

Critical Analysis of “Dents” by Sapiient From the Perspective of Barthes and Bataille

Document of Culture:

“Dents” by Sapiient - <http://youtu.be/I4jrlh6Ytw>

Principal text from Language Paradigm:

“To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” by Roland Barthes

Principal text from Aesthetics Paradigm:

“Notion of Expenditure” by Georges Bataille

Part 1: Close Reading of “Dents” by Sapiient

Featured in hip-hop artist Sapiient’s album, *Eaters Volume Two: Light Tiger*, “Dents” is a song about someone who works hard in the world of making music. The lyrics use war-like imagery of digging trenches and dented shins to describe the labor of writing “grips” (songs) to make a living. These images are also reflected in the “Dents” music video. The sound in “Dents” is produced mostly through electronic sounds using a keyboard and drum machine as well as a guitar.

The “Dents” lyrics begin with a description of someone who has been in the trenches getting dents in their shins from “getting’ it in”. The war imagery of trench digging is also reflected in the music video, where we see Sapiient dressed in military like clothes and helmet, holding a hand grenade. Besides the lyrics, the only other sound we hear is the guitar. The trench digging has caused dents in his shins. It is not uncommon for people to have dents in their shins, if you run your hand along the very front of your shin, often there are small bumps on the bone.

These bumps are caused if the bone is placed under a lot of stress, where micro fractures can develop and form bumps as your body repairs them. These types of fractures are often seen in athletes or people that do manual labor because the micro fractures usually are caused by repetitive motions and stresses. The concept in the song that digging trenches will cause these fractures is true. According to urbandictionary.com, “gettin’ it in” is a colloquial expression used to describe “hard hustling for important things, like getting muscle, money, or knowledge”, so the speaker in this song is “gettin’ it in” to the point where there are micro fractures developing in his shin bones.

In the first 50 seconds of the song the phrase “getting’ it in” is repeated twelve times, the line about digging trenches four times, and the line about how it is stressful twice. There is some alliteration happening with the “s” sound in lines 3-5. Repeating these lyrics and sounds draws your attention to the repetitious nature of “gettin’ it in”. Just like digging a trench, whatever the speaker has been doing to “get it in” is stressful and wears him down, testing his limits.

Next, the “beat drops” (or you hear the bass line for the first time) at :52 seconds, which is when the first verse of the song is played. This verse has rhymes at the ends of its lines. It talks about sitting on a curb, drinking wine out of a paper cup pondering “what doesn’t kill you makes your credit score stronger”. This line plays with the idea that “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”, but in this case, what is important isn’t you being stronger, but rather your financial situation. The image of credit score contrasts with the wine out of a paper cup, because typically your credit score isn’t too strong if you can’t afford to drink out of a real glass, especially if you’re drinking it on the curb outside. The music video switches back and forth between Sapien and AED singing and the “war” scene. This visual effect makes the song feel like it is switching

back and forth between reality and a figurative world, because we know the speaker is not in an actual war, but figuratively, maybe he is.

In the middle of this verse, Sapiient says “I am just a warmonger”(line 12) like his forefathers. Typically, the term warmonger is used to describe someone who is aggressive towards other nations or groups of people. Just like those before him, (forefathers) he has inherited this trait. The last part of verse one ends with the speaker saying that “I am only worth what my arms can lift” which brings back the labor imagery from the introduction. Sapiient says to “pass the roids” (steroids) so that he be as strong as an asteroid. This is a metaphor, Sapiient can’t literally become an asteroid, but the metaphor shows the determination that he has to be as strong as possible. To be a warmonger that is as strong as possible shows the sheer determination that Sapiient has in digging these trenches.

When the chorus starts (1:15), the music video switches between Sapiient singing on a merry-go-round, the war scene and the scenes with both Sapiient and AED singing in various locations while they sing the chorus. The chorus is short, just four lines, all with the same end rhyme. (the “eem” sound) The first two lines repeat themselves, with a slight variation on the last line. Syntactically, the first line is disorienting, sort of how the video is as well with the quick transitions between scenes. Sapiient says he’s in “figurative streets” and “literally living in a dream”. One would think that figurative language would be associated with the dream, and that the literal language would be associated with the streets. Streets are part of our reality, while dreams are not. This use of syntax is intentionally confusing, just as the video is disorienting. (Sapiient is even spinning when on the merry-go-round, which has a dizzying effect.) Whatever is happening in the chorus though, is “bigger than it seems”, so much so that it’s “ripping at the seams”.

The next thing we see and hear described is Sapiient and some other people in his Golf (1:36). A Volkswagen Golf is not a car that one would associate with something that is “bigger than it seems”. Just after the scene with the Golf, Sapiient refers to Noah’s Ark. Using the Noah’s Ark story contrasts with the Golf scene, because Noah’s Ark is a major story in the Bible, which is an incredibly important text to our culture. The reference to Noah’s Ark lines up more with the “bigger than it seems” idea from the chorus. In the middle of the verse in lines 24 and 25, the story shrinks back down to smaller ideas, of paying rent and then celebrating with a vitamin. The mundaneness of paying rent is exaggerated even more with the image of taking a vitamin as a celebration of it. The rhyme scheme in this verse starts with a nice ABABCC scheme, but it changes in line 25. Lines 25-29 don’t seem to rhyme, even though typically hip-hop and rap songs do. This calls our attention to these lines, which talk about writing “grips” or songs. In line 29, Sapiient uses improper grammar, when he says “I didn’t write no novels”. This combined with the irregular rhyme is asking for the listener to think about what he said. In the last line of verse two, Sapiient says, “pass the Tylenol I’ve just seen a flying saucer”, and the music when he says saucer changes to a more trippy electronic sound. This sort of mystical imagery is more dreamlike, which fits with the next part of the song, which is the chorus repeating twice. Again, the chorus has a strangeness to it, like Sapiient is trying to figure out reality. Even though he’s metaphorically living in the streets, in reality he’s living in a dream. What does this mean? Whatever it means, it’s bigger than it seems. Sapiient’s experience in the trenches is important, bigger than what it seems, in fact, it’s “ripping at the seams” which makes you wonder if this labor of writing songs is going to explode or break down. Are the dents in his shins going to become broken bones? Or are the songs he writes going to explode into something – something bigger than what they already are?

Part II: Discussion of Critical Texts

“To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” by Roland Barthes

In class, we studied this essay by Roland Barthes under the paradigm of Language because Barthes is discussing how looking at language when studying literature is important. He argues that the way that we should study literature should be through linguistics, not “through a study of works, authors, and schools, but through a veritable theory of language” (11). He describes that the way literature used to be studied was called “rhetoric”, and modern rationalism had ruined this way of studying literature. The essay reviews Benveniste’s arguments about how “Man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an individual” (13) and how language is how we define ourselves (subjectivity) and experience time (tenses). Because language is so integral in defining our very existence, Barthes thinks that leaving behind linguistic study is a mistake. On page 14-15 Barthes discusses the importance of linguistic temporality, and that linguistic time has two systems – that of the speaker “whose speech act is always the point of origin” (14) and a past tense, or a “system of history” (14).

The “second grammatical category” that Barthes discusses is what I would like to focus on for the purpose of this essay that is the idea of the “person”. Barthes again refers to Benveniste when he says that every language “organizes person into two oppositions: a correlation of a personality, which sets person (*I* or *you*) in opposition of the non-person (*he* or *it*)” (15). What is important here is that the meaning of the word *I* or *you* depends on if you’re the *I* or not. Pronouns are strange because they do not have consistent referents like other signs in language. As soon as the *I* or *you* is said in conversation, the meaning of the *I* or *you* changes. Barthes calls this the “dissymmetry of language” and calls the *I*’s and *you*’s shifters – where the meaning can’t be understood or defined without some reference to the rest of the conversation or

communication. At the end of the passage, Barthes states that this linguistic complication affects meaning and sends dialogue into a “circuitous descent into the labyrinth of meaning”. This means that interpreting, discussing, and understanding literature is far more complicated on a linguistic level. How the words *I* and *you* are used complicates their meaning, thus complicating the meaning of literature in general. According to Barthes, looking at the way a text functions linguistically is essential when studying literature because even if you look at historical context surrounding the text, or an author’s personal biography to help determine “meaning” – that information will not provide concrete answers. Even just looking up a word in the dictionary doesn’t help when the meaning is based on context. These signs (*I* and *you*) have different referents, or realities, based on context. If communications don’t have single meanings and interpretations, how do we determine what is the “correct” meaning? Does this matter? How do we assign value/meaning to certain works and not others? What discourse, communications, texts, or works of art have more “meaning” than others?

“Notion of Expenditure” by Georges Bataille

This essay by Georges Bataille fits in the paradigm of aesthetics because it discusses the reasons why we (humans) bother to create art. For Bataille, there is not a logical economic reason why we create art; in fact, it is rather unproductive. The first section of the essay talks about the “uselessness” of art. He says “any general judgment of social activity implies the principle that all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” (117), of which pleasure (art) is not included. The production of art is a nonproductive expenditure in the fact that it does not focus on the forward movement of the survival and reproduction of humanity.

What I would like to focus on, though, is the second section of his essay where he discusses “the principle of loss”. Bataille reiterates that expending energy producing art is not rational because it does not contribute towards the conservation of life and forward movement of society. Art is grouped into “unproductive expenditures” such as “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity” (118) etc. Bataille then, describes these unproductive expenditures in detail, leading up to an important point on page 120. The study of literature is unproductive, but that is a good thing. There is something about loss, such as losing time to study literature that gives it value. In a sense, the sacrifice of the time to something that is unproductive means that, productive or not, the literature is worth it. Bataille then says that people who can write poetry or create literature, “frequently can use words only for his own loss; he is often forced to choose between the destiny of a reprobate, who is as profoundly separated from society as the dejecta are from apparently life, and a renunciation whose price is a mediocre activity, subordinated to vulgar and superficial needs” (120).

Essentially, the idea that a poet is “wasting time” on writing poetry means that he is an outcast of society, and the very fact that he has placed a priority on his work instead of being productive in society gives value to the work. The image of a poor, starving artist comes to mind. The image of an artist forgoing his own physical needs to produce art gives the art great value. This need to produce art is painful, and the artist is often subject to misery, but he must do it. The way art overcomes the artist is an aesthetic experience that dominates their life.

Part III: Critical Texts applied to Cultural Document

“To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” by Roland Barthes & “Dents” by Sapiient

When looking at Sapiient’s “Dents” through the lense of linguistic analysis, it can open up possibilities about how we derive meaning from the song. This song’s introduction and chorus uses an important pronoun *I*. As soon as Sapiient says “I’ve been in the trenches”, the meaning of the *I* shifts to the listener; the *I* that was once Sapiient’s definition is now the listener’s definition of *I*. This is how listeners can identify with Sapiient’s lyrics. They create their own meaning for the word *I*. When the meaning of the *I* shifts from Sapiient to the listener, the listener can be the *I* in the song, and insert themselves into the trenches. The artist, Sapiient, is irrelevant to the meaning of the song from Barthes point of view, what is more important is the work of art. For Barthes, the fact that the text allows for meaning to shift when pronouns like *I* and *we* are used is what is important. What was once Sapiient’s story is now the listener’s story. In line 8 of “Dents”, Sapiient recognizes that his experience, while he describes it as his own, is a story applicable to more than one person because he uses the word *we*. He pluralizes the *I* and includes all listeners, “we dig trenches”.

Who is I? Who is we? Does identifying who the *I* or *we* is matter? According to Barthes, the text intentionally not giving us a clear cut idea of who the *I* or *we* is. When we listen to “Dents”, *I* gets to be whatever we want it to be, and that’s what makes the song work.

“Notion of Expenditure” by Georges Bataille & “Dents” by Sapiient

According to Bataille, expending energy on art (because it is useless to a productive society) is what gives art its value and, often, the artist’s work “condemns him to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery, to despair, and to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows

that provide nothing but vertigo or rage” (120). Sapiant’s “Dents” explores this concept by using the metaphor of digging trenches as the labor of producing songs. Sapiant describes himself as a “warmonger”, someone who is aggressively fighting this battle of “getting it in”, and pushing himself to the max to write songs. Sapiant is living on “figurative streets”, i.e. the streets are a rough, dangerous place and even though he’s not literally there, metaphorically, he is. His mind is in a warzone, and he’s enduring “dents” in his shins, or experiencing micro fracturing of his bones just to create this music. Literally, he says, he’s “living in a dream”, which is what makes his art applicable to the aesthetic paradigm. In line 31, there is a moment where the lyrics of this song get a little weird, Sapiant describes seeing a flying saucer – he says he’s seen a UFO something that we know doesn’t actually exist. This could be his way of describing what Peter de Bolla would call “mutism”, or being struck dumb by the aesthetic. It’s a dream-like thing to see a flying saucer, and Sapiant is literally living in that dream. He is experiencing the aesthetic, and it’s not an easy trip. In fact, it’s an outright war just to live through it. This doesn’t stop him from doing so, though. The loss that Sapiant experiences, whether it be time, money, life experience, physical needs like eating, whatever it is, losing those things is what gives his “grips” value. The songs are bigger than they seem, and they’re “ripping at the seams”, which coupled with the imagery of the grenade makes you wonder if they’re going to explode.

Part IV: Evaluation of the Disparate Perspectives

These two critical perspectives, Barthes from the language paradigm of looking at a text linguistically, and Bataille from the aesthetic paradigm viewing the text as something Sapiant is overcome with need to create are conflicted in that Barthes would not agree with Bataille that Sapiant is important to the text at all. Even though these perspectives conflict, they allow readers

to look at the text in much different ways. Whether or not Sapien is the subject, or the subject is simply whomever we choose the pronoun *I* to be, we can use these critical perspectives to derive meaning from the texts and why they are important to our culture. Whether it is the language paradigm or the aesthetic paradigm, we can learn something from this song.