

SOPHISTRY WITH DJ SPOOKY

Discorder Magazine, August 2001.

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Where is DJ SPOOKY? WHERE IS DJ SPOOKY?

Rob Robot—my partner in crime who had snuck along for the gig—said he would be DJ Spooky if Spooky didn't show up. But show up he did, arriving from a nappy in his hotel room. So Rob asked a question instead of being DJ Spooky and I tried to counter Spooky's sophistication with super sophistry. Spooky, aka Paul D. Miller, began mixing not only records at an early age, but also records with Theory (with a capital "T.") Coming out of Bowdoin (one of the top 10 liberal arts colleges in the US), Spooky can free-associate any question into a recipe for disaster. It's a beautiful thing to watch.

Spooky has written a recent paper, "Material Memories," for CTheory.com that delves into Time (with another capital "T"), Surrealism, art (film, visual arts) and djing. It's a post-modern mix and one of his casual references is to black performance artist and hardcore Kantian Adrienne Piper. Kant isn't exactly the most tolerant philosopher: his possibly racist writings on Africans are usually dissed outright. So Spooky's use of Piper jumps many contexts with attached cultural baggage. There is a strange analogy at work between academics and DJs in their use of spliced references: (ab)using context and situation to trigger memories conscious or unconscious. A dj pulls records out of a bag, an academic pulls quotes out of a text: and Spooky, he is doing both, often in the same medium.

S: I think she's an important voice, and I love her ideas around conceptual art, identity, and installation art, especially when she deals with racial representation and the conceptual frames of... She did this thing called "Funk Lessons"...

Where she wore a Kant t-shirt and danced to funk music?

S: Yeah, and I thought it was a great idea, of dance and art, of art becoming dance, dance becoming art. The idea of course is that you have people breaking the boundaries in situations. The one thing she is into is Immanuel Kant thing—I just don't get it, you know.

If Kant is Piper's philosopher, what's your philosopher of choice?

S: a strange analogy between academics and DJs in their use of spliced references. I'd say that I have a couple. I wouldn't know where to start or stop, really. Definitely I would go back to early Greek stuff, Heraclitus, and the notion of flux and fragments and particles. Then there's people like Lucretius, a more Roman kind of scene, old-skool. Then, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, the Chinese philosopher scene, the ideas around the notions of *feng shui* and the notions of placement. How you can have structures of relationships and how that affects the mind, and the body and stuff like that. There's a whole West African school of philosophy and art...really, a lot of that was around the notion of the oral tradition, if you look at the traditions of Senegal, later sets of renditions of that: there's people like the jazz philosopher Allan Locke. He had a journal in Harlem during the '20s called *The New Negro*, a lot of the writing of the Harlem Renaissance—he published their stuff. W.E.B. duBois, of course, and then later people like—you can really bounce a lot of stuff through the Deleuze and Guattari angle, but in a more contemporary note I am looking at more and more at people like KRS One, and just different angles of dealing with how he is trying to create a school of philosophy. I am fascinated with how he is dealing with oral culture. He started The Center for Hip-Hop Culture, where he's doing all this stuff on the philosophy of rhymes. And of course Saul Williams, he is a good friend of mine. So I like both of those two as contemporary philosophical kind of entities, you know.

At this point, Rob Robot jumped in with a question on Ritual—before it was too late. **In the same paper, you were talking about art as ritual, ritual being a part of art, so we could see DJing as being an art in itself. If ritual is also an instrumental part in rites-of-passage, in different kinds of contemporary**

rites of passage and different countries as well, how would you consider, say, what governs DJing's rites-of- passage? How would you fit in with that? If that makes sense to you?

S: No, no—absolutely. You are looking at a generation that has grown up on the fragments of the detritus of the 20th Century. I mean, everybody who was born mid-'60s and beyond, we're the first generation of human beings to grow up in a media atmosphere. I think DJing is like an archetypal situation at this point. It's like how people pull together information, it doesn't just have to be music, it can be writing, it can be art, it can be theatre, it can be—it's a mode, at this point. It's how the notion of collage has become our basic kind of frame of thinking. The music is just a social reflection of what's going on in the culture. So the rite of passage for that is being able to play with memory. Like most cultures you have, one way or another, at a certain age...you know, usually they send the guys out in the forest, or hunt a lion, or if you're in Europe they would have, sort of weird bard battles...if you were Irish you had to be able to tell the various stories and myths—every culture has these kinds of rites of passage. A lot of it was around song, and how the community functions and passes information between generations. But for us, all of that is totally fragmented. And I think that that is a healthy thing, because people have to build their own information, and so you're looking at...the real notion of Generation-X, and what all those guys are trying to push, is that all of a sudden you're looking at, kind of...I don't know, there's—a lot of the generational movies right now that I am fascinated with, stuff like *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*. I love the way in *Fight Club*, where the guy's memory is all fucked up. Have you seen *Memento*? And some of my more recent favourite films dealing with psychological fragmentation, and where the characters are like “wait a second, did I really do that?”—everybody I know's memories these days, because everybody I know is using a Palm Pilot, their memory is kind of a strange thing right now. Because we are all keeping track of so many websites, songs, file numbers, phone numbers, email—you know, I remember a lot more people's names from their email than their real name. It's just different ways of thinking about stuff. So, anyway, to make a long story short, I think that the underground psychological aspect of DJing is to play with the fragments, and make that become your overall—every DJ I know, my motto is like: “Every DJ I know is a walking radio station.” You just have swarms of music. Usually the centre points of memory—y'all remember this track, from back then, then some guy sampled it, and flipped it this way, and then y'know...it's just like a community situation.

Within every ritual, there is always a power-play going on within certain events. You mentioned Bahktin as well, and the carnival, and the carnival is usually just taking social order and flipping it, but maintaining it under a certain power structure. So you never have a pure liberation, it's always maintained within a certain atmosphere—the history of carnival in terms of the Church, blah blah. I was thinking, in terms of DJ culture, essentially early hip-hop events and early rave culture and the way they took DJing, it seems like DJs really assume this power position over a sort of carnivalesque atmosphere, where social orders were flipped in terms of various people doing various things, but there was never a liberatory push out of that—there was never a revolutionary movement that came out of it in a sense as well. As a DJ, do you see yourself placed in this power position in terms of being a “memory selector”—what sort of power-plays are you playing with when you are selecting memory fragments to send out to an audience in almost unconscious ways?

S: “Carnival,” when you look at it etymologically, it means *carne vale*, “throwing of the flesh.” It's the same root as *carnivore*, it's dealing with the issues of how people's bodies were reflected in the social environment, mainly around these kind of mediaeval festivals, where everybody would be wearing masks, robes, in the streets in Italy...it's just a wild scene when you think about it. But for us, “carnival” is everything from a football game or watching TV or listening to a radio to...DJing, I can't say it enough, it's a reflection of what's going on, I don't necessarily think that it's a power-dynamic. But of course you have more powerful DJs like Funk Master Flex who's got a radio show with millions of people listening, or you have the VJ on MTV being able to guide and sequence which tracks to work. I'm an underground, artsy guy, you know, so I'm doing this more as a hobby and a kick. So it's not my core life-zone. A lot of people view it as a power dynamic, and that's not why I am doing it all. I am doing it mostly as a conceptual art project. In terms of the power dynamics, you got to think about it as—think of the first mass rituals around the use of multimedia, guess who comes to mind: it's mostly like the way Lenny Riefenstahl was able to document Hitler's huge events where he would have radio and TV broadcasts of the rallies. Radio, TV, all

that stuff became popular precisely because people used it to filter out what was already popular, cipher it, translating it into stuff that they would be able to attach messages to.

You were talking about D.W. Griffith in your essay...

S: Yeah, D.W. Griffith is one of my favourite reflections of that. His movie *Birth of a Nation* is one of the first multiple narrative movies, it's got the whole thing with film sets. I mean—"film set"—the guy went to World War I in Europe and said "there's no drama here, I can't film this." So he came back to the U.S., and the U.S. government hired him to make propaganda films about World War I. So instead of filming the reality of it, he made a film set of it, which, for us at least, when you think about the historical angle of how the film set operates, how many people have been to New York? But you don't really need to see New York anymore, because it's all just a post-card, or whatever.

It's all in Woody Allen films.

S: Yeah, Woody Allen is one of my favourite guys. But, it's the same thing. There's a movie called *Dark City*? I didn't like elements of it, but I liked the idea of it. Where they are injecting memory and playing with the fragments. That's even what *Bladerunner* was about too. Some of my favourite writers and film directors who deal with that are like—I am fascinated how the notion of being able to live in many different times and at the same time: that's what DJing is kind of about. Being able to take all these fragments, and show people that it can work.

We know launch into a discussion that spans the breadth of "mixing"—how DJing is not just records, but a whole system of collage, from technology to eugenics and industrial production. But now it's becoming "post-industrial"—digital. Copies of texts, books can be made within seconds as opposed to rooms full of copy-monks taking years. Speed is accelerating to the post-industrial, and we talk about Paul Virilio and the absolute antiquity of George Bush, who continues to push Cold War technologies on the macro scale in a post-industrial age—because it is to his monetary advantage, making money selling useless mass warfare technology between right-wing cronies. "Information is everything from DNA on up to mixes," he says, and it is the Industrialists who continue to attempt to regulate and suppress new information—from biotechnology to music and culture. That's what the last election was about—"Toxic Terror" Bush representing the Right-Wing Industrialists; the Information Technology guys on the side of the American Left...

Do you think that Djing is definitely post-industrial, in terms of time? I've been thinking that if DJing is recombinant logic, it is inherently stuck in more of a frame of deconstruction, as opposed to a rhizomatics of Deleuze and Guattari that might explode past that. You seem to be arguing that DJing allows you to move out of industrial-linear time completely, or at least play with it.

S: Yeah, pretty much. I mean the whole notion of "deconstruction"—I think we need a new name—it's mostly around living with, being able to move in many directions at the same time, omnidirectional, that's the whole Virilio thing. But even that's still a mostly European aesthetic. I am talking more about like African or Asian time, where their notion—if you look at West Africa, repetition, it was about prolonging the present. You had drumbeats going—like when you leave a nightclub you feel like "Oh my God I've been here for five hours" but it feels like five minutes. That's psychological time. If you look at how a lot of European stuff, they're looking at Hegel, you've got history progressing towards the future, with Marx it was the same thing, he just put, instead of the City of God the Worker's Paradise. These are cultures that are looking for technology as utopia. That's what World War II was about, the conflict of different dreams of utopia. The German model was purity; they wanted to get rid of everybody else, basically. America represented a different kind of utopia. And most of the information tech that we use came out of World War II—computers were used for encryption, radar. These were all massive number crunching issues of being able to take the mass systems of warfare and turn that into information. Can you imagine, at this point—my watch for example—it has the same amount of technology that in the '60s would have required a whole room. My watch has more computing power than the computers that put the Apollo moon mission in orbit. It's getting smaller and smaller...once you get to the density where you get what's called "ubiquitous computing"—that's what William Gibson's stuff is about. There are a couple of other sci-fi

writers whom I find fascinating who are dealing with the psychological aspects of living in an information environment. Did you ever read *Neuromancer*?

Oh yeah. Gibson lives up here...it's required reading...

DJ Spooky is currently at work on a new album called *Jumbo-Mumbo*, an extension of *Riddim Warfare* with more net-oriented and animation features. Then there's two books and a new 'zine based upon the more progressive aspects of *ArtByte* called *21C*. He's generally jetsetting his intellectual ass all over the planet while keeping his mind firmly in his Palm.