

"A Mirror Permutation of the Nation".
Technology and the Cultural Politics of Race in DJ
Spooky's *Re-birth of a Nation*

Abstract: On its 100th anniversary, D.W. Griffith's silent drama *The Birth of Nation* (1915) is still attracting critical attention, both as a masterpiece of cinematic technique and as an infamous racially biased account of the birth of US society. This article presents a critical reading of *The Birth of Nation* through its re-take performed by the African-American DJ and conceptual artist Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky between 2004 and 2008 in his audio-video practice *Re-birth of Nation*. Drawing from Cultural Studies and Media Theory, this article investigates the intersection between technique, practices of visual memorialization and racialization, and the politics of perception in both artworks. In the first part of the article, I present a critical analysis of *The Birth of a Nation* as a 'hegemonic narration', in which avant-garde aesthetical innovation is put at the service of a racialized account of history. In the second part of the article, I turn my attention to *Re-birth of a Nation*, by considering how experimental practices and the techniques of DJ culture may help transform 'History' (official history) into a series of (unauthorised) histories.

Keywords: The Birth of a Nation, Re-birth of a Nation, *D.W. Griffith*, *Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky*, *montage*, *remix*

"Have you seen a ghost?"
"I didn't see anything but I thought I felt something"
"That is the ghost."
(Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*)

Re-birth of a Nation by Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) is a critical re-take on the 1915 US colossal movie *The Birth of a Nation* by David W. Griffith, initiated as a live remix experiment conducted between 2004 and 2008 in international gallery spaces, and only later edited as a film for a 2008 DVD release. A not-so-new artwork now (considering the over-accelerated rhythms of cultural production and critical reception and reporting), *Re-birth of Nation* is however still worthy a further mention on a significant anniversary: in 2015, Griffith's silent drama *The Birth of a Nation*, on which DJ Spooky's remix is based, turns in fact 100.

This recurrence is the occasion for a renewed, wider interest towards the 1915 movie, which has been over the decades equally lauded as an unprecedented technically innovative masterpiece and criticised as the one of the most infamous expressions of colour-line divided American society (allegedly reported as having been a recruiting tool for Ku Klux Klan's members).¹ The oscillation between the acknowledgement of the extraordinary technological significance of Griffith's movie and the critical articulation of the enormous burden that is (righteously so)

¹ A first version of this article has appeared in Italian as Beatrice Ferrara, "A Mirror Permutation of the Nation: DJ Spooky remixa *La nascita di una nazione* di D.W. Griffith", in Rossella Bonito Oliva, ed., *Identità in dialogo: La Liberté des mers* (Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2012), 93-106. I am extremely grateful to my anonymous *Anglistica* peer reviewers for their acute remarks and for having invited me to undertake further reading, challenging me to explore new ideas. I have integrated their inputs into the text whenever possible, considering the limits of space and focus of the article. As an example of the current interest in Griffith's film, consider the June 2015 Commonwealth Fund Conference on American History at UCL (UK), entitled "In the Shadow of *The Birth of a Nation*: A Centennial Assessment of Griffith's Film".

² It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a survey of the enormous corpus of critical literature and public interest developed around Griffith's film. Recently, Melvin Stoke has provided a deep reading of the film's reception and its cultural and political impacts in the extensive study *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of the "Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (New York: Oxford U. P., 2007). A comprehensive reflection on both the artistic achievements of the film and its racist stance (and, per extension, on its fortunes within film scholarship, in which the film has been subjected to apologist readings as well as fierce condemnation) has been carried out, amongst the others, by Daniel Bernardi. See "The Birth of a Nation: Integrating Race into the Narrator System", in Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky, eds., *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 82-96.

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London, Athlone Press, 1986), 11.

⁴ I am well aware of the absence of a univocal, pacified definition of "remix culture" and "remix theory" – since the concepts have been widely used over the past decade in contexts significantly varying from one another. Although I will not embark on a discussion of "remix culture" and "remix theory" in themselves in this context, it is important to make clear that my main reference point on the topic for this article is the study *Remix: Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* by Eduardo Navas (Wien: Springer Verlag, 2007).

attached to it in terms of politics of representation, has granted the 1915 colossal an impressively (albeit complicated) long after-life. Endowed with a quasi-revenant status, *The Birth of a Nation* regularly re-appears as a compelling object of study within several strains of critical scholarship – from film theory to critical reception studies, cultural studies and race theory, and so on – or as the object of non-scholarly public debates.² In this context, the 2015 centennial anniversary is only the last occasion on the list to allow for a reflection on the inextricable relation between the technical and the ethical levels in Griffith's film, and its role in the formation of the modern racialized regime of representation.

With these concepts as its background, the first part of this article unfolds a critical reading of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* as a 'hegemonic narration'. I will highlight how avant-garde aesthetical innovation and the cultural dimension of the historical process of racialized biopolitical subjectivation of black Americans converge in the movie's deployment of "organic montage" (a term I draw from Gilles Deleuze).³ This technique allows for the emergence of a specific 'master narrative', which founds and maintains its claims to 'authority' and 'authenticity' on the exclusion and marginalization of 'other' experiences by way of an aesthetic operation, whose suggestive power lies beyond a reductive ideological reading.

In the second part of the article I will turn my attention to DJ Spooky's *Re-birth of a Nation*, which I will consider as a "re-narration" of Griffith's narration on the birth of 'the (American) Nation'. I will advance a few considerations on remix culture and its transcultural relevance in contemporary art, by considering how experimental practices may help transform 'History' (official history) into a series of (unauthorised) histories. I will not merely focus on the 'meaning(s)' attached to DJ Spooky's artwork, but also to its material dimension, i.e. that of a digital audio-visual practice, which plays on the ways in which we *perceive* difference.

Throughout its unfolding, in discussing the relation between technology and the cultural politics of race, this article will constantly try to turn to a parallel genealogy of cultural critique than the strictly scholarly one. In fact, while obviously relying on a set of scholarly argumentations, I will at the same time focus on art-working as a modality of critique, expanding on DJ Spooky's use of remix techniques as a form of theory-making in itself (*remix culture* or *remix theory*).⁴ The article will suggest that DJ Spooky's artistic research – in engaging with Griffith's 1915 movie – provides interesting insights on the materiality of race in media culture, inviting a reflection on the ways in which *difference is perceived* in the digital age.

The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Construction of a Hegemonic Narration

The US president Woodrow Wilson has been legendary credited with the exclamation "It's like writing history with lightning!", which he would have let out

when watching the first screening of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* back in 1915.⁵ Be it true or not, it was exactly with the quickness and impact of a lightning that Griffith's cinematic narration of the 'birth of the Nation' hit the US. For the many Americans who watched this unprecedented colossal Hollywood production, the knockout was massive: through the eyes straight to the brain, to memory, to History.

In 1915, the US were just recovering from the Civil War – a historical event in which many different geographical, economic, political and cultural elements had converged to generate an explosive situation: the South vs. the North, war chronicles being repeated and distorted from both sides of the Ocean, the interests of land- and slave-owners, the rise of industry, the cruel history of slavery, the imagination of and projections on an African 'motherland', the white routes of trade, abolitionism, the secret routes of the black Underground Railroad escaping routes leading to freedom, the disappointments of life as 'freemen', politics, corruption, money, the KKK, the struggle for black voting rights...⁶ In the attempt to provide a unitary narration of such a complex, fragmentary situation – in which conflicting viewpoints co-existed – Griffith's artistic intuition was to invent a new cinematographic narrative technique, which would exploit fragmentation as a way towards unitary story-telling: i.e. montage (editing). By filming, cutting, and reassembling together several pieces of separated strains of continuous narration, *The Birth of Nation* would thus provide a unitary narration of the birth of the US, through the alternate narration of the diverse life incidents of two competing families. One from the North and one from the South, the two families would eventually come to merge at the end of the filmic narration, thanks to a double, criss-crossed marriage.

The technique of editing (montage and alternate narration), which is now totally familiar to 2015 film spectators and therefore almost totally unacknowledged, felt indeed absolutely overwhelming to the 1915 public of *The Birth of a Nation*, and the affective, emotional and physical impact of the film – and its consequent success – were unprecedented. Gilles Deleuze famously highlighted this aspect in his philosophical reading of Griffith's cinema, for which he proposed the name of "parallel editing" or, alternatively, "organic montage".⁷ According to the French philosopher, Griffith's editing technique proceeds – i.e. generates movement and action, which means the narrative plot of the film – through series of parallelisms. Characters and incidents are chained to each other within binary relations, which are in turn juxtaposed according to their internal differences (blacks and whites, wealthy classes and the poor, and so on), thus creating a specific organic rhythm. Series never really meet, while they flow together, producing a rhythm that results in a coherent narration resting on Manichean differences.⁸

In *The Birth of a Nation*, "organic montage" contributes to the articulation of a hegemonic narration, a master narrative, whose political implications descend from an aesthetic impingement on human perception. In the movie, the complexity of

⁵ This anecdote is also quoted in DJ Spooky's trailer of *Re-birth of a Nation*.

⁶ For this historical background, my reference is Oliviero Bergamini, *Storia degli Stati Uniti* (Bari-Roma, Laterza).

⁷ For the sake of completeness, it should be clarified that the concept of "organic montage" is used by Deleuze with reference to two major Griffith's films, i.e. *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* (1916), a subsequent film that the American film-maker directed as a way to engage with the controversies raised by *The Birth of a Nation*.

⁸ It is important to underline here that for Deleuze the technique of montage is not instrumentally subordinated to narration. On the contrary, according to Deleuze, narration is immanently generated through montage.

narration (the stories of two families) is made cohesive thanks to the alternate cut-and-reprise of several narrative threads, spinning around a main narrative overarching plot (war), and thus adhering to a single central nucleus: a origin myth, bright, illuminating and powerful as a flash of lighting exploding in a pitch black night sky. According to such a myth, the US would be born from the ‘coming together’ of two separate territories, thanks to the intervention of bold white knights, the Klan members, who knew how to ‘keep blacks at bay’ – those same blacks that, according to this historical mythology – had been ‘the single cause of war’. By scrupulously arranging every single frame as a self-sufficient, complete section, Griffith deployed numerous close-up shots aimed at capturing the actors’ facial expressions in all their intensity. The film also featured entertaining shows-within-the-show, such as dances, for the total engagement of the spectator. Everything was cut and sewn together all over again, through a process that was *modelled after* our (body)mind-processes, in which we perceive, select, cut, synthesize, linearize, associate, merge...

Brilliantly constructed, this specific all too white narration could easily become an effective propaganda tool, an ideologically charged memory act, a mono-linguistic account of American history. A moving (in the sense of both ‘touching’ and ‘in motion’) technical and aesthetic study of the ways in which we collectively memorize, *The Birth of a Nation* claimed a realistic approach to history and its density by way of a highly innovative, super elaborated technique. Simultaneously, its awe-inspiring innovative narrative style configured an “itinerary of silencing”, i.e. an act of ‘erasure’ of other potential narrations of American history – those same narrations that are resurrected as digital ghosts in DJ Spooky’s *Re-birth of a Nation*.⁹

⁹ The expression “itinerary of silencing” is drawn from Gayatri C. Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasim (London-New York: Routledge, 1990), 31.

Re-birth of a Nation: Remixing History

Jazz time versus Hollywood time ... on the mind-screens of contemporary America.
(Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky, *Material Memories*)

Cutting back from 1915 to 2008, when DJ Spooky’s *Re-birth of a Nation* is released as a DVD, the link between image and hegemony, and more widely between perception and the bio/noo-politics of communication, is still very strong – as the trailer of *Re-birth of a Nation* makes clear, suggesting DJ Spooky’s artwork’s critical positioning and conjunctural dimension. The trailer opens with a precise framing of Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, in which the link between US cultural hegemony and the construction of a dominant historical narrative is discussed. It ends instead with an introduction to DJ Spooky’s *Re-birth* ‘re-take’ on Griffith, in which it is explained how the artwork applies DJ culture cut ‘n’ mix techniques to modernist Hollywood cinema. In between the opening and closing sections of the trailer, the African-American artist inserts some visual references to his ‘historical present’, i.e.

footage from the US military missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. This makes immediately clear that the main aim of *Re-birth of a Nation* is to open up the US historical, national, racial archive of the past (through a versioning of Griffith's film) in order to force it to confront the present. What the 2008 artwork suggests is the persistence of forms of 'othering' and 'mastering' of every non-hegemonic presence throughout US popular visual culture at large (i.e. cinema and the news).

Moving towards the future, DJ Spooky's art-practice as a DJ and visual artist meets Griffith's film-making practice at the crossroad between historical narrative and cultural narration. *Re-birth of Nation* takes as its starting points Griffith's ingenious insights on how (hi)stories are constructed and his intuitions on the ways in which memory selects, stores and retrieves information. However, these insights and intuitions are updated to the global digital present of a world that is highly and densely connected, and they are used as a lever for a critical speculation on the transcultural dimension of information dynamics. In DJ Spooky's own words, "the DJ metaphor is about thinking around the concept of collage and its place in the everyday world of information, computational modelling, and conceptual art. All of them offer exits from the tired realms of Euro-centric philosophy".¹⁰

¹⁰ Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky), http://www.djspooky.com/articles/deleuze_and_guattari.php, accessed 14 October 2014.

Acknowledging that the aesthetic deployment of fluxes, fragments and fractures pre-exists the digital turn, DJ Spooky individuates some recalls between Griffith's techniques and contemporary DJ culture. In both cases, narrative fragments are selected and mixed with each other to generate further narrations, engender thoughts and actions, evoke new meanings, and suggest new perceptual possibilities. Nevertheless, DJ Spooky's practice differs from Griffith's practices on a significant aspect: "Griffith was essentially a propagandist for state repression – he created 'cut-up' cinema as a tool to portray multiple situations – but ... he used it to lock down perception.... [F]or a dj ... origin, and destination blur: they become loops, cycles, patterns. The way to explore them is through the filter of woven meaning".¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.

In *Re-birth of Nation*, as the trailer suggests, "truth" and "knowledge" are questioned, while DJ Spooky intervenes on codes. Digitally converted, Griffith's silent drama is first rendered sonorous. Simultaneously, existing images are altered and other visual elements are inserted. Contrary to Griffith, for whom the role of technique was to make the artwork 'feel' as much 'real'/'natural' as possible, DJ Spooky does not hide away the fact that he is intervening on what is shown on screen. Re-editing the editing, DJ Spooky makes Griffith's authoritative voice stutter and turn into a cacophony of potential alternative narrations, which are ultimately left unresolved and unfinished.

The 'original' movie is condensed in a much shorter version, which lasts less than half the time of the 1915 film. DJ Spooky uses a variety of digital interventions to his ends, which can be ideally divided into two main typologies: the insertion of series of juxtaposed images created or selected by the artist, and the superimposition of a series of visual effects provided to DJ Spooky by Gary

Breslin and Adam Lewin of the New York design/production studio panOptic. The inserted images include stills created by DJ Spooky starting from Griffith's shots, to which the artists apply effects such as reversed colouring (b/w) or mirror reflection (resulting less in a doubling than in a deformation and leaking of the image's contours). Alternatively, DJ Spooky mixes counter-images *tout court*, i.e. images sampled from recent works by black artists, which are inserted in the 1915 film to counter its most stereotyping representations. panOptic's superimposed effects consist instead mostly of animated geometrical shapes or diagram-resembling graphics. These can either appear on screen moving transversally and rhythmically from side to side, or can contour specific details of a single 1915 shot (a character, a single detail of a figure, and so on) in order to emphasise it for the viewers by attracting their attention towards it and thus fragmenting the visual continuum. Sound is also a very central element of *Re-birth of Nation*. Rather eerie-sounding and dark, the minimal yet very layered music of the remix merges classical forms (performed by the San Francisco-based string quartet Kronos Quartet) with hip hop and blues (the latter evoking a black presence which is otherwise absent on screen, as the only black characters in the 1915 are in fact whites in blackface).¹²

¹² In August 2015, DJ Spooky and Kronos Quartet released a 100th anniversary score with the label Cantaloupe Music, which can be streamed here <https://cantaloupemusic.bandcamp.com/album/re-birth-of-a-nation>, accessed 5 October 2015.

DJ Spooky's excavation of *The Birth of Nation* is thus firstly a *technical* operation. By converting Griffith's movie to digital and applying to it the cut 'n' mix techniques globally popularised by the cultures of the African diaspora, DJ Spooky performs both a practical reflection on the changes occurring in media culture over time, and a poetical-political enactment of new media culture's potentialities.¹³ The outcomes of this intervention are two-fold. On the one side – and in line with a (by now very classical) Marshall McLuhan's intuition – DJ Spooky seems to suggest that it is only through the emergence of a 'new' medium that antecedent media become 'understandable'.¹⁴ *Re-birth of a Nation* is in fact a 'homage' paid to a medium undergoing a critical phase – i.e. modernist cinema, as 'invented' by Griffith – through a re-enactment performed in the space opened up by a 'following' medium – i.e. digital video-art.¹⁵ On the other side, DJ Spooky's intervention interrogates the relation between 'audio' and 'video' nowadays, investigating the ways in which they co-exist being both made of binary code.

Beyond being a technical operation, DJ Spooky's excavation is also an *ethical* operation, whose wider implications lie at the intersection between media theory and postcolonial studies. As this article suggests, the transformations Griffith's film undergoes when re-enacted by DJ Spooky are relevant to a wider cultural politics aimed at deconstructing identity-as-fixed. In *Re-birth of Nation*, Griffith's 1915 film is featured as both a magnificent modernist artwork, and as a cornerstone in the consolidation of a racialised politics of (historical) representation in relation to the formation of the 'American Nation' (the US), in which the presences of all of those who qualify as 'non-White' and 'non-hegemonic' have been structurally repressed. The 'remix' (the 'Re-birth') engages with Griffith's masterpiece to allow this

¹³ On the diasporic genealogy of cut 'n' mix techniques, see Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (London, Methuen, 1987).

¹⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994).

¹⁵ I am not suggesting here that media follow each other in a chronological, linear fashion. On the contrary, I am alluding to a situation of marked by a rhythm of continuity/discontinuity, akin to the one described by the concept of the "post-cinematic" in Steven Shaviro, *Post-cinematic Affect* (Ropley: Zer0 Books, 2010).

removal to be ‘felt’: Griffith’s avant-garde modernism is repeated *with a difference*.¹⁶ As DJ Spooky himself explains: “It’s all a lot more complex than that dualism. This is the new ‘operating system’ I envisage when I remixed *Birth of a Nation* – the collapse of Wagner, the collapse of the Western scripts of linear progress, the renewal of a world where repetition is a kind of homage to the future by respecting the past”.¹⁷

It is however necessary to specify here that the *technical* and the *ethical* sides of DJ Spooky’s artistic intervention are not considered here as separated and distinct from each other. At the same time, I am not suggesting here a simple conflation of the two sides: the use of interactive and heterogeneous ‘new’ media technologies in contemporary art-practices does not straightforwardly guarantee wider, plural, more ethical outcomes. In fact, the relation between technics and ethics is regulated by chaotic dynamics, in which both human and non-human forces concur. Well before the (important and inescapable) affective turn of the early 21st Century, this was already a key intuition of the linguistic and representational paradigm in media theory. Indeed, of all the insights provided by Birmingham Cultural Studies, one at least still proves to be very effective and useful for the contemporary times, i.e. that techno-cultural outcomes are to be evaluated in their everyday, situated, conjunctural, singular performances. As Stuart Hall put it:

Identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production”, which is never complete, always in process.... [T]his view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term “cultural identity” lays claim.¹⁸

This is especially crucial since questions of (cultural) identity are still very much present in the digital age, where the material dimension of the social is inescapably to be accounted for in every theoretical discourse on technology.¹⁹ In *Re-birth of a Nation*, the ‘removed presences’ of (past, present) History come back to complicate historical narration and memorialization embodied as *techniques*. They exist – and resist – being evoked by the use of remixing. As DJ Spooky writes:

The idea of the “remix” is pretty trendy these days – as usual people tend to “script” over the multi-cultural links: the economics of “re-purposing”, “outsourcing” and above all, of living in an “experience economy” – these are things that fuel African American culture, and its active dissemination in all of the diaspora of Afro-Modernity. ... Black culture has been the world’s “subconscious” for most of the last several centuries - it has been the operating system of a culture that refuses to realize that its ideals have died long ago. The threads of the fabric of contemporary 21st century culture, the media landscape of filaments, systems, fiber optic cables, satellite transmissions, and so on - these are all rhizomatic. They are relational architectures – the[y] move in

¹⁶ A first critical take on *The Birth of Nation* had already been realized by Guy Debord using the asthetical-political strategy of *détournement*. See Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “Mode d’emploi du détournement”, *Les livres nus*, n. 8 (May), 1956.

¹⁷ http://www.djspooky.com/articles/deleuze_and_guattari.php, accessed 13 October 2014.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation”, in Houston A. Backer Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg, eds., *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (London-Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 210.

¹⁹ See Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis, MN: MIT, 2008).

synchronization. The meshwork needs to be polyphonic. The gears move in different cadences, but they create movement. They need to be pulled apart so that we can break the loops holding the past and present together so that the future can leak through.²⁰

²⁰ http://www.djspooky.com/articles/deleuze_and_guattari.php, accessed 14 October 2014.

By manipulating some constitutive elements of Griffith's film, *Re-birth of Nation* activates some latent reflection that were lying within the film. The "re-birth" the title of the artwork alludes to could then be read as an excavation of a dead, closed archive in order to bring some new, future perspectives to the fore.²¹ DJ Spooky's poetical practice is thus a transcultural investigation of global technology, which operates on perception through the repetition of the canon of Western audio-visual texts, in order to investigate their hidden, racialized dimensions.

²¹ I use the word "archive" here as a hint to a recent 'turn' in research and art towards different forms of archives – a terrain which is still very open and problematic (see for ex. Jamie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* [London: Routledge, 2014]; and Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse", *October*, 110, 3-22). Although the argument would require a specific, more extended reflection – that goes beyond the scope of this article – I would like to specify that I am aware of the fact that I am relying on an extended concept of the "archive" here, i.e. not referring to a 'lost' text (since Griffith's film is not a lost artefact from the past). I use the term here in a non-linear temporal fashion, referring to a text in which several potential narrations co-exist, only a part of which is in full visibility.

In fact, DJ Spooky's intervention *on* Griffith does not aim to 'amend' faulty narrations, and the African-American artist does in fact intervene barely to alter the ghastly content of the 1915 film. More subtly, by manipulating the surface of the screen where Griffith's movie is projected, DJ Spooky acts on the articulation between the *techno-matter of the filmic* in itself, and the *complex regimes* organising the ways in which 'we' make experience of the world (of which the filmic is a mode). The artist turns the screen into a complex 'space' on the verge of abstraction, where hints and clues are disseminated. A sort of spirit board evoking ghosts from the past: other figures that had been removed from historical narration in Griffith's account, whose present testimony to history remains however unclear, non-univocal – ultimately, a ghostly matter.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the power of abstraction, DJ Spooky himself claims that

Abstraction is the ultimate weapon.... It defies limits, and posits "the subject" as an imploded category – one that is, and always has been, basically a construct. What other constructs - the nation state, the idea of the "self" etc. – are linked to this category that is slowly being pulled apart by the centrifugal forces of digital media?²²

²² http://www.djspooky.com/articles/deleuze_and_guattari.php, accessed 3 October 2015.

Whereas the artist highlights the (undeniable) specificity of digital media to the wider cultural repercussions of his practice on concepts such as identity and the nation, it is however my contention that his take on remix culture in *Re-birth of a Nation* places his practice within a longer genealogy of African-American techno-experimentalism. As claimed by Alexander G. Wehliye in his *Phonographies* in relation to sound, black artists have since long used technologies to overhaul key notions of modernity such as identity, subjectivity, temporality, and so on.²³ A similar process is at play also in DJ Spooky's use of audio-visual remix, in which the repressed of (film) history returns as a series of experimental "techniques":

²³ Alexander G. Wehliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham NC: Duke, 2005).

“What you do as a DJ is ... speaking with the voices of the dead, playing with that sense of presence and absence. If the mix doesn’t evoke something, it doesn’t work”.²⁴ Simultaneously, while strongly placed within this genealogy – and while being expression of the ongoing contemporary ‘archival’ and ‘remix’ turns in research-by-art – *Re-birth of a Nation* is also very much different from other expressions of remix culture, exactly insofar as it faces a mostly uneasy knot, in which techno-experimentalism and racist formation are entwined.

Taking as its focus the relation between D.W. Griffith’s 1915 *Birth of a Nation* and DJ Spooky’s contemporary re-mix *Re-birth of a Nation*, this article has in fact focused precisely on the above-mentioned “knot”. The analysis here presented has benefited from an already existing and still expanding corpus of media theory investigating the organisation of perception in the modern cinematic and the contemporary post-cinematic eras, and from the body of work developed within post-colonial theory in relation to the practices of visual narration and memorialisation and the process of racialisation. The brief reference to the necessity to consider DJ Spooky’s artwork as part of a wider genealogy of black media practices has also allowed me to advance two crucial (and more general) propositions. First, the importance of increasingly considering (and creating) non-linear, ecological approaches to media practices – beyond any techno-historical categorisation (the analogue/digital and form/content binarisms being just two of many disempowering impasses). Secondly, the centrality of expanding on the presence of several, parallel and often neglected genealogies of media theory and practices, all concurring together (non-necessarily in a pacified way) to create contemporary ‘media ecologies’.

To finally round off my argumentation, I will briefly return more closely to DJ Spooky’s *Re-birth of a Nation*, to propose that a post-colonial approach to media theory and practice may be a possible way to tackle both the powers and potentials of technology, as far as post-colonial media theory configures a deconstructive gesture. As suggested by Silvana Carotenuto, DJ Spooky’s technological practice has indeed a deconstructive dimension to itself, as it unfolds the ethical dimension of “forgiveness”. In her words:

The present may ‘forgive’ the horrors of the past. ‘Forgiveness’ takes place by intensifying the ‘technical’ material, which allowed for horror itself to take place (by showing the subtle, internal and uncontrollable workings it implied). Intensification – which means the singular acquisition of a practice and a technique face to face with horror, with evil, with the monstrous – opens the way to a cure operating through perception: to the act of taking care of the world’s destiny. In this way, horror is forgiven, the burden of the past is dematerialized through technical transformation, and art – as an engaged testimony to the world – can contribute to create those social, political and cultural conditions that might prevent horror from repeating in the time to-come.²⁵

²⁴ DJ Spooky, cit. in Erik Davis, *Remixing the Matrix*, 2003 (<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/dj-spooky-paul-miller/articles/remixing-the-matrix-an-interview-with-paul-d-miller/>). The trope of *the ghost/the dead* in relation to slavery, memory and African-American media culture and modernism is everywhere in my article, as the red thread unfolding across my argument. I am aware however that the political potentiality of this trope should deserve a closer and more precise exploration, especially given its relevance to African-American literary, artistic and scholarly production.

²⁵ Silvana Carotenuto, “Tra perdono, tecnologia e futuro: l’interculturalità contemporanea. Risposta a Beatrice Ferrara”, in Rossella Bonito Oliva, ed., *Identità in dialogo*, 107; my translation.

Under this light, *Re-birth of Nation* appears finally not simply as the umpteenth visual culture product, but more as a curatorial act – with ‘curatorship’ here referring to both the process of *editing* and the process of *healing* (Lat. *curare*).