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# Rough Play: Music and Symbolic Violence in an Age of Perpetual War

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# Rough Play: Music and Symbolic Violence in an Age of Perpetual War

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The Morning News:

*Another car bomb went off in Iraq today. More soldiers and civilians died, American and Iraqi. The Taliban has returned to southern Afghanistan. Torture continues in Guantanamo and secret US-sponsored prisons around the world. A marine returns home without her legs. Meanwhile, a grand American city lies dying. The inaction that is the new New Orleans suggests not the "failure of government"—a Bush/Cheney abstraction by way of excuse—but a "willful failure to govern," an act of violence by neglect (or some say, prejudice). The children of the Los Angeles Riots and Rodney King have grown up. The AIDS pandemic enters its 25th year, and the United States' first-ever preemptive war drags on and on, without an end in sight.*

(Thus began my presentation to the Mayday Colloquium XVIII, Princeton, New Jersey, 23/06/06).

We live, unarguably, in a violent world: in hard times, of dark days and nights. In this essay, I ask the questions, what does it mean to live in an age of perpetual war? How do we make sense of everyday violence? How is it symbolically enacted? How is it sublimated and transcended? These are not original questions, but valuable and necessary ones.[1] With regard to music and its place in and outside of school, we might begin an inquiry like this with the anthropological stance, well stated by Alan Merriam (1964), that music is "a summation activity for the expression of value, a means whereby the heart of the psychology of a culture is exposed" (p.225). Even a body as politically neutral as MENC[2] agrees to this. They write in what I think is MENC's most honest statement on record that music is "a reflection of the culture that produced it."[3] Good enough. But our profession rarely goes on to ask, as we will here, what it might mean if this selfsame culture is morally corrupt?[4]

One way to narrow an examination as broad as this one is to look for a shared vocabulary, a particular symbol or collection of tropes that form a response to or an expression of a history's time and place. With regard to my introduction, you might take the popular use of military apparel in everyday fashion as one example of the normalization of on-going war. Camouflage cargo pants, whether jungle design or desert storm, are worn

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everywhere nowadays—in shopping malls, grocery stores, and nightclubs. You even see camouflage baby wear, an idea of style whose meaning if taken literally is sickening to think about. But this is the point: When a symbol like this one emerges or bubbles up from the "psychology" of the culture that produced it, the values that the symbol represents may be too troubling to contemplate. You may not want to consider that a camouflaged baby signals protection from gunfire.[5]

Symbols, we will see, are notoriously difficult to capture and subdue (to use a war metaphor). Some work best in a kind of guerrilla subterfuge, others as undercover agents. Some tropes like "Freedom is on the march" or "Democracy is God's gift to Man" are meant to inspire us directly without much thought. Particularly revealing for this paper will be those tropes and metaphors that go unperceived in our civilian, day-to-day life. We will consider Freud's quote, "Whatever is conscious wears out. Whatever is unconscious remains unalterable."[6] This is an epistemological puzzle, suggesting that the too-familiar conducts unnoticed action, just as the unfamiliar or unconscious continues on unnoticed: a double trap, it seems. Authentic consciousness, if you prefer an existentialist reading, becomes a singular precondition for the making of meaning.[7] Ideology, by contrast, camouflages itself within the unconscious, often in the realm of art.[8] This essay looks broadly at the meaning of style, focusing on a recurring symbol that will emerge and evolve: *the veil.* I will explore how the veil informs and distorts our ability to make meaning, and what it means to put it on, or take it off. I will interact loosely with this symbol, teasing out new meanings in a kind of inter/play of contexts and concepts.

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Finding examples of violence in everyday life isn't hard. You've heard beginning teachers, even veterans (an interesting term in this context), describe public education as being conducted on the front lines or from deep in the trenches; these are metaphors few people find problematic. Nor is the sublimation of violence a new phenomenon in music and art. Think of the *capoeira*, the traditional Brazilian dance that celebrates the art or craft of war. W. E. B. DuBois referred to jazz as "the spiritual strivings in a troubled world" (in O'Meally, 1998, p. 6). I'd like to suggest (humbly) that there might be something more going on today: that an intensified transference has recently occurred, an epistemological shift in

knowing. Today's young people, the generation of Bush/Cheney/Rove and Hurricane Katrina, have grown up in the cross hairs of violence and capitalism (however conflated the two are, or have become). Unfinished wars in the Persian Gulf and wars of neglect aimed at the poor have coincided within an increasingly dense media atmosphere, one that is propelled by entertainment and creativity, and fueled by consumption and the self-agency of purchasing power. In the contradictory light of neo-liberalist capitalism, art forms like the *capoeira* and jazz music seem quaint in their "world views," safely familiar in their hothouse meanings, even ossified (as Freud might say) by the explicitness of their tradition. So my comments here concern two contemporary American art forms that are rich in symbolic meaning: drum corps and krumping. These are two slippery, media-saturated subcultures with complex relationships to violence and the military. They may not last as long as jazz music and the *capoeira*, but that is beside the point.

Although they exist almost completely outside North American schools and Schools of Music, drum and bugle corps will be familiar to instrumental music educators in the United States and Canada. Drum corps (for short) are oxymoronic fringe groups, incredibly popular within their system, filling stadiums with fans, yet almost entirely unknown to broader society. And although they function as carefully crafted and highly disciplined forms of music education, they are ignored by academics, critics, music teacher educators, and even their ostensible allies in the college band director community—the powerful CBDNA (College Band Directors National Association). Krumpers and clowners are a bit harder to describe. These are teens in South Central Los Angeles who have invented their own kind of music education as an alternative to public neglect and gang membership. This too is a fringe group, incredibly popular within its system, but also almost entirely unknown outside it. What I know about krumping and clowning comes from the documentary *Rize,* by David LaChapelle (2005), and from discussions with students in and outside of my classes.[9]

Let's start with the less familiar of these two idioms: krumping/clowning. The transcript below comes from *Rize*, now available on DVD and easily rentable. Here, a group of krumpers offer an explanation of their world. They start by defining the differences between krumping and clowning, and then go on to talk about the violence in their neighborhoods and schools. Clown make-up on the participants' faces is one of the most immediately striking features of the clip from which the text is drawn:

*<<Scene>>*

*A group of young African-American men, all in clown makeup.*

Lil C: You have stripper dancing, which we do not do. . . You have clown dancing, and then you have the krump dancing.
Tight Eyez: It's like hygiene. Either you smell good or you don't. Either you krump, or you're not.
Dragon: Basically, we're from the inner city. What you call the ghetto. The lower parts of Los Angeles, Watts, east side of LA, Compton, Long Beach. We don't get the best of everything, but what we do, we get come together and we dance.

*<<Scene>>*

*Night: an urban playground, loud music. Shirtless dancers propel their arms rapidly and sharply from the lower torso, walking, almost bouncing to the beat. Bodies are flipping, mixing chaotically among the crowd. While at first glance the style of dancing appears violent, there is little physical contact between dancers. Most participants wear some kind of face paint.*

Dragon: We don't have after-school programs. When you don't want to do football . . . that's pretty much the only thing that you can do in the inner city. There's always a football team. Because in the inner city we're all thought of to be sports players. Not everyone is a sports player. Everyone does not play basketball. And everyone does not play football. Is there something else for us to do? So what we did is—is a group of us got together and we invented this.
Lil C: In better neighborhoods they have performing arts schools. You have ballet, you have modern, you have jazz, you have tap, and this is all those prestigious academies you can go to. There's nothing like that available to you when you live where we live.
Dragon: There's a spirit in the midst of krumping . . . a lot of people think they're just a bunch of rowdy ghetto heathens, thugs. No. No, what we are, are oppressed.

What are we to make of this excerpt? Certainly not pity, although the images in this clip show two faces of terrible beauty: de-humanizing inequity and a warrior spirit striving to transcend it. There is no existential weariness here, no so-called historical amnesia either—terms often applied *to* the oppressed by those other than themselves. There is, most clearly, a recognition that absence of choice is an on-going form of violence, a state of perpetual war made manifest in a style of dance that is as extreme in its ferocity as it is in its striving.

"There's a spirit in the midst of krumping . . . a lot of people think we're just a bunch of rowdy ghetto heathens, thugs . . . No, what we are, are oppressed." Dragon's words suggest a kind of double vision, a recognition that his life and his world is not good—at least as seen by others—but unarguably, it is a *lived life*, a life of *his* choosing, however otherwise limited it may be. The krumpers and clowners in LaChapelle's documentary ask the viewer to consider, "How does it feel to be a problem?" This is the existential question asked by W.E.B. DuBois (1999/1903) in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and this selfsame question—posed by both Dragon and DuBois—comes from a place without weariness or expectant pity. This invention—krumping—is revelatory and charged with agency. "Basically, we're from the inner city. What you call the ghetto," says Dragon. "We don't get the best of everything, but what we do, we come together and dance." Recall the words of Lil C: "In better neighborhoods they have performing arts schools . . . There's nothing like that available to you when you live where we live."

When he was a boy, W.E.B. DuBois (1999/1903) had a similar "revelation": After an incident of discrimination in his New England school, "it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; of like, mayhaps, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (p.10). This veil is a mark that the American Negro (to use DuBois's words) is born with, a terrible gift of double consciousness. "One ever feels his two-ness," writes DuBois (p.11) in the chapter called "Of Our Spiritual Strivings": "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (p.12). DuBois likens the veil of double-consciousness to a caul, the membrane that sometimes covers a baby's head when it is born (p.10). According to African-American folklore, a child born with a caul is gifted with second-sight—a curse and a blessing. While the veil acts as a kind of inward protection and offers insights otherwise unavailable to the white world (or to those "in better neighborhoods"), the veil also distorts one's ability to see in- and outward. What of so-called "authentic consciousness," when in and out are bent, and when one is two and never one?

In a fictional account of a New England pastor who covers his face with a black veil to the great mystery of his Puritan community, Nathaniel Hawthorne asks us to consider the double consciousness of sin. In Hawthorne's parable, "The Minister's Black Veil," a swath of black crepe shines a mirror on a small town's hypocrisy: "What grievous affliction hath

befallen you" asks Elizabeth, the good minister's betrothed, "that you should thus darken your eyes forever?"

> "If it be a sign of mourning," replied Mr. Hooper, "I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrows dark enough to be typified by a black veil."
> "But what if the world will not believe that it is the type of an innocent sorrow?" urged Elizabeth.
> "If I hide my face for sorrow, there is cause enough," he merely replied, "and if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?"
>
> (Hawthorne, 2002, pp.333-34)

A symbol of this nature, one that is made literal and exposed, has the effect of unnerving the righteous town folk who, confronted and accused by it, are thus compelled to interpret its message. The presence of Minister Hooper's veil de-normalizes everyday events; it disrupts weddings and scares children. It acts to "awaken" consciousness and calls attention to hidden meanings—to suppressed desires, sins, and violent secrets.

I would like to suggest—if only in part—that this desire to make plain, *to don the veil,* is what compels clowners and krumpers to paint their faces. But still, I don't know. What *does* it mean that they choose to mark their faces? Is it for sorrow or mourning? To awaken others? Do they say, like good minister Hooper, "I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!" (p. 337)? There must be other explanations for this mask, this symbol made literal. Certainly clowning and krumping owe more to hip-hop than they do to Nathaniel Hawthorne (or to W.E.B. DuBois, although I wish it were otherwise). On a practical level, you might ask what compels ostensibly tough—and ostensibly straight—young men and women to paint their faces in the abstractions of a clown while moving about the violent streets of the Los Angeles ghetto? Is this related to club or rave culture? If this is an issue of fashion, how does it make sense?

For help with this question, we might look to Dick Hebdige, a cultural studies theorist and author of a seminal text on the subversive meanings of ordinary objects within musical subgroups. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Hebdige, 1979) has become a classic in the field of literary studies. Hebdige's point is that while the meanings of a given subgroup are always open to negotiation and dispute—whether they are krumpers, clowners, or our soon-to-be-examined drum corps participants—it is in the area of *style* where the "opposing definitions clash with the most dramatic force" (p.3). Style, according to Hebdige, can refer to any collection of chosen objects: to "a safety pin, a pointed shoe, [or] a motorcycle" (p.2). Above all, style operates with an intention to communicate: so it is by "repositioning and

recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, [that] the subcultural stylist gives the lie to what Althusser has called the 'false obviousness of everyday practice'" (p.102). This "repositioning" opens up the symbol or object to new meanings and new possibilities. Minister Hooper's black veil acts exactly like the painted faces of Dragon and Lil C: all are subcultural stylists in this sense. What is important in this analysis is that these symbols—the veils, the costuming and make-up—turn our ordinary world on its head. They communicate to us the lies of "false obviousness," while they separate their participants from a world of narcolepsy and corruption.

When I get depressed about war, when I get angry about an American president who approves of "controlled drowning" and other forms of torture, or when I think about New Orleans, I wonder how our world can continue with the ordinary business of our ordinary lives. That we can hold a conference in a nice hotel, enjoy an undisturbed breakfast, or take money out of a bank, feels like an untruth—a "false obviousness of everyday practice," an illusion built on lies. I remember watching the morning news on September 11th, about twenty minutes before terrorists slammed planes into the Twin Towers. A television newscaster was interviewing the Planters Peanut man: the news anchor was actually conducting a conversation with a man dressed up as a peanut. And then the crashes occurred. Later that evening, when I wrote down all I could remember about that day, I recall thinking that we can never go back to this kind of non/sense. This catastrophe exposed something false, something ugly about the world; it was as if a great veil were lifted, and in a momentary grasp of double consciousness, we saw too many things that were hitherto hidden. You must remember, as I do, that this terrible gift of insight created—if only for a month or two—a great sense of community around the world. But then, lies became truth, Osama bin Laden became Saddam Hussein, what had become conscious wore out.

The American president and his staff work hard to stage convincing symbolic responses to a world in crisis. You remember "Shock and Awe." Then there are the Bush-Cheney chestnuts: the war on terror, the defense of marriage, born-again faith. The overuse of these tropes, initially quite powerful in their obviousness, seemed to dissolve rather too quickly, in a somnolent blur of media flutter. So here we are, now more than six years after 9/11, having to be reminded over and over again that we live in violent times—times that call for preemptive war, abiding faith, etc., etc.

Frederic Jameson, in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (2003/1991), argues that this bully pulpit used to be the function aesthetics: art was meant to sharpen or restimulate perception, "to reconquer a freshness of experience back from the habituated and reified numbness of everyday life in the fallen world" (p.121). Because late capitalism has collapsed everyday life into a lifestyle and has dissolved the notion of art into mere entertainment, the potent symbol is bound to lose its shelf life. This is what postmodernists mean when they claim that a primary text, (say) a particular vision of war or a grand historical label like "axis of evil" dissolves into a series of discourses or secondary meanings. The resulting fragments, according to Jameson, are not "pieces of a former work...but rather the terms themselves...neologisms, which, having become ideological logos, then spray out into the social world like so much shrapnel, passing into general usage and describing their parabola with diminishing force..." (p. 103).

This is why George W. Bush and I share the same frustration. The public forgets, doesn't care about, or has become oblivious to the idea of a violent world. The meta-narrative, so powerful following 9/11, has finally collapsed. The lasting result, according to Jameson, "is this secondary and not all together intended one of loosening the primary unity, dissolving a work...releasing the elements and setting them free for semiautonomous existence as information bits in the message-saturated space of late-capitalist media culture" (p. 103). In other words, either the messages and symbols of war get released and repositioned as something new, or else they sink into soft unconsciousness. In this, George W. Bush and I make bad postmodernists. He wishes to carry forth his modernist *justum bellum*, his uncomplicated battles between good and evil, while I wish to carry forth the utopian vision that I saw in the weeks following September 11th, as when the French newspaper *Le Monde* declared, "*Nous sommes tous Americains*!"

On some level, all educators must make bad postmodernists. Our job is to sharpen perspectives, to make sense of experience—not to dull it—to uncover and unpack the assumed and unseen. We may even harbor hopes that we can help fix a fallen world. With regard to our double roles as musicians and music educators, we are lucky that our discipline is so rich in metaphor and so complex in meaning. One of the great contributions of the Mayday group has been to ask our profession to consider that there are cultural meanings attached to every musical action in which we engage, and that there are cultural meanings to uncover in every musical object to which we attend. As you know, this is not an easy

argument to make. We play notes. We develop the skills to play the notes. We perform the notes. We repeat…

I would like to share an incident that occurred a short while ago. My colleague Cathy Benedict and I presented a paper to the College Band Directors National Association in which we asked our band director colleagues to reconsider their roles to include that of Music Educator as much as Musical Director or Conductor of Bands (Allsup & Benedict, In press). Cathy and I gave differing interpretations of the educational impact of "band," of how the discipline is taught or should be taught, and of the changes we thought possible. At the conclusion of our presentation, a good-hearted but clearly frustrated college band director stood up and asked, "Why are you trying to deconstruct the band experience?!" I don't remember exactly what we said—probably something vaguely challenging yet vaguely reassuring—but I do recall being completely caught off guard. It was like asking, Why are you practicing philosophy? Or better, Why are you asking people to think: Why are you *teaching*?

I am being slightly facetious. The question this gentleman probably meant to ask was, Why are you taking apart a good thing? *Why are you looking for problems*? I don't find this thinking uncommon, whether among my colleagues, students, relatives, or the American public at large. My grandmother in Kankakee, Illinois was famous for telling me not to read or think too much—or else I might get sick! There is a kind of truth to this observation. Real learning agitates and disrupts. It isn't always pleasant to reevaluate something you love. The veil in this context is not exactly a gift of second sight; its uncovering is an intrusion.

I would like to return to the question I interpolated (fairly or unfairly) above: that is, *Why are you looking for a problem*? It is such an interesting question when you compare it to the one posed by W.E.B. DuBois: *How does it feel to be a problem?* The former perspective reveals a will to self-deceive, a desire to be safe and left alone. Its veil is fundamentalist. The latter perspective suggests an *unveiling*—an engagement or a confrontation. A problem after all is the starting point of education. While this may seem obvious, rarely do we see this perspective embraced by teachers, except, of course, when it is the teacher who is helping others with *their* problems; except, of course, when it is the teacher who has chosen the problem *for* the student. There are many among our ranks, furthermore, for whom the only problems we face are musical problems: problems playing the notes; problems developing the skills to play the notes; problems performing the notes. Repeat…

This paper has grown out of investigations I have undertaken with students in my philosophy class at Teachers College Columbia University. Usually, our community shares a fairly measured and respectful debate with the authors we look at—at least until we get to Christopher Small! After the first few chapters of *Musicking* (1998) all bets are off and measured debate often turns into exasperation and anger. Small apparently does two things to unnerve the average formally trained college musician. First, he is prohibitively values-neutral, asking the reader to undertake a detached stance toward the process of decoding or deconstructing music and musical experiences. Second, he brings a DuBois-like "two-ness"—what Edward Said might call a contrapuntal consciousness—to cherished art forms like classical or tradition musics. When, for example, his symbolic analysis of the symphony concert experience asks readers to consider the class implications of classical music and how they are sustained and perpetuated, student responses sound like Elizabeth, who, confronted by her fiancé's black veil, begs: "What grievous affliction hath befallen you that you should thus darken your eyes forever? What if the world will not believe that it is the type of an innocent sorrow?" In other words, my students ask, Why are you taking apart a good thing? *Why are you looking for a problem*?

This is where drum and bugle corps come in. What if, accepting Small's invitation and extending its application to the drum corps tradition, we ask, "What does it mean when this performance of this work takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?" (Small, 1998, p.10)? What if we were to use his framework to test the validity of MENC's claim that "music is a product of the culture that produced it" or, better still, that musicking in the North American drum and bugle corps system is "a summation activity for the expression of value, a means whereby the heart of the psychology of a culture is exposed." What would we find if we took such a look? What would be unveiled? What might it say about our world? The following brief excerpt is dense with musical and cultural signifiers. The performance was recorded at the 2003 DCI (Drum Corps International) Division One quarterfinals in Orlando, Florida (Drum Corps International, 2003). The group, the Blue Devils of Concord, California is one of the oldest and most celebrated drum and bugle corps. They are known for only playing jazz. Listen to the musical text, how it is arranged and performed. Pay attention to what is being communicated: its style of presentation, costuming, and posturing. Above all, keep in mind Small's challenge: What does it mean

“We live, unarguably, in a violent world.”  Perhaps all times, histories, and places would make the same remark.  Whether this contention is true or not – that all times have been violent – alters little of my thesis.  The questions before us, “how do we make sense of everyday violence, how is it symbolically enacted, how is it sublimated and transcended?” are questions of a kind – important, eminently necessary – that every culture must ask.

Merriam, Alan. 1964. The Anthropology of Music (Evanston: Northwestern University Press).

This position statement from MENC's webpage is used to introduce a readymade lesson plan for the teaching of popular music. Its tone suggests that for better or worse, popular music is part of American culture, and can be taught along side the classics . . . without too much alteration. See http://www.menc.org/guides/nsync/started.htm.

Even an apologist for “pure music” as extreme as Igor Stravinsky would agree.  In an address to Harvard University in 1939, Stravinsky lectured, “We are living at a time when the status of man is undergoing profound upheavals. . . Since the mind itself is ailing, the music of our time . . . carries within it the symptoms of a pathological blemish and spreads the germs of a new original sin” (Stravinsky, 1942/2003, p.47).