

DAVE CHAPPELLE'S BLOCK PARTY

Dharmender Singh Dhillon

Cardiff University

This paper examines Michel Gondry's 2006 documentary: *Dave Chappelle's Block Party* (hereafter referred to as *Block Party*), in light of the work of the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1888-1979). I shall begin with a brief introduction to the work of both Chappelle and Marcuse, which will lead onto a discussion of how the content of *Block Party*—music from the marginalized inhabitants of the ghettos of the USA—meets certain conditions that Marcuse posits as necessary for revolutionary action. I will then look at some of the problems of this reading in terms of how the film betrays some other of Marcuse's conditions, as well as some more general problems with his theory of revolutionary art. I will argue that, whilst history has not necessarily vindicated Marcuse's claims, there is still something of them that can be salvaged, which is made evident in certain moments in the film.

1 Dave Chappelle

At the time of filming, Chappelle was one of the most popular comedians in the USA. By collaborating with the innovative music video director Gondry, Chappelle sought to document his attempts to put together a secret, low-budget block party in the Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto in Brooklyn, New York. Coming from a middle class background in Washington D.C., having been raised by his African-American mother (who has a PhD in linguistics), Chappelle is not—like his hero, the comedian Richard Pryor, who grew up in a

brothel—a child of the ghetto. Chappelle's sketch show, *The Chappelle Show*, shot him into the limelight in the early 2000s, and he became renowned for his biting social satire. This is best illustrated by what was probably the show's most notorious sketch, which involved Chappelle's humorous and controversial depiction of an elderly blind white supremacist that happened to be—unbeknownst to him—African-American.

Inspired by Mel Stuart's *Wattstax* (1973), *Block Party* depicts Chappelle at the height of his powers bringing together artists and members of the public to attend a block party entirely self-funded, bypassing the need for the multitude of corporate sponsors that usually accompany such events. The aim of this appeared to be to create a carnival atmosphere in an area of deprivation in the manner of the ghetto parties of the 1970s-1980s. In this way then, by bringing the party to the block, as opposed to a popular and relatively safe tourist spot like Central Park, Chappelle sought to create a more 'authentic' event. This is corroborated by his proclamation in the film that this is a concert he had always wanted to see, one that involved artists who all had something to say, something that went beyond pure entertainment value. Chappelle seemed to envisage a manifestation of artists-cum-social-critics, with performances of works that would not receive mainstream media exposure owing to their challenging perspective on the establishment. Therefore, it is apparent from the roster of artists that Chappelle recruited—Dead Prez, Mos Def and Erykah Badu, to name a few—who all performed for free, that his aim was not only to entertain, but also to educate. In the words of pioneering Hip Hop artist KRS-One, the party could be labelled as 'edu-tainment'.

2 Marcuse

Like many Jewish intellectuals in Germany during the Third Reich, Marcuse left his native land, settling in Berkeley, California. His radical brand of social philosophy led him to become the father of the 'New Left' during the 1960s-1970s US counter-culture. Quite notably, in relation to this paper, Marcuse served as the doctoral supervisor

to Angela Davis—the radical feminist and social activist who was associated with the Black Panther Party.¹ Accordingly, Marcuse is important in this reading of *Block Party* because of the great emphasis in his work on the power of the margins of society to effect revolutionary change. For Marcuse, such marginal sections have the least to lose from overhauling the status quo, because their consciousness is already at odds with the hegemonic discourse. People from these margins are thus necessarily able literally to see, feel and hear with a unique perspective. Significantly, Marcuse repeatedly places great emphasis on the revolutionary potential within black ghetto movements, as well as many different women’s movements. Moreover, he explicitly asserts the power of art from such spectrums of society to effect real revolutionary rupture from within what he calls—alluding to Freud—‘a repressive reality principle.’ That is, the demand of civilized society that the people eschew gratification of their wants in favour of satisfying the norms of that society.

3 Ghetto Hip Hop

Angela Davis argues in a Marcusean vein that art “is a special form of social consciousness that can potentially awaken an urge in those affected by it to creatively transform their oppressive environments Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation.”² Marcuse builds on similar themes in his later works, most prominently in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972). There he argues that there is “a black literature . . . which may well be called revolutionary: it lends voice to a total rebellion which finds expression in the aesthetic form.”³ The aesthetic form featured in *Block Party* can be bracketed within the genre of what has come to be known as ‘Hip Hop’. Pioneering African-

¹During the early 1970s Angela Davis (born 1944) was on a CIA-produced most-wanted list as one of the ‘most dangerous’ people in the USA. She wrote her doctoral thesis on Kant and political violence during the French revolution—some of it was written during a period of incarceration—and is now Distinguished Professor Emerita at the University of California, Santa Cruz. (See G. H. Olsson’s documentary film: *The Black Power Mix-Tape 1967-1975* (2011).)

²Davis 1998, p. 236.

³Marcuse 1972b, p. 128.

American artists with monikers such as 'Afrika Bambaataa' and 'Zulu Nation,' born in the 1970s in the ghettos of New York, demonstrated a clear awareness of their ancestry before enslavement in the USA. By extension, they also demonstrated an understanding of the Griot tradition of Western Africa from which they created modern Hip Hop; namely, that of an oratory tradition stretching back many hundreds of years.⁴ The noun 'Hip Hop,' in the argot of the ghettos in which it was created, refers to 'intelligent (Hip) movement (Hop)'. For Marcuse, 'black music'—here he was talking in 1972 about blues and jazz, but his comments can be equally applied to Hip Hop—"is the cry and song of the slaves and the ghettos which, born in an exasperated tension, announces a violent rupture with the established white order."⁵ In this vein then, Marcuse asserts that:

In this music, the very lives and deaths of black men and women are lived again: the music *is* body; the aesthetic form is the 'gesture' of pain, sorrow, indictment. However, with the takeover by the whites, a significant change occurs: white 'rock' is what its black paradigm *is not*, namely, *performance*. It is as if the crying and shouting, the jumping and playing, now takes place in an artificial, organized space; that they are directed toward a (sympathetic) *audience*.⁶

By way of elucidating the distinction between authentic 'gesture' and 'performance,' Marcuse is keen to stress the problematic dilution of a potentially revolutionary aesthetic form once the Rolling Stones, for example, cover Otis Redding; thus transmuting pain into performance by way of unabashed plagiarism. The problem with this for Marcuse is that the carnivalesque performance—in the tradition running from Woodstock to Glastonbury—functions as a "safety valve to upturn order such that order may be maintained."⁷ Although it may create a tem-

⁴For a comprehensive account of the genealogy of Hip Hop, see Neal 2004.

⁵Marcuse 1972b, p. 114.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 114-5.

⁷McKay 1966, p. 42.

porarily positive atmosphere, the performance ultimately merely reinforces the status quo. Therefore, whilst Marcuse acknowledges the rebellious nature of some white rock music, he maintains that, for the main part, it “remains artistic without the negating power of art,” and that by often partaking in commercialized carnivalesque performances, it “loses the transcendence which opposes art to the established order.” Therefore, for Marcuse, this art “remains *immanent* in this order, one-dimensional, and thus succumbs to this order.”⁸

As a result, Marcuse posits the need for a different discourse to break the hegemonic one that engulfs any resistance by means of what he terms “incestuous reasoning.”⁹ In this way, he identifies black literature, music, argot and slang as a potentially revolutionary language of the ‘other’;¹⁰ contra the all-encompassing and thus incestuous discourse of the establishment. This language of the ‘other’ incorporates all of the criteria of Marcuse’s definition of the genuinely revolutionary, which can in turn most powerfully reside in the margins, in what he characterises as:

The substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours; the unemployed and unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game.¹¹

What this passage implies is that African-American Hip Hop—given that it originates from the marginalized and exploited, from those who

⁸Marcuse 1972b, p. 101.

⁹Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 80.

¹¹Marcuse 1964, p. 260.

can use the language of the oppressor in inventive ways to disrupt the hegemonic discourse—comprises all the necessary ingredients of a Marcusian revolutionary aesthetic medium. What is more, to add to the radical potential of this music, given its marginalized authors, Marcuse is adamant that the ghetto is the site *par excellence* of meaningful resistance. Referring to the *faubourgs* of Paris during the eighteenth century, he observes that:

Confined to small areas of living and dying, [the ghetto] can be more easily organized and directed. Moreover, located in the core cities of the country, the ghettos form natural geographical centres from which the struggle can be mounted against targets of vital economic and political importance . . . and their location makes for spreading and 'contagious' upheavals.¹²

Marcuse's observations seem to be reflected in Chappelle's film. The comedian spends much time and attention focusing upon the importance of situating the party in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood, with its large African-American and Latin American population, the majority of which live in extreme poverty. Chappelle enlisted the services of Gondry to direct the project because of his ability to work in an unconventional setting. This was an inspired move, as Gondry demonstrated an uncanny ability to work within the confines of an inhabited neighbourhood street as opposed to a film set; his direction succeeded on what was a rainy, windy and dark day, and also overcame the problem of not being able to shoot re-takes, given the film's documentary format. Accordingly, the film is not comparable to an MTV pop-style video in that it involves no ensemble costumes, special effects or elaborate staging. Rather, the viewer receives a gritty, intimate and apparently honest portrayal of a group of artists who seem to revel in sharing their music with a welcoming crowd that in turn braves the elements and confines of the street locale. In this way, the film successfully encapsulates Chappelle's ambition to create an 'authentic' event amidst an age of increasingly mechanical and corpo-

¹²Marcuse 1972a, p. 62.

rately controlled performances which function under the pretence of being revolutionarily carnivalesque. This is corroborated by the fact that in *Block Party* we have many 'exploited outsiders' of 'other colours' using and performing black language, literature and music, therein satisfying all of the necessary conditions for a Marcusean genuinely revolutionary art form.

4 Contra Marcuse's revolutionary *Block Party*

In spite of the commendable aspects in *Block Party* of the portrayal of a Marcusean potentially revolutionary aesthetic medium, there are also some problems with this reading. First, Chappelle's repetitive use of the polymorphous term 'nigger'—especially given that his self-proclaimed hero Richard Pryor eschewed it 30 years earlier—is unsettling and arguably demonstrates a lack of genuine cultural and political awareness. Furthermore, his humour is perpetually infused with misogyny, and many of the artists that he enlists regularly demonstrate a level of misogyny in their works. As African-American female author and social activist bell hooks (intentionally uncapitalized—her real name is Gloria Jean Watkins) argues, Hip Hop music is often a black male expression of feelings of powerlessness in the system at large taken out on the 'fairer sex'. She adds that "the openness of black males about rage and hatred towards females" is "at times worryingly bragging in misogynistic rap about how they see sexuality as a war zone where they must assert their dominance."¹³

To illustrate this, whilst the male artists in the film do not perform overtly misogynistic works, strikingly all three of the high-profile female performers featured in the film—Erykah Badu, Jill Scott and Lauren Hill—are depicted in the main singing love songs eulogizing men. Whilst these artists are all connoted with the image of a strong black female, none of them would be accepted by their present audience should they 'radicalise' and challenge male pre-dominance. What is apparent is that they understand their lyrical content to be acceptable only insofar as it allows 'strong black men to be men.' Conversely,

¹³hooks 2004, p. 68.

many of the male Hip Hop artists in the film either do not discuss women explicitly in their songs, or if they do it is in a patronizing manner that, if not born out of overt misogyny, is at least tacitly in step with the patriarchy encapsulated in the status quo.

As a result, to expect unique and rebellious insight about entitlement and revolution from Marcuse's archetypal marginalized black female is to fall prey to what contemporary political philosopher Saul Newman qualifies as an 'essentialist assumption.' Newman asks why we assume "that being black or gay or female is necessarily an identity of resistance."¹⁴ For Newman, this assumption is based on reductive binary thinking, which will inevitably reproduce structures of oppression. In a similar vein, contemporary feminist philosopher Jennifer Saul argues that "we are not always enlightened about what is just by asking persons who seem to be suffering injustices what they want." This is because "oppressed people have often internalized their oppression so well that they *have* no sense of what they are justly entitled to as human beings."¹⁵ This counters Marcuse's assertion that those marginalized in the ghettos are always a genuinely revolutionary opposition, even if their consciousness is not. Furthermore, in light of the critiques provided by Newman and Saul, many of Marcuse's 'outsiders' and the 'substratum' have become incorporated into the all-engulfing 'incestuous discourse,' or into what his peer Theodor Adorno called the 'totally administered society.'

By extension, following the Marxist theorist Slavoj Žižek's analysis of contemporary dynamic capitalism, in Chappelle's film there appears to be what journalist Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* (2009) calls a "hard-headed embracing of a brutally reductive version of reality,"¹⁶ which has displaced any naive Marcusean hope that marginal culture could revolutionarily change anything. This is best illustrated by the wearing of t-shirts promoting symbols of anti-power, that have in all likelihood been acquired through the capitalist mode of production. Reflecting the capitalistic Ernesto 'Che' Guevara phenomenon,

¹⁴Newman 2001, p. 172.

¹⁵Saul 2003, p. 284.

¹⁶Fisher 2009, p. 10.

whereby pictures of the revolutionary communist Guevara are sold for corporate profit on everything ranging from pens to posters, the film depicts many members of the audience, as well as the performers, wearing a *de facto* uniform of the safe-zone 'one-day warrior'; namely, a t-shirt with a picture or logo of Angela Davis, Black Power, Che Guevara, Free Tibet, Marcus Garvey, Marvin Gaye, or Muhammad Ali, to Chappelle's wearing of a t-shirt displaying his hero, Richard Pryor. In this way then, those depicted in the film seem to demonstrate that they believe themselves to be revolutionary to some extent by way of their fashion choices, and whilst it is conceivably preferable to wear a 'Free Tibet' t-shirt to one emblazoned with corporate branding, it problematizes the notion of whether there is a genuinely revolutionary consciousness at work in the Marcusean understanding, or merely a derivative one which has consciously embraced a 'brutally reductive version of reality'.

Moreover, there is no doubt that Hip Hop, since the early 1990s, has become increasingly heavily corporatized, with a lot of its early dynamism and revolutionary zeal replaced with hyper-masculinity, extreme misogyny and crude materialism. A lot of the artists in the film, Chappelle included, are guilty of this to some degree. The corporate appropriation of Hip Hop resulted in a re-branding and marketing which involved, more often than not, an unnerving glorification of the most negative aspects of marginal black ghetto culture. The vast majority of Hip Hop in the contemporary mainstream is full of dross lyrical content and formulaic beat structures, arguably rendering it defunct in terms of its revolutionary potential to be the voice of the 'other'. More problematically in relation to Marcuse's thesis, a majority of the artists in the film seem interested solely in 'performing' in the manner of *merely* rebellious white rock acts, but not necessarily open to unrehearsed expressions of truly revolutionary aesthetic abandonment in the mode that the 'father of the New Left' calls for in the spirit of early blues and jazz.

That said, the setting of the film, and the subsequent use of local facilities such as a children's day-care centre, as well as a recycling unit, demonstrates that the film project works successfully in conjunction

with the local community, and seeks to engage with local businesses as opposed to bringing in corporate sponsorship. Therefore, to a great extent, *Block Party* successfully carries out Chappelle's project of 'authenticity', and whilst many of the artists may deliver 'performances', there are enough off-the-cuff on-stage collaborations, as well as discussions between the artists and audience to make up for much of the distance created by way of the staging of the music. This is achieved in spite of the fact that the project did not go so far as to depict a Hip Hop cipher whereby participants, including rappers, beat-boxers and break-dancers, gather in a circle along with a crowd in order to engage in a communal rap session. Nevertheless, the film does depict exploration of the lives of the 'regular folk' who are invited to the party, which range from elderly white females to a high school marching band, which is almost exclusively African-American, and investigates their reception to both the artists and to Hip Hop on the whole. As a result, the communal nature of the event successfully retorts the charge that the film is emblematic of strictly 'performance' in the manner of Marcuse's white rock acts.

5 Conclusion

In the harrowing words of Adorno, "what slips through the net is filtered through the net."¹⁷ Thus, in addition to the Newmanian risk of making an 'essentialist assumption', it is imperative that any revolutionary zeal from African-American ghetto music must necessarily be through the unique insights of the *margins of the margins* in terms of a social ideology critique against the hegemonic discourse, as opposed to on crude geographical, economical, or racial terms. For example, Marcuse himself was a white middle-class male of Jewish descent, whilst Dave Chappelle is a middle-class black male from an extremely well-educated family. Therefore, taking into consideration the Adornian caveat above, as well as Newman's and Saul's critiques, Marcuse's arguments become somewhat crude, and even in this form history has not necessarily vindicated them. That said it is clear that

¹⁷Adorno 1973, p. 85.

the margins are unquestionably able to see things afresh—no matter how little—and to create ruptures that the mainstream, by definition, cannot. Even whilst some of the performers, including Chappelle, grew up relatively comfortably, they still possess a novel—if not necessarily revolutionary—way of seeing the world.

Moreover, there is much to be said for a marginal seeing in order for any aesthetic form to be potentially revolutionary. In this way, contemporary social anthropologist and social activist David Graeber argues that “what revolutionaries do is to break existing frames to create new horizons of possibility, an act that then allows a radical restructuring of the social imagination. This is perhaps the one form of action that cannot, by definition, be institutionalized.”¹⁸ By extension, this is where there is evidence in the film of Marcuse’s hope being kept alive; there are enough of such moments provided by artists such as the politically charged Dead Prez, as well as Bedford-Stuyvesant natives Mos Def and Talib Kweli, both examples of young African-American males who auto-didactically went on to achieve much critical acclaim through their socially aware Hip Hop, which to a large extent was born out of a Marcusean vein, because of their upbringing in this particular neighbourhood. Hence, all things considered, the worth of the film resides in its depiction of the power of an authentic ghetto carnival and of music of the marginalized ‘other,’ that can challenge, uplift and have an emancipatory effect—perhaps leading onto a revolutionary effect—in the spirit of KRS-One’s ‘edu-tainment.’

dhillonds2@cf.ac.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Dharmender S. Dhillon is a PhD candidate at Cardiff University. His interests include Nietzsche, Critical Theory, Race and Gender Studies, as well as Hip Hop culture.

¹⁸Graeber 2011, p. 15.

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