Aesthetic Potentials of Rhythm in Hip Hop Music and Culture: Rhythmic Conventions, Skills, and Everyday Life

Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen

Hip hop culture was originally primarily a “black” cultural phenomenon during the 1970s and early 1980s, with close ties to the “black” ghettos of New York. As a broad concept, hip hop covers dance, graffiti, deejaying, and rap, and in its original form it was known as a live expression, a game in which the hip hop players took part in battles and fought against one another through rhythmically based rhymes and acrobatic movements. Dancing and rapping were done to achieve a certain status: winning the favor of the audience and consequently earning its respect was the main purpose of their creative activity. Hip hop culture belongs to the street; so does its language and music. The role of rhythm in this particular youth culture concerns style, movements, and “feeling.” Rhythm appears crucial to hip hop, and the aim of this article is to discuss the phenomena both as an aesthetic and as a cultural practice.

Thus, this article wishes to point out the significance of aesthetics, and more precisely rhythm, in this particular culture. The rhythm of hip hop is treated as an aesthetic movement and experience that plays an active part in generating the concept of hip hop in a broad cultural sense. I try to illustrate the sense of delay in the beat, the “laid-back” feeling the micro-rhythmic feeling in groove-oriented hip hop music can be said to produce, and to demonstrate that this rhythmic feeling influences both the movements and the lifestyle of hip hop culture.

To support my analysis, I discuss rhythm from different theoretical positions: from a musicological position concerning the fabric of the groove and the microrhythmic characteristics of rap music (Hasty; Danielsen, Presence), from a phenomenological, literary angle concerning rhythm as an experienced phenomenon (Ringgaard; Lilja), and as a philosophical and sociological phenomenon concerning the transgressive potential
of the concept of rhythm from aesthetics to everyday life (Lefebvre; Wittgenstein, *Blue and the Brown*). Thus, I investigate aspects of the concept of rhythm that show its ability to expand the field of aesthetics and enter the sphere of everyday culture.

The article is divided into two parts. The first part concerns the concept of rhythm as a methodological premise, and the second part discusses this concept more specifically in relation to hip hop music and culture. The article is meant as a survey of potential, and especially transgressive, possibilities of the concept of rhythm, but will not itself use rhythm analytically. It could be said that the article investigates preliminary conditions for an interdisciplinary method for analyzing rhythm in hip hop culture.

The Concept of Rhythm

The following quotation from Virginia Woolf’s last novel, *The Waves*, sets the tone for my reading of the field of rhythm:

> People go on passing; they go on passing against the spires of the church and the plates of ham sandwiches. The streamers of my consciousness waver out and are perpetually torn and distressed by their disorder. I cannot concentrate on my dinner . . . They dive and and plunge like guillemots whose feathers are slippy with oil . . . Meanwhile the hats bob up and down; the door perpetually shuts and opens. I am conscious of flux, of disorder . . . yet I feel, too, the rhythm of the eating house. It is like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round . . . Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included. (69–70)

These words by Virginia Woolf demonstrate the significance and power of rhythm as an experience that involves our everyday life—both our sense of being and our sense of belonging or exclusion. Rhythm thus appears to be a complex phenomenon involving several modalities concerning the perception of our surroundings.

Among the challenges for an analysis of rhythmic modalities is, first of all, the concept of rhythm. As the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre puts it in his book *Rhythmanalysis*:

> Is there a general concept of rhythm?—Answers: yes, and everyone possesses it; but nearly all of those who use this word believe themselves to master and possess its content, its meaning. Yet the meanings of the term remain obscure. We easily confuse rhythm with movement, speed, a sequence, a sequence of movements (gestes) or objects. (5)

Lefebvre’s work on rhythm was one of his last publications and should be seen as a continuation of his work on urban space. Rhythm in Lefebvre’s thinking thus emerges as a broad concept able to transgress time and space, though it is still closely connected to time and, in particular, repetition. But repetition is also