

Lecture 9: Our Machines, Our Music: From White Noise to Black Noise

THEME 2: COMPUTERS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

Our Machines, Our Music: From White Noise to Black Noise

Pinch, Trevor and Frank Trocco. 2002. Introduction: Sculpting Sound, Chapter 1: Subterranean Homesick Blues, Chapter 3: Shaping the Synthesizer. In *Analog Days: The Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesizer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, (pp. 1-31, 53-69).

"A synthesizer assembled parts of sound into a complete sound" (p. 67).

What goes into this assembly? Pinch and Trocco argue that ideas about what counts as a proper musical instrument are part of it. How?

Keyboard: makes it look like you're playing music! [HISTORY OF MUSIC](#)

Technophallus guitar. Machismo. [HISTORY OF GENDER](#)

Rose, Tricia. 1994. Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality, and Black Cultural Practice in Rap Music. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, MA: Wesleyan University Press, (pp. 62-96).

Asks us to think about the question: "What is the point of rap's volume, looped drum beats, and bass frequencies?" in terms of *technology and sociology*.

Connected to traditions that highlight rhythm over melody: "the complexity of rap music, like many Afrodiasporic musics, is in the rhythmic and percussive density and organization" (p. 65). break beats

But there are *new* things here as well. Rap artists have appropriated recording studio technology — [SAMPLING](#) in particular — for purposes other than those for which it was originally intended and built; they have appropriated it "in keeping with long-standing *black cultural priorities*, particularly regarding approaches to sound organization" (p. 63). *What does Rose mean?*

What is the importance of repetition? Snead claims that it has a social meaning in Afrodiasporic musics as connected to circulation, equilibrium (p. 69). "Rap producers' strategic use of electronic reproduction technology, particularly sampling equipment, affirms stylistic priorities in the organization and selection of sounds found in many black diasporic musical expressions" (p. 71). *Do you buy this?*

What does Rose mean when she writes:

"repetition cannot be reduced to a repressive industrial force" (p. 71). That would be the Marx argument, right? That repetition is the signal feature of labor alienation.

"Positioning repetition in late capitalist markets as a consequence of that market, marginalizes or erases alternative uses of and relationships to repetition that might suggest collective resistance to that system" (p. 72).

What is the cultural meaning of sampling in rap?

How does Rose illustrate that "Rap production resonates with black cultural priorities in the age of digital reproduction" (p. 75), What is the role of technology?

Rap as a complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology: "This mixture of orality and technology is essential to understanding the logic of rap music; a logic that, although not purely oral, maintains many characteristics of orally based expression and at the same time incorporates and destabilizes many characteristics of the literate and highly technological society in which its practitioners live" (p. 85). *Can we unpack this? How does rap do both of these things and what is the place of technology here?*

Rose says that rap is part of Walter Ong has called a "post-literate orality" (p. 86). An orality that depends on writing — or other technologies of inscription — for its existence. *Explain?*

Sampling undermines copyright law: "Computer sampling instruments create access to sounds formerly uncopyable and therefore unprotected" (p. 91). *So what?*

Paul Gilroy claims that Rose's "assertions that hip hop is reducible to a core of invariant and exclusively African-American "black practices" that permanently resist both commodification and white appropriation" are problematic. *Why?*

Williams, Ben. 2001. Black Secret Technology: Detroit Techno and the Information Age. In Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life. Alondra Nelson and Thuy Linh N. Tu with Alicia Headlam Hines, eds. New York: NYU Press, (pp. 154-176).

Different moments of Afrofuturism:

The outer space moment: Lee Perry's Black Ark studio, Sun Ra, P-Funk. (includes various articulations, including Nation of Islam and the idea of the Mother Plane)

Imagery of aliens. Mark Dery quote, (p. 165). Statements and then reversal (P-Funk: *Mothership Connection*).

The robot becoming cyborg moment:

Ben Williams argues that Detroit techno as an Afrodiasporic cultural form operates *differently* from hip-hop/rap as analyzed by Tricia Rose. *HOW?*

cyborg/cyberspace moment

"Blackness becomes production technique; alienation is converted into cyborg identity; and the practice of international musical data exchange becomes a utopian myth of non-property based, open source collaboration that function as a resolution to the contradictions of global electronic capitalism" (p. 171) *comment?*

Film excerpt: Scratch

Your papers are due on our next meeting, the 18th.
Let me read you the assignment:

For this paper, you should write about some aspect of computer and information technology, either another example of something we discussed in this thematic unit (computers and the self, artificial life, electronic music) or something we did not read about (e.g. cell phones, computer games). You must use some of the theoretical tools offered in the readings for this section (e.g. Edwards, Pfaffenberger, Rose) to analyze your case.

Let's go over some themes from this segment!

We started with WHAT is A COMPUTER

- We got TOOL FOR REPRESENTATION, MODEL, COMPUTER AS MEDIUM
- KNOWLEDGE/POWER
- CLOSED WORLD/GENDER: SEX/GENDER/TECHNOLOGY
- HARD MASTERY/SOFT MASTERY
- EXPERT SYSTEMS/KNOWLEDGE AS INFORMATION/INTERPRETATION
- HETEROGENOUS ENGINEERS/CONSTRUCTION
- TECHNOLOGY'S DOUBLE LIFE
- REVERSE COMMODITY FETISHISM
- SILICON SECOND NATURE
- HACKING