All of the Above


Perhaps he is “all of the above,” which might make him the model of the twenty-first-century artist, the type who lays waste to the quaint taxonomies that dominated the last century, jumping across categories and deploying any and all media to make his point.

Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky, that Subliminal Kid) revels in the superabundance of information made possible by globalization and advancing technological know-how. One of the most compendious artists and liberal compilers of source content working today, Spooky’s eclectic list of interests ranges from French literature to dub step, and touches almost everything in between: all of them a single, generous palette from which to sample.

Disentangling the creative vectors of such an ecumenical dabbler is more difficult than it might be with a more limited artist. Let’s face it, if you get excited about, say, Robert Ryman’s work, your mind’s never blown by the next move. With Miller, the next enterprise often leaves you either slackjawed or scratching your head; one minute he’s talking about thermodynamics, the next he’s making music with Thurston Moore. Just when you get a bead on him, he’s off to foster artistic development among natives of Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Sometimes it seems the only common thread in Miller’s work is uncommonness itself. Indeed, Spooky has long suggested that his collaging ways are a reflection of this age of mechanical reproduction and digital advancement, and therefore a reliable reading of its vital signs.

For instance, in his brilliant mash-up film project Rebirth of a Nation, DJ Spooky dissects D.W. Griffith’s racist classic like a surgeon, and reconfigures and recontextualizes the imagery to expose the overtly racist elements and to emphasize how the narrative medium intoxicates and impairs our critical faculties. His analysis amounts to chilling effort in Brechtian estrangement, forcing the viewer to consider the form and content simultaneously — with some great sound composition to boot.

Only shortly after the undertaking of Rebirth, Spooky released the intoxicating album Drums of Death, a collaboration with Slayer’s John Lombardo, with major contributions from Public Enemy’s Chuck D and Living Colour’s Vernon Reid. It’s a departure from Rebirth, to say the least — revved up and full of surprises. “Kultur Krieg,” the seventh track, should be the official “let’s-get-ready-to-do-this” song, and even the more ambient tracks on the album such as “Obscure Disorder” are dopamine juicers. You never know what you’ll get with Spooky.
part symphony, part science experiment, and part environmental intervention. The enterprise began when Miller set out to Antarctica in 2007 to sample the sounds of the retreating ice on the continent. The concept began as a foray into material science, to study the way ice transmits sound waves — but associations sprouted, forms emerged, and content expanded (and continues to expand). This is the DJ Spooky way. Terra Nova’s most tangible expression is as a seventy-minute multimedia performance, with Spooky on turntables accompanied by several classical musicians and backdropped by a video collage of imagery and text. The work was produced for the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and has since traveled widely, continuing to evolve and inspire new projects.

One such spawn is the Book of Ice, which further builds on the metaphoric potential of Antarctica. Spooky muses about it as a symbol of colonial futility and environmental calamity before using it as a musical instrument. It’s a brilliant if scattered vision of the forbidding continent. His eccentric and compulsive drive to deconstruct with scientific rigor and reconnect with freestyle intuition will remind many of another prolific genius who was driven to encounter the icy forbiddingness at the end of the world: Werner Herzog.

Where other artists might have some arrows in a quiver, Spooky wears a referential Bat Belt. He has a pachydermous recall memory and a prodigious bank of historical and cultural knowledge that can be exhausting to keep up with. Some may need a search engine at their disposal to follow along. In some cases, this rhizomic expansiveness is exactly the point. As noted, his body of work is somewhat of a living metaphor for the fragmentation and surplus of the globalized world; however, Spooky’s ambition transcends the notion of being a metaphor for contemporary chaos. Getting this finer point across in the haystack of his ouvre is his biggest challenge.

I asked Spooky to address his more personal connection to art-making and how his sources of inspiration have evolved over time, and to consider where the young heart meets the wise mind in his work.

“There are so many people who just let the world define them. You see the way this shapes everything — clothes, cars, food, our addiction to oil, etc. What happens when you begin to realize another world is possible — that’s art. I would say that basically I’m a collage; many layers, many reflections. My life has been non-linear, and probably always will be. I’m about twelve years old at the moment…”

A pretty gifted twelve-year-old, I would reason.

It’s been suggested that Spooky’s work hovers around politics. I disagree; something more akin to cultural archaeology is his primary aim, with politics as a natural byproduct. Many have challenged me, claiming Spooky’s work is quite obviously motivated by politics and activism. And it’s a fair assumption; he’s certainly willing to tackle sensitive issues. The politics in Rebirth of a Nation speaks for itself, as do his ecological concerns in Terra Nova. He was commissioned to produce a digital media collage, Wings of Change: A Composition and Homage to the NAACP on 100 Years of Change, which dives into the thorny politics of race in very specific ways, including clips of Lyndon Johnson’s legendarily ambivalent support and degradation of the African American community. The multimedia provides a nuanced view of Johnson as both a bigoted Southerner but also an important catalyst in the civil rights movement. This type of specificity leads me to believe that Spooky is too into the details of history to be doing it for the bomb-throwing. And, remember, he has a Bat Belt.

When I posed the question about his politics to him directly, he managed to provide, as one might expect, an elliptical yet strikingly profound answer:
These are cynical times. There have always been paradoxical situations between powerful interests and the people. This is just the era I happen to have been born in. Art helps me understand that — it’s like a continuous reference point to a map that is uncharted. I just try to understand the terrain. Music helps with that.”

Spooky is the rare artist that toggles between nerdy, technical indulgence, and sentient inventorying of the human condition. I’ve heard Spooky comment on several occasions, in regard to this eclecticism and reach, that it’s “all just one big record.” Which is funny, because it’s an omnivorous approach to art-making that sends me back to the Renaissance and Leonardo’s flying machines, as much as it anticipates the next century, where the digital technology Spooky embraces will reign. So, one wonders: is Spooky a throwback, a contemporary, or an oracle?

Again, probably “all of the above.”

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