For the past decade Paul D Miller (aka DJ Spooky Tha Subliminal Kid) has been recognised with increasing acclaim in two distinct cultural fields: the popular world of electronic music, where Spooky is a cutting-edge DJ, and the more elite world of contemporary art, where the New York-based Miller has presented audio works, paintings and, more recently, digital prints. With the recent release of his 128-page manifesto, Rhythm Science (2004), it’s easy to see why Miller is so acclaimed. An artist who uses multiple forms of digital technology to explore the development of hybrid forms of human identity in today’s global networks, his is a powerful manifestation of the cybernetic aesthetic that pervades both contemporary art and popular culture today.

Miller’s Rebirth of a Nation is a ‘remix’ of DW Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915), the blockbuster silent film about the American Civil War and the Southern Reconstruction. For nearly a century Griffith’s film has been rightly regarded as both brilliant and heinous. Its narrative complexity is staggering for a film of its day, combining a fast-paced story with exciting chases, dynamic crowd scenes, dramatic battle sequences and stunning outdoor photography. At the same time, it is an extremely vehement piece of racist propaganda, presenting images that demonised African Americans and justified their torture and murder at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan.

Miller’s Rebirth... unfolded across three separate screens. The central screen presented an edited, mostly chronological version of the original film, sequences of shots and intensities which were digitally filtered or overlaid with a variety of different types of moving image, including shots from other narrative sequences in the film, circuit diagrams, maps, geometrical frames and excerpts from two Bill T Jones dance pieces. The two outer
screens presented identical images, consisting of flashbacks or flash-forwards of the ambiguous central story. Miller's remix cut the original film down to one-third of its original three-hour length. By repeating significant shots and sequences, he focused on the racism of Griffith's film, as well as its central political and romantic storylines, which involve the intertwined lives of a Southern and a Northern family.

Rebirth... was performed live. Miller mixed both audio and video as the film unfolded. The score was eerie, quiet and unsettling - a mix of bells, violins and orchestra sounds with occasional hip-hop beats and, at one point (during the infamous Reconstruction Statehouse scene), an echoing sample of Robert Johnson singing the blues. Miller seemed to mix the music fairly continuously. It was less easy to tell, however, how much the video was mixed live. Because the narrative remained coherent, it seemed that Miller only mixed the two side screens.

Miller's remix emphasised the uncanny parallels between the world that Griffith represented and the brave new world of today. Both worlds, it suggested, are beset with wars and violence, ethnic and gender stereotypes, terror of migration and miscegenation and fears of stolen elections and the abuse of power. At the end of Rebirth... the Klan has triumphed, just as it did in the original version, and the North and South have once again been united in the false unity of their shared 'ethnic' whiteness. Yet the naturalness of this state of affairs has been thoroughly undermined by Miller's live performance which, while echoing the earliest days of cinema with its live musical accompaniment, also shows how radically things have changed today as a result of globalization and digital technologies.

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A sprawling geometry of TV's, leaking sound and light, clutter the space like a web viewed from ground level. An appropriate alignment for this presumably ironically titled exhibition, which seems to foreground ways of forming connections between artists and curators rather than any links between actual works.

There are a few beautiful individual works here, notably Mark Aerial Waller's ritualistic time-shifting mythopoeia Reversion of the Beast (2004) and Grace Weir's Dust Defying Gravity (2003). Weir's film builds up slowly, an almost silent tracking shot over a collection of scientific instruments in an empty room. The instruments, all designed to amplify, augment or modify human perception, here become uncannily threatening while the rich texture and smooth movement of the film becomes increasingly seductive. To a constantly enhancing monorhythmic intensity, dust particles emerge slowly into the field of vision, floating, multiplying and shifting like a viral optical drone, sucked upward by some unperceived force. Eventually they overwhelm the image, and become the texture of the film. It is both a horrific and beautiful epiphany, a moment of the camera as vision slips from the perceived objects to the instrument of perception.

David Blandy's lip-synching in What is Soul (2002) resonates with Orhan Fox's performance in Consciousness, Understanding and Furt (2004). Fox, as in her previous work, plays all the roles in her video, producing an ironic reiteration of '70s feminist performance art and history, media representation and productions of femininity. Both works are most interesting in their failures. In Blandy's piece the heartfelt earnestness of his pathetic mimicry, as heores directly at the camera while miming to soul music, undercuts simplistic histories of appropriation and containment in relation to African-American music and politics. Similarly, it is in the gaps between Fox's stereotyped roles and her attempts at reproduction where something humorous or perhaps critical emerges. This is further complicated by Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard's Everybody Else is Wrong (2004). The video consists of documentary style interviews with couples talking about the role of music in their relationships. The interviewees, without Fox's self-awareness, play out and communicate clichéd roles so accurately that their words become completely meaningless, and also strangely and deeply touching.

ANDY WEIR