The Vulgar Voice on the New Black Realist Soundtrack: Sounds of Resistance, Policing and Crime in Spike Lee's Clockers

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"Bam Bam," "Ch-Ch," "Woop Woop." In mainstream narrative cinema the sounds of gunshots and police sirens usually occupy the peripheral levels of the film soundtrack, where they help simply to qualify the presence of the onscreen cinematic space. However, in African-American independent cinema of the 1990s, New Black Realism, these sounds crept into film's central vocal track. Echoing Hip Hop music of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the vocalising of these otherwise fringe elements of the narrative soundtrack expose an attempt to engage with and resist the issues of crime, surveillance, and policing that these sounds represent. In that, these vocal sound effects become consequential to these cinematic narratives, announcing and verifying the exchange between the bodies of those that utter them and the environment in which those same bodies exist onscreen. With this in mind, this article will center on the role and purpose of these vocal sounds in the narrative cinematic soundtrack, focusing specifically on Spike Lee's 1995 crime drama, *Clockers*, as the supposed final iteration in this collection of cinema. This article will analyse how and why these 'vulgar' sound effects have become fundamental to the vocal expressions of Hip Hop culture onscreen and explore some of the developed non-linear narratives that these sounds have contributed to in Lee's work. In short, this article will explore the space for resistance that the vulgar voice has crafted on the New Black Realist soundtrack.

> The medium of film has communicated, shaped, reproduced, and challenged
> various notions of black subjectivity in twentieth and twenty-first century
> America since D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* appeared in 1915.
> — Guthrie Ramsey, "Muzing New Hoods, Making New Identities" (2002)

KRS-One's 1993 single "Sound of Da Police" is an interesting case study in Hip Hop. In 1988, with the release of Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*, Hip Hop became a vehicle for political discourse and change. These albums saw the music establish a direct and fearless attack on the blatant racial inequalities in the world around it, an attack mounted in specific opposition to the American criminal justice system.[1] Across America Hip Hop acts like Ice-T, LL Cool J, Tupac, Main Source, and Brand Nubian dealt with issues of surveillance, police brutality and racial profiling in their music. These acts explored those tropes both in their lyrics and in the musical soundscapes over which they rapped, where sounds of helicopters, police radios, sirens and gunshots accompanied the music's central vocal line. In "Sound of Da Police" those sounds exist as part of the voice in Hip Hop. Here, through his exclamations of "woop woop," KRS-One vocalised the sound effect of police sirens, bringing them to the fore of the music's narrative. In

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[1] Erik. Nielson, ""Can't C Me": Surveillance and Rap Music," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 6 (2010): 1257 - 1258.

expressing those sounds vocally, KRS-One was not just experiencing them as a passive subject but attempting to confront and control them through his voice. However, as Hip Hop began to encounter new arts and media this language unsettled the frameworks and structures of previously established forms. Nowhere is this disruption more fascinating than in New Black Realism, a collection of African-American commercial independent films in which the aesthetics of Hip Hop culture stand as guiding principles.[2] Grounded in the cinéma vérité style of their predecessors, the "Hip Hop musicals" of the 1980s,[3] New Black Realism offered a unique and developed moment in contemporary cinema. While these films attempted to explore the "reality" of African-American life in the late twentieth-century, through a view of "worlds and milieux where random violence, drugs and general criminal activities pervade[d] every aspect of everyday life," they also engaged with a "strategic employment of a sophisticated 'cine-literacy'," to mimic, reorganise and reshape Hollywood's characters, situations and visual and musical structures in ways which unsettled preconceived conceptions of cinematic realism.[4] So, while in mainstream narrative cinema the sounds of police sirens and gunshots usually occupy the peripheral levels of the film soundtrack, where they help simply to qualify the presence of the onscreen cinematic space,[5] in New Black Realism these sounds leaked into the central vocal track. They became consequential to the cinematic narrative, announcing and verifying the exchange between the bodies of those that utter them and the environment in which those same bodies exist onscreen.[6] The vocalisation of these sounds highlights the invasive role that they play in the mediated expression of Hip Hop culture. In New Black Realist cinema, the vocalising of these otherwise fringe elements of the cinematic soundtrack became a culturally-specific attempt to engage and resist crime and the contemporary American criminal justice system that these sounds represent. With this in mind, as a critical musicological study, this article will focus on the role and purpose of these vocal sounds in the narrative cinematic soundtrack, centering specifically on Spike Lee's 1995 crime drama *Clockers*, as the supposed final iteration in this collection of cinema.[7]

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[2] Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993), 23; S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 98.

[3] Massood quoted in Kimberley Monteyne, *Hip Hop on Film: Performance Culture, Urban Space, and Genre Transformation the 1980s* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 4 - 5.

[4] Paul Gormley, *The New-Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary American Film* (Bristol: Intellect, 2005), 126.

[5] Gianluca Sergi, "In Defence of Vulgarity: The Place of Sound Effects in the Cinema," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* 5 (June, 2006), accessed December 15, 2015, http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2006/june-2006/sergi.pdf; Chion Referenced in Holly Rogers, "Beethoven's Myth Sympathy: Hollywood's Re-Construction," *British Postgraduate Musicology* 8 (2006), accessed December 15, 2015, http://britishpostgraduatemusicology.org/bpm8/Rogers.html

[6] Steven Connor, "What I Say Goes," in *Dumbstruck: A History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

[7] Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African America Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 189.

This article will analyse how and why these "vulgar" sound effects have become fundamental to the vocal expressions of Hip Hop culture onscreen and explore some of the developed non-linear narratives that these sounds have contributed to in Lee's work.[8] In short, this article will explore the space for resistance that the vulgar voice has crafted on the New Black Realist soundtrack. To do so, this article is split into three sections: it will first explore the ability of the voice in Hip Hop to echo the physical body and space in which that body exists, then move on to map the role that sound effects play in mainstream cinema, before finally connecting the two in a detailed analysis of key scenes in *Clockers*.

The Problem with the Problem of the Voice in Hip Hop

The artistic revolution that followed the success of Run-DMC in the early 1980s led to Hip Hop's current manifestation as a vocally-centric expression.[9] Although the release of "Rapper's Delight" in 1979 marked the initial tear in Hip Hop's form as an "integrated series of live community based practices," practices which included breakdancing, graffiti, deejaying and emceeing,[10] it was Run-DMC that "consolidated and commodified" Hip Hop as aural form, one specifically centred on the voices of the group's rappers: Run (Joseph Simmons) and DMC (Daryl McDaniels).[11] In this, Hip Hop's tumble into late twentieth-century culture as a technologically mediated object brought with it an understanding of the music as a cultural expression focused on the voice. For artists such as Eric B. & Rakim, Big Daddy Kane and Boogie Down Productions, the voice symbolised a sonic space for individual utterance and agency, a chance to articulate the realities of their contemporary world and to have those articulations heard.[12] However for Hip Hop scholars this elevation of orality, and the ebbing importance of the elements that it left behind, led to deterioration in the presence of the physical body, a far more crucial aspect in the culture's integrated artistic expression and its ability to communicate the experiential.

In his article on Hip Hop music as mediated narrative, Greg Dimitriadis explores the music's principal role in Hip Hop as a culture of performance. In his study he draws on Katrina Hazzard-Gordon's research on social dance formations in African-American culture. [13] Hazzard-Gordon's work looks at how community dance and social interaction have been linked to the availability of "dance arenas" that act as crucial spaces for marginalized groups and specifically allow "aesthetic and technical commonalities" to be retained throughout the histories of African and African-

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[8] Sergi, "In Defence of Vulgarity"; Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 3 - 4.

[9] Greg Dimitriadis, "Hip Hop: From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative," *Popular Music* 15:2 (May, 1996): 184.

[10] Dimitriadis, "From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative," 179.

[11] Dimitriadis, "From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative," 185.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

American dance. What is most telling in Dimitriadis' extending of this reference is the declaration that these commonalities "are, of course, not biologically determined, but rather ... the product of body-to-body socialisation processes made possible through the availability of dance spaces."[14] He pinpoints the significance of this relationship through the work of Susan McClary, who notes that "the musical power of the disenfranchised youth [and] the underclass ethnic minorities ... more often reside in their ability to articulate different ways of constructing the body, ways that bring along in their wake the potential for different experiential worlds."[15] In showing early Hip Hop to be a performance of four interrelated and cross-fertilizing elements, Dimitriadis defines Hip Hop in the body and the interactions that that body shares in a physical arena. He argues, therefore, that in its reification of "the vocal content alone" Hip Hop as recorded musical object has "downplayed the significance of dance, graffiti and other face-to-face community building practices."[16] In other words, Hip Hop as recorded object lacks the presence of the physical body in which it creates and speaks. For Dimitriadis, Hip Hop as cultural expression is tied specifically to the physical body and the space in which that body exists. As his use of McClary suggests, without constructing the body within a communal space with which it can converse with other bodies and media, the voice in Hip Hop must fall short of being able to construct "different experiential worlds." However, to suggest such a binary - that the mediated voice in Hip Hop music has become disembodied and without a cultural space - is to not fully allow for the voice's role in music generally, and Hip Hop more specifically. In fact, I suggest that Hip Hop as mediated narrative not only holds a relationship with the physical body and social space but offers novel and innovative ways to echo that which Dimitriadis argues it has "left behind," a suggestion that exists in two parts.

In the first sense, Roland Barthes has considered such relationships in his famed essay, "The Grain of the Voice." In this work, Barthes defines the vocal "grain" as the "body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs," and argues that this relationship determines the hearing of the alliance between the voice and "the body of the man or woman singing or playing ...."[17] Barthes proffers that the very production of the voice brings with it that which created it, the physical body. He suggests an inherent connection between the two that means to engage with the voice we must also engage with the materiality of the body. For Barthes, the voice has the audible presence of the physical form in which it was constructed contained within its very utterance, a concept which in itself also offers a further displacement of Dimitriadis' argument. In his concept of the "utterance," Mikhail Bakhtin argues that through orality and vocalised language each word's very "performance is of historical and social significance, as ... the fact of its realisation in the here and now, in given

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[14] Dimitriadis, "From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative," 180.

[15] Susan McClary, "Same As it Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Culture and Youth Music*, ed. A. Ross and T. Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 34.

[16] Dimitriadis, "From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative," 191.

[17] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 188.

circumstances, at a certain historical moment [and] under the conditions of the given social situation."[18] Bakhtin's utterance does not attempt to authorise the voice in the body but instead contends that the voice is unable to elude the shackles of the cultural and social space from which it emanates. The vocal utterance reverberates from within and through the cultural actuality in which it exists. It is in Steven Connor's work that the logic of the intrinsic connection between the voice, the social space and the body becomes most apparent.[19] Here, Connor posits that the "voice comes from the inside of a body and radiates through a space which is exterior to and extends beyond that body. In moving from an interior to an exterior, and therefore marking out the relations of interior and exterior, a voice also announces and verifies the co-operation of bodies and the environments in which they have their being."[20] While the body may not be visually present at the moment that it speaks, it still undoubtedly qualifies the existence of the being and social space from which it is uttered. In that sense, the voice can never be fully uncoupled from the being that creates it and the environments in which it is both created and heard. With the words of Barthes, Bakhtin and Connor ringing out we can agree that the existence of the body in Hip Hop, and of the physical space in which that body exists, has undoubtedly changed with the voice's centrality in the culture. But, in so doing, we must contend that the change is a complication rather than a deterioration in the connection between the voice, the body and Hip Hop's cultural space. Artists like Run-DMC have certainly readjusted the possibilities of what the voice means in Hip Hop culture, but they have not exhumed it from the fundamental links which make it "Hip Hop."

In the second sense it is also imperative to consider the role that technological mediation has played in rearranging the sonic components in Hip Hop culture. In fact, it is Hip Hop's relationship with technology that has opened the possibilities of sonic exploration in Hip Hop music and specifically it has encouraged the culture to explore the experiential through the voice. Such an argument stems from Tricia Rose's work on Hip Hop music and black culture, *Black Noise*.[21] Grounded in Walter Ong's discussion of orality and technology,[22] Rose suggests that Hip Hop exists as a post-literate orality, a term used to describe the way [that] oral traditions are revised and presented in a technologically sophisticated context." Rose proposes that as post-literate orality Hip Hop music "simultaneously makes technology oral and technologises orality." [23] However, the "technology" in question here exists in a very particular format, through the concept of sampling. Sampling's ability to capture sound artefacts from previous recordings and reorganise them to create new sounds through manipulations of sonic material is fundamental to the specific and culturally charged construction of Hip Hop

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[18] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 17.

[19] Connor, "What I Say Goes."

[20] Connor, "What I Say Goes," 6.

[21] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

[22] Walter Ong, *Orality and Technology: The Technologising of the Word* (London: Meuthen, 1982).

[23] Rose, *Black Noise,* 86.

culture and music.[24] Therefore, and in paraphrasing Rose, the voice in Hip Hop structures sampling and sampling structures the voice in Hip Hop. Or, more precisely, the Hip Hop voice *is* sampled and sampling *is* the Hip Hop voice. The two are intertwined and inseparable. Hip Hop music is constructed from and for the (re)organisation and (re)structuring of sonic material. Technology's position in Hip Hop then is not something to mourn but a relationship that allows us to understand the music in its fundamental existence: as creative "process." It is the Hip Hop voice that reverberates through the cultural expressions of the Hip Hop generation and it is a technologically mediated voice, mediated through the technology of sampling. Such a point is echoed by Paul Clarke in his investigation of popular music as recording art where he considers the way in which the recorded "object" has reshaped the composition and creation of rock music.[25] He argues that "along with its marked influence on performance traditions recording has also been instrumental in the development of what can best be described as new forms of creative art—forms in which the capturing of performances (on disc or tape or in digital recording) becomes not an end in itself but a gathering of raw material which can then be treated in various ways ... as part of a process of considered composition."[26] As a post-literate orality, Hip Hop's innate connection with technology is fundamental to its existence and the concept of sampling is at the center of that. At the same time the elemental role that sampling holds in Hip Hop means that it is more than an immediate, compositional apparatus. It is also an aesthetic ideology, an approach to the (re)creation and (re)orchestration of material that influences and frames expressions of "self" and "the real" in Hip Hop music. The concept of sampling is what structures the Hip Hop voice as it echoes in a dominant, subcultural existence.

By situating ourselves in the work of Barthes, Bakhtin and Connor, and accepting that Hip Hop's music is structured by the (re)shaping and (re)organising of sonic material - that sampling *is* the Hip Hop voice and the Hip Hop voice *is* sampled - then our understanding of the possibilities of the vocal utterance in Hip Hop can be considerably extended. In the voice in hip hop, communication is not limited to the linguistic, or at least, language is not just about the construction of words in a set order. Instead the very sound of the voice becomes the raw material through which the story can be told, in which a culturally understood and contemporarily significant narrative exists. Technologising orality has allowed the Hip Hop generation to sample the voice and voice the sample, and while this understanding has led to a number of Hip Hop poets and rappers, like Busta Rhymes, Shabba Ranks, Monie Love and B-Real, building their vocal-style in a prominent and "percussive voice," more importantly, sampling has reconstituted what is available to the voice in Hip Hop in the expression of its

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[24] Emery Petchauer, "Sampling Memories: Using Hip Hop Aesthetics to Learn from Urban Schooling Experiences," *Educational Series* 48 (2012): 138.

[25] Paul Clarke, "A Magic Science: Rock Music as Recording Art," *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 195 - 213.

[26] Clarke, "Rock Music as Recording Art," 199 - 200.

cultural reality. [27] In this sense the sampled voice marks a balance between the immediacy of the material that it presents and the hypermediacy of the intertextual relationships that that mediation constructs. This culturally charged, sampled voice manifests itself in the vocalising of the non-musical, non-linguistic and non-organic sounds of the subdominant culture. Screeching tires, gunshots, explosions, sirens, helicopters and airplanes become material that the voice can (re)shape and (re)organise. The culture's understanding of "sound as music" allows those constructing the Hip Hop voice to draw on the immediate and non-musical tropes within their social and cultural environments. These sounds constitute the soundscape of the African-American existence in the last moments of the twentieth-century and in using those sounds the Hip Hop voice calls on both the internally and externally enculturated comprehensions of this sonic material. As a post-literate orality, the vocalising of these sounds, rather than just the sampling of them in a normal musical sense, offers us a developed awareness of their importance to the Hip Hop generation. On the one hand, the encroaching of these sounds into Hip Hop's central expressive element shows their encompassing occupancy in the subcultural reality - their very existence constantly reminding the Hip Hop generation of their social, economic and political hardships in the late twentieth-century. On the other hand, the voice's sampling of these noises points towards both the culture's attempt to control these elements in its surroundings and the ability of that same voice, as a sampled utterance, to explore and echo the culture's reality.

The "Vulgar" Sound Effect and the Hip Hop Soundtrack

"There remains one thorny issue, namely the understanding of sound effects as an expression of the crude, the mechanical [and] repetitive, the unsophisticated, that is, as an expression of vulgarity."[28]

The non-linguistic and non-musical tropes that exist in Hip Hop culture's musical expression already hold a defined function and purpose in the mainstream film soundtrack. That is, the non-organic sounds that the Hip Hop voice samples in its music exist as a fundamental component in the construction of the contemporary film soundscape. Therefore in Hip Hop culture moves to the filmic medium there is an inherent contrast in the structuring of this sonic material. However, it is in interactions like this, in the space between a subdominant cultural articulation and the structuring of a mainstream medium, where the composition and control of these sounds is of most interest.

In his contribution to 2006's June issue of *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, Gianluca Sergi defines a sound effect as "a sound that is made artificially, not one to be

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[27] Rose, *Black Noise,* 67. For more on percussive-style voices see Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

[28] Sergi, 'In Defence of Vulgarity.'

found in nature," and suggests that these sounds are "used to create a greater sense of realism in the audio-visual."[29] In other words, a sound effect is a piece of non-organic sonic material that is used in a work of film to construct a sense of reality around the images on screen. Sergi's definition echoes the work of Michel Chion, a pre-eminent figure in film music scholarship, who argues that in the "contract that exists between the images and sounds of cinema, sounds flesh out the two dimensions of the image providing effects that are experiential and related to sensation."[30] Chion sets film sound as qualification for the presence of the images onscreen and in so doing he establishes what most agree is the film sound effect's main purpose: to sound the "real" of the onscreen world. Through this determination, the sound effect is a "technical matter," mapped by sound designers to augment the "emotional and sensual level" of the filmic medium rather than the "intellectual." As Sergi suggests, film sound and sound effects "are understood as customarily providing ambience, mood, scope and size, but not information, characterisation and plot development ...," these central elements of the film's construction left for the soundtrack's more prominent components of music and dialogue.[31] Consequently, the structuring of the mainstream film soundscape exists as a three-tier system of dialogue, music and sound effects, placed in order of their contribution to the film's narrative and their perceived importance to the film audience's engagement with that narrative. This idea that the sound effect plays a lesser role in the film soundtrack, that it is set as the final component in the construction of the film's aesthetic existence, is a persisting doctrine in film and film music research and one which is continually reaffirmed through two related channels. The first is the apparent lack of relevant academic scholarship on this subject matter, a point made by scholars like Tony Grajeda and Jay Beck who proffer that the "field of sound studies is very much in the process of formation – a work in progress subject to ongoing transformations as it coalesces into its own distinctive field." [32] The second exists through the assertions and confirmations made by the small collection of key scholars and texts that have chosen to explore these "other" elements of the film soundtrack. This returns us to academics like Chion who, in his concept of the "aural triage," suggests that film as a vocally-centric medium places sound and music more generally in the background of the mainstream film soundtrack.[33] So, it is clear then that the role of the sound effect in film never changes - it is always meant to echo the reality of the onscreen images - but what about when the reality on screen is altered?

"Against a black screen" John Singleton's 1991 film *Boyz 'N' the Hood* bursts open with "a cacophonous mixture of angry male voices, gunshots, police helicopters, sirens,

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Quoted in Helen Hanson, "Sound Affects: Post Productions Sound, Soundscapes and Sound Design in Hollywood's Studio Era," *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* 1, no. 1 (2007): 39.

[31] Sergi, "In Defence of Vulgarity."

[32] Tony Grajeda, and Jay Beck, *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2008), 110.

[33] Holly Rogers, "Beethoven's Myth Sympathy: Hollywood's Re-Construction," *British Postgraduate Musicology* 8 (2006), accessed December 15, 2015, http://britishpostgraduatemusicology.org/bpm8/Rogers.html

chaos, and violence."[34] If there is a "contract" between the "images and sounds of cinema," as Chion suggests, then such an opening scene plays into the very specific agreement that must be written up for New Black Realism. As Paula Massood highlights, African-American culture is not only linked by, but specifically identified through the city, a framework which foregrounds "histories and asks concurrent questions of mobility, progress and stasis." It was migration that brought the Hip Hop generation to the city and it was the city that placed economic and social limits on its plethora of Black residents.[35] So, in a cultural construct where the city stands as a thematic and structural centerpiece, the film soundscape must reflect such an integral component. As "black commercial independent" films, these audio-visual social documents were created through culturally-charged independent aesthetics but benefitted from "access to commercial film industry resources and, most notably, production and marketing budgets, distribution, and theatrical exhibition." [36] The soundscapes of these films were built to explore the existence of young African-American lives at the turn of the twenty-first century and they had the financial stability to be able to bring that existence to fruition in the film soundscape. The soundtrack of New Black Realism therefore needed to be composed with rich, diegetic and prominent (even if heard off-screen) sound effects to highlight and explore the dominant role that the city plays in Hip Hop culture. As Rick Altman explains, sound effects like those used in New Black Realism carried with them a "spatial signature"[37] which provided information that was "narrative and spatial in nature."[38] For New Black Realism the function of the film sound effect was to echo and explore the culturally-centered actuality that the film presented onscreen, and sonic constructions like that which opens *Boyz 'N' The Hood* allowed them to do so. So while its role is stationary and unchanged, the possibility of its function permits the sound effect to engage with the realities of the world onscreen. This balance between stasis and movement, or rather role and function, allows the film sound effect to serve its inherent purpose, the why of its existence: to sonically engage with the experientiality of Hip Hop culture on film.

The comprehension of music, dialogue and sound effects on the film soundtrack is built on the "language" that each component uses, and that language's ability to communicate alongside the filmic image. While vital in the overall composition of the film and its soundtrack, the sound effect is seen as a somewhat indecipherable component. It is part of the film's sonic wallpaper: necessary for the overall aesthetics, but not something that commands attention, for even if it did we couldn't understand too much of what it meant. As Sergi notes, "in film sound, [while] dialogue employs

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[34] Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., "Scoring A Black Nation: Music, Film and Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," in *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip Hop*. London: University of California Press, 2003), 180.

[35] Massood, *Black City Cinema,* 204.

[36] Watkins, *Representing.*

[37] Randolph Jordan, "The Ecology of Listening While Looking in the Cinema: Reflective Audioviewing in Gus Van Sant's Elephant," *Organised Sound* 17:3 (December, 2012): 250.

[38] Rick Altman, *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (London: Routledge, 1992), 24.

verbal communication, [and] music uses both verbal and non-verbal (but crucially has a recognised "grammar" of its own in terms of structure and phrasing), [sound effects] would appear to be a purely non-verbal form of communication.' He contends that the film sound effect lacks a "recognised structure" and that ipso facto it must "be content with the kind of sensual activities traditionally linked to non-verbal forms of communication." In other words, the sound effect "can give you a sense of location, scope, and detail but it cannot engage you at an intellectual level." Here the distinction between the intellectual and sensual, verbal and non-verbal, sophisticated and vulgar appear indefensible. Sergi highlights the muddled position that sound effects hold in the film soundscape further by stating that it is "not commonly thought of as a non-verbal form of communication either, since non-verbal communication has come to mean [the] visual. In other words, [sound effects] would appear to be without a logical home in the realm of communication: it cannot be regarded as verbal nor can it be understood as non-verbal."[39] In this sense the problem of the film sound effect exists within its closed, unclear "language" and our subsequent inability to take anything more from these sounds than the immediacy of their presence on the filmic image. But what if the film sound effect had a language in which the audience could unpack its meaning? What if they were able to take from a structure which allowed them to decipher what this sonic material meant in reference to the onscreen images and narrative? With Hip Hop, as in the work of KRS-One, the audience has been given a culturally-specific platform upon which they can grasp what these sounds mean. This is something that Sergi even hints to in his suggestion that "in cultural terms music is a different kind of sound than [sound effects]."[40] This proffers the idea that both music and sound effects are culturally-charged sonic constructions, and if this is true, then surely the "language" that the filmic sound effect speaks is centered in the culture that is looks to present. In other words, the sound effect in New Black Realism can be built upon and expresses the existence of the Hip Hop generation.

This raises two fundamental points of interest in our exploration. First, if we suggest that Hip Hop offers a system through which to understand these filmic sound effects, does it itself emphasise and exploit such sonic components in its music? In her analysis of two seminal Hip Hop albums at the turn of the 1990s, Amanda Sewell creates a developed typology through which to discuss sampling as a compositional tool in Hip Hop music. Sewell delineates three specific sections - structural, surface and lyric - and various subsections within each.[41] While both the structural and lyrical sections are of interest to a more general discussion of Hip Hop music, it is the "surface sample types" that hold a particular importance in our current discussion. Sewell suggests that these surface samples "decorate or punctuate a track's groove without necessarily participating in the track's primary loop" and that these "surface samples do not contribute to the rhythmic or harmonic propulsion of the track, but they are

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[39] Sergi, "In Defence of Vulgarity."

[40] Ibid.

[41] Amanda Sewell, "Paul's Boutique and Fear of Black Planet: Digital Sampling and Musical Style in Hip Hop," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 8, no. 1 (2014): 32.

valuable samples for rhetorical emphasis, historical context, and formal articulation." Then, by splitting these into three subsections, "momentary (appearing a single time during a track), emphatic (beginning or ending a track or a section within a track), or constituent (occurring at regular intervals but without the same sense of continuity as a structural sample)," Sewell enables us to explore how these samples, in their various permutations, interact with and augment the central musical elements of Hip Hop.[42] Sewell's work determines the innate connection and value of these surface samples to the construction of Hip Hop music. While these sounds do not reside in the music's central vocal track or constitute sonically integral elements in the music's beat, per se, they are intrinsic to the creation of Hip Hop music and its meaning, and the Hip Hop generation not only engage with these components but look to them in aesthetic, narrational and connotational terms. With this culturally specific construction of sound in mind, the sound effect in New Black Realism can be seen not just as a tertiary element of the soundtrack but instead stand as a sonic component which creates a "spatial signature" that conveys the space in which these sounds emanate from and the cultural existence in which that space is situated. Nevertheless, while Hip Hop culture and music may denote that these "surface samples" offer aesthetic and connotational purposes, dominant film still understands the film sound effect as the "sensual," the "vulgar." Therefore, Hip Hop culture's identification through these vulgar sound effects in New Black Realism both express their own cultural meanings and characterisations and also place it in relation to the dominant medium and culture in which it exists.

The second point of interest is the most crucial in our developed understanding of the potential of vocalised sound effects to express the experiential in the soundscapes New Black Realism. While these films have augmented the final element of the filmic soundtrack and reset the function and purpose of the film sound effect, they have also displaced the vulgar on the Hip Hop soundscape, moving it from the peripheral realms of the filmic soundtrack, to the central narrative track in the filmic medium. Here, Hip Hop contradicts the intellectual with the sensual, the verbal with the non-verbal, and the sophisticated with the vulgar. Hip Hop, as a culturally charged music process, reshapes the voice in cinema for the purpose of the Hip Hop generation. Now, we understand the voice not just as identifying the individual and reflecting the social space but tying the two together inextricably and echoing the actuality of that specific, cultural existence. While the voice in Hip Hop is sampled, the Hip Hop voice on film, as it samples the non-organic sound effect, is vulgar.

The 'Vulgar' Voice and Echoes of a Cultural Actuality in the Soundscape of Spike Lee's Clockers

As the final moment in New Black Realist cinema, Spike Lee's *Clockers* offers one of the "loudest" examples of the experiential, "vulgar" voice. An adaption of Richard

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[42] Sewell, "Paul's Boutique and Fear of Black Planet," 37.

Price's 1992 novel of the same name, the film follows Ronald "Strike" Dunham (Mekhi Phifer) in his attempts to progress as a low-level drug dealer in charge of a small crew of "clockers," those who sell drugs "around the clock."[43] Strike is a street marshal for Rodney Little (Delroy Lindo) and his right-hand, Errol Barnes (Thomas Jefferson Byrd). While the local drug trade is Rodney's, he is never close enough to be pinned to any particular crimes or convictions. After the murder of another of Rodney's more prominent dealers, Strike's brother, Victor Dunham (Isaiah Washington), turns himself into the local authorities claiming to have shot the man in self-defense. While Detective Larry Mazilli (John Turturro) thinks that this is an open-and-shut case, Detective Rocco Klein (Harvey Keitel) thinks otherwise, suggesting that Victor's impeccably clean record means that something else is surely going on. Like both Rodney and the neighbourhood police officer, André the Giant (Keith David), Det. Klein suspects and pursues Victor's drug dealing brother. Strike, everyone agrees, is the reason for the murder of his fellow "clocker" and the fall of Rodney Little. As the film closes out, so too does Strike's time as a "clocker"; he must make a decision, flee his current existence and lifestyle, or fight and die on the streets. Although those who have discussed the film tend to focus on its "film noir" connotations,[44] *Clockers* presents an expert construction in the genre of New Black Realism. Like most of these ghetto-centric films,[45] the soundtrack is an eclectic mix of Hip Hop music, African-American-specific popular musics (soul and R&B) and scored cues, composed in this instance by Terence Blanchard. Alongside the music, there is also a developed construction of linguistic variations, again reflecting a trope in the soundscapes of New Black Realism.[46] Through the diverse, culturally informed structuring of language, the film shows the interactions of social groups both within themselves and with each other. However, what is most progressive and engaging about the soundscape of this film is its expanded construction of the vulgar voice. Throughout *Clockers* the vocal expression of the vulgar sound effect litters almost all voices in the film's soundscape, from the White and Italian-American police investigating the murder and connected drug dealers to the drug dealers themselves, all young African-Americans members of the Hip Hop generation. In this film, the vocalising of these "noises" relates to the violent reality of New York City at the end of the twentieth-century for the community onscreen. These sound effects, which specifically echo gunshots, car noises, explosions and trains, can be heard in the human voice as "pop," "boom," "beep," "bam," "gat," and "choo choo." The concurrent existence of these biological expressions of non-organic sounds in all channels of the

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[43] Amy Taubin, "Clockers," in *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. J. Hiller, (London: BFI, 2001), 52.

[44] See Dan Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Massood, *Black City Cinema*.

[45] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 182.

[46] Margaret Thomas, "Linguistic Variation in Spike Lee's School Daze," *College English* 56:8 (December, 1994): 911 - 927.

voice on film alters the position, and therefore function and purpose, of the mainstream filmic sound effect.

In film, the sound effect is largely diegetic, unspecified and offscreen, rarely foregrounded. Unlike the voice or music, we cannot pinpoint these sounds and can never truly determine their origin, only gather an inference from their unattached relationship with the images and narrative that we are following onscreen. Drawing again on the work of Chion, these sounds are "acousmatic," "heard without [their] cause or source being seen," and so simply ground the characters, narrative and image in a filmic space.[47] However, *Clockers* (re)situates these sound effects in the voice and those voices echo them repeatedly throughout their sound world. The move from offscreen to onscreen, in a specified existence, changes the function of the film sound effect both physically and metaphorically. The vulgar voices that utter these sound effects shrink the film world in which the narrative is set. The constant reiteration of these sounds, now onscreen and having bled onto the central vocal track, reduces the range and breadth of the world in which they were constructed. Instead of these sounds echoing outside the film's image, and reflecting the world in which they exist, they have encroached upon the characters and their narrative. The vocalising of the film sound effect not only constructs the cinematic world of New Black Realism but reminds its characters and the viewing audience of the Hip Hop generation's restricted opportunities and movement. When Det. Rocco Klein questions Victor Dunham, and both men articulate varying numbers of the word "bam" to highlight the gunshots that Victor supposedly fired at the deceased drug dealer, they do not just allow the characters to talk about the narrative but remind each of the immediacy of those elements within their existence. This is particularly true for Victor who, although he utters the term just once, has Det. Klein repeat "bam" four times in the interrogation room with him. The vocalised sound effect in this sense shrinks Victor's world to a small, cramped and circumscribed box. It reminds Victor of the proximity and inescapable nature of the world in which he lives, as even when he is inside the police station those sounds and that actuality follow him in. The police do not protect him from that life - they can't; they simply perpetuate that existence for Victor. In this sense, the vocal sampling of the film sound effect in the vulgar voice still holds its relationship with its original connotations in mainstream Hollywood film but relocates their position in New Black Realism and augments our understanding of the social space in which that voice echoes.

This movement of the sound effect has also reshaped the voice in New Black Realism. As the central sonic track in the film's "aural triage," the voice offers us film's plot, its narrative and the identity of its characters. It is sophisticated and intellectual and it is the most important aural component in any film that engages with mainstream aesthetics and audiences. To be clear, the fundamental nature of the voice in these films has not changed, but the form of material which that voice uses certainly has. The voice

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[47] Schaeffer quoted in Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. and ed. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 18.

is still the pivotal force in the expression but its structuring has changed in its relationship with Hip Hop culture and music. Through the technologising of Hip Hop's orality, the Hip Hop voice has sampled the film sound effect and subsequently identified the Hip Hop body through that component of the soundtrack. The tertiary element of film sound design has not just crept into the voice but is now constructed with and around it. The Hip Hop voice is vulgar because it is framed through the filmic sound effect and, unlike conventional sound design, these vocalised sound effects qualify not just the reality of the onscreen action and image but the actuality of that cultural existence. These explicitly tie together the Hip Hop body and the post-industrial city. The vulgar voice is experiential because it is ingrained with the sound world in which it echoes, not just in the way that Steven Connor's work previously suggested, but in the shaping of that voice through that sonic reality. This shaping also creates the idea of a subcultural filmic voice. Unlike the dominant vocal expressions of more mainstream film movies, the non-dominant existence (re)organises the voice around its sonic representations of a culturally specific actuality in which the city, as a trope of modernity, migration, economic difficulty and social limits, is fundamental to these vocal expressions. This innate connection and (re)shaping of the voice on film is prominent throughout *Clockers* and it is the recurring and varied nature of these examples which highlights a change in the creation of the voice in Hip Hop's New Black Realism. Whether it is police talking to Strike about his hobbies ("Choo Choo"), the soon-to-be deceased clocker Daryl Adams (Steve White) trying to intimidate Strike ("Boom"), or the interrogation between Victor and Det. Klein ("Bam"), these (re)structured voices are a concurrent motif in Spike Lee's filmic soundscape. It is one of the film's final scenes, where Det. Rocco Klein tries to save Tyrone "Shorty" Jeeter (Peewee Love) after he murders Errol Barnes, that this motif is most apparent.

Before the interrogation begins André begs Det. Klein to rescue the young boy from the situation in which he finds himself, arguing that this incident is a glitch in the life of an otherwise innocent, intelligent and well-behaved young man. Klein decides to help and explains to Tyrone how to retell the story once the tape recorder is on, suggesting that it was all done in panic and self-defense. This leads to a rather interesting moment of meta-diegesis within the filmic soundtrack and, even more importantly, a prominent instance of the vulgar voice. As Det. Klein talks to Tyrone, we see an illusionary version of the scene in which the young boy kills Errol Barnes, created from both the images of the events that actually occurred and the story that Klein offers to Tyrone to save him from jail. In this scene the vulgar voice occurs on two levels: in the centered vocal and image of Klein as he "(re)tells" the story for Tyrone, and in the imagined peripheral discussions of Strike's crew of clockers. In the latter, we hear the vulgar voice as a moment of meta-diegesis in which the young African-American drug dealers point guns at each other, pretending to shoot and reload as they voice the sound effects as "pwooch," "blup blup" and "ch-ch." This is coupled with Klein's dialogue, which speaks of the threat and menace that this world brings to Tyrone and his mother. Initially, this allows us to hear the way in which Tyrone subconsciously constructs the sonic boundaries of his actuality. When he imagines this world, he places these

vocalised sound effects in the film image's soundscape and in so doing allows them, like Sewell's surface samples, to sonically punctuate and augment the sentiments and ideas of the film's central dialogue at that moment. However, as we have seen, these sound effects offer more than just additional material to the film's dialogue. In understanding that the vulgar voice is a biological manifestation of non-organic sounds and components specific to a cultural existence, the subconscious sounding of Tyrone's world through these surface samples offers developed identification processes for the film's characters. When we hear these sounds, and can specifically tie them to Tyrone through the meta-diegesis, we can elevate our understanding of him as a character through a sound world that is culturally and socially specific. The physical space echoes within these vulgar voices and ties the character of Tyrone specifically to the world in which he lives and hears these sounds. Also, the characters that utter these vocalised sound effects remind Tyrone of the encroaching nature of the violent city and neighbourhood in which he exists. Arguably those sounds suggest that at this moment he cannot escape this social environment and all that it represents. In this case, the immediacy of the vulgar voice offers narrative connotations and a developed understanding of character. In the case of the former, when Det. Klein finishes the filmic sequence by echoing the two gunshots fired, he vocalises them as "boom boom." The difference here is that Tyrone is not creating or imagining these sounds, but rather Det. Klein is actually speaking them. The situating of the vulgar voice in the central expression of dialogue is a move of considerable note. Now, the fundamental identifying track of the film expressly vocalises the culturally specific sound effect of the post-industrial city, and with it, the audience's engagement with that element of the film's soundscape. However, what is most interesting is who actually voices the vulgar: Det. Rocco Klein. If we return to the suggestion that these films talk the "lingo" of Hip Hop, then Det. Klein's vocalising of the filmic sound effect at the end of his speech is an attempt to speak to Tyrone on a level that he may truly understand. Like Margaret Thomas's discussion of linguistic variation in Lee's *School Daze*,[48] Klein's vulgar voice is an effort to talk to a young member of the African-American Hip Hop community in a way that Klein thinks he fully comprehends, through a form loaded with the cultural connections and socially constructed sonic tropes that speak on both a conscious and subconscious level.

It is important to note that neither Shorty nor Strike (except for a solitary utterance which he is startled into repeating by Det. Klein) use this vulgar voice, but instead listen to and imagine others speaking it. And in that, the lack of or purposefully avoiding the use of this vulgar voice also contributes to character identification in Lee's *Clockers*. While Strike, as the film closes, escapes the reality of New York City by train, forced out by his fear of Rodney and a beating from André, Tyrone escapes the repercussions of murdering a man and his future, it seems, exists outside the world he currently occupies. The vulgar voice dictates the life of these characters throughout *Clockers* and it is omnipresent in the reality of their onscreen existence. But their ability

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48 Thomas, "Linguistic Variation in Spike Lee's School Daze," 1994.

to avoid engaging with it on a personal level, to avoid the vulgar utterance, gives them the hope, freedom and possibility to escape the reality of their existence and the innate connection with the violent hardship of the post-industrial city.

Conclusion: The Experientiality of Hip Hop's 'Vulgar' Voice

"In my class, some students argued that these films use hip hop culture, which is the new Black youth culture and the most important youth culture in America today. Thus, the characters look real because they dress in the style of hip hop, talk the lingo of hip hop, practice its world view toward the police and women and are played by rap stars ...." [49]

While the above quote from Manthia Diawara's students suggest that these films draw from Hip Hop culture in a number of ways, their assessment arguably boils down to a single component: the "language" of Hip Hop and its artistic expressions. In this sense, the students suggest that these films use Hip Hop's aesthetics, techniques and conventions in their creation of authentic audio-visual social documents. New Black Realism, these students argue, speak the "lingo" of Hip Hop's arts and media. In drawing on the aesthetics of Hip Hop's construction of sonic material in its music, these films tap into a culturally charged understanding of the possibilities of the Hip Hop voice and music in New Black Realism. The soundtrack becomes unhinged from the parameters set out by the mainstream medium that it exists in and instead leans towards the subdominant culture's comprehension of sound and sonic possibilities. The blurred boundaries of the filmic soundtrack, and the embodied narratives that the Hip Hop voice on film offers, exists not as symptoms of an exploited filmic blip, but as a statement of intent and artistic force from a subculture that is (re)shaping and (re)constructing a mainstream medium. While the Hip Hop voice is sampled, the Hip Hop voice on film is vulgar, and that vulgarity brings with it an inherent duality that marks a balance between the immediate nature of the material presented and the hypermediated frames that present it. In these films, the biological uttering of the non-organic and mechanical constructs of the Hip Hop generation's existence in the post-industrial city qualifies the presence of the physical body in that space and the culturally specific place in which that body exists. The sounds that the voice sample become engrained in its utterance and in our understanding of that reality through the film's narrative and character identification. The vulgar Hip Hop voice is "vulgar" only to the mainstream filmic medium, but that vulgarity serves a purpose in Hip Hop's expression on film. The construction of Hip Hop's vulgar voice echoes the cultural actuality of the Hip Hop generation, both through its structuring and sampling of material, and its interactions with the dominant medium of mainstream film. In both form and content, the vulgar Hip Hop voice, the voice of New Black Realism, is inherently experiential in its expression of its facticity.

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[49] Diawara, "Black American Cinema," 24.

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