

Showing, Seeing: Hip-Hop, Visual Culture, and the Show-and-Tell Performance

By James E. Brunson III

Nearly forty years have passed since the global emergence of hip-hop culture. When the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" hit the airwaves in 1979 around Christmastime, casual observers—myself included—viewed the song as little more than the next radio hit (I was a Parliament-Funkadelic and Earth, Wind, & Fire fan). By the time the Sugar Hill Gang became popular in the United States and Western Europe, writes music critic Mir Wermuth, "hip-hop had begun to reach a more international audience." "Rapper's Delight" is usually cited as the start of hip-hop history; the song traveled to Tokyo discos that same year. It ranks #248 on Rolling Stone Magazine's list of The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time, #2 on About.com's 100 Greatest Hip Hop Songs, and #2 on VH1's 100 Greatest Hip Hop Songs (#1 is Public Enemy's masterpiece "Fight the Power").

What Is Hip-Hop?

Hip-hop is a North American cultural phenomenon that was created in the early 1970s. The roots of hip-hop are usually ascribed to New York's South Bronx and the introduction of the Jamaican sound system. Its cultural forms or common activities—DJing (i.e., "turntablism"), rapping (i.e., "emceeing"), dancing (i.e., "breaking" or breakdancing), and art writing ("graffiti art")—function as a source of identity formation and social status by and for Black and Latino young people.¹ While language and fashion (clothing styles) have always been part of hip-hop's cultural expression, it has been only recently that critics and observers acknowledged them as part of the phenomenon. Recently, the cultural expressions of hip-hop have expanded to include other creative forms such as writing rhymes and poetry, theater, and some forms of activism.²

Hip-hop has important antecedents in the 1960s and 1970s. The impact of the Black Arts Movement (1968-1972) on hip-hop cultural production cannot be overstated. As cultural critic Tricia Rose points out, its cultural production is indebted to black musical figures such as the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Millie Jackson, James Brown, Parliament-Funkadelic, and Curtis Mayfield, as well as the speeches, comedy,

and literary works of Iceberg Slim, Rudy Ray Moore, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and Muhammad Ali. Other iconic figures include the Jamaican sound system toasters (DJs who rapped over instrumental dub music and reggae records they played) such as Lee "Scratch" Perry and Max Romeo. Latino American influences in breakdancing, graffiti art writing, and poetry are seminal to the origins of hip-hop. The Slam poetry movement and the poetry of Nuyorican Poets Café are intimately linked to Puerto Rican and black oral traditions. Other critical elements that contribute to the language of hip-hop are youth gang culture, blaxploitation and martial arts films, disco, double-dutch (rope jumping), comic books and commercial advertising, skate culture, house music, Rastafarianism, and Islam.³

The commercial exploitation of hip-hop culture has transformed its various elements into a global force and a multi-billion-dollar industry. In 2001, *Ebony* magazine reported that hip-hop represented a ten-billion-dollar business. In *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, journalist Dan Charnas discusses corporate America's early flirtations with hip-hop, the evolution of the record deal, corporate appropriation of rap music, and hip-hop's influence on corporate marketing. According to Charnas, there are five industry-changing moments: 1) the Sugar Hill Gang getting on American Pop Radio and "Rapper's Delight"; 2) Run-DMC's "Rock Box" video getting on MTV; 3) hip-hop record label Def Jam signing with Columbia, which was owned by CBS; 4) Yo MTV Raps!; and 5) Def Jam being sold to Universal Music Group for over 200 million dollars. Hip-hop is the predominant popular culture of global youth.⁴

Fascination with hip-hop extends to visual objects and images. In 2006, the National Museum of American History launched a major collecting initiative, "Hip-Hop Won't Stop: The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life." The museum's multi-year project traces hip-hop from its origins, as an expression of urban black and Latino youth culture, to its status today. The museum is collecting objects from all aspects of hip-hop arts and culture—music, technology, sports, graffiti, fashion, breakdancing, and language—including vinyl records, handwritten lyrics, boom boxes, clothing and costumes, video and interviews, disc jockey equipment and microphones, personal and business correspondence, and posters and photographs. As the hip-hop economy has continued to grow, the popularity of its objects and images as forms of visual culture has intensified.⁵

What Is Visual Culture?

Cultural theorist W. J. T. Mitchell has written seminal critical essays on visual culture.⁶ According to Mitchell's analysis, vision is a cultural construction: it is something that is learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature. While visual culture perhaps has a history related in some yet-to-be-determined way to the history of arts, technologies, media, and social practices of display and spectatorship, it is deeply involved with human societies, with ethics and politics, aesthetics, and the epistemology of seeing and being seen. Mitchell offers eight theses on visual culture; four are critical to this article. First, visual culture encourages reflection on the differences between art and non-art, visual and verbal signs, and the ratios between different sensory and semiotic modes. Second, visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision. The question of visual nature is therefore a central and unavoidable issue, along with the role of animals as images and spectators. Next, the political task of visual culture is to perform critique without the comforts of iconoclasm. And finally, visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate or unmediated. It is less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves.

Mitchell views hip-hop as a medium, a complex social institution that contains the individuals within it and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces (stages, studios, television sets, movie theaters, laptop computers). For example, hip-hop historian Jeff Chang demonstrates how Hollywood cashed in on teen-targeted hip-hop exploitation films. After the unexpected success of 1983's *Flashdance*, which featured Rock Steady Crew members breakdancing, *Breakin'* (1984) expanded the Crew's cameo into a full-length feature film. The low-budget film made nearly 60 million dollars. Hip-hop movies signaled what Chang calls the "end of innocence": the decisions of a small, centralized few dictating the seasonal tastes of the masses. While Hollywood has broadcast hip-hop onto tiny islands in the Pacific and into teeming working-class ethnic suburbs in Europe, images "scrubbed clean for primetime" increased the demand for the real thing.⁷

Visual culture offers reflections on the objects and imagery of hip-hop. It provides face-to-face encounters with stereotypes, caricatures, classificatory figures, search images, mappings of the visible body, and the social spaces in which it appears. Is anyone, for example, unaware of the figure of the male sporting sagging pants and exposing his underwear? Such images constitute a fundamental elaboration of visual culture on which the domain of the image—and the "Other"—is constructed. They function as go-betweens or filters, unmediated or face-to-face relations through which we recognize or misrecognize other people. As Mitchell claims, these encounters show that the "social construction of the visual field" has to be continuously replayed as "the visual construction of the social field."⁸ As we face the hip-hop image, then, we face our own interpolation as seeing/speaking subjects in face-to-face communication.

Hip-Hop and Its Visual Impact on Urban Youth (Popular) Culture

Hip-hop images reside within media the way organisms reside in a habitat. Like organisms, "Rapper's Delight" moved from one media environment to another, so that its message has been reborn in music video and rendered in the virtual reality environments of *spike.com* and *youtube.com*. They offer places to live, and that is what a medium provides.⁹ During one classroom show-and-tell presentation, for example, one of my students introduced a gold pendant beautifully modeled and detailed to resemble a tape cassette. She spoke eloquently about the object's old-school quality. Remarkably, the presenter couldn't explain why she adored a hip-hop image that embodied the bootleg tape cassette market of the '70s and '80s. The medium is the embodied messenger, not the message.

Hip-hop images of media address students as images of spaces or bodies, landscapes or figures, producing in us all the ambivalence we associate with them. Of course, teachers might dismiss hip-hop culture as sexist, homophobic, narcissistic, materialistic, and juvenile.¹⁰ While I agree that we question the power of hip-hop images—their efficacy as agents of domination, seduction, persuasion, or deception—iconoclastic critiques that imagine the destruction or exposure of false images represent an unfortunate tendency to slide back into the reductive treatment of visual images and objects. After all, rock and roll (rooted in the black

music tradition, as well) engages in the production of similarly constructed images. New media inventions invariably produce a set of hypothetical futures, both utopian and dystopian.¹¹

When youth culture confronted an urban dystopian spectacle (unemployment, segregation, housing, and other forms of environmental violence) in the 1970s, it tried to reverse its negative effects with a new vision. Even more than earlier cultural incursions (ragtime and jazz), hip-hop projected a new urban black persona throughout the world. This leads to the question of whether hip-hop imagery is redeemable, and if so, in what terms and for what sort of observer. As Mitchell claims, “Abomination and adoration are precisely the terms in which idolatry is excoriated in the Bible: it is because the idol is adored that it must be abominated by the iconophobe. The idol, like the black man, is both despised and worshipped, reviled for being a nonentity, a slave, and feared as an alien and supernatural power.” The show-and-tell performance represents the point where the “lives of images” intersect the “love of images,” where the animation of black icons is called forth by desire, attraction, need, and longing.¹²

Teaching Hip-Hop and Visual Culture

According to educator Emery Petchauer, hip-hop has become relevant to the field of education and educational research in at least three distinct ways.¹³ First, teachers at an increasing rate are centering rap music texts in urban high school curricula; they are used in the name of culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy, to empower marginalized groups, teach academic skills, and educate students about how aspects of their lives are subject to manipulation and control by capitalist demands.¹⁴ Second, the creative practices of hip-hop and the messages constructed in the music are woven into the processes of identity formation by which youth and young adults conceive of themselves, others, and the world around them. Finally, higher education institutions around the world are engaging hip-hop in an academically rigorous manner through courses, research, conferences, and symposia. Currently, more than 100 institutions offer courses on hip-hop, with many universities offering multiple courses in various departments. My course, *Hip-Hop and Visual Culture*, fits within the latter category.

In my classroom, students address and are addressed by images of media, stereotypes of specific mediascapes, or personifying figures (media stars, moguls, gurus, spokespeople). For example, as a teaching tool, show-and-tell performance allows for the visual presentation of hip-hop imagery and objects. This activity has what Mitchell calls “the effect of acting out the method and lessons of the curriculum.”¹⁵ It is elaborated around a set of simple but extremely difficult questions: What is vision? What is a visual image? What is a medium? What is the relation of vision to the other senses? To language? Why is the visual experience fraught with anxiety and fantasy? How do visual encounters with other people (and with image and objects) inform the construction of social life? A reasonable place for students to start addressing media, then, is by addressing the forms that bring them to life.

Hip-hop’s images and objects have expanded from visual mediums like fashion (clothing, cosmetics, jewelry), performance (art writing, rapping, dancing, DJing), and electronic technologies (mixing boards, tape recorders, boom boxes, microphones, discs, and so on) to embrace traditional artistic forms like painting, photography, film, painting, toys, magazines, and comic books. To explore these visual forms in my classroom, I have found it useful to return to one of the earliest pedagogical rituals in American elementary education, the show-and-tell exercise. The object of the show-and-tell performance is the process of seeing itself, and the exercise could be called “Showing Seeing.”¹⁶ I ask students to select an object of their choice and to frame their presentations by assuming that they are ethnographers who come from, and are reporting back to, a society that has no concept of hip-hop. They cannot take it for granted that the audience has any familiarity with their personalized objects, much less with traditional visual media. Of course, the audience has to feign ignorance and the presenter has to lead them toward an understanding of things they would ordinarily take for granted. The range of examples and objects that students bring to class can be broad and unpredictable. The reports of my students suggest that these performances provide opportunities to engage in acts of self-expression.



While hip-hop represents the voice of a new generation, its images are filters through which we recognize and misrecognize other people. The recurrent trope that displaces moral and political panic onto hip-hop images transforms them into “convenient scapegoats.”¹⁷ However, educators need to understand that the shock of the new media is as old as the hills. Youthful violence has been attributed to everything from video games to comic books to television. Perhaps the most important thing the Showing Seeing exercise demonstrates is that the visual construction of the social can “rend the veil of familiarity and awaken the sense of wonder,” so that many of the things are taken for granted are put into question.¹⁸ In the classroom, it makes the subtle nuances of hip-hop culture visible to educators and casts the show-and-tell performance in a new role: a means of accessing urban student culture.¹⁹

Notes

1. Emery Petchauer, “Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (June 2009): 946-978.
2. Bryan Brown, “Hip Hop as a Resource for Understanding the Urban Context,” *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 5, no. 2 (2010): 521-524.
3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1990).
4. Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop* (New York: NAL, 2010).
5. “Hip Hop Won’t Stop; The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History, last modified 2006, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/news/factsheet.cfm?key=30&newskey=324>.
6. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

7. Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: a History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 192-193.

8. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Mary Hanley, “Old School Crossings: Hip Hop in Teacher Education and Beyond,” *New Directions for Adult Education and Continuing Education* (2007): 35-44.

11. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Petchauer. “Framing and Reviewing.”

14. Dorit Barchana-Lorand and Efrat Galnoor, “Philosophy of Art Education in the Visual Culture: Aesthetics for Art Teachers,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 1 (2009): 133-148.

15. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*

16. Martin Jay, “Introduction to Show and Tell,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (2005): 139-141.

17. Hanley, “Old School Crossings.”

18. Philip Armstrong, “From Appearance to Exposure,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 9, no. 1 (2010): 11-27.

19. Marcella Runell Hall, “Hip Hop Education Resources,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 42, no. 1 (2009): 86-94.



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Lesson Plan

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Connection to Middle School and/or High School:

As students progress through adolescent development and school, they are inundated with thousands of images and representations through media and popular culture. Becoming critically aware of those images and representations is key in developing skills and dispositions of critical thinking, and those skills can help all students become more socially and culturally conscious individuals. Hip-hop is one of the most powerful and influential streams of popular culture today. As such, engaging and understanding the visual culture of hip-hop is a necessary step in understanding how society functions and how the values, dispositions, and expectations for youth are shaped.

Goals:

- Students will develop critical thinking skills to evaluate and analyze media and popular culture.
- Students will recognize the aesthetics of objects and visual images.
- Students will analyze cultural and historical differences in the production of media and popular culture.
- Students will become more aware of the roles visual culture and popular culture play in reflecting and influencing society.

Objectives:

Students will engage a hip-hop text (song, object, or image) and analyze the meanings generated through the representations. Students will also compare and contrast both their own lived experiences and those represented through the images and popular interpretations/commentary about hip-hop as a cultural institution.

National Council for Social Studies Standards Culture and Diversity

- Assist learners to understand and apply the concept of culture as an integrated whole that governs the functions and interactions of language, literature, arts, traditions, beliefs, values, and behavior patterns.
- Enable learners to assess the importance of cultural unity and diversity within and across groups.

Warm-Up/Anticipatory Set:

To begin this lesson, teachers should introduce the lesson by asking students, “What is hip-hop?” Teachers should then list answers on the chalkboard or an ELMO. After answers are brainstormed, the teacher should begin a mini-lecture about what hip-hop is, providing a brief history of its roots, the pillars of hip-hop culture (DJing, MCing, breakdancing, and graffiti art). Conclude the mini-lecture by emphasizing the importance of images and representations in hip-hop and popular media.

Activity:

Engage the students in a discussion about visual images and media and how popular culture characterizes and/or defines hip-hop. Additionally, the teacher should offer clarifying information about hip-hop and refer back to information from the Anticipatory Set mini-lecture. To engage students in what hip-hop is and its visual culture, teachers can screen clips of hip-hop documentaries like *Style Wars*, *Planet B-Boy*, *The Freshest Kids*, or *Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (all videos are available through libraries and online rental services). The following questions can be utilized to guide the discussion.

- What is a visual image?
- How does the selected object function as a visual image?
- What is a medium? How does the selected object function as a medium?
- What does hip-hop look like, or how do you know something is related to hip-hop when you see it?
- What does hip-hop's visual culture tell you about its values and expectations?
- How do comments of critics for and against hip-hop compare and contrast to what hip-hop artists and activists say about the culture?
- Identify ways in which hip-hop has influenced our daily practices.

Next, display to students three different media representations of hip-hop (music videos, interviews with hip-hop artists and activists, photographs/posters, magazines, album artwork). The choice of images should be determined by subject matter, age/maturity of students, school/community standards, and viewpoints the teacher wishes to engage.

Students can be separated into small groups to further discuss the common trends in representations and themes associated with the song or artist. After small group discussion, the students should come back together for a large group discussion and summary.

Assessment:

Individually or in groups, students must identify and explain to the class an object or artifact that represents hip-hop culture through an electronic show-and-tell performance. An electronic show-and-tell performance is the contemporary iteration of the age-old activity of bringing an object or artifact to class, sharing and explaining it, and discussing how the artifact has an impact on the person's life. In this case, the student or group will choose an object or artifact they believe represents hip-hop and will give a short presentation about why it does and how it has impacted popular culture. Additionally, students should write an essay (individually or collaboratively) that addresses the same points as their oral presentation.

1. Each student/group must create an electronic show-and-tell performance using iMovie, PowerPoint, or other similar software.
2. Each student/group will provide the teacher with a typed copy of the presentation prior to the show-and-tell performance.
3. Teacher will provide class members with a list of presenters' topics along with the dates of each presentation.
4. Teacher will have each classroom member generate at least two questions for the presenter.

5. Student presentations must be at least five minutes long, or ten minutes for groups. Allow an additional five minutes for question and answer and discussion.
6. Student identifies a personal object that defines hip-hop culture.
7. Student brings the object to class.

For the show-and-tells, each of the following points should be addressed:

- Identify your object and where it comes from.
- Explain why you selected the object.
- Provide a date or era for the object (1970s, '80s, '90s, 2000s, golden age, etc.).
- Describe the object in detail.
- Think about when you first saw it.
- Relate it to when you first began to understand what hip-hop means to you. If working in groups, each group member should say something about this.
- As the instructor, it is your own determination about whether or not there is a minimum number of slides for PowerPoint presentations.

Teacher Resources

1. Chalfant, Henry, and Tony Silver, directors. *Style Wars* (Public Art Films, 1983), DVD, 69 minutes. This award-winning PBS film, called a “breakthrough documentary” by the *New York Times*, examines the New York street culture of the early 1980s.
2. Lee, Benson, director. *Planet B-Boy* (Arts Alliance America, 2007), DVD, 95 minutes. This film provides an international perspective on the world of B-boying, commonly known as breakdancing.
3. Israel, director. *The Freshest Kids—A History of the B-Boy* (Image Entertainment, 2002), DVD, 94 minutes. This film provides a comprehensive look at B-boys, or breakdancers, and their role in shaping hip-hop culture.
4. *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (Media Education Foundation, 2006), DVD, 61 minutes. This acclaimed documentary pays tribute to hip-hop while challenging the music industry for glamorizing destructive stereotypes.
5. Websites for Consideration:

<http://allhiphop.com/>

<http://www.sohh.com/>

<http://www.hiphopmusicdotcom.com/>

<http://hiphopgame.ihiphop.com/mainpage.php3>

<http://www.thesource.com/>

<http://www.xxlmag.com/>

<http://www.b-boys.com/classic/hiphopculture.html>

<http://rap.about.com/od/rootsofraphiphop/p/RootsOfRap.htm>

http://www.globaldarkness.com/articles/true_meaning_of_hip_hop_bambaata.htm

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/visualarts/Intro-VisualCulture.html>

<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/aesthetics/>