

Guelph Jazz Festival
Guelph, Ontario

**A Choreography of Instants:
A Response to Paul D. Miller/DJ Spooky's Keynote Address
at the 2003 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium**

by Jesse Stewart
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On Thursday September 5, 2003, Paul D. Miller—perhaps better known as DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid—gave a keynote address at the Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium. On first thought, it might seem odd that a contemporary DJ would be invited to give a keynote address at a colloquium sponsored by a jazz festival. However, Miller's remarkable interdisciplinary profile as a conceptual artist, writer, theorist, and musician is very much in keeping with the focus of the Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium, both of which routinely cross disciplinary borders, challenging received notions of jazz and improvisation through the presentation of cutting edge musical performances and innovative scholarship. Titled "Activating Jazz: Human Rights, Resistant Sounds, and the Politics of Music Making," the 2003 colloquium focused on the roles that jazz and improvised music have played--and continue to play--in struggles for human rights and social justice. Miller's multi-media presentation was based loosely on an essay entitled "Freeze Frame" that he co-authored with Ken Jordan (available on-line at <http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=42tp00>). The talk touched on a dizzying array of topics ranging from the history and impact of Muzak to the digital music revolution.

At numerous points, Miller likened the art of digital sampling (something he poetically referred to as the "choreography of instants") to jazz improvisation. He suggested that in much the same way that a jazz ensemble depends crucially on musical dialogue, digital sampling enables a virtually limitless array of dialogic possibilities through networked computer systems and electronic file transfers. For Miller, the digital universe provides an infinite archive of material for sampling and represents a kind of collective cultural memory that is being continually shaped and reshaped by contemporary DJ culture.

To my mind, the most interesting aspect of Miller's keynote address was its intensely performative dimension. On the surface level, his presentation involved the performance of a kind of extreme technological finesse through his use of turntables, digital audio, and computer projected imagery (replete with ultra-slick cross-fades and other digital eye-candy). Miller switched between these different technologies as quickly as he moved between topics, creating a dense web of audio-visual information. Dubbing this particular version of the talk "the Canadian mix," he began by manipulating an LP version of famed Canadian media theorist, Marshall

McLuhan's, *The Medium is the Message* over a dense hip hop-inspired "illbient" beat. As a visual illustration of McLuhan's global village concept, Miller was silhouetted against an extremely fast-paced video projection of different flags of the world that had been cut up and reassembled in various ways. Conceptually, the video component was not only an apt illustration of McLuhan's ideas but also a compelling visual analog to the cut and mix musical processes involved in Miller/Spooky's music and in sample-based music generally. In my view, this approach was indicative of another important performative dimension of Miller's talk - the performance of an aesthetic sensibility and system of logic derived, at least in part, from Miller's musical practice as a contemporary DJ. The talk felt very much like a remix, an audio-visual collage of seemingly disparate materials that were held together by Miller's persona of DJ Spooky.

It was the performance of this persona that for me represented the most intriguing performative dimension of Miller's talk. In some ways, the entire talk functioned as an elaborate performance of a highly complex and fluid subject position. At one point, Miller discussed Alex Steinweiss's 1939 invention of record cover art. He suggested that the advent of record cover art might be construed as a democratization of culture, the movement of visual art out of the elite space of the art gallery and into mass society (this was one of the few instances in which Miller explicitly addressed the colloquium's focus on musical politics although the idea of "resistant sounds" was implicit throughout). Miller then passed around several vinyl recordings that he described as featuring some of his favourite examples of record cover art. Included were the aforementioned Marshall McLuhan record, a limited edition copy of the Talking Heads' *Speaking In Tongues* featuring art work by famed American artist Robert Rauschenberg, as well as several of Spooky's own recordings.

I would argue that in addition to firmly entrenching his position within DJ culture through the fetishization of vinyl recordings, Miller used these records as a strategic means of positioning (and performing) his identity as DJ Spooky in relation to several key cultural figures including an influential media theorist (McLuhan) and a celebrated visual artist (Rauschenberg). Perhaps not surprisingly, the LP version of Spooky's recording entitled "Optometry" features art work by Miller on the front and a spiral image derived from Marcel Duchamp's 1926 Dada film *Anemic Cinema* on the back. The musical content of the recording features Spooky in musical dialogue with contemporary free jazz players including William Parker, Mathew Shipp, and Joe McPhee. During his talk, Miller would go on to reference the work of Duke Ellington, Richard Wagner, John Cage, Edgar Varèse, George Antheil, and many others. At one point, he showed a photo of himself with Yoko Ono and Thurston Moore (of Sonic Youth fame) with whom he has collaborated in the past. Within the space of an hour, Miller had, through various forms of sampling--audio, visual, and intellectual--positioned himself in relation to, and in dialogue with, virtually every major avant-garde musical and artistic movement of the past 80 years from Dada to conceptualism to free jazz and beyond. For Miller, it's all in the mix.

Miller's talk raised a number of provocative questions for me. Are there limits, I wonder, to the kind of musical hybridity and dialogism enabled by digital technology and espoused by Miller's "choreography of instants"? What is gained through such extreme dependence on mediatized technologies and what is lost? Miller's talk also raised questions for me about the complex relationship between theory and practice. My sense is that to view Miller's talk as "theory" and

DJ Spooky's club performance that evening as "practice" would be to miss the innovation and cultural importance of both. In my view, each aspect of Miller's multi-faceted career might best be regarded as both a "practical theory" and a trenchant "theoretical practice."