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# The musicalization of 'reality'

## *Reality rap and rap reality on Public Enemy's Fear of a Black Planet*

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**ABSTRACT** A recurring theme in the theorizing of documentary film is the nature of the relation between image and reality. This article deals with reality effects and documentary aspects in reality rap, focusing on Public Enemy's album *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam, 1990). Specific attention is given to the use of samples from 'real life' locations, the inclusion of mass media debates and the use of sonic montage. The article discusses the exchange of music and reality in Public Enemy's music, arguing that the musicalization of reality both enhances the expressive power of their music and makes it possible to produce new meanings in an informational sense.

**KEYWORDS** *hip-hop music, music and documentary, music and reality, Public Enemy, reality rap*

## Introduction

The 'mainstreaming' of rap music has given black music culture more global visibility than ever before. As Bakari Kitwana, former editor of *The Source*, points out, we do not yet know the consequences of the acceptance of hip-hop as mainstream popular culture, or how this may have 'altered the racial landscape' (Kitwana, 2005: xii). Even though the popularity of rap has been achieved to some extent through confirming a primitivist representation of African American culture, this ongoing process has led to what Cornel West described more than 10 years ago as an 'Afro-Americanization of white youth' (West, 1994: 127).

An interesting part of this process is the genre of 'reality rap', which earned its name from its attempts to portray the soundscapes and difficult sociopolitical realities of North-American inner cities. Reality rap's prehistory is located in the early 1980s, when several artists addressed the problems and issues linked to unemployment, poverty, the underground economy and drug abuse in inner-city communities. Grandmaster Flash and

the Furious Five were among the first to introduce such social statement into rap through their song 'The Message' (1982), which commented on New York City's deteriorating conditions. The genre peaked with the commercial breakthrough of groups such as Public Enemy and Niggas With Attitude (NWA) at the end of the 1980s, then declined with the larger shift to the more stripped-down, minimalistic sound of gangsta rap.

Reality rap brought about a representation of the situation in inner-city communities which has become inextricably linked with rap as a genre. The aim of this article is to get a better understanding of the processes at work in this two-way exchange between music and reality in reality rap through an investigation of Public Enemy's music. Its analytical focus is on *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam, 1990), because it is an outstanding example of their sonic output at the time, and because this topic requires an in-depth reading of one album rather than a survey of several. A starting point was the recognition that the political and musical dimensions of Public Enemy's work intertwine to an extreme degree: it is almost impossible, in fact, to say where the one ends and the other begins. As a consequence, their songs appear to report on reality – their music does not present itself as a separate world in which events unfold according to abstract musical rules; rather it is perceived as relating to, and dealing with, life outside of music. The following will discuss some features of this process, focusing on how their music manages to produce 'reality effects' as well as on its documentary aspects in relation to 'real life', the latter of which recalls the relationship between image and reality in documentary film.

The reality effects and documentary aspects of Public Enemy's music are part of a larger picture of how identity formation in hip-hop in general is strongly linked to place. In his book *The Hood Comes First. Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (2002), Murray Forman links the importance of dimensions such as space and place to articulations of blackness. According to Forman, an important aspect of the process of making spatial sites significant – of transforming space to place – is the attribution of meanings to components of the socially-constructed environment. In this 'reiterative process', certain practices of everyday life or otherwise subordinated details of the immediate environment are rendered explicit and, in turn, loaded with value (Forman, 2002). Making sonic samples of such practices and environments part of one's music contributes to this reiterative process of meaning investment, since lifting sonic elements and details out of a pragmatic context and making them part of a musical one is in itself a way of investing symbolic value into the elements used.

This article begins with a discussion of the notion of 'documentary' as applied to music based on the theorizing of documentary film which has taken place within media studies in the last 10 to 15 years. It then proceeds to a discussion of selected songs on the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, using



different contributions from linguistics as its own theoretical viewpoint; it will deal only with the auditory output of Public Enemy's production. Even though it acknowledges that music videos and other related images influence how their music is interpreted here, the aim of this article is to focus on how an exchange of art and reality may be staged inside a sonic world. It pays specific attention to Public Enemy's use of samples from 'real-life' locations, their inclusion of mass media debates, and their use of sonic montage, all now trademarks of Public Enemy's production style.

## The relationship of recording and reality

In the theory of documentary film, the relationship between image and reality is a recurring theme. As Bill Nichols points out in his book *Representing Reality* (1991), there is a distinctive bond between a photographic image and that which it depicts: 'Something of reality itself seems to pass through the lens and remain embedded in the photographic emulsion' (Nichols, 1991: 5). Michael Renov also stresses the relation of documentary film to a historical world. In the introduction to the anthology *Theorizing Documentary*, he states:

At the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart, not the formal relations among signifier, signified, and referent ... Is the referent a piece of the world, drawn from the domain of lived experience, or, instead, do the people and objects placed before the camera yield to the demands of creative vision? (1993a: 2)

We might say also that the image or documentary bears an indexical relation to the historical world (Nichols, 1991). This description relies on Charles S. Peirce's (1960) semiotic theory of three different classes of signs: icons, indexes and symbols. While 'icon' points to a certain likeness between the sign and its referent, 'index' is a sign because there is, or once was, a causal connection between the sign and its referent – 'An *Index* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object' (1960: 143). Symbols, finally, become signs by way of convention (Peirce, 1960); for example, in the case of a word there is a rule determining the otherwise arbitrary relation between the sign – which may vary from language to language ('cat', 'Katz', 'chat') – and its referent (cat). The rule determining the relation between the sign and its referent is in the case of symbols thus derived from practice and not from an initially physical connection or correspondence in features by way of similarity or analogy. An index differs from this by being a sign or representation that

refers to its object not so much because of any similarity or analogy with it, nor because it is associated with general characters which that object happens to possess, as because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with

the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand. (Peirce, 1960: 170)

This resonates with Renov's emphasis on the reliance of documentary on the historical status of the referent. Documentary (the sign) is based also on a perceived connection with events or objects belonging to a historical or present world (referent), as well as on the perceiver experiencing such a relationship.

The importance of indexical signification in documentary does not mean that documentary does not involve fictional strategies, or that documentary is necessarily truer than fiction. Following Derrida, one might say that there is an irreducible difference between reality and truth. While reality simply *is*, truth has to be 'unveiled' through an act of inscription.<sup>1</sup> Thus the presence of an indexical relation to reality is no guarantee of truth, since telling the truth, or non-fiction, in fact relies on the very structure of fiction. In keeping with Derrida, Renov holds all discursive forms – documentary included – to be, if not fictional, at least fictive, 'this by virtue of their tropic character (their recourse to tropes or rhetorical figures)' (Renov, 1993a: 7). Moreover, according to Renov, there is nothing inherently less creative about non-fictional representations, and both fiction and non-fiction may create a 'truth' with their text. However, what differs between them 'is the extent to which the referent of the documentary sign may be considered as a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen' (Renov, 1993a: 7). In line with this, documentary may be described as an artistic practice of plucking and recontextualizing pre-filmic elements in a filmic discourse.<sup>2</sup> As Renov points out, such an act of plucking elements from a culturally-specific context and using them within a documentary may be a kind of 'violence', and the question then arises quite forcefully about the adequacy of a representational system as 'a stand-in for lived experience' (this point will be returned to later).

Although the presence of indexical traces of the real or historical world is considerably greater in a traditional cinematic documentary, Public Enemy's style of musical production – for example, their samples from 'real-life' locations or inclusion of mass-media debates – merits examination in relation to indexical signification. Similarly, these non-musical – or to borrow from Renov, 'pre-musical' – elements carry with them indexical traces of a world outside music and thus act as documentary material within it.

Soundscapes made up of obviously manufactured sonic elements may lead also to a strengthening of this music's bond with reality, producing certain reality effects and thereby raising the listener's expectations about the authenticity of the representation. This in fact parallels the paradigm of realism in film. In some cases, such as the docudramas *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) or *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (Marc Rothemund, 2005), the claim of authentic representation is essential. In his writings on



historical discourse and realism in literature, Roland Barthes has argued that 'the real' in such cases 'is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the omnipotence of the referent. This situation defines what we might call the "reality effect"' (1986: 139). According to Barthes, historical discourse's extrusion of the signified outside any 'objective' discourse, by way of a repeated 'this happened', produces a new meaning: reality itself. Furthermore, realism in literature relies on a referential illusion. The exactitude of realism – its meticulous descriptions of things or interiors, for example – works to signify the 'real', in the sense that the apparent absence of interpretational activity becomes the very signifier of realism, as if the act of attending to the meticulous descriptions defers the production of a traditional signified (Barthes, 1986).

Both documentary effects and reality effects – the latter in the form of 'docudramatic realism', a manufactured realism that tries to represent a historical or contemporary reality authentically – may be said to be present in Public Enemy's music. However, in the age of digital reproduction, the dividing line between these two modes of signification is hard to draw. Today's software makes it possible to digitally record any sound (or image) and then manipulate it in different ways: it can be filtered, stretched, inverted, morphed or combined with other recordings, and so on. This means that a documentary sound, for example a recording of voices from mass media, can be manipulated to sound inauthentic through various forms of digital signal processing. At the same time a constructed realistic soundscape may sound more authentic than a recording of a similar real soundscape. In short, there are now many new and perhaps historic technological possibilities for the manipulation, as well as blurring, of musical and non-musical sounds.<sup>3</sup>

Thus we are definitely beyond the era described by Nichols, among others, during which the phonographic recording (or the photographic document) could be trusted to be a reliable representation of what it had recorded. However, indexical signification has not outlived its role, and indexical traces as mediators between an artistic and a 'real' world are no less important. On the contrary, our desire for the 'real' only seems to have increased, in the sense that the circulation of indexical signs continues to accelerate. Hal Foster (1996), for example, has discussed certain trends of visual art in the last 20 years as a 'return of the real'. Moreover, in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999), Bolter and Grusin describe the contradiction at play concerning the real in contemporary media, referring to

our culture's contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy ... Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them. (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 5)

Certainly it is arguable that people maintain a desire for the real in the sense of indexical signification. Perhaps it is only the status of the

documentary as evidence – as a real trace of an initial indexical relationship with reality – which has become more problematic (or less important). The authenticity of their relationship is now strained, to say the least. We are in an era where the possibilities for manipulating the duality of fiction and non-fiction in documentary material are richer than ever before. Or, as Renov states in his introduction, following Trinh T. Minh, one of the contributors in *Theorizing Documentary*, perhaps ‘it is toward the “interval” between those two terms [fiction and non-fiction] rather than to their identity or dichotomization that our fullest attention should be given’ (Renov, 1993a: 11).

### Three ways of musicalizing reality

A striking aspect of rap music is the way in which fragments of other songs or sounds are recirculated and reused in a new musical context through sampling. This recirculation takes place on two levels. First, the choice of samples serves musical aims, such as the need for raw material in designing a sound or a particular rhythmic event. In this respect the sound quality and feel of 1960s and 1970s soul and funk are, in Tricia Rose’s words, ‘as important to hip hop’s sound as the machines that de-construct and reformulate them’ (Rose, 1994: 78). On another level, the sample, musical or non-musical, obviously has more to it than its sound as such: it also includes a history and symbolic value. The musical era of the classic Public Enemy albums had fewer options for manipulating recorded sound; nevertheless, the sampler, combined with sequencing equipment, was central to the development of the signature multi-layered sound collages of the Bomb Squad, Public Enemy’s production team. One important aspect of their technique was the linking of musical recordings with certain sociopolitical realities.

### Situating the musical event

On the album *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990), both indexical signification and reality effects are used to establish a connection to the real. For example, in the tune ‘911 Is a Joke’, such techniques locate the music in time and space. The eight-bar introduction immediately evokes an emergency in an inner-city environment. The atmosphere is urgent: there is hectic, chaotic engagement among several voices talking over one another. Some sort of authority repeatedly states: ‘There is not a minute to spare!’ while another repeats ‘Don’t worry!’ Far behind we hear the sound of a megaphone, and running throughout is an oscillating, enervating synthetic sound with a siren-like melodic movement.

As the rap itself starts, this act of sonic location retreats to the back of the mix and the sound dries up. The lead rapper enters the scene, establishing a communicative focus similar to the live report of a journalist on television.





However, in the rap's 'chorus' the soundscape recalls the intro: once again it is crammed with emergency sounds and distinct utterances of different kinds, some shared with the intro, yet the overall impression of the chorus is significantly different. This is partly because the lead rapper remains the focus here. However, there are also important differences in the underlying rhythmic collage. In general, the soundscape of the chorus is less dense and chaotic; a few elements have been removed, including the voices uttering the various 'emergency statements' and the siren-like synthetic sound. The one added element, a sample that fills the musical role of a horn section (although it does not sound like one), manages to tug the soundscape in the direction of musical signification. As a consequence, the samples forming the original location, such as the buzz of voices in the background, trade much of their original contextual function for a musical function, emerging as significant timbral and textural aspects of the groove as a whole.

This becomes even clearer with the arrival, after the chorus, of the interlude before the second verse, which returns to the location sounds of the intro, thereby refocusing on the urgency of the inner-city environment through the reality effects of the samples. However, this time a distinct strain of evil has been added to the situation in the form of sarcastic, raw laughter. This change in atmosphere underlines the message of the rap itself: even though the emergency service was called a 'long time ago', as lead rapper Chuck D. states, no help arrives: '911 is a joke in this town.'

These relatively small alterations in sonic texture result in the profound shift from informational to musical signification and back again: the sign moves between a primarily pragmatic function and a primarily aesthetic one. Interestingly, the close relation between the pragmatic and the aesthetic functions of language is a recurring theme of the Prague school of linguistics, whose body of theory specifically includes the poetic qualities of language among its 'normal' usages: aesthetic functions are not isolated in a separate realm, but incorporated among the practical, everyday purposes of language. Jan Mukarovsky investigates the exact relationship between pragmatic and aesthetic functions through a discussion of what he calls poetic reference, or 'every reference appearing in a text which has a dominant aesthetic function' (Mukarovsky, 1976: 155). According to Mukarovsky, poetic reference is not determined by qualities *in* the sign itself. Neither is it the relationship (or lack thereof) to the reality indicated that is decisive. Poetic reference is instead primarily determined by the *way* it is set into the verbal context:

In poetry as against informal language, there is a reversal in the hierarchy of relations: in the latter attention is focused above all on the relation, important from the practical point of view, between reference and reality, whereas for the former, it is the relationship between the reference and the context incorporating it that stands to the fore. (Mukarovsky, 1976: 157)



Put differently, one might say that this ‘shift in the centre of gravity’ concerns whether the sign and the signifying chain point outward, towards an object or reality, or inward, towards the sounding work of art. In a tune like ‘911 Is a Joke’, the possibility of such a shift is used to make a sample balance on the edge between musical and informational signification. One moment a sampled element may direct our attention towards the relation between the sample and a certain extra-musical reality, while in the next it may act primarily as a musical feature: the musical qualities of the sampled element and the (musical) context incorporating it come to the fore. This shift is achieved by small alterations in the texture. In line with Mukarovsky, such minor changes could be seen as an awakening of the aesthetic potential in any ‘real’ sound.

### **Signifying on the public debate**

As Mukarovsky (1976) points out, the boundary separating the aesthetic from the practical is not always apparent and, in fact, seldom coincides with the boundary between art and other human activities. Public Enemy fully exploits this ambiguity when they pick their samples from mass media, in this case from the debate on the relation between rap, ‘race’, crime and violence in American inner-city ghettos. ‘Incident at 66.6 FM’, also from *Fear of a Black Planet*, is an example of how such mass-media fragments can be musicalized while simultaneously evoking the public discourse surrounding the music. This ‘instrumental’ song – there is no rap in it – is based almost completely on sonic material from a New York radio call-in programme devoted to Chuck D. and Public Enemy’s music.<sup>4</sup> The tune is a patchwork of different samples, many of them phoned-in snippets such as ‘Go back to Africa!’, ‘They are the most appalling things I have ever seen’ and ‘Chuck D. represents the frustrations of the majority of black people out there today’. These verbal utterances are combined with other sampled sounds, among them a telephone’s characteristic keypad tone. Together they form a collage-like but steady rhythmic pattern.

In this tune, documentary sounds are taken out of their original context and used as music; their aesthetic role overrides their original semantic meanings. The effect parallels Renov’s fourth mode of documentary in his poetics of documentary, namely the ‘expressive’: ‘The documenting eye is necessarily transformational in a thousand ways,’ he states. About the photographs of Paul Strand, he continues, ‘Strand’s mutations of the visible world foreground the singularity of his vision as against the familiarity of his object source’ (Renov, 1993b: 33). In more general terms, one might say that Strand’s photographs foreground his mediation at the expense of the mediated object’s familiarity. As a consequence, the bond between the situation and the image’s portrayal of it is weakened. Similarly, in Public Enemy’s ‘Incident at 66.6 FM’, the referential bonds of the samples to the original talk radio show are loosened. However, in the same moment



these samples start to speak again: as they are transformed into music, they acquire new semantic meanings. They cease to form arguments in a debate on crime and disorder in North-American urban areas – a debate that ran non-stop in the American mass media after rap exploded in the late 1980s – and act as powerful examples of the common prejudices and opinions about both Public Enemy and black rap in general at the time.

This means of reusing and at the same time commenting upon historical material evokes the act of 'signifyin(g)' as described by Henry L. Gates, Jr in his pioneering book *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). In general terms, signifyin(g) can be described as repetition and revision in one and the same manœuvre: to signify upon something is to repeat with a difference (Gates, 1988). According to Gates, such rhetorical skills are highly regarded in African American communities, and he quotes Roger D. Abrahams' definition from 1962:

The name 'Signifying Monkey' shows the hero to be a trickster, 'signifying' being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at 'direction through indirection'. (Abrahams, 1962: 125, quoted in Gates, 1988: 74)

Signifyin(g) is, among other things, a means of communication to which one may assign messages that are undeliverable via literal language.<sup>5</sup> In line with this, we might say that Public Enemy, by repeating (and revising) the white establishment's public debate, manages to comment upon these arguments in a rather subtle way. When combined with the soundscape of the reality Public Enemy want to address, the tone of these statements on rap, 'race', crime and the situation in the inner-city ghettos, usually uttered from a position of power and authority, is significantly changed. They become somehow ridiculous, even comic.

Following Mukarovsky, we can observe that when documentary material is used musically, indexical signification must give way to some extent. Throughout this process the original meaning is transformed and displaced, and verbal utterances are deverbalized: sometimes speech even becomes pure sound. In fact, the very distinction between documentary and musical meaning becomes difficult to maintain. The close relation and frequent shifts between the two modes of signification (like the interweaving of fiction and non-fiction in documentary) make the patchwork of sampled sounds act almost simultaneously on two levels.

Roman Jakobson (1976a), another writer of the Prague school, theorized this borderland between aesthetic and pragmatic functions as a borderland between signs and things. As an example he used the difference between the effect of a painted dog and a filmed (real) dog on a real dog:

A dog does not recognize a painted dog, since a painting is wholly a sign. However, a dog barks at dogs on film because the material of the cinema is a real thing, but he remains blind to the montage, to the semiotic interrelation of things he sees on the screen. (Jakobson, 1976a: 147)

Jakobson claims that it is precisely such real things (visual and auditory) transformed into signs that are the specific material of cinematic art. Similarly, in the music of Public Enemy, many of the sounds, like the key-pad tone or the phone-ins from the radio programme, belong to the world outside of the musical 'screen' and thus are things transformed into signs. However, just like in a film, they are 'things' that have become part of a new context, a musical montage that promptly generates new perspectives.

Nevertheless, much of the expressive power of their music results from how they retain some indexical signification in it. This means that while things have become signs, they still (vitaly) 'bear an indexical relation to the historical world' (Nichols, 1991: 27). It is important that the statements in 'Incident at 66.6 FM' still point to their original context. In this way, not only is speech transformed into music but music also becomes 'speech'. The samples are reactivated: the documentary material points to an actual reality while commenting on it in an act of signifyin(g).

### **Association by contiguity: the sonic montage**

Public Enemy's sonic montages combine glimpses of reality (so as to launch virtual landslides of recognition and meaningfulness) with an equally crucial musical role. The use of montage is a familiar rhetorical device in visual documentary, and in particular the mode described by Renov as 'analytical' or 'interrogatory':

The analytical documentary is likely to acknowledge that mediational structures are formative rather than mere embellishments ... A process of interrogation is thus undertaken through the layering and resonance of heterogeneous elements. (1993b: 31–2)

Nichols also points out how a documentary film can sustain gaps, fissures, cracks and jumps in the visual representation of reality because 'Leaps in time and space and the placement of characters become relatively unimportant compared to the sense of flow of evidence' (1991: 18).

The transition from track 4, 'Incident at 66.6 FM', to track 5, 'Welcome to the Terrordome', demonstrates Public Enemy's exploitation of sonic montage. The last 17 seconds of 'Incident At 66.6 FM' include the following dialogue:

Listener: I think that white people have difficulty understanding that Chuck D. represents the frustrations to the majority of black youth out there today.

Host: I do understand that.

Listener: But before he came on you were blaming –

Host: If you had read the stuff I've read about them, you know the way he [Chuck D.] has been portrayed in the American press.

The conversation ends abruptly, and after a moment of silence a sample of a strongly syncopated riff is played in unison by a synthetic 'horn section'. This sample lasts for two or three seconds, evoking a radio jingle or



a commercial break. A cacophony of sounds lasting for another second or so in turn introduces the next 'groove' – the oscillating, enervating, chaotic soundtrack of the journey to the 'Terrordome'.

In this very short and, in terms of composition, quite simple montage, both the contrasts in texture between the radio conversation, the synthetic horn section, the cacophonous introduction to 'Welcome to the Terrordome', and the timing, allow the different elements in the montage to emerge suddenly as a distinct and meaningful constellation. However, this meaningfulness is rather elusive in character, since it is a quality linked to the temporal nature of music. Even though we could disassemble the montage and catalogue its different aspects – the chronology of the elements, their timbral relations, their relative durations, the intervals between arrivals, and so on – a constellation such as this hardly can be reproduced through such structural data.

Interesting to us here is less the montage's musical success than its potential for communication. As mentioned previously, both Renov and Nichols refer to the editing of documentary as devoted to creating 'a flow of evidence'. Instead of organizing cuts within a scene according to a narrative logic – for example, to present a sense of a single, unified time and place – the 'documentary organizes cuts within a scene to present the impression of a single, convincing argument in which we can locate a logic' (Nichols, 1991: 18). Even though montages in Public Enemy's music do not form 'arguments', as with a traditional documentary, partly because of their very limited duration, the different elements create a similar flow of evidence. As a result, Public Enemy uses the expressivity of the successful montage to communicate something about power relations and inequality in American society that is fundamentally richer than any exclusively verbal text could manage. Moreover, the 'knowledge' transmitted by the sonic montage is located less in the indexical traces of the elements used, than in the way that they are combined: that is, in the breaks, the timbral contrasts and the timing.

How do these sonic montages convey so much 'information' in such a short period of time? The concept of metonymy contributes something here. A montage establishes what Jakobson has described as 'forced' metonymical relations. While metaphors operate through creative association by similarity and contrast, metonymical relations rely upon association by contiguity. Both means of association open up new ways of understanding the usual order of things. In the essay 'The Contours of *The Safe Conduct*', Jakobson writes:

The essence of poetic tropes is not simply to record the multifarious connections between things but also to displace the usual relationships. The greater the stress under which metaphor operates in a given poetic structure, the more violently are traditional classifications disrupted, while things are redistributed on the basis of new generic traits. (Jakobson, 1976b: 192)

As he points out, metonymy may involve the decomposition or mutual interpenetration of objects. Clearly, this is the case in the transition from 'Incident at 66.6 FM' to 'Welcome to the Terrordome', which includes elements from very different social and cultural spheres (or 'planes of reality', to quote Jakobson). These different excerpts from the world are combined in a way that evokes new meanings; the natural contiguities and distances between the different elements change, and so do their dimensions.

### **Reality rap and rap reality: a two-way exchange**

According to Andre Bazin, the notion of 'documentary authenticity' (quoted in Renov, 1993b: 23) developed with the wealth of objective reporting following the Second World War. This work defined the documentary 'look' – the shaky camera, grainy black-and-white images, and so on. Today, as Renov points out, 'the technically flawed depiction of a purported reality no longer suffices as a visual guarantee of authenticity. It is simply understood as yet another artifice' (1993b: 23). Nevertheless, such techniques – albeit no longer comprising a guarantee of factual documentary authenticity – still signify a documentary. Similarly, the construction of imaginary urban locations, the use of documentary material, the sonic montage and the inclusion of noise and an overall edgy, fragmentary sound, contribute to establishing Public Enemy's 'documentary' sound, linking their music to a certain post-industrial urban sphere. Even though we know that the reality effects conveyed by such expressive means provide no guarantee for a one-to-one relationship between music and reality, the songs still manage to convey the impression of an unusually close relation between music and reality.

The documentary impulse of reality rap is also striking in rap films from the same era, blurring even further the place of art relative to reality. As Michele Wallace, bell hooks and Valerie Smith have pointed out regarding the film *Boyz 'n' the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), this blurring can encourage undesirable stereotypes regarding, for example, the role of black single mothers in the problems of inner-city children, because the documentary aura sustains the illusion that the film occupies 'an intimate, if not contiguous, relation to an externally verifiable reality' (Smith, 1992: 60; see also hooks, 1992; Wallace, 1992). In his discussion of hip-hop films, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr touches upon the same issue, reminding us that there is no one-to-one homology between lived experience and its representations.

Clearly, the naive realism that hooks, Ramsey, Smith and Wallace warn us against is problematic. However, at the same time there persists some kind of relation between reality and its musical (or documentary) representation. As Ramsey points out:



We should keep in mind that the social energy that sustains ideologies like misogyny and other forms of discrimination also circulates in these films. In other words, these directors didn't invent misogyny, but they help to reproduce it. (Ramsey, 2003: 169; see also Lindberg, 1995)

In the case of the music of Public Enemy we also face a situation where 'the work' is nurtured by the sounds and symbolic capital of a certain sociopolitical environment. This does not mean that there is a one-to-one relationship between their representation of reality and reality itself, but rather that their music succeeds in establishing a link between the two. In fact, the reality effects of Public Enemy's music ultimately rely on listeners experiencing just such a link.

Public Enemy's hybrid of art, politics and social reality was a success in crossover markets, which was surprising for several reasons. First, Public Enemy was a black hip-hop group with a black nationalist agenda.<sup>6</sup> Second, as Robert Walser (1995) has pointed out, Public Enemy's music is characterized by a multi-linear, repetitive, rhythmic organization and the use of polyrhythm and clashing rhythmic accents; this, together with the high density of musical events and the heterogeneous sound, links their music to what have been conceived as Africanisms in the African American musical tradition (see Maultsby, 1990; Wilson, 1974, 1983). We might well expect, then, that this musical 'otherness' would distance them from a traditional white rock audience, who might be prone to hearing such groove-based musical forms as lacking traditional song structure and melody (see e.g. Danielsen, 2006). However, one explanation for Public Enemy's crossover success may be exactly their raw, noisy, 'documentary' sound, which aligns with what Simon Frith claims to be 'the continuing core of the ideology of rock', namely that 'raw sounds are more authentic than cooked' (Frith, 1986: 266). Nelson George (1998) also points to how well rap music ties in with some central values of rock, via its reinforcement of anti-establishment, rebellious attitudes.

In such a perspective, reality rap was just another episode in the century-long cultural exchange between black music cultures and white audiences, of black musicians providing musical hipness and exotic, stylish attitudes to a thrilled, white audience.<sup>7</sup> However, a spin-off effect of Public Enemy's sonic strategies was that audiences all over the world were exposed not only to the style, music and values of black urban communities, but also to a particularly powerful representation of a sociopolitical reality that, according to Kitwana (2002), shaped what he calls the 'hip-hop generation'. As has been demonstrated above, the potential didactic effect of such a musical practice is not achieved simply by the presence of reality effects and documentary aspects, but by the exploitation of the potential aesthetic function inherent in this sonic material. This has consequences for the kind of 'knowledge' transmitted, since while the informational function

of documentary material – both mimed and real – tends toward the pole of immediate relationships between signs and the world, the aesthetic function tends towards, in Mukarovsky's words, 'the pole of global relationships': it is precisely the possible weakness of the relationship between the sign and the reality it denotes that makes poetry and music capable of affecting our way of ordering and understanding the world. Along these lines, one might say that, through their different ways of musicalizing reality, Public Enemy achieves a referential 'weakness' that allows each track, and ultimately the whole album, to create a coherent context that influences all of the references in the entire 'work'. This weakness does not exclude, but rather supports, the existence of a relationship between music and the world. However, the relationship is of a different sort than the traditionally informational, because the global reference affects our way of ordering reality. It allows for what might be called a 'critical versioning of the world'.

In order for Public Enemy's music to have this effect, the global reference has to be counterbalanced by informational referencing. The power of Public Enemy's sonic output – in the realms of music and politics – lies in their ability to get this balance right. The group's purpose was not to eliminate the informational function and make the music turn back on itself. Contrary to much avant-garde art, balanced on the line between art and reality, Public Enemy did not aim primarily at pointing out the aesthetic qualities of our lifeworld or questioning the limits of art. Rather, they sought to work with that very line, asserting a two-way exchange between music and reality, where a certain lifeworld enhances the expressive power of music and the musicalization of reality makes new meanings possible in an informational sense as well.

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### Notes

1. Paradoxically, an act of unveiling truth such as this, at the same time, unavoidably veils the underlying reality of truth. This is addressed in the philosophy of the later Heidegger (1971) and Derrida (1987) in his essay 'Le facteur de la vérité', one of Renov's (1993a) references in his discussion of the relation of truth and reality in the introduction to *Theorizing Documentary*.
2. According to Renov and Nichols, the constitutive character of the fictional elements – and, one might add, of the aesthetic aspects in general – in non-fictional forms has been severely understated. Renov writes:

The expressive capabilities of nonfiction forms, too frequently overlooked, account for an aesthetic dimension which is – on historical as well as conceptual grounds – constitutive. (1993a: 5)





3. The use of non-musical sounds in musical contexts has a prominent prehistory in the electro-acoustic tradition of contemporary art music. In the late 1940s and 1950s, encouraged by developments in recording technology, Pierre Schaeffer created *musique concrète*, using the magnetic tape recorder and microphones to record and edit fragments of natural and industrial sounds into a 'musical' whole.
4. In an interview with Davey D from the time of the release of the record, published at the website *Davey D's Hip Hop Corner*, Chuck D. explains the background of the track as follows:  

'66.6 FM' deals with me being the topic of discussion on a radio program in New York [a WNBC program hosted by Alan Colmes]. Note the 666, which means collectively the media is the devil, especially until we pick up some counterbalance against the same forces that worked against us. In order for us to offset radio, in order to offset television, we must control some sort of television. In order for us to offset movies, we must have some movies. (<http://www.daveyd.com/petererrord.html>, accessed 10 June 2005)
5. In *Talking Black*, Abrahams defines signifyin(g) as 'a wide variety of verbal techniques united by the single strategy of verbal manipulation through indirection' (1976: 50–1).
6. According to Adam Krims (2000), in the late 1980s, the complex layering and sampling techniques of the Bomb Squad came to mark out the new musical space of rap 'hardcore'. In line with this, Krims interprets the collaboration between the Bomb Squad and Ice Cube on the latter's solo album *AmeriKKKas Most Wanted* (Priority, 1990) as a means of fortifying – consciously or unconsciously – Ice Cube's black revolutionary identity.
7. For a discussion of this cultural exchange in connection with the meeting of black dance music and the international, mostly white pop/rock audiences in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Danielsen (2006). For a discussion of the relationship between black culture and white audiences in early North-American popular culture, see Eric Lott's (1993) seminal study of black minstrelsy, and Christopher Small's discussions of the same (1987, ch. 5).

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