

Composition in the Dromosphere[☆]

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Abstract

Speed is one way to distinguish how we approach rhetorical situations within and outside of the academy. Texts and arguments move quickly in any rhetorical situation, and rhetoric and composition has begun to theorize ways to make sense of these speedy situations. Drawing on Paul Virilio's discussion of the *dromosphere*, our contemporary environment of speed, this essay continues that work by examining the work of two DJs: DJ Spooky and Girl Talk. The compositional methods of DJs have received a great deal of attention in computers and composition scholarship, and much of that work has focused on how DJs can help us rethink intellectual property. This essay examines DJs for a different purpose, in order to examine two approaches to the difficulties of speed: *scholê* and *dromos*. I discuss DJ Spooky's remix of the film *The Birth of a Nation*, and I apply Girl Talk's methods to provide my own mashup of that same film. This essay argues that the mashup, in all of its various forms, is a particularly useful example of dromological writing, writing that is attuned to the problem of speed.

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1. Beginnings

This essay began (and begins) in two places, 15 months apart.

1.1. Beginning 1 (February 15, 2009):

I sit in the Alamo Drafthouse Movie Theater in Austin, Texas and settle in for *Rebirth of a Nation* (2008). The film is a remix of the influential and notoriously racist film, *The Birth of a Nation*. The director/DJ of this remix is DJ Spooky (a.k.a. Paul Miller, a.k.a. That Subliminal Kid), an artist who does much more than just spin records. Spooky is also an academic, and he is often in conversation with theorists such as Baudrillard and Deleuze. Spooky brings DJ culture and electronic music to critical theory, and his book *Rhythm Science* both describes and enacts a DJ remix by combining personal anecdotes with theoretical reflection. Spooky's *Rebirth of a Nation* takes the DJ method to film. What the DJ does with sound—remixing various songs to create new tracks—Spooky's *Rebirth* enacts with images. By remixing the film, adding visual elements, composing an original soundtrack, adding inter-titles, and adding a voice-over, Spooky offers a counter narrative to *The Birth of a Nation* (Miller, 2008).

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1.2. Beginning 2 (November 4, 2007):

I stand on the edge of a mass of people. Part mosh pit, part dance floor, this group swarms a small stage in Austin's Waterloo Park. It is FunFunFun Fest, a small outdoor music festival, and this group is moving to the music of Greg Gillis (a.k.a. Girl Talk), a DJ who specializes in the mashup. Girl Talk's mashups are comprised of dozens of songs. Mashing together music by 'N Sync, Genesis, Ludacris, and Eminem (these are a few of the musicians sampled in a song called "Once Again"), Girl Talk is a pop music enthusiast who uses a laptop and AudioMulch software to compose songs. Taking slices of songs, changing pitch and beat, and mashing them back together, Gillis transforms pop music. The Girl Talk album *Night Ripper*, "contains about 6,250 variations on samples from 167 different artists" (M, 2007). In late 2010, Girl Talk released the album *All Day*, which combines 373 different samples ("All Day (Album)," 2010). In an advertisement for Microsoft (part of the "I'm a PC" campaign), Gillis succinctly explains the goal of his performances: "I'm a PC, and I make people sweat." In this same ad, he expresses a preference for "raw expression" over "formalized training." This "raw" approach is evident during the Waterloo Park performance when a sweating and shirtless Gillis screams a request that he repeats at many of his performances: "Let's move together!"

1.3. Speed and the parlor

These two scenes were both composed by DJs. DJs do not only compose music; they compose entire spaces. The DJ's job is to read the room, respond to the audience, and help coax a scene out of the kairotic moment. We can locate Geoffrey Sirc's "happenings composition" in the scenes composed by DJs who do "something unconventional, sublime, exciting" because "any material and technique [is] allowed, if it [can] produce something exciting" (Sirc, 2002, p. 18). These two scenes were different. One performance was dark, quiet, and academic. The other was sweaty and loud. The audience in the air-conditioned movie theatre was guided through *Rebirth of a Nation* by a voice-over, and the outdoor music festival was a mass of limbs guided by hundreds of voices, ranging from Notorious B.I.G., to Freddy Mercury, to Stevie Nicks. Girl Talk guided the crowd ("Everyone! Let's move together!"), but what he was doing was not, by any traditional definition, an argument. Further, Spooky focused on remixing *The Birth of a Nation* by working mainly with the single film while Girl Talk mashed together dozens of tracks with mix speeds that often made it difficult to identify the original source materials.

Spooky aims to provide a careful, step-by-step argument. He guides the viewer through D.W. Griffith's imagery, explaining how this film was both unbelievably groundbreaking and devastatingly racist. Stepping through the narrative, slowing down certain images, and explaining how the film depicted Reconstruction, Spooky's film explains *The Birth of a Nation* to the audience. But Spooky's film also remixes the film visually and aurally. It points to moments when Griffith's film plays on particularly harmful racial stereotypes, and it draws our ears and eyes to the film's techniques. Girl Talk does not step us through anything. In fact, it is often difficult to know what's going on in a Girl Talk track. Just when you think you have identified a guitar riff from Bon Jovi, the track has moved on to three other pop songs. What is the message in a Girl Talk song? What is the song doing? There is no voice-over, and no one explains what is happening. Girl Talk offers us a fast-paced composition that never stops to explain itself. As different as these two scenes are, these DJs have very similar methods. While their compositions seem to operate at very different speeds, both Spooky and Girl Talk slow things down and put texts in conversation with one another. Spooky's film may look much more like an academic argument, but a Girl Talk composition is the result of the same painstaking process of arrangement and invention that Spooky deploys in *Rebirth of a Nation*.

The methods of Spooky and Girl Talk share a great deal while producing very different results, and this essay will address their compositional methods in an attempt to show how seemingly dizzying or speedy compositions can rely on a slowness of method. I argue that these faster compositions can be useful to those of us who teach and theorize rhetoric and writing. Like many of his other compositions, Spooky's remix draws on academic and nonacademic approaches, and for this reason his work is often taken up by theorists of rhetoric and writing. Spooky has one foot in the academy and the other outside of it. But what does Girl Talk's method offer? Most would argue that Girl Talk's main argument is about intellectual property. His music is featured in the film *Rip!: A Remix Manifesto*, and is often lauded by Lawrence Lessig as an example of what can happen if we shift from a "permission culture" to a "free culture." But I think Girl Talk offers us something more than a novel way of critiquing copyright. This essay is an attempt to work through this "something more."

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