

REBIRTH OF A NATION

Following the copyright controversy surrounding *The Grey Album*—in which DJ Dangermouse remixed The Beatles' *White Album* with Jay-Z's *Black Album*—paranoia has reared its ugly head. The fear, in some quarters, has been akin to the horror of miscegenation, as "white" mingles with "black," and record-industry lawyers attest to the sully of the purity of the original (among other things). It's a fertile time, then, for Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky) to premiere his spin on D. W. Griffith's 1915

mental states are more accurately portrayed, and if Gance *were* to tackle the mental state of the Civil War and its aftermath, it might indeed appear like Miller's crazed, circular landscape of images blending into one another, moments repeated beyond reckoning, and historical figures fading into ghostly forces. War and race are dissolved in Miller's invented space-time, although, like any good remix, part of the charge of the new comes from the tenacity of the old. Call it *The Blue and the Grey Album*.

DJ form follows historical function: instead of moving forward, history is suspended in a circular trap of memory and repetition. We witness characters haunted by the specters of their past, as Miller dwells on blind moments of power, anger, fear, and desire. In counterpoint, he also emphasizes the few moments of calm within the intoxication of historical dudgeon that Griffith's wild eye whips up. A cotton flower plucked in the midst of toiling slaves is recontextualized in order to call attention to its political valences, and, just as quickly, that same phantasmic blossom is re-aestheticized. At such

especially to the South, have not been irrevocably damaged in the aftermath of the Civil War—a period that, in many ways (unfortunately), is still with us. By including images from the Bill T. Jones dance ensemble, Miller invites us to believe in the miracle of the African-American experience—that bodies can still move beautifully, that circuits can be soldered back in place to channel vital energies once thought to be lost, exploited, or burned out.

While Miller's writings reference the modernist legacy of cinematic montage and the hip-hop lords of turntable time travel, he does not come to terms with what's specific about this use of digital technology as a way to reimagine history. While *Rebirth* is aesthetically and aurally rich, its complexity undermines Miller's efforts to create a space for rethinking the politics of race. Instead, his seamless transmutations provide a slippery surface upon which both everything and nothing can be projected. One would hope that Miller would either embrace pure aesthetic play (and thus detour racial essentialism) as a specific challenge or provide a more satisfying historical deconstruction, especially given that he presents himself as a theoretician. Although he can deliver an apt Spooky-ism from time to time, his claims for *Rebirth* are hyperbolic. In fact, the multimedia event and its marketing come to seem like completely separate entities, even though Miller would probably insist on a continuum—spin on spin. For this reason, *écriture Spooky* is deceptive: it gives the effect of deconstruction but in no way challenges the pleasure principle of the flows he inhabits. What little he writes about Griffith (e.g., in his new book *Rhythm Science*) focuses on Griffith's stylistic innovations, making favorable comparisons to rap pioneer Grandmaster Flash. In many ways, this is refreshing and an interesting way to counter puritanical notions of how to read *Birth of a Nation* correctly in order to protect us from its dangerous radiations. But it's a similar mistake to assume that *Rebirth of a Nation* somehow rectifies, makes safe, or deconstructs its source material. History is still in the mix.

—JOE MILUTIS



Birth of a Nation, a film that glorified the birth of the Ku Klux Klan in the face of a cultural/genetic remix sanctioned by the end of the Civil War. Miller calls *Rebirth of a Nation* "a deconstruction" of the film, but it's unclear what he means. His update doesn't so much deconstruct Griffith's reconstruction of Reconstruction as Europeanize it. In fact, *Rebirth* seems like nothing less than Griffith transformed into Abel Gance. With its triptych visual presentation and schematic superimpositions, remixed live every performance, *Rebirth* recalls Gance's polyvisual *Napoleon* (27) reconceived as an instrument rather than as a film—a Napoleodeon, let's say. The benefit of Gance's synesthetic is that

moments, the remix becomes the equivalent of a Zen moment dissolving (or deflowering) history.

Most prominent are the superimpositions Miller creates onscreen—graphics of prisons, circuits, and maps highlighting the ways in which individuals contribute to larger historical forces. The circuit and, perhaps by extension, electronic music, emerges as the most compelling metaphor for these processes. The most domestic gestures from *Birth of a Nation* are reframed as the products of new circuitry—history not as grand action but as minute wiring of transistors and resistors. Miller implies that the circuits connecting African-Americans to the political grid of America, and

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