

# David Blandy

Master: What are your thoughts when facing an opponent?

Lee: There is no opponent

Master: And why is that?

Lee: Because the word 'I' does not exist.

Master: So, continue.

Lee: A good artist does not become tense, but ready. Not thinking but not dreaming. Ready for whatever may come.

Master: Now, you must remember that the enemy has only images and illusions behind which he hides his true motives. Destroy the image, and you will break the enemy.

Although drawn from a cult martial arts film, Blandy/Lee's words might be taken as a manifesto for Blandy's own artistic production, in which he attempts to overcome the limiting notion of 'technique', banish his ego, and dispel the smoke and mirrors of mendacious imagery. It's one that applies to his recent work 'The White and Black Minstrel Show' (2006) in which we discover what became of the record sleeve – sold, we should remember, 'as art' – in 'The Soul of the Lakes'. Here, on a plush, gilded stage, Blandy revisits his lip-syncing to Syl Johnson's 'Is it Because I'm Black' in his earlier video 'hollow bones', exchanging its kitchen sink aesthetics for something of a more vaudevillian stripe. His face slathered in an oblong of chalky make-up, and wearing a top hat and checkered zoot suit, he presents himself as an inverted minstrel – half-clown, half Voodoo death god. Just as some of the original minstrel performers were African-

Americans who were compelled to 'black-up' to play racist stereotypes in front of whooping Caucasian audiences, here Blandy 'whites-up' to cartoonishly emphasize his 'whiteness', and the blundering cultural insensitivity to which that 'whiteness' may give rise. Who, after all, but a clueless white kid would reduce Syl Johnson's harrowing protest song into a cheap pantomime, complete with a solo on the honky rock fan's favourite instrument, the air guitar?

What's going on here? Is Blandy's video – like his bare footed passage along the rough New York sidewalks – a form of penance or self-correction? In a way, yes, but it is also something else. Behind his make-up lies another white face, another performance of the self. Vinyl nerd? Wannabe Kung-Fu master? Artist? Ol' Dirty Blandy? As he mouths in 'The Soul of London' 'the word "I" does not exist'. In a world in which so much of the self is formed from (pop) cultural fantasies, this may be the best and only response to the question 'who am I?'

Tom Morton

**Inside: 'The Way of the Barefoot Lone Pilgrim: The Soul of the USA', photograph, 2004**

**'The White and Black Minstrel Show', DVD, 2006**



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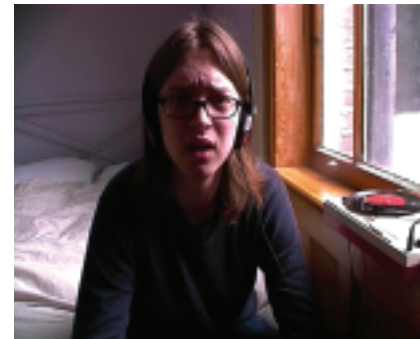
In David Blandy's video 'what is soul' (2002), the artist, a white man in his mid-twenties, walks into a non-descript bedroom and perches himself on the foot of the bed. He seems a little nerdy, this guy, with his lank hair, his spectacles and shapeless sweater, but his face is all steely purposefulness, like a samurai or gunslinger about to prosecute some dark, necessary horror. Turning to a portable record player, he sets a disc spinning, and lowers the needle into its grooves. We hear hisses, crackles, and then the opening bars of Ben E. King's 'What is Soul?' (1967). Donning a pair of headphones and facing the camera, Blandy begins to lip-sync to the words. It's an odd sight – however deadpan his delivery, however deep his commitment to his task, King's rich, booming voice seems somehow too big for his mouth. As his Adam's apple bobs and his girlish lips ripple with effort, we begin to suspect that the artist has been possessed, that his skinny, white-boy soul has been temporarily replaced by a blacker, infinitely more masculine essence.

Blandy's 'what is soul' forms part of a suite of three works in which the artist lip-syncs to songs performed by iconic black musicians. While his 'hollow bones' (2001) shares 'what is soul's' domestic locale, replacing King's track with Syl Johnson's classic 'Is it Because I'm Black?' (1970), Blandy's 'from the underground' (2001) sees him pass through London's subway system, mouthing the words to the Wu-tang Clan's 'Bring Da Ruckus' (1993). Watching the artist mimic the Staten Island rappers in the urban yet undoubtedly English setting of Archway Tube Station is, on the face of

things at least, a culturally disorienting experience. Does he really, as he claims 'rip it hardcore like porno-flick bitches', or 'roll with groups of ghetto bastards with biscuits'? Does he even know what these words mean, and if so what is he doing spitting them out? One answer, of course, is that he's doing what white, middle class guys have been doing since Hip Hop's inception: experiencing vicarious thrills through the music of the ghetto, safe in the knowledge that the ghetto's poverty and violence will never touch their privileged world. (As any record company executive will tell you, it wasn't black kids from Compton who made NWA millionaires). But while Blandy's video mines the uncomfortable politics and the humour of such cultural cross-dressing, it also, I think, expresses a type of yearning. While RZA of the Wu-tang clan can 'bring da motherfuckin' ruckas' with absolute conviction, the artist – lacking RZA's credibility – may not. For Blandy, 'keeping it real' means creating self-reflexive works of art that lay bare the absurdity of his desire to rap like he grew up on a crime-blighted New York project. Somehow, that just can't compete with bellowing the words 'Bust this / I'm kicking like Seagal out for justice' and being greeted with cheers rather than cackling derision.

Back, for a moment, to 'what is soul', or rather its domestic setting. Drawing on Kung-Fu movies, classic Soul, Hip Hop, comic books and sci-fi movies, Blandy's art is born out of a set of typically adolescent obsessions, nurtured in the safety of the parental home, and the privacy of the teenage bedroom. Here, one might

**'what is soul', DVD, 2002**



**'from the underground', DVD, 2001**



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imaginatively travel to South Central or the Death Star, or heal one's hurts by listening to Nina Simone, or by fantasizing that one is a superhero or Shaolin Master – here, one negotiates and renegotiates the self. Teenagers, though, are prone to growing up, and those that train as artists soon learn to unpick their passions, a process that sharpens the mind, but risks dulling the soul. Blandy's work, it seems to me, resists this. For all that it is aware that pop culture is open to the slicing and dicing of deconstruction, it also knows that – for all its clichés, all its banal bromides – it may also contain something of value, something that may illuminate our relationship with art and with ourselves. Perhaps this is why, in his trilogy of films 'The Five Boroughs of the Soul' (2004), 'The Soul of the Lakes' (2005) and 'The Soul of London' (2006), he adopts the persona of 'The Barefoot Lone Pilgrim', a man dressed in the saffron robes of a Shaolin monk who recalls David Carradine's questing martial arts master Kwai Chang Caine in the '70s TV series 'Kung-Fu'. However, while Caine's search was for his brother Danny, Blandy's Pilgrim is in pursuit of a much more nebulous quarry. In this world of spin, spectacle, and cultural confusion, he is resolved to find that elusive thing, soul.

As befits the beginning of a quest, 'The Five Boroughs of the Soul' (2004) sees the Lone Pilgrim perform a relatively simple task. For five days, he walks barefoot through New York, playing seminal Soul and Hip Hop tracks on his portable record player in a variety of pertinent locations – Bobby Womack's 'Across 110th Street' (1972) is

played on 110th Street, Ol' Dirty Bastard's 'Brooklyn Zoo' (1995) is played outside Prospect Park Zoo, BDP's 'South Bronx' (1987) is played at the site of DJ and producer Scott La Rock's shooting, and James Brown's 'Soul Power' (1971) is played outside a mansion in Queens which the Godfather once made his home. Between these ritualistic moments, Blandy chats with various black New Yorkers, who express bemusement at his strange, self-appointed task, or else a concern that he might cut his vulnerable soles on a shard of broken glass (at one point, the artist describes his barefooted traipsing as 'my penance'). In Manhattan, a street preacher – his words reproduced on the screen in comic book word balloons – espouses a bizarre conspiracy theory to Blandy that implicates the Queen, Dick Cheney, and George W. Bush in Hitler's atrocities, and promises bloody retribution. The artist smiles evenly, as though encountering such Sphinxes (with their riddles, their promises of violence) is part and parcel of a pilgrim's progress. The film ends with Blandy taking the ferry to Staten Island, where he plays The Wu-Tang Clan's 'C.R.E.A.M.' (1993). As he gazes at the Statue of Liberty, the words 'Cash rules everything around me / C.R.E.A.M. / Get the money / Dollar, dollar bill y'all' thud over the soundtrack. Having come to New York in search of something holy, our pilgrim has found mammon. His implication in this – and by his extension his implication in the erosion of Soul and Hip Hop culture from an expression of political resistance to a dumb, All-About-the-Benjamins materialism – is clear. While it often voices its disapproval of Bling, the white mainstream created and

sustains the ghettos in which it was born, and it is the white mainstream that is its main consumer. The death of Soul, here, is also in a sense the death of Blandy's soul. The only solution is (symbolic) rebirth.

'The Soul of the Lakes' sees Blandy's Pilgrim move from urban New York to rural Cumbria, there to undertake a long walk between Rare Records in Keswick, to Action Replay Records in Bowness. Journeying across hill and down dale, muddying his toes with Lakeland earth, he encounters Takakata Buddha from the cult 1970s Japanese TV show 'Monkey', Caine from 'Kung Fu' (who becomes his spirit guide), and, eventually, a form of enlightenment. Having reached Action Replay, he tells the shop assistant that 'I've been searching for Soul'. Perhaps more aware of the purpose of Blandy's quest than he lets on, the assistant replies that 'Soul is hard to find. We stopped selling records years ago. Those are all we have left. We sell them as art'. Gazing up at a framed LP sleeve bearing the words 'The George Mitchell Minstrels' Black and White Minstrel Show' and an image of a blazer-ed, black-ed up performer, the artist remarks 'Well, I'll take the anti-Soul then', and removes it from the wall. We next see him at the shores of a lake, practicing Tai Chi, while the following words from the RZA-sound-tracked movie 'Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai' (1999) seep from the speakers: 'Our bodies are given life from the midst of nothingness. Existing where there is nothing is the meaning of the phrase, 'form is emptiness.' That all things are provided for by nothingness is the meaning of the phrase,

'Emptiness is form.' One should not think that these are two separate things'. Blandy then walks to the end of a jetty, slips the Isaac Hayes disc 'To Be Continued' (1970) onto his portable record player, and then unaccountably disappears. His fate – and the fate of the racist image he procures from the record shop – is uncertain, the subject of another sequel, in which this barefoot Jedi will return.

In 'The Soul of London', the third installment of Blandy's trilogy, the artist is instructed by 'The Empire Strikes Back's' (1980) Obi-Wan Kenobi to 'go to the Dagobah system, [where] you will learn from Yoda'. Lacking a starship, the artist instead returns to his childhood home in London, where he encounters a self-portrait he painted in his teenage years. Pretentious and overwrought as only art made by adolescents can be, we might read this image as a reference to the scene in 'Empire' in which Luke Skywalker has a hallucination in which he sees his evil nemesis (and, we later discover, father) Darth Vader's severed head mutate into his own, as though to indicate that the future will see him 'turn to the dark side'. Is Blandy predicting that his soul – his art – will falter and fail? What might be the conditions of this failure, and what might protect against it? The answer comes in a later sequence, in which he adopts the role of Bruce Lee in a scene from the 1973 movie 'Enter the Dragon', in which Lee discusses his ambitions with his Master:

Master: What is the highest technique you hope to achieve?

Lee: To have no technique.

'The Way of the Barefoot Lone Pilgrim: The 5 Boroughs of the Soul', DVD, 2004



'The Way of the Barefoot Lone Pilgrim: The Soul of the Lakes', DVD, 2005



'The Way of the Barefoot Lone Pilgrim: The Soul of the Lakes', DVD, 2005



'The Way of the Barefoot Lone Pilgrim: The Soul of London', DVD, 2006

