

Covert Sounds: The Sonic Codes of Glitch and Ambiguity in Drill Instrumentals

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Figure 1. *67 ft Giggs - Lets Lurk* [Music Video], YouTube, 2016.

The Drill MC, known as 'LD' stands motionless in the centre of the screen. One arm is raised to eye level and his fingers are curled in the shape of an imaginary handgun, which is directed toward the viewer. Just as the camera adjusts its focus, he pulls the imaginary trigger and pauses, his hand hovering at the centre of the screen. A metallic mask obscures his face, allowing him to be at once hidden and explicitly visible, an image that demands centre stage of the shot. His presence is powerful, yet he lurks in the background of the group and maintains a distant, mysterious aura that speaks to the track's title 'Let's Lurk' (67 crew, 2016). The camera refocuses, lingering on close-ups of individual members, before settling on a shot of the whole group. Another man, now at the front of the group, gestures toward the camera. The entire picture shudders with a flickering gesture, multiplying a tiny snippet of the image which momentarily unsettles the smooth arch of the shot. This gesture creates a shock, disrupting the flow of the image and the instrumental. But through this action, a new and distinctive relationship between these elements is revealed.

Shudders and glitches such as this often occur in Drill videos, but they can equally be heard in the instrumental tracks in more subtle ways. These sonic glitches, such as the hi-hat stutter, merge with the camera shudders in the videos to establish a new expression of the glitch that unite the sound and the image. In this context I am not referring to the glitch music movement written about by Cascone (2000) but

instead, I will explore Marie Thompson's (2017) understanding of the glitch as a sonic artefact and 'a process of disruption that works to mutate time' (Thompson, 2017, 162). Like the visual codes of masks, and the slang used in lyrics, Drill's sonic codes obscure, rattle and expose new musical spaces in a variety of ways. Through close listening to 'Drill and Repent' by Young Dizz, produced by Mun Roe (2017), I will explore sonic codes of ambiguity in rhythm and timbre, sonic mutations and the disruptiveness of samples, and sonic-visual glitches, which all contribute to the communicative power of Drill.

UK Drill is a genre deemed controversial for both its portrayals of and associations with gang violence. The style emerged in the mid-2000s in a similar musical and culture context to Grime, a closely related musical style. As Fatsis' study highlights, Drill 'treads in the footsteps of its Chicagoan counterpart, featuring masked-up 'crews' of rappers, like 67, Moscow17 and the Harlem Spartans, who deliver their lyrics over distorted, makeshift beats that fiercely express the harsh reality of life in deprived South London social housing estates, and the artists' loyalties to their immediate locale.' (Fatsis, 2019, 3). The reactions of the Metropolitan police and the British press echo the moral panics triggered by battles between mods and rockers in the early 1960s, and rave culture in the 1980s and 90s (Redhead, 1993; Hill, 2002, pp. 89–105). The genre has been explicitly linked to the rise in knife crime in the city of London, and as a result, the Metropolitan police launched 'Operation domain' to censor gang-related YouTube videos (HM Government, 2018, cited in Fatsis, 2019, 4). In 2019 Young Dizz was arrested and imprisoned for kidnapping, grooming and torture (news.sky.com, 2019), but the details of his conviction differ between sources that encourages speculation within online discussion forums. This is an extreme case within the Drill scene, but it demonstrates the centrality of online spaces in Drill culture, and the discussions that they provoke. Young Dizz's lyric 'man I stabbed that yout to the core, I didn't kill him, but I tried taaaaa,' raises the question - disturbing fantasy or a careless confession? Fatsis argues that the content of Drill lyrics such as this can alternatively be understood as 'chronicles of the violence and disorder that young Black rappers *suffer from* rather than *cause* in the spatial and social milieus they inhabit.' (Fatsis, 2019, 10).

Others have identified Drill as a vital mode of creative and political expression. The Fader and FACT magazine have hosted in-depth features on MCs and producers that go beyond the music's

relationship to gang culture (FACT, 2018 The Fadar, 2019). These diverse responses to the music and culture have created new discursive spaces by bringing together the Metropolitan police, scholars, the mainstream press, underground music publications, online and offline communities into the same conversation. Despite this, there is a lack of focus on the intricacies of the instrumental productions, and the mysterious sound worlds created by producers. Drill producers construct dark, intense moods through enigmatic rhythmic subtleties and dense low frequency timbres. In 'Drill and Repent,' Mun Roe programs sophisticated drums and percussion which demonstrate the aesthetic strategies used in Drill production, and which contribute to its sonic power. For the following sections, I will listen closely to the intricacies of sonic expression in 'Drill and Repent', in order to outline the codes of mood and affect in Drill production.

The sonic codes of Drill production: 'Drill and Repent'

'Sonic signatures' or tags that announce the name of the producer within the instrumental track highlight the central role of producers within the scene. Having a particular sound and artistic identity is an important assertion of individuality for producers. However, producers often work with numerous crews and vocalists simultaneously, which therefore feeds into a collective sonic identity within the scene. The beats, or tracks, of Drill often include repeated melodic motifs voiced by a bassline or synth, a bassline, pads and synthesised harmonic textures and MIDI drums. Dense kick drums and snares are integral to the structure and feel of a beat, but the majority of the rhythmic detail is achieved through much lighter percussion elements. Hi-hats, electronic blips and beeps, sound effects and samples add rhythmic layers and textures which elaborate the core groove. Synthetic melody lines encompass 'slides' or 'glides' which warp the pitch of the sound up or down a semitone, producing an eerie, haunting effect. Drill producer MKtheplug demonstrates this technique in a discussion of his creative process for FACT (FACT magazine, 2018, YouTube). He explains the importance of sample packs in the construction of his 'signature beats.' Amongst these, he highlights the Roland TR-808 drum machine - a widely used sonic palette in Hip Hop, Trap, House and Techno and one 'celebrated for its sonic and rhythmic deepness.' (Weheliye, 2002, 33). Amongst other sonic and technical similarities, this highlights one example of Drill's connectedness with the wider traditions of production in genres including Hip Hop, Trap and Grime.

Further to this, the structure of the drum patterns is comparable to the basic underlying rhythmic logic of Trap and Hip Hop, where a one or two bar rhythmic idea loops to form an underlying momentum and feel. Rhythmic variations, breaks and inflections embellish the core groove and most often occur on even 2, 4, or 8 bar cycles. Tempos do vary between tracks, but they often fall around 140 beats per minute, as MKtheplug explains. (FACT magazine, 2018). The beats can feel much slower and lethargic to the listener, which is partly due to the particular MC-ing style of vocalists. The rhythmic sparsity and the slower tempo of the MC's flow creates more space for more intricate drum programming which deviates from earlier production styles within the (expansive) Hip Hop tradition.

In 'Drill and Repent' producer Mun Roe has created a stripped back, but crafted arrangement which is unique, yet still shares similar sonic language and techniques included in the wider trends in Drill production. The track begins with a brooding, swelling synthesiser, followed by a sample that sounds somewhere between a gunshot and breaking glass that pierces through and momentarily breaks the tension. A hi-hat sound creeps in, gently propelling the overall feel of the beat through a looping cross-rhythm. The core rhythmic structure is grounded by an intense, heavy kick drum and sub which echoes techniques used in Trap production. Adams Burton describes that in Trap, 'the traditional kick drum relies primarily on a low synth for resonance in the low frequencies.' (Adams Burton, 2017, 83). The kick and sub are more present than any other rhythmic element in the track and a dominant rhythmic force within the track. 67 Crew's 'Let's Lurk' provides another example of this technique in play. In 'Drill and Repent', however, Mun Roe developed the initial impact of these samples and sounds through audio processing and effects, which allowed him to extract more sonic material from each individual sound. Through these processes, the breaking glass sample is made to swirl, twist and meander from left to right, foreground and background in the stereo picture. Similarly, the backing vocals repeat particular lyrics in the main vocals before fading away, leaving lingering traces of delay and reverb. These sounds contribute to a soft, and sombre textural backdrop that murmurs behind the intensity of more forceful sonic gestures.

Timbre

The muffled, dull quality of the snare, and the faint, silkiness of the hi-hat further contributes to the specific sonic character of 'Drill and Repent.' The timbre of the snare in Hip Hop and Grime in particular is integral to

the mood and rhythmic feel of the track. Snares often cut through in a groove as acute gestures that are both anchoring and propulsive in the rhythmic flow. In Hip Hop production, for example, the snare is expected to have presence, definition and forceful impact and often serves as a core, defining sonic feature of a producers' sound. As an article by Red Bull Music Academy on Hip Hop drums and percussion demonstrates

'Drums represent a sort of holy grail for fledgling producers as well as perhaps the most complex, even esoteric aspect of making a track . . . achieving the perfect crack or thump is a matter of almost life-or-death importance.'
(Houghton, 2017).

Mun Roe's creative adaptation of the expected timbres and rhythmic roles of sounds and instruments constantly gestures toward new articulations and possibilities. The sonic character and rhythmic role of the snare is unusual as its timbre sits between a typical snare sound, and that of a hi-hat, which allows it to exist in an alternative sonic space. It sits just below the surface in the mix and the metallic sheen and sharpness that is often characteristic of hi-hats, has been muffled and muted. The sound is softened, but it maintains the crunch commonly associated with electronic and acoustic snares. Occasionally, the lack of punch causes the sound to become engulfed by the synth and the lower resonances of the kick drum, however this contributes to a growing feeling of suspense.

These elements do not remain in one particular fixed role within the piece, which enables them to occupy coexistent spaces. Each sound has the potential to mutate and morph into something new, or to move into an alternative sonic space within the track. Moreover, the over-emphasis of the kick drum and sub, and the unusually subtle timbre of the snare, places the structural responsibility disproportionately in the lower frequencies. This results in more rhythmic and sonic space, and thus more potential for the lighter, percussive elements (hi-hats and samples) to be crafted in more intricate ways. They have more room to be unpredictable, or to be less prominent in the mix without impacting the overall character of the beat. Sounds can enter and then quickly disappear into the distance, leaving wispy sonic traces behind them. This creative exploration of uncertainty and ambiguity, the fluidity of roles and timbre, and the sonic and rhythmic delicacy are integral to the propulsive power of the track.

'Rapid fire' hi-hats

The hi-hat cross-rhythm is repeated throughout, but short rhythmic gestures and stutters interject and deviate from the core pulse. Adams Burton (2017) identifies a similar trend in Trap production as 'perhaps the most iconic rhythmic element of Trap in the 2010's.' He examples that these 'rapid fire hi-hats,' often manifest as steady eighth or sixteenth notes with interludes, or 'inhumanly fast thirty-second rattles.' (Adams Burton, 2017, 86). In 'Drill and Repent,' the hi-hat stutter manifests as a short burst of notes in quick succession which then dissipate through the use of reverbs and delays. This allows the hi-hats to serve two functions; first, as a key element in the main rhythmic structure of the track, and second, as a texture that carves alternative sonic spaces. Adam Burton's places these hi-hats in relation to the discourse of post-humanism, as they possess the potential to go 'past the boundaries of what we perceive to be human,' therefore expressing 'the queerly vibrating frequencies of other ways to exist.' (Adams Burton, 2017, 131). The extension of this gesture in Drill, through audio processing techniques, allows the sounds to occupy multiple spaces and functions, thus maximising the gestures potential. This speaks to Drill's wider exploration of space, including the parallel spaces online and offline, reality and fantasy, the hidden and the visible. By developing a version of the 'rapid-fire' hi-hat, Drill producers share and build on the sonic language used in Trap and US Drill, thus expanding the collective sonic discussion to a global level.

The rupture

The hi-hat stutters work in conversation with sonic ruptures including the sound of records rewinding, gunshots, and breaking glass. For instance, the sound of breaking glass interjects approximately every four bars and has the dual impact of pushing the momentum of the track, and simultaneously providing a regular anchoring moment within the beat. This contrasts from the more ambiguous and fluid approach to the lighter percussion elements discussed previously. The sound of a record being pulled backward (often called a 'rewind' of electronic music and sound system culture) creates a similar effect. On several occasions, Mun Roe uses the gesture to instigate a complete and sudden cut off in the track. Although at times softened and subtle, these moments of rhythmic rupture function in a similar way to the rupture in Hip Hop, as developed in the work of Tricia Rose. Theories of 'flow, layering and rupture' in Hip Hop discourse is helpful in explaining the relationships between the different sonic elements and their relationship to the wider socio-political context and meanings. A rupture, as Tricia Rose (1994) explains, is when 'the flow and motion of the initial bass or drum line in rap music is abruptly ruptured by scratching (a process that

highlights as it breaks the flow of the base rhythm).’ (Rose, 1994, 39). These distinct moments create tension and release through the dynamic interplay between the instrumental track (and the DJ in live performance) and the MC.

The sounds of breaking glass, the hi-hat stutter, and the violent lyrical content in ‘Drill and Repent’ are all forms of sonic rupture. These gestures can destabilise the beat, whilst also elaborating the core rhythmic arrangement. Although the samples used here are sounds that typically possess a harsh or cutting character, Mun Roe chose to soften their edge, causing the sounds to become less prominent and possess less attack which plays with the expectations of the listener. Instead, they take on a delicacy of expression that contrasts with the more explicit ruptures. Mun Roe’s use of long delays and echo elongate the initial attack of the sound which allows them to linger in the sonic picture. The impact of these ruptures leaves sonic traces that transform the initial attack into textures and spatial effects, thus demonstrating that the ruptures not only disrupt the flow of the beat, but they create divergent rhythmic and textural directions. Theories of the rupture account for the rhythmic impact of these gestures, and their ability to generate tension and momentum, but to gain a more nuanced understanding of the critical and transformative potential of these sounds in relation to the Drill culture more widely, I will now turn to theories of the glitch. Marie Thompson’s (2017) recent work on the glitch is particularly helpful as a framework to explore how the hi-hat stutters, the samples, and the textures function within Drill production.

The glitch effect

A technological glitch is typically ‘related to procedural flow disturbances, and as resulting from minor and major system dysfunctions.’ (Janik, 2017, 68). As a musical movement, the glitch aesthetic became especially popular in the 1990s, as Kim Cascone’s (2000) often cited essay discussed. Artists such as ‘Aphex Twin, LTJ Bukem, Omni Trio, Wagon Christ, and Goldie were experimenting with all sorts of manipulation in the digital domain . . . such as time-stretching vocals and reducing drum loops to eight bits or less were some of the first techniques used in creating artefacts and exposing them as timbral content.’ (Cascone, 2000, 15). The glitch in Drill, however, explores an alternative aesthetic function in the music. The hi-hat and sampled sound effects do not *sound* exactly like the glitches heard in Glitch music, yet they do share some micro-rhythmic similarities due to their jittery expression. In this context, the glitch does not

point to a failing of technology as is common in Glitch music. Nor are they representative of an aesthetic of imperfection, and they serve a more delicate and decorative function; they contribute as much as they disrupt.

Thompson defines the glitch as an 'asymmetric and irregular swing and stutter,' she explains that this is often used to 'knock the regular 4/4 beat off balance in electronic dance music.' (Thompson, 2017, 166). 'Drill and Repent' is not based around a 4/4 kick drum and so the hi-hat stutter and sound effects do not knock the beat off balance in this same way. Their influence on the feel is more like a gentle push and pull which operates in more covert ways. Glitches are ambiguous, which, as Thompson highlights is encapsulated in the word itself, as a 'kind of skidding and catching' which 'recalls a slippage of gears or wheels as well as a nick in a smooth surface.' (Thompson, 2017, 162). It disrupts or resists, whilst also implying movement, momentum and progression. This approach sits within larger philosophical discussions on noise, but for the purposes of this discussion I apply these broader ideas with the glitch specifically in mind. Thompson's chapter titled 'What noise can do' explains the work of the biophysicist Henri Atlan, who, building on the work of Claude Shannon in information theory explored 'noise's seemingly paradoxical potential.' (Thompson, 2017, 49). Atlan's work drew attention to the ways in which 'change, adaptability and variability are beneficial to certain systems.' (Thompson, 2017, 55-56). Thompson explains that in communications systems, 'noise threatens the reliability of the original message by distorting it and thus increasing its ambiguity.' She continues, 'in doing so, noise has the potential to unlock new information' and 'likewise, noise can destroy or diminish the functioning of a system, but it can also cause systems to reorganise with greater complexity and variety, increasing their capacity to act.' (Thompson, 2017, 55-56). Therefore, if Drill production is understood in relation to Thompson's glitch, the ambiguity of the drum programming, the in-betweenness of the snare and hi-hat timbre, and the ruptures and stutters could all be understood as differing manifestations of the glitch.

The sonic-visual glitch

The glitch's transformative potential in 'Drill and Repent' is more explicit when the sonic gestures are heard in relation to the music videos that accompany the tracks. (See Young Dizz, YouTube, 2017). When combined with the visual glitch, the sonic gestures transform from being imitations to a more obvious visual

expression. This process reveals the sonic glitch within the instrumental track, through the interaction between sound and image. In the 'Drill and Repent' video, visual glitches manifest as multi-coloured flickers and distortions, camera shudders and rhythmic editing techniques. As mentioned previously, camera shudders emphasise the kick drum and disturb the rhythmic flow of the image. This increases the impact of the kick drum and creates the 'kind of skidding and catching' that Thompson described (Thompson, 2017, 162). Furthermore, the shudders and glitches warp the physical spaces represented on the screen, and the temporal flow is stretched and chopped. Each shudder emphasises the sounds on the instrumental and creates, then exploits the space between sound and image. The visual glitch obscures the images of real council estates, local environments and bodies in the music videos, which exploits the boundaries between reality and fiction and mirrors that sonic strategies already discussed.

Further to this, the visual glitch places Drill music videos in conversation with other media, such as the video game aesthetic of games such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA). The game is referenced explicitly in 'Drill and Repent,' in the lyric 'Man I duck man down on the m-way coming like a mission in GTA 5,' and the use of words such as 'opps' (meaning enemy) (Young Dizz, 2017). In video game theory, a glitch can also refer to an opportunity for the game player to outsmart or subvert the internal architecture and laws of the games' system - a 'functional glitch' as Janik (2017) calls it, otherwise known as 'glitching' within the gaming community. This logic has potential real-life manifestations, such as the attitude toward transforming the negative experience of incarceration into a chance for education, research and artistic development and creativity. In relation to his time in prison, Rapper Scribz asserts that

'It let me just take a step back from life and see how I wanted to move forward. Before that, I had no plan . . . but in prison I listened to radio every day. I studied the industry, what got plays, what didn't. I've always said this: you take what you want from prison, and I figured out what I needed to do next.' (Scribz, quoted in I-D.Vice, 2018).

Conclusions: Ambiguity, Rupture, Glitch

The non-sonic codes, such as masks and coded slang in the lyrics, in UK Drill are used as strategies to hide, and protect, the identity of the artists and the lyrical meaning. The speculative discussions online

make it almost impossible - as someone outside of the immediate cultural networks (the police, a fan, or the press) – to decipher these codes. In the video for 'Let's Lurk,' the metallic mask is a visual expression of the contradictory positions of wanting to be hidden and simultaneously seen, or the need to express whilst being silenced through increased measures of surveillance. Beyond the image of Drill, the instrumental tracks created by producers sonically explore strategies of ambiguity, rupture and glitch which feed into the subversive and power of the music. 'Drill and Repent,' produced by Mun Roe, allowed for a closer look at these sonic codes. In this instance, the ambiguous, erratic nature of the percussion can be disorientating and unpredictable, but these intricate and intriguing elements are the result of Mun Roe's creative exploration of the new sonic spaces opened up by the increased intensity of the kick drum. Similarly, the timbral ambiguity in the snare and hi-hat allow sounds to be fluid, adaptable and occupy multiple roles and spaces at once. More widely, UK Drill extends the sonic language of styles such as Hip Hop, Grime and Trap in order to craft its own identity that still communicates with earlier approaches. The hi-hat stutter and the sound effects - such as breaking glass and gunshots - act as 'sonic ruptures' which can be muffled and softened. These ruptures possess a delicacy and a subtle force which allows them to influence the feel and structure of the track from inside the main structure of the beat, rather than being externally imposed.

Marie Thompson's theorisation of the Glitch provided an alternative understanding of the sonic codes in 'Drill and Repent' and its transformative potential. Like the online discussions, the violent lyrics and the intimidating image, the sonic glitches can reveal as much as they disrupt. A glitch can allow the potential for new pathways and meanings to emerge. Like the rupture, they can disrupt the flow, but they also reveal underlying issues within a system and can act as a spark, or catalyst for reformation in new and more complex ways. As in the video for 'Let's Lurk' and 'Drill and repent' the visual glitch makes explicit the sonic codes within the track through the symbiotic relationship between sound and image. The temporal flow of the image is altered, and the real-life spaces in the videos are contorted, warped and transformed to create alternative spaces for expression within the music video. 'Drill and Repent' has demonstrated how sonic ambiguity, rupture and the glitch are used as creative strategies that are exemplary of Drill's power to express in subtle and sophisticated ways that go beyond the threatening image presented in the media. Artists and producers are exposing and pulling to the surface just some of deep structural and systematic issues and hidden realities that prevail in Britain and have sparked new, vital conversations between the

Metropolitan police, the British press, and audiences. Yet it is also operating on a quieter, but no less powerful, level which can be seen and heard in Drill's sonic and visual expressions, which I argue, warrant much more focussed attention.

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