

DRUMMING TO THE EDGE OF DISCOURSE:
RHYTHM, DISCIPLINE AND RESISTANCE

by

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ABSTRACT

This project is an examination of the emergent practice of drumming circles and world beat music in the contemporary U.S. In developing a framework for approaching these cultural forms, I propose that rhythm, generally marginalized and dismissed as "primitive" in classical musicology and popular discourse, can be heard as a central element linking a culture's sense of order, epistemology and social organization. Rhythm, taken seriously as a form of discourse, a mechanism of power and a type of knowledge, expands and questions current conceptualizations of communication and culture, particularly in terms of the split between mind and body and the boundary between individual and environment. Different rhythmic sensibilities can not only alter the sense-making of individuals, they can transform the bases of social structures and relations with the earth. Rhythm is a site and means of struggle that holds the potential to rewrite the "code" underlying multiple levels of social and biological organization. Drumming circles and world beat music are sites for the discovery and performance of such alternative rhythmic sensibilities; they are attempts to reclaim the ability to produce rhythms, and therefore social structures, that arise from within a group instead of being imposed from without. However, these emergent forms are also being appropriated from marginalized cultures, commodified and rearticulated with dominant practices and ideologies (e.g., liberal pluralism), thereby complicating any simple evaluation.

If you think the angels are playing harps--well, that's your problem. For me, the angels are playing on great big cylinder drums.

-Mickey Hart (quoted in Cushman 100)

Humans evolved in a universe which has optical and acoustic properties. In this process eyes and ears were developed. Eyes and ears are one form of Nature's expression of her optical and acoustic structure. Ears and hearing would probably not exist in a universe lacking acoustic properties.

-William Condon, "Communication: Rhythm and Structure" (55)

If only a few hundred people of the next generation get what I get out of music, then I anticipate an utterly new culture.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, from an 1871 letter (quoted in Storr 166)

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PROLOGUE

This project is an eclectic, exploratory and provisional attempt to grapple with the social role and significance of drumming and rhythm. It is also an attempt to rescue some politically transformative practices and alternative modes of experience from the clutches of my never-ending ability to deconstruct. Nothing here is (intended as) the Truth. I have never read or heard anyone or anything that I accept wholeheartedly and without reservation, so please do not assume that of anything you read here. This is not (for me) Anthropology, History, Musicology, Neurophysiology, Rhetoric, Theory--nor is it New Age. It is a piece of (interdisciplinary) criticism--at times reverent, at others precocious, with more than a bit of hostility here and there--grounded in my experiences and developed through my appropriations of the ideas of others. It is driven by my desperation to formulate some resistances and alternatives to the violence I see all around me, violence directed in almost every conceivable direction. This has been my primary criterion all along, and it remains: not truth, not disciplinary bullshit, but a desire to develop transformational opportunities.

Some suggestions for reading. Be patient. Be active. Maintain your skepticism but don't let it block what's here. Listen, read, view and participate in what I name here, both ugly and joyous. Watch Modern Times while reading "Discipline," Koyaanisqatsi while reading "Order." Read some Nietzsche at almost any point and let yourself argue with him while also

taking him absolutely seriously and with a strong sense of irony. Read aloud some Eldridge Cleaver and watch The Commitments while working your way through "Struggle." Listen to Talking Heads or watch Stop Making Sense. Read Woman and Nature during "Order" or "Drumming." Pick up Drumming at the Edge of Magic and read some passages. Listen to any or all of the recordings listed in the discography, especially the ones by Mickey Hart and Babatunde Olatunji. Seek out a drumming circle and give it a try. Draw from your experiences--of music, of dancing, of yoga, of meditation, of drugs, of exercise--to make this come alive. That's the point, after all. And never forget that none of this is the truth. That's the other point. (Or is it the same one?)

If your position as a reader is professional or disciplinary, balance that with a reading of this project as something not completely divorced from your personal, political and/or spiritual existence. I ask you to take this seriously, to let it matter. Please don't compartmentalize my work or the senses you make of it.

Overview

Given the generic constraints within which I am supposed to be writing, and within which you may be reading, some or all of this project may not "make sense" in the way it "should." Therefore, allow me to lay out, in as explicit and linear of a fashion as I can, what I think I am doing here. Please note that I would prefer you not read what follows on the next several pages, at least not right away. Think of it as a guide, something you can turn to if you are feeling hopelessly lost and/or too frustrated to continue. But if you are in a hurry, if you just want to get through this, if you want to "get it right," then read on.

This project is about examining the social/cultural/economic/political

significance of rhythm, about hearing rhythm as central to many forms of collective action and sense-making. The first essay, "Process," introduces the primary "sites" for my analysis, the cultural forms that captured my interest and whose significance I will try to explain: drumming circles and world beat music. However, as I explain at the end of that essay, I could not jump right into a direct analysis of those forms, because at their heart is rhythm and the sociopolitical significance of rhythm is something about which few people have written. Therefore, the four essays that form the bulk of this project examine different aspects of the importance of rhythm if it is taken seriously as both a form of discourse and connected to systems of exploitation. Only after I open up some of the various roles rhythm plays can I make an argument for the importance of drumming and world beat.

The first of these four essays, "Discipline," begins by making audible the power of rhythm to coordinate collective human action. When placed in the context of industrialization, this quickly turns into an examination of the use of rhythm to control the bodies of workers and consumers in ways that are neither freely chosen nor coerced. In this discussion, I emphasize the crucial shift in the rhythms of contemporary Western societies that not only articulates those rhythms to a machinic sensibility, but that removes from the hands of the collectivity the ability to produce the rhythms that guide collective action. The rhythms of collective and private life come to be produced by others for us, whether in the form of music or the assembly line. This separation parallels, among other structures, the removal of knowledge about production processes from workers and its monopolization by management--a key structure of Taylorist and Fordist modes of production. This is the first of many parallel structures--what I term isomorphisms--that serve as sources of critical energy to drive the project

forward. I am hearing music, particularly rhythm, as intimately related to the larger social orders: in the case of this essay, to the mode of production, technology and the disciplining of the body.

The second of the four preparatory essays, "Order," follows from the discussion of discipline in a variety of ways. In contrast to the step-by-step, "A connects with B" style of "Discipline," "Order" is more associational and many of the connections are left for the reader to make. This relates to a central idea in this essay, that we need to reformulate our sense of what counts as order because our current conceptions do violence to the earth and its people. This reformulation is accomplished by using the film Koyaanisqatsi, a critique of idealist epistemology, and the challenge that fluidity, turbulence and femininity pose to traditional scientific ways of ordering the world. This essay suggests that our current ways of ordering are driven not by necessity or "reality" but by the desire to control; that different senses of order are suggested by the discourses of chaos theory, Nietzsche, Irigaray and Talking Heads; and that our dominant conceptions of rhythm are intimately linked to these forms of violence, to an epistemology built on singularity, solidity, stability and the will to control. Rhythm is a form of discipline and a means for enacting violence as well as a site where alternative orders can be performed.

What I identify as "rhythm" in this essay is simultaneously more ephemeral than in "Discipline" and yet is the most material of all the forms I examine: rhythm as epistemology and rhythm as the (violent, massive and material) imposition of order onto the earth. This paradox is evident in the primary isomorphisms of this essay: the parallels between the channeling of human bodies and the production of commodities, between the computer chip and the spatial structures that form the rhythms of city life. Fluidity becomes a central thematic because of its potential to confound and oppose

such canalizations. Epistemology, via geometry and certain conceptions of language, is heard not as a description of how we do know, but of how we should know, as the dictation of an imperative regarding how things must be ordered: geometry and a certain conception of rhythm become order-words whose driving will is hostile to life, to ontology. This essay tries to bring home another imperative, that of listening to life.

The impulses driving "Order" continue in the next essay, "Struggle." A different conception of rhythm and order is needed and rhythm is a site both to enact those alternatives and to engage in a struggle with the dominant conceptions and performances of order. To make evident the possibility of radically alternative orders, I examine the nature of West African polyrhythms and the possible relationship between those forms of order and the larger social order in which they are embedded. To demonstrate the actuality of the social struggles engaged through rhythm, I examine African-American forms of dance and music and their relationship to the dominant, Euro-American culture in North America. An examination of such struggles complicates quick generalizations about the stability of any rhythmic order and its "ownership" by any one culture while also problematizing the use of the rhythmic sensibilities of non-Western cultures as a means to solve European and Euro-American problems. Listening to rhythm becomes, for me, a diagnostic tool for the sickness of Euro-American culture--in the case of this essay, this sickness manifests itself as an extreme hostility toward our bodies and the prices paid for that hostility by our "Others."

The last of the four preparatory essays is "Consciousness." Whereas the previous three essays focus on demonstrating the relevance of rhythm to different aspects of social life (disciplining bodies, ordering the earth, structuring collective action, serving as a site of social struggle), this

essay begins to develop more directly an understanding of the mechanisms (for lack of a better word) by which rhythm carries out its ordering and, alternatively, its disruptions. I work toward this understanding by analyzing existing arguments for rhythm's effects on consciousness (and by developing some of my own from theoretical perspectives not previously applied in any depth to drumming). As with much of the larger project, my primary criterion here is not empirical validity but the creation of possibilities for transformation.

Two opposing explanations dominate the literature regarding the relationship between drumming and consciousness. The first, grounded in laboratory experiments and mechanistic causal relations, claims something intrinsic to the physical characteristics of the sounds of drums that makes them a powerful "auditory driver," capable of altering brain wave patterns and inducing alternative forms of consciousness. The second argues that the types of instruments, range of contexts and forms of consciousness involved are far too varied for a narrowly acoustic explanation; this variability points to only one possible explanation: cultural conditioning. The battle is between nature and culture, signifier and signified. What is crucial here, for me, are the assumptions: that nature is static, linear, mechanistic; that any variability must therefore be attributed to culture.

To break down the illusion of a stark barrier between nature and culture and to add to the political understanding of the importance of drumming's effects on consciousness, I bring in two perspectives regarding the relationship between the body and socialization processes: Kristevan psychoanalysis and biogenetic structuralism. Kristeva helps me hear the processes by which the subject is formed through the channeling of the drives of the presocial body, through their repression and harnessing for the production of meaningful discourse. A key element in this disciplining is

the entrainment of the body into the rhythms (linguistic and otherwise) of its home culture; this disciplining establishes the possibility that alternative rhythms can disrupt these channelings and alter the subject--and therefore the subject's relation to the larger social order. Biogenetic structuralism combines neurophysiology, anthropology and phenomenology to develop a model of the brain and mind that further questions the nature/culture, mind/body distinction. The neurological structures in the brain are formed, in part, by the physical and social environment: the brain is plastic and cultural patterns are inscribed into the neural pathways of the brain, forming the neurological structures that mediate our awareness of the world. This model provides at least two crucial insights in addition to explaining the importance of ritualistic rhythms: that the relationship between organism and environment is strongly dialectical and that the common construction of "nature" as static (and, for many social constructionists, "passive") is easily countered.

The political importance of these reformulations becomes evident in relation to the materialist critique of "ludic" postmodernism. An emphasis on pleasure (or, in my case, changes in consciousness) is both individualistic and idealistic, promoting a program for social change that emphasizes the individual over the structural factors that produce and reproduce material inequality and violence. I argue that the model of social and neurological order developed in this essay questions the distinctions between the individual and social structure, consciousness and practice, mind and body, and base and superstructure upon which the critique rests. The distinctions between different scales of analysis (e.g., biological, subjective and social) are denaturalized by an alternate story. Rhythm, I argue, can be heard as a "code"--an in-forming, structuring force--that inscribes itself simultaneously in multiple levels of organization. Rhythm

produces neurological, cognitive, interpersonal, economic and other structures all of which are potentially "entrained": produced by a common rhythm or rhythmic sensibility.

This model of the role of rhythm in the formation of the subject and the larger social formation begins to make audible the potentials of drumming circles and world beat. I argue in the final essay, "Drumming," that these emergent cultural forms are attempts to recapture the ability to produce our own rhythms, to relearn the knowledge that has been taken from us by the forces (to give them but one name) of Taylorism. By relearning the power of rhythm we can both resist and reform the existing social structures--economic, environmental, interpersonal, gendered, sexual, ethnic, epistemological and so on--which, as I have tried to demonstrate in the previous four essays, are based to some degree on a particular rhythmic sensibility. The need for such resistance is heightened by the shift from structures such as Taylorism to those of the information age, in which the entire world is being reduced to a code manipulable by means of the digital technologies of the emergent but already hegemonic "informatics of domination."

At the same time, this final essay also problematizes drumming circles and world beat as not only nostalgic, but as commodity forms that channel these resistant and nostalgic impulses toward hegemonic ends. Perhaps even more troubling are the ways in which these forms turn other cultures into resources to be mined in order to solve the problems of Euro-American culture, into caricatures and idealizations that serve our psychic and social purposes while potentially profaning the cultures from which they are drawn. Although the tensions involved in these forms cannot easily be dissolved, they also do not negate the need for resistance or the potential of drumming as an oppositional practice. We are being turned into

information to be manipulated by the technopornographers, the cyborg is a part of our lived social reality, and the life-world is being systematically ordered by violent, rational means. (Although I am uncomfortable with truth claims in the academic sense, I do stand by certain political investments.) Resistance, no form of which will ever be pure, is absolutely necessary; the lived social reality of drumming circles and the attendant nostalgic desires should not be dismissed simply because we have the theoretical tools to deconstruct them. We must negotiate the tensions carefully, but we must find other ways of acting, both old and new--and we must act, now.

There is a desperation here, one I experience as absolutely real. I would imagine that if you do not experience it as such, these essays will be little more than a passing theoretical curiosity or an academic exercise ("claims" requiring "substantive arguments"). I hope--desperately--that this will become more.

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* * *

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