

review

performance

DJ Spooky, *Rebirth of a Nation*
Power Center for the Arts,
University of Michigan 1/14/2005
by Patrick Lichty

DJ Spooky, a.k.a. Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. That Subliminal Kid, has always been known for his experimental spirit in stretching the boundaries of media culture through his hip-hop deconstructivism of everything from Metallica to D.W. Griffith, the subject of the work reviewed here. *Rebirth of a Nation*, the first installment of a proposed trilogy consisting of remixes of polemic silent films, was described by Miller as his "first salvo of the 2008 election." Miller's remapping and remixing of the Civil War tropes in Griffith's classic film create a critical matrix encompassing the Civil War, Griffith's interpretation, and their resonances with the social ills of the post-millennial society.

The presentation of the performance, which lasted just over an hour, had Miller at the side of the stage beneath three large projection screens where his remix of *Birth of a Nation* occurred. Although the venue of a large university auditorium was a little odd in that *Rebirth of a Nation* felt like it would be more suitable for a less traditional space better, the performance was not altogether out of place. Miller came out and introduced the piece, gave a brief overview of his thoughts regarding the '04 election, the parallels between *Birth of a Nation* and contemporary culture, and the selection of music that would constitute the night's mix.

Miller then retired to his station at the side of the stage and began the show, which started with a Flash-based rapid-fire animation of flags, monetary symbols, and other icons of Global Capital that then faded into his remix of Griffith's Civil War epic. What followed was a compressed, jump-cut, hip-hop mash-up of Griffith's epic, with a heavy reliance on the most iconic moments -- the opposing brothers dying together, the KKK, Lee and Grant negotiating surrender -- overlaid with images of modern dance, circuitry, and clips from ephemeral films. In addition, the interspersed title screens showed the names "D.W. Griffith" or "Paul D. Miller," which positioned DJ Spooky as critic and (de/re)constructor of Griffith's social narrative. However, Miller created a profound sense of irony: as recontextualizer of the narrative, he placed himself on the side of the stage, which put him simultaneously in all positions of the performance's social signification -- from the Griffith analogue to the piano player cum cyber-DJ -- filling all places in the meta-narrative. Musically, *Rebirth of a Nation* put me at a disadvantage in that it seduced me with its novel visual approach -- to the point where my attention to Miller's method and my curiosity about his technique overrode my attention to the selection of music incorpo-

rated in the set, although, as usual, his sonic manipulations were spectacular.

Rebirth of a Nation is an excellent concept and represents a significant advance in the merger of DJ / VJ, media culture, and historical genres. However, a couple of points made the piece a "merely excellent" one and did not elevate it to a singular status. The quality of Miller's musical approach to the piece was without question; and his visuals were very much in line with contemporary media culture. The colorful Flash animation that started the show fit conceptually, but seemed out of place / not needed for the performance. The construction of a seemingly linear narrative parallel to Griffith's detracted from the potential to really reconstruct the film according to Miller's vision, and the repetition of dance and circuit clips became overly repetitive after 45 minutes and was distracting over time. Lastly, Miller's pronouncement of a criticism of the post-millennial Bush era in connection with Griffith's work (and possibly next, Riefenstahl's) called for some external visual referents from more contemporary sources to frame his discourse. But again, while these elements of the performance might hold it back from the full potential of its (extremely powerful) concept, *Rebirth of a Nation* represents a real conceptual and technical tour de force for Miller, and I look forward to seeing the rest of his proposed trilogy.

