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**Graphic Brighton:** *Comics and Music*

### **Friday 20th July 2018**

University of Sussex Campus: Pevensey 1 Lecture Theatre 1A6

13:40 - 3:00pm Counter-cultural Musical Aesthetics

(18-minute paper: 2,700 words)

**Ed Piskor and the Sirens Song**

If nostalgia is, as Adorno and Horkheimer claim[[1]](#endnote-1), an Island best viewed from a passing boat whose oarsmen have wax filled ears and whose captain is securely tied to the mast, as in book XII of Homers *Odyssey*; then Ed Piskor, the sole fabricator of *Hip Hop Family Tree,* has tied himself to the near-impossible task of rowing his own boat whilst being bound to its seat. This situation, if you will forgive me for continuing this metaphor on for just a little bit longer, has prevented him from simply passing on by the islands of Sirenum Scopuli, because like many fanatics, he has become so captivated by the Sirens Song that his self-piloted craft is imperceptibly listing to the port side, forcing him to circumnavigate the island in ever decreasing concentric circles.

In the five years of working on the four collected volumes of *Hip Hop Family Tree*, published by Fantagraphics between 2013 and 2016, which, so far, cover the early years of Hip Hop’s history from 1970 to 1985; it feels as though Piskor is being pulled towards the nostalgic sound of Hip Hops’ Sirens Song. A situation that could all too easily lull him into a state of jouissance, a condition of excessive enjoyment leading to contentment as a form of artistic sterility, somewhat akin to death, in which nothing new can be brought into the world. A place where the past becomes petrified, and like Walter Benjamin’s reinterpretation of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus,* from his ninth thesis *On the Concept of History*, a figure blown backwards into a future that he can no longer see, because he is fixated upon the wreckage of the past that is piled up in front of him. Or what Slavoj Zizek would term, known knowns; a dark uncanny nostalgia for what one already knows, rather than the sheer exuberance of facing the perpetual present of the future and all of its unknown unknowns.

However, what I would like to explore in this paper, are those particular moments in Piskor’s *Hip Hop Family Tree,* where the brilliance of his artistic storytelling and synesthetic ability to communicate music through the visual form, jump out from the page at the reader and break free from a simple, linear, and untroubled retelling of history and open up a way of re-reading the past that can inform our present. In this sense, I want to ask if Piskor’s *Hip Hop Family Tree* is a Siren’s song in the form of a Fire Alarm, a wake-up call; or if it is merely a ‘nostalgia work’, which, in Fredric Jameson’s terms, transforms parody into its opposite, pastiche, ‘a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language, a flattening of history’.

Each time I re-read *Hip Hop Family Tree* I’m left asking myself the same Bakhtinian and Gramscian question, is Ed Piskor simply turning Hip Hop, a Black, African-American, urban, working-class folk art into a commodified part of the hegemonic bourgeois culture industry; tamed and transformed into the song of the siren, whose audience, made up mainly of white affluent middle class young men, are all too willing to rest comfortably upon the imaginary shores of an Island safely positioned between Scylla and Charybdis.

Although I remain acutely aware that one could concentrate a critique upon the many aspects of cultural appropriation in regard to Ed Piskor’s adaptation and retelling of Black, African-American, music and culture; being, as he is, from quite a different culture and ethnicity. I feel somewhat uncomfortable critiquing Piskor from this perspective, without first turning this lens upon myself, as a white academic interrogating a culture outside of my own ethnicity and experience. Therefore, what I would like to suggest, is that there is also something else going on in *Hip Hop Family Tree* that needs to be fully understood before an interrogation of cultural appropriation takes place.

What I want to explore, as an important aspect of Piskor’s retelling of the early years of Hip Hop culture, is how this relates to his own hometown of Pittsburgh and its history of racial intolerance, violence and the ongoing struggle for equality that he addresses in volume 4 of the series. So, although I do recognise that there is far too much credit given to white individuals in *Hip Hop Family Tree*; minor figures on the fringes of the art form who have merely co-opted Hip Hop Culture for their own financial gains; individuals such as Debbie Harry from the new wave pop group Blondie, The Beastie Boys and their ironic and somewhat problematic imitation of African American culture in their early years, as well as the entrepreneurial culture industry vultures of Rick Ruben and Malcolm Maclaren.

Nonetheless, I am choosing to put all of these aspects to one side in this reading today in favour of what I think is the more pressing aspect of the series that connects the culture and politics of Hip Hop from the 1970’s and 80’s to our own time and the prescient concerns of *The Black Lives Matter* movement and the issues of race and ethnicity that have been heightened in 21st century America.

Piskor grew up in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania and became an avid fan of comics from an early age and developed a love for comics from both the superhero genre and underground and alternative comix scene. He also developed a love for Hip Hop culture and rap music. After leaving High School he attended the *Kubert School* for a year before going on to work with underground comix pioneer Harvey Pekar, on *American Splendour* and *Macedonia* in 2007, and on *The Beats: A Graphic History* in 2009. He then began working on his own internet comic *WIZZYWI: Portrait of a Serial Hacker,* which was published in 2012 by Top Shelf Productions. Piskor is presently working on *X-Men Grand Design*, a six-part retelling of the X-Men continuity that nostalgically reorders the original convoluted storylines from the first 280 issues of the *Uncanny X-Men*. However, Piskor really came to prominence as an auteur fabricator of comics in 2013, with *Hip Hop Family Tree*, an artwork connecting his love of underground comix with popular culture.

One aspect that ties all these projects together is the theme of nostalgia, and a desire to capture and preserve the past in a form that is both clear and ordered without the problems of contingent histories and messy continuity. This can be seen quite clearly in *Hip Hop Family Tree* in its use of simulated discoloured newsprint paper stock, Ben-Day-Dot shading, and a limited nineteen-seventies colour palette, all of which are used to lend an aspect of ageing and authenticity to the comic itself. However, these elements can also be read as being part of the problem of any ‘nostalgia work’ which often try so hard to be authentic, they end up drawing attention to their own artifice and reconstruction. The simulacrum of these faded pages merely acts to focus our attention upon the nature of the copy itself. Yet, what I do find interesting and creative about this simulated use of faded newspaper stock, is the way in which it enables Piskor, as an artist, to use whites within scenes and panels of his books that a modern comic, printed on a high-quality white paper stock, would not be able to do.

An example of this can be seen on pages that illustrate the slow and difficult rise to prominence of Hip Hop artist, historian and metaphysical philosopher, KRS-One[[2]](#endnote-2). The very first time we see him in *Hip Hop Family Tree* is the first time we see Piskor using the power of bright untainted white in his panels. This occurs on page 20 of issue #10 where we see the graffiti writing and tagging on the side of a train of Lawrence “Kris” Parker, aka KRS-One. The narrative then picks up on the early years of his learning to rap as a young homeless man who, all too often, finds himself on the wrong side of the law and struggling to find a way out of a life of poverty and violence. The images illustrate his developing awareness of the cultural significance that he finds in the deep connection between Hip Hop Culture and his study of African history from Egypt and Ethiopia.

These scenes express the power of his voice and the poetic reinvention of language that KRS-ONE employs in his lyrics to move beyond the accepted meaning of words in order to challenge the dominant hegemonic form of the English language and its meaning. A language that operates to maintain a particular power dynamic over particular ethnic and economic groups. The rhymes, rhythms and use of slang by the Hip Hop artists challenges this hegemonic power and Piskor’s images capture this aspect of the Culture of Hip Hop and present it as a revolutionary force for change.

In refusing to sign with any of the big corporate record labels, KRS-ONE, like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, foresee the problems that these white capitalist corporations, that were subsidiary divisions of larger multinationals companies, with links to Banking and the American military and prison complexes, would inevitably bring into their communities in the Bronx as well as to other black communities across America. By the mid-nineteen-eighties, these record labels along with MTV, had begun to exploit the poverty of working-class Rappers, MCs, D-jays, Gaffers and B-Boys and B-Girls and manage to turn Hip Hop from a Culture into a mere musical genre.

Another technique that Piskor employs in his work, to communicate the power of Hip Hop music, is that of Synaesthesia, a perceptual phenomenon in which the stimulation of one sense triggers an involuntary experience in a secondary sense. In other words, Piskor’s use of text, image, and colour, to produce an experience of sound within a purely visual medium. The most obvious way he does this is through using the recognised culturally learnt symbols of music such as floating notes, onomatopoeic words such as ‘Boom, Bomp, Bang and Clap’, as well as song lyrics written in large font within speech bubbles. Examples such as these are nothing new and are everywhere in the history of comics.

A more interesting example of Piskor’s use of images, that communicate sound, is the manner in which he constructs the panel composition to appear as though our vision has been distorted and blurred. These images indicate the power of the sound systems being used by the Hip Hop D-Jays and the huge concentration upon loud bass speakers which were a direct influence from Jamaican reggae sound systems. This panel, taken from page 10 of issue #1, illustrates how the image is offset twice from the original and the colours of red and blue are used in the line work to create and re-create the effect that we often see in 3D images and produces in the reader a symbolic representation of hearing deep bass sounds that are so loud that they distort and affect our vision.

Another interesting device that Piskor employs in the comic is the use of panel rhythms to capture a sense of breaks and breakbeats. Breaks are best understood as the percussion or instrumental sections of any composition which are used to interrupt and fill the space between the ‘main’ sections of the music. However, what early Hip Hop D-Jay’s like Kool Herc invented was a way to take two identical records and drop the needle onto one of the records, queue it up on the headphones, and then let the breakbeat play, while setting up the second record on the other turntable by dropping the needle onto the same break, queuing it up and then letting that break play straight after the first one, on and on in a style Herc called “the Merry Go Round”. Eventually, mixer decks with crossfaders as well as 808 drum machines and looped music would be used to create much more complex music compositions. This use of Breaks shows the manner in which Hip Hop artists were using the often overlooked and discarded aspects of music to create a new art form and a new genre of music and rhythm. Piskor’s visual homage to these breakbeats is not to take ready-made material and cut it into his own art, but rather to create a form of narrative by using already existing techniques from the rich history of comic book art. He drops non-sequential images into the mix of his pages to create a story where the reader has to fill in the gaps. This happens all the way through issue #11 from pages 1 through to page 13 where we see Piskor using images of record labels, colour coded sequences to illustrated different groups and styles of rapping, split panels indicating the passing of time, and diffused colours to illustrate flashbacks, all of these elements are dropped into the mix to create a rhythm of storytelling that mirrors that of Hip Hop music.

The section of *Hip Hop Family Tree* where all of these aspects are used to their most interesting and political effect is in issue #15, where Piskor’s addresses the events of May 13, 1985, when the Philadelphia's city government saw fit to bomb its own citizens in a confrontation with the radical left wing, black liberation organization. MOVE. A situation which left 11 MOVE members dead, five of whom were small children, and 250 homes destroyed. This one-sided confrontation is captured in the award-winning 2013 documentary *Let the Fires Burn* and is still one of the most controversial internal political episodes in modern American history. One in which no one from the City government was ever charged with a crime, even though they were all found guilty of gross negligence by two Grand Jury committees and judicial inquiries. The events of the 13th of May were the culmination of a dozen years of activity on the part of the police against the MOVE organisation and on May 13th the police fired tear gas into the property, pelted it with high-velocity water cannon, and fired more than 10,000 unopposed rounds of automatic weapons fire into the building in the first hours of the siege. Then, in an unprecedented action, the Police bomb unit then dropped a C4 explosive device on the top of the ‘Row House’ and the ensuing fire that was allowed escalate, hence the call from the police and fire commissioners to “Let the Fire Burn”, left only one MOVE member and one child still alive after the siege.

This is captured in Piskor’s art over four pages in which he utilises all of the techniques I’ve listed above, such as muted colours to show the historical background to a confrontation that goes all the way back to the early 1970s. He also uses the bright white to draw attention to the police violence and onomatopoeic text to show the force of the blow that struck Delbert Afrika in an earlier example of police violence against the Move organisation. The rhythm of the panels and the use of colours and text boxes all add to the mix and development of this short narrative piece.

It is worth remembering that this comic is being released at the height of the Black Lives Matter civil rights movement of 2013 to the present, and this historical retelling of the events of Philadelphia cannot be separated from these contemporary events. Therefore, in response to my earlier question I think it is fair to claim that Piskor’s *Hip Hop Family Tree* is a work that addresses the Siren’s song as a wakeup call, fire alarm, a work that confronts the themes of political inequality and addresses the past in a manner that enables us to understand the present which, at the very least, saves much of the rest of the work from being merely another ‘nostalgia work’.

1. Adorno, T.W. & Horkheimer, M. (2002) *Dialectics of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, (Trans by E. Jephcott) Stanford University Press. "…tells how Odysseus sailed past the Sirens. Their allurement is that of losing oneself in the past" (2002: 25). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a lecture by KRS-One see this website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxb8ute4SW0> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)