*Popular Music* (2007) Volume 26/3. Copyright © 2007 Cambridge University Press, pp. 505–512
Printed in the United Kingdom

# Essay Review

# Spookier than Spooky

***Rhythm Science*. By Paul D Miller (aka DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid). Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Mediawork/The MIT Press, 2004. 128 pp. ISBN-10:0-262-63287-X, ISBN-13:978-0-262-63287-4**
doi:10.1017/S0261143007001419

The academic book review – like its related genres, the summary, précis and abstract – values processes of condensation; it seeks to reduce the (always essentially) messy complexity of books to statements that elucidate what books are about. And so beginning in academic mode I might say that Miller's *Rhythm Science* is an extended essay on the following interrelated topics: on the processes of sampling as exhibited in the work of DJs; on how those processes have resonance with other creative, artistic, critical and investigative activities (such as photography, film, semiotics and literature during, though not exclusively, the course of the twentieth century); and how such processes might produce certain kinds of creative and maybe even cultural and political freedoms. However, one illustrative quotation regarding what, for Miller, the sample is, immediately shows that we are misrepresenting our object in stating that Miller's book is *about* the culture of sampling: 'Sampling is a *new* way of doing something that's been with us for a long time: creating with found objects. The rotation gets thick. The constraints get thin. The languages evolve and learn to speak in *new* forms, *new* thoughts. The sound of thought becomes legible again at the edge of the *new* meanings. After all, you have to learn a *new* language. Take the idea and fold it in on itself. Think of it as laptop jazz, cybernetic jazz, nu-bop, ILLbient – a nameless, formless, shapeless concept given structure by the rhythms. And that's a good start' (my emphasis, p. 25). Traditionally, academic prose has (and continues to have) a certain self-effacing frugality to it; it aspires to being the transparent, abstract medium through which material is both brought to us and also kept at a certain distance so it can be subjected to processes of analysis and understood. Miller claims to distance himself from the academy and its modes; he notes that although DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid 'was embraced by the art world and the critical establishment' (as is attested by this book being published by MIT Press), 'I'm not really concerned with the academy per se. Frankly', as he continues, 'by the twenty-first century, the academy is such a reflection of class structure and hierarchy that it tends to cloud any real progressive context of criticism and discourse' (p. 48). Thus, it is no surprise that Miller's language is not that of the academy. Rather, it seems to have become both saturated with Miller and his persona (DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid) and with his object of study, the 'rhythms' of a music made up of samples. So, for example, even though the first sentence of the passage just quoted begins uneventfully enough, the



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next two small sentences unleash a certain duple-time rhythm into the prose that is then echoed on a local level by the repeated one-two of 'new forms, new thoughts', and on a broader rhythmic scale by the following two sentences, which are brought into rhythmic relationship with each other by the 'new' in their respective endings: 'new meanings . . . new language'. 'New', this passage's (and indeed the whole book's) *idée fixe*, then gets rescripted into street savvy 'nu' in the midst of a list ('laptop jazz, cybernetic jazz, nu-bop, ILLbient') whose rhythm carries on the practice throughout this passage of transforming lists into infectious rhythmic movements, a practice that reverberates further through the proceeding accents on '*name*less, *form*-less, *shape*less', only to be brought to a halt by the laconic final sentence: a highly attractive snap of the fingers as the prose swivels on its heals and walks off, leaving us with the process of disentangling ourselves from the virtuosity of its music – it's most immediately striking feature – in order to work out what it might mean – something that comes to us much slower. If in fact at all. For the next wave of prose again snaps us up almost immediately again into a certain music rather than a clear meaning, and so on and so forth, *ad infinitum.* This is not a book *about* the culture of sampling, this *is*, according to Miller, what proper, liberatory sampling should be: a rhythm science. Miller confesses: 'I'm more concerned with practice' (rather than description or critical distance), '[with] how to foster a milieu where dialog about culture becomes a way to move into the pictures we describe with words, texts, sounds . . . The method becomes ''actionary'' rather than ''re-actionary''', and, as a result, 'you end up with a culture that is healthier and more dynamic' (p. 13).

So what is rhythm science? 'Rhythm science. Rhyme time. Rough trade. Sound. Think of it as a mirror held up to a culture that has learned to fly again, that has released itself from the constraints of the ground drift through dataspace, continuously morphing its form in response to diverse streams of information' (p. 5). Again, one asks the book a question and rather than giving one back a straightforward answer it sings one a song – a song seasoned, as is this book's common stylistic *modus operandi*, with the rhythmic play of rap, and a certain *jouissance* created by the forming of new words that is common to science fiction, radical prose since James Joyce, and the neologistic poetics of much contemporary theory and philosophy, by all of which this book is deeply infused (or rather which this book samples into the rhythmicised music of its prose). Is one therefore being prudish in resisting the book's fundamental seduction, which is to encourage us to submit to the flow of its music rather than to interrogate its content? Can one justify standing back from its effect, alienating oneself from it in the name of knowing it, to demand a 'proper' answer to basic questions, such as 'what is rhythm science?' If one were being true to the model for this book's language (the complex, collage-like structures of the truly radical DJ) then the answer to the first question is 'yes', the second, 'no'. For although the music that a DJ such as DJ Spooky produces is hardly limited to a club where it can be danced to – DJ Spooky being notable for creating/performing pieces for other environments, such as art galleries and traditional concert-hall situations – the notion of getting into the *flow* rather than, as it were, the *know* remains fundamental both to how we are to approach the book and as to what constitutes the book's content. The message would seem to be: you've got to be in it to win it!

In the same ways that we find ourselves having to submit to the flow of Miller's book, and to submitting our bodies to the flow of the DJ's music rather than standing un-moved (in both senses of the word) at the bar, so we have to submit ourselves on a certain level to the movements of the world in which we find ourselves. Like many

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of the theorists and philosophers by whom, loosely, this book is inspired (for this reader, Derrida and Deleuze, in particular, seem to haunt the pages), Miller is relatively consistent in his aversion to any kind of critical or aesthetic vantage point with metaphysical pretensions. Since the world is now almost euphorically pluralistic (so Miller asserts), and since one manifestation and cause of this global plurality is the net of highly complex informational technology by which it is covered, we should start from that point, rather than imagining that we could be elsewhere. So for Miller it is a good thing that 'people are becoming more technological in a way that is at heart how we live and breathe and think in the everyday'; it is important that '[y]oung composers . . . think about the world around them, an environment made up of wireless networks, cellular relays, hybrid systems, rootless philosophies, immigrants from countries on the verge of transformation'; it is a bad thing that '[too] many people continue looking backwards to 12-note music and Wagner'. We have to give up the position of cultural mandarin looking disdainfully at our technology-drenched world: 'In industrialized countries, children come to understand video games, how to use cellphones, and how to navigate their urban and suburban superstructures. They aren't alienated from these technological and geographical phenomenon, they are born into them' (pp. 16–17).

## First break

At this point I move to my first critical intervention; I go and stand at the bar, out of the immediate flow of this book and the dance it inspires in me. If one were born into slavery would that mean one was not alienated from the condition (the context) of slavery in which one found oneself? The fact that slaves do try to escape would seem to imply that the answer were no! To take another example: in Marx, alienation is exactly that produced by the context (industrial capitalism) into which one is born. Was Marx wrong? If, for example, it is the case that we are born into a world of cellphones and the like, if such technology does not immediately strike us as uncanny, if it is the case that we even desire these things – none of this necessitates the conclusion that we are not alienated from them. In fact, it can just as easily lead us to the completely opposite and far more devastating conclusion: that we are so alienated from them that we have, to all extents and purposes, become *self-contained* in our alienation. Next time you are on a bus (i.e. if you are not already in the alienation of your car) put down your cellphone and look at the blank despair of the average cellphone user as they fiddle with the technology with a kind of dull obsessiveness, redolent of the pornography user, utterly unable to be still, just where they are, and thus alienated from themselves but hoping, through an endless stream of text messaging and frequently meaningless calls ('Hi, I'm on the bus', 'What are you doing?', 'Oh, you know . . . nothing'), that via the technology they will be able to fill the void of their own alienated sense of lack with plenitudinous moments of social reciprocity. You don't need to have read any of the Marxists on the commodity fetish to realise that a large part of the obsessiveness we feel in relation to our cellphones and e-mail and the like is the product not of the satisfaction that we get from these things, but from that which they constantly withhold from us. We are, thus, fundamentally alienated from these things, for although we may financially own them, and in a certain sense be fluent in the practice of using them, they, in fact, spiritually own us. Miller is positive – 'Life is interesting . . . People really don't think about the absolute wonders that surround us and make this life livable and our way of thinking sustainable'

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(p. 20); 'I'm just happy to be alive in this era' (p. 100) – and I'm pleased for him. My anger is not an injunction against happiness; it is directed against the misery that happiness often works to mask. For cellphones and e-mail have *not* necessarily made us happier – although they have made certain, but certainly not all, things easier – and more importantly the kind of global information euphoria of which such things are part have not necessarily made us happier, either. The percentage of people on medication in the industrial world for depression- (and thus alienation-) related diseases of the soul (to appropriate a phrase from Cornel West) is staggering, and ever on the increase. To ignore the role that our technologically information-saturated world plays in the production of this despair, would be to ignore context, the acknowledgment of which being one of Miller's primary critical commandments. Of course, there are moments when Miller acknowledges the problems; but (again) we are not encouraged to dwell on them, because the claims made on us by the rhythmic flow of the prose's music prevail over any desire to stop dancing, sit down, and get critically active. (Few people will thank you if you deliberately blow the fuse on the stereo at a party.) There seem too many places in *Rhythm Science* where the music of Miller's prose, like Prozac, blots out the despair produced by the very things Miller places in front of us as the key to our liberations. (To take another example, in the attempt to inspire us all into following our own creative path, Miller states the following: 'If you follow through with whatever you're into, you can do it. It doesn't matter if it's not consistent, there's a market or niche for every possible endeavor under the sun' (p. 56). The effects of the recent deregulation of the media and the subsequent domination of the markets by Titanic media corporations has proven that this is categorically not true, and that what is allowed access to the sphere of commodity exchange and the market is increasingly censored according to unambiguously political agendas. [On this point, see Martin Scherzinger's excellent 'Music, corporate power, and the age of unending war', *Cultural Critique*.]) When Miller's music moves into this modality then its flow (its loop), I assert, has to be broken.

## Second break

True to my dialectical leanings, my second moment of critical intervention involves me in moving to the bar (again) – this time, however, to resist submission to my self rather than to Miller. For my readers might have noted during the course of the previous paragraph that as the (genuine) passion of my critique gained momentum, my prose began to move toward being music, rather than a more sober and analytical form of critique. (The moral of the story would seem to be that if you wish to get critically sober about music, leave the venue and don't stand drinking at the bar.) In the same way that Miller's music can work to obfuscate despair, so my music has, in part, obfuscated the critique within Miller's music. There is indeed a certain wide-eyed naivety to some of Miller's statements that, I feel, undermines the integrity of his 'actionary' intent; it is far spookier out there than Spooky's 'spookings' are prepared to admit; there are moments when it does almost seem that we are being asked to submit to a mimetic replication of the structures of global information technology as a replacement for the now (apparently) outmoded notion of the subject. ('I would say that the twenty-first-century self is so fully immersed in and defined by the data that surrounds it, we are entering an era of multiplex consciousness' [p. 61]. 'Multiplex consciousness' is a positive term in Miller's essay.) Nevertheless, in places it is also

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being argued that the reason we enter fully into the context of our world is in order to transform it. Thus, deliberately and delightfully painting a cartoon-like picture mixed with the Messianic overtones of the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999), Miller writes the following: 'The Subliminal Kid breaks into the Reality Studio and fights the Mob by manipulating tape loops, hoping that if the association lines holding the past and the present together are ruptured, the future will leak through' (p. 13). The DJ does not quote parts of other musics; quotation is authoritarian. Rather, he samples, which means that he presents quotations from the already-existent in such a way as to undermine the authority of their meanings and origins; he defamiliarises the recognisable quoted unit and in doing so, so Miller asserts, aligns himself with a long line of such practices stretching back across the entire twentieth century. Working in tandem with the givens of postructuralist theory, Miller seeks to unteather sound from being clamped down to meaning since (to sample from various passages), by releasing sound 'from the constraints of the ground drift' that is created by the gravity of meaning, a culture can once again learn 'to fly' (p. 5) and flow as opposed to know, to return to an earlier remark of mine. If the present refuses to accept the meanings that the past has given to itself, if it ruptures the 'association lines holding the past and the present together', futurity becomes a possibility (p. 13). We have to keep 'offering iterations of version and versions of everything', there has to be 'all change all the time', since 'inertia' is 'not just boring', but also 'against the basic principles of physics!' and thus of culture and our political freedoms as well (p. 17); music must be allowed 'always' to be 'metaphor . . . an open signifier, an invisible, utterly malleable material', it must never become 'fixed or cast in stone'. Hence the importance of 'Rhythm science', this radical culture of musical defamiliarisation, which 'uses an endless recontextualizing as a core compositional strategy', a process of endless recontextualising that if applied to life in general, using the possibilities inherent (but as of yet, so Miller implies, not fully actualised) within informational technology, could be a model for the creation of a truly pluralistic world (pp. 20–1). To keep the faith we must not allow anything to solidify and become ideology; '[e]very story' must 'lead to another story to another story to another story' (p. 21); 'keeping the boundaries between musical styles', and stories, and identities, and concepts 'in a world of total flux' is 'crazy'; we have, thus, to keep finding ways 'to flip things so that people could check the vibe' of how things could be if things were better. We have to keep confronting ourselves with the injunction: 'Break the loops' (p. 113).

## Third break

Again, the prose takes on a rhythmically hypnotic musical quality. And so (once again) I move back to the bar for my third and final moment of critique. Early on in 2005 Paul Miller came to the university where I teach (University at Buffalo, State University of New York), giving a lecture in the afternoon and then reappearing at a downtown Buffalo club the same night as DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid. Generously, he had come in support of a benefit to create funds for the legal fees that Steven Kurtz, a professor in the Media Department and member of the Critical Arts Ensemble, has accrued as a result of having been charged by the Federal Government under new anti-terrorism laws. Steven's story is a grisly one, which I won't go into here. Suffice it to say that his situation is a frightening and sobering illustration of the degrees to which America's present administration is prepared to go; unnerving proof of how we are increasingly under duress; evidence, yet again, that politicians are more

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than aware of the threat posed by intellectual and creative activity; a portent of what it might be like to be an artist or an intellectual should the political situation continue to swerve in the radically negative fashion of recent years. We were concerned then when Miller came and we are still concerned now. The event was loaded and our situation has remained so. I write this review from out of the continuation of this negative context.

Miller's lecture was essentially concerned with variations on the themes outlined in *Rhythm Science.* As an illustration of the subversive powers of sampling, towards the end of his lecture, Miller presented footage of George W. Bush's State of the Union Address, but with Bush's words morphed so as to reveal the realities that they sought to mask. It was a satisfying moment for all of us there, since no one is really under any illusions as to what is going on politically. There was a certain comfort to this sampled Bush pulling all those characteristically hammy facial expressions and rhetorical gestures of paper-thin sincerity, since in being completely incapable of registering that they had merely become the filter for the transmission of a message the polar opposite to the one intended, his physiognomic gesticulations started to look even more thickly lumpy and carelessly cosmetic than usual. Moreover, considering Bush's tendency towards remaining blissfully unconscious of his various tellingly self-defeating verbal blunders, this morphed and sampled Bush, to a degree, merely accentuated an existing reality. But the satisfaction that we, the audience, took in it also left a sour taste in my mouth. For the defamiliarisation of the sample (whether of text, information, image or sound) into an 'open signifier' that can be morphed like so much 'utterly malleable material'; the refusal to let a story remain untouched by transmogrification so that it can resist oily slippage into 'another story [in]to another story [in]to another story'; the fracturing of 'the association lines holding the past and present together', which essentially amounts to the destruction of a certain kind of historical memory so that 'the future will leap through' – all of this is *exactly* that in which the Bush administration specialises. Thus, they are, to all extents and purposes, master of a certain rhythm science; theirs is a politics of breaking loops. (The old-fashioned word for it would probably be propaganda.) On that cold afternoon earlier in 2005 we were wrong in that lecture theatre to imagine that we could take warmth from our laughter at a morphed Bush, since we were essentially laughing at what is being done to us. And that should have left us feeling very cold indeed.

Miller asserts that we should not remain attached to illusory notions of the fixed, not even with regard to our notion of self: we live in a pluralistic world of contradictions and so we too should become contradictory. That, Miller implies, is what would keep things moving and stop us from being pinned down: 'The multiplex concept of the self seems key if you want to avoid the context' (p. 112). Contradiction is liberation, so it seems: 'Hell, Walt Whitman lived in Brooklyn, the same borough as Biggie Smalls. ''So what if I contradict myself – I am large, I contain multitudes'', is a famous line, but it could just as easily have been Biggie's as Whitman's' (p. 65). It could also just as easily have been Dick Cheyney's or Donald Rumsfeld's. Should that bother us, or would Miller, if pressed, assert that there is a distinction to be made between what artists need to do and what politicians ought; that artists should attack the notion of truth whereas politicians should endeavour to actually speak it? It would seem as if art and politics are separate spheres working according to different principles. And maybe that is the case. Yet the music of Miller's prose in *Rhythm Science* carries this reader (at least) endlessly forward to a vision of the world that is redeemed because it

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has completely accepted rhythm science. But could that world not also be one of total propaganda?

## Last dance

Later that day I went to the club in downtown Buffalo, and DJ Spooky spun and thus spun me round too, as he has managed to do every time in the past ten years when I have found myself again in his orbit. I was moved and thus I moved, and that was indeed as a result of a music working at least to the basic technical principles of rhythm science, a music that I would not have wished any other way. Evidently, I am suspicious of some of the broader cultural and political claims Miller makes for what essentially amounts to a culture of sampling. And yet, to appropriate an appropriate line, '[that] night a DJ saved my life'. It is profoundly liberating, that utterly recognisable Dionysian moment (invoking the god here is not too strong) when in the middle of the dance floor one finds oneself transported by something utterly familiar that in quotidian life one's ear would barely notice but which now has become one's life itself. There is something utopian and even messianic about it: that that which is usually not significant has become the portal through which some sense of revelation has suddenly shone through. Next time you are standing at a bar in a club, watch the dancers as their arms rise into the air, notice their closed eyes and their heads slowly shaking with a kind of ecstatic disbelief at the impossible reality of how good they feel. For there is indeed little that feels as good as that moment when one stops dancing (i.e. as an act of one's will) and one starts, as it were, to be danced. It is a bejewelled moment that propels us to keep returning to the club, to that bejewelled place, and means – to nod briefly in the direction of Donna Summer – that the last dance of the evening will only ever truly be the last when the world itself has become bejewelled and thus, itself, become that dance.

I can't help thinking that Paul Miller's deeply and laudably Romantic yearning (and, ironically, there is a strong strain of Romanticism in *Rhythm Science*), a yearning for the world outside to be bejewelled like the dance inside, leads him, metaphorically, to open the doors of the club so as to let the rhythm science stream forth, hoping thus that the dancers' euphoria will flood out the world's aporia. For indeed, dance is the universal solvent. But, as I have illustrated, what may well be redemptive in one situation can be completely oppressive and authoritarian in another. If one of our responsibilities for living in the world is to ensure the preservation of places that are bejewelled, that must always be accompanied by the preservation and development of tools that help us to distinguish between real jewels and fake ones, between that which might lead us towards redemption and that which leads towards unimaginable horrors. That tool is critique, and part of its sadness is that, by definition, it cannot remain on the dance floor but must step back to the bar and resist submission to the music so that the music can be known – both the music of our world as it is and the music that hides that music from us. One of the places where that sad and melancholy tool has traditionally been *and continues to be* fashioned is the academy, and although I would be the first to agree with Miller's periodic criticisms of it during the course of *Rhythm Science*, and although it is rife with problems, the academy is also a place that is facing increasing external, corporate, and political pressures to give up its critical function and to become a kind of department store where students merely purchase transferable skills that allow them to be immediately incorporated into present

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economic and political conditions but equip them with next to no abilities to understand and thus resist those conditions. And so I end by personally urging Miller to curb his tendency towards sometimes rather cheap digs at academia: first, since they strike me as the symptoms of an inverted snobbery; second, since Miller's own critical practice, 'actionary' or not, requires quite serious, and sober critique. The end of critique, and the closing of the academy, might well be the herald of our last dance. And then we would be left (and then, only if we are lucky) at the sidelines watching another dance that might then never end: the dance of domination. That is, the dance of death.

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