opens with a static framing of an empty, generic urban space at night devoid of movement. The main signifying object within this sequence shot is a wall with the word "graffiti" sprayed in an array of decorative colors. The city itself, as a living object, is denoted through the use of off-screen sound effects – cars, police sirens, stray cats, gunshots – before a rope drops into the frame and the main character slides down it, projecting himself into this stark,

hellish environment. Zorro ("Lee" Quinones), the protagonist, advances towards the camera until he comes against a wire fence which locks him in the frame as well as the city space. The visual notion of the city trap is evoked here. Also as Zorro silently moves through the shadows, dressed in all black, he mimics the manners of a hunter, though his prey is a fresh urban surface – a subway train – to use as a canvas for his latest work of street art. Zorro is a "user" and a hunter, whose "tactic" as a graffiti artist "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance."[15]

This brief pre-credit prologue in *Wild Style* gives way to the credit sequence proper which is rendered as animated designs. After a flurry of shifting images that detail the four organizing elements of hip-hop culture[16] a cartoonish city skyline drawn as a backdrop is introduced as one of the final images in the credit sequence and this is the image that the director signs his name upon. The hip-hop film as a genre is born with an introduction to the urban space and the use of the city skyline as an establishing shot/setting.

CELEBRATING THE CITY SKYLINE
KRUSH GROOVE (1985)

THE CITY AS THEATRICAL BACKDROP
DO THE RIGHT THING (1989)

The musical biopic *Krush Groove* (1985) by Michael Schultz opens with a montage of images of the New York City skyline, almost fetishizing the city through this series of celebratory pictures that seem to promise action, allure, fame and fortune. Because of its historical position within the hip-hop film canon this particular opening credit sequence works as a template-setting piece that would be followed time and time again in the genre. The city in the hip-hop film as depicted through its enchanting and majestic skyline in opening credit sequences promises everything and reveals nothing. It is an impersonal mass in these introductory moments – rarely do we see life teeming from within.

The film *Do the Right Thing* abstracts the city space in its opening credit sequence. Lee presents the backdrop of a city street as a literal theatrical backdrop, flat and distant. The studio floor is visible in this opening shot, lending further artificiality to the abstraction. A highly-theatrical lighting scheme dominates the frame, as it is bathed in a series of alternately warm and cool primary colors that wash over the entire image, enhancing its lack of depth. The city space is reduced here to the level of a crude

signifier, a *literal* stage for the ensuing drama. Flusser's "alternative city" comes to mind, though without citizens or even expatriates – a total alternative to a living city itself. The only thing that populates the frame is Rosie Perez as she gyrates to the sounds of Public Enemy's anthemic song *Fight the Power* (1989).

Lee's fractured city in this opening credit sequence is the opposite of Augé's "supermodernity" – there is no excess, no spatial overabundance. Yet and still this visualization of the city functions as a decoy. As Augé states, "We can say of these universes, which are themselves broadly fictional, that they are essentially universes of recognition. The property of symbolic universes is that they constitute a means of recognition, rather than knowledge, for those who have invented them: closed universes where everything is a sign; collections of codes to which only some hold the key but whose existence everyone accepts […]."[17]

High-angle shots are the primary method through which the city skyline is visualized in the opening credit sequences of hip-hop films. These high-angle shots often appropriate the point-of-view of God, just as de Certeau describes the effect of maps as the city experienced by someone looking down from high above. Of course, that someone represents the institutes of power that strategize the city formation. In the context of the hip-hop film these high-angle shots become a subtle reminder of those who create the rules the hip-hop citizen must contend with, of those who pull the strings of the urban trap.

The film *New Jack City* merits returning to in close consideration of its opening credit sequence and its particular rendering of the city space. The first image of the film is a helicopter shot that glides by the Statue of Liberty with the New York City skyline visible in the background of the frame. The shot is what is traditionally called a "bird's eye" view and it slowly draws us towards the city in an almost magnetic pull. This first image gives way to an overhead view of the city that is captured in a 90˚ angle. It is this particular image that can be equated to the point-of-view of God or the institutional parties that calculate the strategy of the urban environment. As the camera moves in this map-like fashion over the city de Certeau's notion of "trajectory" is evoked which "suggests a movement, but it also involves a plane projection, a flattening out. It is a transcription."[18] The city becomes a graph "which the eye can master"[19]and it is also abstracted here like the city space in the opening credit sequence of *Do the Right Thing*. Like the city space in *Wild Style* we come to know the urban environment through an aural montage that juxtaposes police sirens and other sound effects against a string of news reports that narrate the social strife that the city experiences, the social hell that the city is.

Momentarily visible in this 90˚ graph-like shot is the roof of St. Patrick's Cathedral and the huge shape of a cross that this structure forms. This image is a subtle reminder of the redemptive forces necessary to exit the hellish city we will be subjected to in the film – a reminder (and chance) that is fleeting in this inexorable traveling shot. The cross-shaped roof of St. Patrick's Cathedral also subtly comments on the God-like point-of-view that we are privy to in this opening credit sequence.

THE CITY BECOMES A GRAPH
NEW JACK CITY (1991)

This traveling shot gives off the effect that we are precariously hanging over the city ready to be thrown into it at any moment, without our permission, as Flusser would say. Drops or descents from high angles become a structuring motif of *New Jack City* from the aforementioned early shot where the camera drops into the junkyard inferno of crime and corruption to the final shot of the film, where Nino Brown falls to his death from the top of the courthouse spiral staircase, also evoking the 90˚ shot from the opening credit sequence. Many characters in this film are thrown or dropped to their deaths from high points.

The first action of the film proper is prefigured by the 90˚ graph-like shot of the city. After the conclusion of the credit sequence the camera continues on its flight path, eventually closing in on a far-off bridge and revealing a man who is being held by his feet dangling off the edge above a river. The director signs his name over this precarious image only moments before the man is dropped to his doom. These downward arcs that are a central motif of this film combined with the repetitive religious imagery and themes can be said to represent the fall of man.

The opening credit sequence of *New Jack City* recalls that of *The Naked City* (1948) by Jules Dassin and its extreme high-angle shots of New York City. However, this modern New York City is no longer naked – it lost its innocence some time ago, any Edenic qualities being swallowed up by the plagues described in the aural montage of tragic news reports featured in the credit sequence. The link to *The Naked City* reveals another larger connection that the hip-hop film shares – that with classic film noir. In *New Jack City* the gangsters think of themselves as similar to James Cagney or George Raft – actors who portrayed larger-than-life criminals in classic films noir. This also links with the hip-hop tradition of artists naming themselves with the likenesses of gangsters past, both real and fictional.[20] Furthermore, the classic film noir is an urban film in which the city is often depicted as a trap, an expressionist nightmare as dystopian hell that the noir protagonist must navigate. Finally, city skylines as a representation of the urban space are featured repeatedly in the opening credit sequences of many classic films noir.

THE NOIR CITY
AS EXPRESSIONIST NIGHTMARE
THE NAKED CITY (1948)

The visualization and repetition of city skylines in the opening credit sequences of hip-hop films create a symbolic universe, in the process becoming a "non-place," almost more than a place, somehow transcending its confining categorization as "space" – as Augé says: "Totalities which are partially fictional but effective."[21] They are effective precisely because they are only partially fictional and they have an objective correlative in reality. This objective correlative – the urban city – is key to an understanding of hip-hop culture, to an understanding of the condition of the "expatriates" surviving in the treacherous inner-city. It is key to "give a meaning to the present, if not the past […]."[22]

Endnotes:

[1] General Baker and C. L. R. Odell. "Theses on hip-hop: preface to the second edition," (Tuesday, November 07, 2006), http://democracyandhiphop.blogspot.com/2006/11/democracy-and-hip-hop-our-line_02.html (accessed October 12, 2008).

[2] Todd Boyd. *The new h.n.i.c. (head niggas in charge): the death of civil rights and the reign of hip hop* (New York-London: New York University Press, 2002), p. ix.

[3] Tricia Rose. *Black noise: rap music and black culture in contemporary america* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 3.

[4] During this time new regions and cities such as Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, Miami, Memphis, Detroit and others have put themselves on the hip-hop map, so to speak. A rare hip-hop film that depicted small-town America (set in the state of Arkansas) was the HBO documentary *Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock* (1994) by Marc Levin, which was followed by a sequel called *Back in the Hood: Gang War 2* (2004) also directed by Levin.

[5] This maxim can be heard to great effect in the song *In the Ghetto* (1990) by Eric B. & Rakim.

[6] I analyze the disastrous codes and the dubious performative strategies hip-hop citizens use to negotiate them in the essay "Performing hip-hop: ethics, complex acting and Tupac Shakur in *Juice*" published in *Kultura* #127 (June 2010).

[7] The quote comes from I Corinthians (6:9) – a letter from the apostle Paul as a disciplinary warning against immoral behavior.

[8] A "basehead" is hip-hop slang for a drug addict, most often one who is addicted to crack cocaine or the particular method of "freebasing" cocaine as a way to smoke it.

[9] A bitter irony regarding Public Enemy and the song "Night of the Living Baseheads" is that group member Flavor Flav struggled with drug addiction problems in his professional life.
[10] The ghetto as "the trap" came into currency as slang derived from the city of Atlanta, most notably evoked in the album *Trap Muzik* (2003) by T. I. and the mixtapes *Trap or Die* (2005) by Young Jeezy and DJ Drama and *Trap or Die II: By Any Means Necessary* (2010) by Young Jeezy and Don Cannon.
[11] Vilém Flusser. *Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 172.
[12] Michel de Certeau. *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. xxiii-xxiv.
[13] Marc Augé. *Non-places, introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London-New York: Verso, 1995), p. 31.
[14] Ibid., p. 32.
[15] Michel de Certeau. *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xix.
[16] The four organizing elements of hip-hop culture embodying the art forms of music, dance, painting and poetry are, respectively: DJ-ing, B-boying, graffiti writing and MC-ing.
[17] Marc Augé. *Non-places, introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London-New York: Verso, 1995), pp. 32-33.
[18] Michel de Certeau. *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xviii.
[19] Ibid.
[20] The rapper Scarface named himself after the title character of Brian De Palma's cult film *Scarface* (1983), which although not a hip-hop film is extremely popular and held in the highest reverence in hip-hop culture. Of course, De Palma's film is a remake of Howard Hawks' classic gangster film *Scarface* (1932) which itself was a homage to the life of Al Capone, who went by the nickname "Scarface."
[21] Marc Augé. *Non-places, introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London-New York: Verso, 1995), p. 33.
[22] Ibid., p. 29.

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PUTANJE I ZAMKE:
VIZUALIZACIJA URBANOG PEJZAŽA U HIP-HOP FILMOVIMA

Sažetak:
Kao kulturni fenomen i pokret hip-hop je takođe umetnost – savršen kao primer postmodernog doba. U širom smislu hip-hop film je novi afro-američki film. Ovi filmovi predstavljaju stil života, kulturu i konkretnu muziku. Hip-hop umetnici su glavni glumci u filmovima koji pokazuju gradske priče o afro-američkoj omladini posle 60-ih godina 20. veka: to je hip-hop generacija. Grad kao simbol je scena za dramsko dešavanje u ovim filmovima. Hip-hop film je vezan za grad kako vizuelno tako i tematski. Grad kao prostor definiše oblike urbanog života ljudi koji žive u njemu. Grad je ključna reč za razumevanje i kulturu hip-hopa kao i za ljude koji moraju da prežive u tom opasnom prostoru.

Ključne reči: hip-hop, film, Afro-Amerikanci, grad, urbana kultura

(KATEGORIJA ČLANKA: NAUČNI ČLANAK – ORIGINALNI NAUČNI RAD