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Order, Joy, Youth

Parade Aesthetics in Popular Music

ABSTRACT This talk identifies in popular music a common but largely untheorized phenomenon. Parade aesthetics are marked by an implied permeability between performers and audience, and the jubilant instrumentalization of individuals toward collective identity for its own sake. As a connoted medium (per Marshall McLuhan) the parade extends the body, rendering its participants larger, louder, and more opulently visible. It simultaneously miniaturizes the world, reducing it to the status of model, token, and toy. Such aesthetics then invite young pop audiences to step into roles with grownup attributes of instrumentalization, bigness, and access. These attributes are structural within parade aesthetics and largely independent of specific content. The talk concludes with an insight into the parade-like nature of first-wave hip-hop.

KEYWORDS parade, aesthetics, pageantry, youth, children, popular music, hip-hop, rap

The video lecture transcribed here is available in the online version of JPMS Volume 33, Number 1.

The parade is a medium that regularly speaks more loudly than its content. Outlandish costumes, floats, a mashup of musics in tight proximity: these can all be features of parades for homecoming, Thanksgiving, pride, Halloween, victory tailgate parties. Do the Shriners want to drive funny cars? Do students at the local dojo want to kick their way down the street? They're all part of the civic landscape, so maybe. Parades—even political ones—rarely demand total relevance.

Relatedly, let me issue a disclaimer right off the bat here: not all parades are the same. Not all parades are good. I am not advocating for this aesthetic, but am merely identifying it—saying, hey, it's a thing.

Despite important potential differences, though, parades do tend to have a common structure: not an argument but a declaration that we deserve your attention *because we deserve your attention*.

This can certainly be a politically powerful move, and indeed parades overlap with demonstrations and protests, as do parade aesthetics in pop. But for the child at the jubilant parade, the celebration and extension of one's mere existence has a particularly uncomplicated recursivity.

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In the case of pageantry, the medium is transparently the message. So taking a tip from McLuhan, I want to recall his assertion from *Understanding Media* that technologies are extensions and externalizations of the body. The wheel extends and externalizes the foot; the gun extends and externalizes the hand; the camera does so with the eye; the VCR does so with memory.

Where do parades figure into this? They extend our visibility and audibility. They expand our capacity to marshal and organize ourselves. In a parade, we are not bodies, but we are the expanded body politic. More keenly, we are expansion itself. Parades don't *actually do* anything except reinforce the power of the collective: oneness in engineered synchrony, tactical force, emotional investment.

In short, parade aesthetics instrumentalize us for the sake of instrumentalization.

What we lose in personal meaning, we make up for in the giant outward gesture from the body. We celebrate expanding the body in all directions. Our arms reach farther with batons and flags; our voices are louder with marching bands, bagpipes, and chants; our footfalls heavier with quantized steps; our colors brighter, greatly visible from a great distance.

What does this have to do with youth and pop music?

As a child grows into the world, their radius of perception and control expands: physically they can reach farther and move more swiftly. Socially their capacity to communicate moves from the tactile to the sonic and eventually to the written word, itself a technology of extending the voice. Geographically they come to know a parent's embrace, a crib, a room, a house, the neighborhood, and so forth as they map the world around them, again, in outward expansion. In this way, grownups mark the actualization of expansion: they are big; they wear big clothes; they stay up later; they use tools; they go places; they read and write and use the phone. Grownups have jobs; that is, they are instrumentalized: they do things. They have the answers, know things, and lay down rules, which means that to a kid, they are both in epistemological harmony with the world's order and are its agents.

(Never mind the dirty secret that we're all just making everything up as we go.)

Anyhow, as far as young children are concerned, this bluntly expansive outward gesturing is part of the central appeal of parade aesthetics. To be instrumentalized is to be bigger, louder, more important, more listened to, stronger, more worldly. The end goal of the instrumentalization, the occasion of the parade, the specific costume worn—all of that message fades under the medium itself. The most important verb in this world is *do*. In parade aesthetics, everyone is *doing a thing*.

Parade aesthetics underlie our childhood desire to form "clubs" whose only purpose is to exist. They offer the promise of belonging and instrumentalized purpose. And so the sounds and images drive a wedge between kids, or at least kids-at-heart, and the jaded grownups turned off either by the useless assemblies of conformity, or by what they feel as childishness—uncanny and no longer needed.

Indeed parades are historically linked with children. Michael Witmore describes the 1559 coronation parade of Queen Elizabeth I. As she walked through London,

Children were the primary mediators of the action, serving as narrators, singers and performers; as the tiny orchestrators of events in the pageant world, they were both the instigators and products of civic pageantry's transformative poetic mode, its capacity to rescale and so relocate the solid architecture of the City within the fluid locale of the imagination. (61)

The parade, Witmore continues, involved

a triple strategy of musical enclosure, compression of scale, and mechanical animation—features that contributed to the spectacle's essentially centripetal appeal. (61)

And so simultaneously, pageantry is both symbolically an expansion of the body, and also a miniaturization of civic life: all the groups of a macroscopic territory represented in microscopic automation. Think here of *It's a Small World After All* at Disneyland.

When the world you're portraying is small, incidentally, it doesn't have to be realistic. It can be an alternate timeline—like Parliament-Funkadelic imagines. A miniature world can, of course, be easier to conquer, and so parade pop can veer into the martial—here's Laibach—or the self-righteous—here's P.O.D.

This double situation of the person's expansion amid the world's miniaturization helps explain why parades have such a push-pull energy, especially for children. An audience imagines what it would be like to join in. They picture the view from inside. Meanwhile the participants in a parade imagine what they look like to the audience, performing for someone else's eye.

These complementary tendencies are two sides of one coin. To expand your body *is*, relatively speaking, to miniaturize the world—to bring more of it within reach. This is a joyful two-way gesture: you and the world are headed toward each other, and it's going to be great.

Here's a very quick tour of some of the things I mean when I say parade pop.

The Mighty Mighty Bosstones coordinate their outfits, dancing, and sing in massive unison. Their arrangements reveal that simultaneous outreach and miniaturization, a celebration of joy and order. In fact, we could say this about third-wave ska as a whole genre.

Twenty-one-member K-Pop act Double B beckon with sheer magnitude; here's the video for "Loverboy," whose mix is as dense and busy as its cast.

Massive lineups are common in parade pop. Here's the band Superorganism live at NPR in 2018. The expressly twee childlike band amplifies and extends itself by singing in harmony, banging on suitcases, and talking about nighttime—grownup time—all while playing up a miniature pageant of adult life. They're crowded into a small space and playing with little toys. It's called a *Tiny Desk Concert*. Anyhow don't let their Gen-Z disaffection fool you: they're inviting you to participate, even with a band name that suggests agglomeration.

You don't need to have giant ensembles and opulent visuals to connote the parade, though. Simply taking up the stylistic markers of parade music can do the job. Duo They Might Be Giants' song "Whistling in the Dark" celebrates the waving of one's own freak flag, and as such its outro features an idiot trumpet going rogue atop what sounds like a Teutonic march.

Here's solo rapper Paris with his 1989 "Escape from Babylon." The drumrolls and bass rhythm in the groove connote organized marching, supported by his voice's timbral

control and the lyrical emphasis on discipline as he enumerates the Ten Point Program of the Black Panthers, implicitly asking listeners to join the cause.

In closing, the example I want to go deeper with is Funky 4 + 1's 1980 "That's the Joint." Right from the start, we hear the sounds of partying, of assimilated masses, but the group's vocals immediately conflate order and joy. The first two minutes are an archetype of old school hip-hop's vocal trading, mic-passing call-and-response. I want to recognize how even the phrase "funky four plus one" suggests the act of joining in, as if any kid listening at home or in the crowd could become that *plus one more*. The lead vocals of Sha-Rock make it clear that this isn't just a boys club.

The organized trading off of lines between group members, the full ensemble, and the imagined audience amounts to a multi-social bid for participation, one that allows for spontaneity, but also values planning and synchronization. In short, you can tell that they *rehearsed* this. They move in sync, and proclamations of *I* are redoubled in *We*. Roles are assigned:

C is the melody
 Keith singing harmony
 Jeff is the rhythm K is the bass
 And we all get together, we can turn it out
 Now let's go to work

No specifics: this is about form and not content, togetherness as form, going to work—just like a grownup—as doing.

Going a little further, I think "That's the Joint" is far from unique in these regards. Yes, it helps us to zero in on parade aesthetics, but it can also point to where and how they arise in cultural history. Old school hip-hop as a genre draws particularly on pageantry, with its sartorially coordinated crews of MCs, DJs, and B-Boys and Girls, with its rehearsed mic-passing, with the DJ's ability to diversely shrink whole genres in the breaks that they choose and mix. Built into the style is the simultaneous expansion of the performer and the centripetal, miniaturizing pull on the world around them.

In the wake of New York City's 1971 gang peace treaty, as documented by Jeff Chang, and the steady decimation of the Black Panther party throughout the 1970s, a site of discipline and outreach opened up into which a DJ and their crew might step. Vitality, their stepping was more jubilant than paramilitary, as Chang writes; block parties took the place of political parties.

This is part of the music's literal appeal to the very young, which included pedagogical elements. As parade pop, old school hip-hop offers listeners the first steps toward joining in. The Sugar Hill Gang's line "I'm rapping to the beat" is lesson one in understanding an entire genre.

As a kid I started rapping in the 1980s, in third grade. And my k-5 wasn't the only elementary school, whether in a city or a small town, where kids rapped and danced in groups to hip-hop in talent shows—kids who were afraid of singing on their own.

And so having identified parade pop at least as an idea and an aesthetic with structural, social, bodily, and ethical priorities, I'm going to close with an outwardly

gesturing segue, specific to hip-hop. It's the other humble contribution of this presentation.

There's a pile of reasons why hip-hop is the biggest story in pop's last half-century. I'd like to add one more reason to that pile. Although the genre has become far more varied and mature, I think that in its first decade, hip-hop planted tremendously fertile seeds for its own growth by appealing with unique shininess to the very young. I don't know of any music ever that so immediately suggested to kids that the routines, the doings, the access, and the mixing of adulthood were joyously within reach. And that all you needed to do, to grow your body, to be heard, be respected, to move, and talk like the coolest grownup kids, was to step out of the audience and into the parade. ■

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