The Electra Complex: DJ Spooky interview with Angela Dalle Vacche[*]

Angela Dalle Vacche[**]

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1) In your website, it says that your work is about "encoded gesture," "encrypted psychology." Can you explain what you mean?

Response: All aspects of modern life are getting transformed by digital media and we live in a data driven society. Amusingly enough, that means people are enmeshed in social media in a way that is turning their life inside out. Film and music are just forerunners of this kind of hyper expressive type of media. So basically all I mean is that there are many different types of information that have evolved to reflect the way we have used technology to reverse engineer the human psyche. From psyche to psychology… it's pretty much a hall of digital mirrors at this point. Think of the rivalry between Thomas Edison and Nicola Tessa and the way that changed the way we use electricity and see film. They are both different sides of the same coin. I love the fact that the foundation of modern life — electricity — is connected to Electra. A myth embodied in science, apocryphally…

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[*] American multi-media artist, composer, and writer DJ Spooky (Paul Miller) is well known all over the world for re-scoring the sound track of D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation (1915), — a racist film about the American Civil War — , that inaugurates the classical style of Hollywood cinema with its cross-cutting and narrative continuity. DJ Spooky was also the executive producer for the Kino Lorber DVD "Pioneers of African American Cinema," 20 films made by Richard Norman, Richard Maurice, Spencer Williams, Oscar Micheaux. Aimed at black audiences, these films go from 1915 to 1946.

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2) You also talk about your fascination with the unconscious. When did you become interested for the first time in this topic?

Response: Both my parents were professors. My Mother was a historian of design and my father was Dean of Howard University Law School. So I grew up in a household that was really engaged with how things would unfold in history — nothing is separate, and things like human rights, gender equality, social justice — these were all part of the family conversation.

The main issue is that you could easily see the gap between ideals that were espoused by so many people — politicians, musicians, artists, activists etc but then you'd see the "human side" where everyone is conflicted, flawed and filled with paradoxes. That's what made me realize when I was a kid — it's all about how people psychologically engage whatever issue they are grappling with. Look at our time: so many people are presented with clear, scientifically valid information, and then do absurd, stupid stuff like watching while Trump was "elected" etc When I work on my film art projects, or my music compositions, or my books, I try to keep this in mind, front and center: it's all about people.

3) You mention Wagner in relation to your multimedia work. How is it that you are not worried about the regressive, primitive connotations attached to the Wagnerian model in comparison to the Merce Cunningham's modernist approach? Wagner strives for a loss of self into the oceanic, whereas Modernism relishes discontinuity, randomness, and dialectical relations. What is it about Wagner that is important for you, despite his controversial ideological associations?

Response: I'm a huge Wagner fan. He's a perfect example of the surreal issues facing our time. His fall out with Nietzsche for example, his espousal of revolutionary ideas in 1848, then his passion for myth and "gesamkunstwerk" (Total Art) — all of these things relate to our current multimedia driven scenario. The controversy is at the core of modern life — ideology is entangled with paradox. Especially in a world where software and bias are connected at every level. It's amazing that studies come out and show that software which is always thought of as "neutral" has the biases of the people who made it. So too with literature, art, and music. Wagner was a racist but brilliant composer and a deeply flawed human being. Think about the kinds of "information disorder" that exist online, from fabricated videos to impersonated accounts to memes designed to manipulate your emotions with "computational propaganda" — things like software collaborative filtering (it is basically recommendation engines built into software — the easiest to understand is stuff like what happens when you watch a movie on Netflix and it recommends many more films based on how the artificial intelligence analyses your taste etc), automation and "microtargeting" tactics that have made it easier for agents of disinformation to weaponize normal users of the social web to spread propaganda and hate driven messages and radicalize people who are not "literate" in software media manipulation — these are things that Wagner intuitively understood. The Nazi's for example appropriated his work and Nietzsche's work and made their dispute become a foundation of propaganda and disinformation guiding an entire nation state. It's wild that advertising and film have inherited the same dynamic. Think of DW Griffith, Lehni Riefenstahl, and Sergei Eisenstein as part of the same scenario.

4) Your website mentions your experiments with no vocals, hip hop music and abstract sounds. Isn't this a very modernist direction in conflict with a Wagnerian ideal of seamless merging?

Response: Instrumental music is fascinating because it can be used to create "atomospere" and all sorts of dynamic environments. Language sometimes gets in the way. I majored in

Philosophy, Economics, and French Literature while I was in university. I find that silent film, and my music compositions kind of relate to that approach of using body language (watch any silent film in the box set on the history of African American Cinema that I produced). You have a blank palette that you can remix sound and image, and destabilize that way that people look at one idea or millions of ideas. I like the ambiguity that silent film music can generate. That's probably the connection to Wagner.

5) How important are randomness and improvisation in your work? How do you differentiate between these

two concepts?

Response: When you are based in a medium like electronic music and film music — it's all a collage. That means you are pulling from a lot of disparate sources, that's what make the material become coherent. Nothing is really random — even randomness has a pattern...

6) You are famous for having transformed the turn-table of the DJ into a new medium of self-expression. How did this happen and when?

Response: I was never planning on being a DJ. I was planning on being a diplomat and music was a side hobby. I started doing a lot of art projects and made them match with music compositions. I never really felt like music was "just music." I really wanted to show that there is a deeply complex scenario at work when we look at sound, and how it unfolds in different media. It basically was a hobby that I was serious about, and then took over my life! I will be thinking about this all for many years to come. I didn't really think it would be this long in my life. Many people really really really want to be a famous musician. I didn't.

7) In your Re-birth of a Nation, at one point, the inter-titles are replaced with a male voice-over narrator. Is that you speaking? Why this shift?

Response: The subtitles are a great way to get people to look at the intersection of storytelling and silent film. Some of my favorite early film makers like Alice Guy Blache who had a great paradoxical phrase for this would say "act natural." It's not me speaking, but we hired an actor. I generally do my own speaking for projects and whatnot. But generally that specific project was all about layers of paradox in history from the Civil War that still linger over the entire American and global experience of cinema. It's the way we look at language and cinema that I'm fascinated with: from a photography perspective, there are artists like Teju Cole who are looking at narrative and immersive approaches to how film gives sequence to photos, on over to Werner Herzog and the way he narrates his films. I like both their styles and they both have a bit of influence on my thinking. Ditto Susan Sontag and her essays on photography, like her work "Against Interpretation."

8) You are now working on post-Civil War reconstruction. Very little is known about this topic. Please tell us about your ideas and plans.

Response: That's a project with Henry Louis Gates from Harvard. It's a bit more of a documentary approach that he has set up. I was composer for the project. I love scoring for film. Next year — 2020, I have several multimedia projects that will explore the way memory and film intersect with politics and "computational propaganda." They are in development this summer. I'm also starting a relationship with Google for a series of art projects about climate change.

9) You have dome a lot of collaborations. Which experiences stand out the most?

Response: You really can't pick out one or the other. It's always about the "dialectic" of how you spend time with people. I have many conversations about creativity. One doesn't stand out or the other. Some people really like the work I did with Yoko Ono, some like what I did producing a box set on the history of African American cinema. Some might like the compositions I did for Ai Weiwei in China. You really never know...

10) Why the word "subliminal" is such an important part of your identity: "The Subliminal Kid?"

Response: I'm a big fan of William S. Burroughs and his cut-up/collage technique. Ditto for Brian Gysin. Burroughs has a novel called "Nova Express" that is still eerily resonant with our time, and there's a character in the novel called The Subliminal Kid. I appropriated that and flipped it into my own mythology. It's that simple. Everything is beyond and above the normal threshold of perception. We humans think we understand the universe around us. We don't. We can only accept that we always need more and better information. That's what makes life interesting. And that's... subliminal. Think of the linguistics and codes behind Emoji — they are the Lingua Franca of our time. They've gone from being virtually unknown to being a central theme

in Internet communication. Winks faces, clinking glasses, exploding flames, black eggplants, smiling pieces of shit... what do these say? No one really knows. We just bring our associative logic to the scenario and read into the text whatever we want. They move across all platforms and, given the sheer variety of verbal and written communication on the Internet and English language's still-controversial role as Lingua Mundi for the web... icons and images like a smiley face or a raised black fist can mean many different things. I just wanted to join the conversation. I guess you can say DJ Spooky is Emoji for the subconscious...

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