

EDITING CHILLS

Arthur Jafa's Video Art

A FEW MINUTES INTO Arthur Jafa's 2016 video work *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* comes a clip of black couples dancing in a dingy setting, grinding, one man guiding his partner by the hips from behind as she fans her face in slight slow motion. It is one of many moments of grace emerging unexpectedly, in the blink of an eye, in Jafa's artwork. The next shot shows more moving hips, this time in a jumble. A split-second is enough to recognize the thrust of police bodies against a black man, next to cell bars. The VHS timestamp, September 1990, indicates this was shortly before the LAPD officers' beating of Rodney King, while the position of the camera suggests the clip was shot by law enforcement—an exception among the many images of racially targeted police brutality in this work. The screen cuts to singer Chris Brown, dancing the Dougie in a nightclub to the sound of Cali Swag District's 'Teach Me How to Dougie'.

The song continues as the image switches to 1960s black-and-white footage of performers on a stage, swaying their hips in unison, like the Dougie. This smooth audio-visual edit, known as an L cut, in which the sound bridges onto no-longer matching video, serves to propose a gestural ancestry for the Dougie, since the dance only emerged in the 1980s and was popularized in the early years of YouTube. The sound-image mismatch provokes a moment of delight. The sequence ends with scenes from the wedding of Jafa's daughter, in which family and guests dance a variation of the Dougie. In the virtuoso cinematography of these shots, filmed by the bride's father, home-video merges with the high production value of a romantic film. Without any guiding voiceover, and within the mere fifteen seconds that make up the entire dense sequence

of montage, brisk hip movements and the Dougie's side-to-side shimmy become a motif that takes us from viral African-American art forms to racist violence to familial love.

Film sequences are sometimes compared to sentences: discrete units within a broader discourse, which convey their meaning by ordering smaller units, such as words or shots, according to a set of conventions. Yet unlike sentences, Jafa's sequences do not formulate unified propositions. As with many art videos, they do not follow cinematic conventions of continuity editing or other dependable narrative codes. If *Love Is the Message* has nevertheless become an emblem for anti-racist mobilization in the art world, it achieved this status not through a declarative stance, but rather through what we might call 'editing chills', aesthetic *frissons* that mesmerize or move the viewer, translating sometimes into dilated pupils or goose bumps. Here the sensation results from the velocity of the editing, from the evocative power of the film's many clips, orchestrated to conjure the worlds of African-American life—everyday scenes, historical civil-rights footage, viral videos of white police violence, black music, cinema, dance, sport, sociability—as they flash by. The power of this montage does not reside in the promise of a fully resolved narrative. Rather it lies in the dense historical experience which these fragments concentrate into nuggets, allowing multiple ideas to be grasped together, conjoining supposedly irreconcilable forms of beauty and pain.

This is everything

Love Is the Message is barely seven minutes long but it collates over 150 clips, echoing imagery that would become ubiquitous in the summer of 2020, after the police killing of George Floyd, as well as much older material. The work is driven by the insistent rhythm of Kanye West's 2016 hip-hop track, 'Ultralight Beam', with its chorus: 'This is a God dream, this is a God dream, this is everything.' Jafa edits police shootings of black people together with dance scenes and parties; a home-video of a black child in tears, as he is made to hold his hands against a wall, in preparation for 'what the police do to you', with a post on Tumblr by teen actress Amandla Stenberg, inviting people to think of what America would be like 'if we loved black people as much as we love black culture'; phone footage of Walter Scott, shot in the back as he runs from the police, with rarely seen black-and-white archive

footage of Angela Davis, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Not only is Jafa's film, to an important degree, *about* these hundreds of scenes, people and subjects; it also addresses the experience of watching them, as a multitude of often decontextualized images, each of which comes bearing its own history and layers of meaning. In a sense, then, *Love Is the Message* also depicts its own medium, as a thematic aggregator of digitized moving images.

This platform-like quality is particularly apparent when, instead of being projected in a gallery, the work is shown online, literally operating within the same medium through which many of its images were originally disseminated. While it was made in 2016, *Love Is the Message* underwent a cultural rebirth in the summer of 2020 when, at the height of the global pandemic, and despite the widespread lockdowns—which for many had reduced the world to what could be experienced onscreen—uprisings grew in protest at the killing of Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin. In June 2020, as the protests proliferated, filmed footage of them spread still farther and faster, both in the United States and internationally: demonstrators confronting teargas, toppling monuments to slave owners, circulating meme-based exhortations to revolt. This new digital iconography drew millions of protesters out of their homes, despite lockdowns, and rallied newly politicized layers online. The themes of *Love Is the Message* were now instantly recognizable to a mass international audience. Jafa's work became something like a visual anthem for the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement.

In the first four years of its existence, *Love Is the Message* had mostly been screened in art galleries, as part of a larger show. But in late June 2020, a coalition of thirteen museums agreed to show the work on their websites for 48 hours, free of charge. They included the Tate, the Stedelijk, the Pinault Collection and LA's MOCA, as well as the Hirschhorn and the Smithsonian in Washington DC—some of the most prominent art institutions in the Northern hemisphere. These widely publicized simultaneous screenings were framed by an agreement between the artist and the institutional holders of the work that, in the wake of Floyd's killing, *Love Is the Message* should be made accessible beyond gallery walls to as many people as possible. The Dallas Museum of Art drew attention to the clips originating in Texas: the brief but startling shot of a black teenager in a bright bikini, thrown to the ground at a pool party by white police,

is one of them. By the end of the summer, Jafa's work had become synonymous with the art world's new-found commitment to racial justice.¹

Screenlife

Behind the mobilizations of 2020—and Jafa's propulsion to the forefront of the art world—lay shifts in the broader visual and sensory culture that affected almost anyone with a computer or a smartphone. The past decade has seen an unprecedented growth in the scale and speed of moving-image dissemination. In 2016, when Jafa made *Love Is the Message*, an estimated 400 hours of video were being uploaded to YouTube every single minute—a volume that had quadrupled since 2014.² The artwork thus emerged at a moment when the relation between video abundance and the representation of current events was being reconfigured, with more recordings than ever available in widely varied visual, sonic and durational forms. The possibility of grasping their totality, or even a significant fraction of them, had become unthinkable. The claim—associated with the post-conceptual Pictures Generation artists of the 1970s—that we experience reality through the pictures we make of it, could now be updated: we experience reality through the *moving pictures* we make.³ This applied all the more during the lockdowns of 2020, when for large swathes of the population, confined to their homes for weeks on end, the existence of the exterior world was also experienced as 'edited': footage was arranged in different combinations depending on the clips shared, the apps used, the algorithms applied, the TV channels selected. *Love Is the Message* thus also corresponds to a historical moment when events have been outdistanced in sheer scale and duration by their own visual recording. In this context, Jafa's capacity to edit together scores of moving images from vastly disparate sources, to

¹ Interest in Jafa's work also expanded in academia. At the beginning of the 2020 autumn term, two of my students at the University of Warwick, Ellie Beckett and Evelyn Goh, independently made requests to change their undergraduate dissertation projects to study Jafa. They have been valuable interlocutors and I'm grateful to them for conversations that stretched my thinking about Jafa's work.

² In 2020, the figure reached 500 hours of video footage per minute. See 'Hours of Video Uploaded to YouTube Every Minute', *Statista*, 2021.

³ The tenet that 'we only experience reality through the pictures we make of it' is often attributed to Douglas Crimp. It was rather an (extrapolating) clarification of artist Jack Goldstein's own claim about our need for a mediated distance from the world, if we are to understand it. See Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, New York 1977, p. 2.

produce a work that evokes immensity and complexity rather than chaos and confusion, gains a new valence.

How then should this work be read? *Love Is the Message* appears to be doing different things. On the one hand, it transfigures existing images of African-American life by radically reorganizing them, while registering a specific experience of viewing. On the other hand, the artwork is often treated almost like an essay, parsing its account of black experience almost literally, as if it were pure discourse. Here, *Love Is the Message* is praised insofar as it constitutes an adequate representation of a complex social reality, and criticized if judged to have failed in this task. Commentators have asked whether it gives too much time to elite sport (9 clips, compared to, for instance, 13 clips of contemporary police violence, 14 of music-making, 20 of dance and 26 scenes from everyday life).⁴ Others have questioned Jafa's affiliation with Kanye West, given the superstar's support for Trump—incompatible with a championing of Jafa's work that relies on the political acceptability of all its parts.⁵ That the work's title contains the word 'message', twice over, may encourage viewers to seek one out. But its very contradiction—the idea that love is the message and, separated only by a comma, that the message is death—may also be a warning that attempts to pinpoint a single meaning are bound to fail.

Yet there does seem to be something singular in the structure of Jafa's work that produces a shock at once aesthetic and political. This singularity resides partly in the fact that much of Jafa's raw material is documentary in nature. Many of the clips are indeed unmediated records of events, serving as evidence: testamentary witness to their occurrence. Their very profusion, and the unsettling speed with which they flash by, suggest that these filmed fragments have been selected from a still vaster, global body of material. But evidence, by definition, testifies to something specific in time and place. We usually consume these types of images in contexts that tightly frame their meaning. Serena Williams, dancing for joy on the tennis court; teeming crowds, cross-cutting to a close-up of

⁴ Evelyn Carmen Ramos and Rhea Combs for example discussed this in a roundtable held by the Smithsonian American Art Museum on 9 July 2020, available on YouTube.

⁵ See the conversation between Jafa and Ja'Tovia Gary hosted by the Smithsonian, 12 October 2019, available on YouTube.

hands reaching for badges at a civil-rights protest; the wonder of a not-yet-famous Biggie Smalls, rapping on the street; a couple supporting each other as they wade, waist-deep, through New Orleans flood water after Katrina—normally, we would access these scenes separately, as illustrations of explanatory language, whether speech or writing. In news broadcasts, they would illustrate the story told by the TV anchor or on-the-spot reporter. In a documentary, the voiceover would spell out their context or given meaning. Even on social media or a streaming platform like YouTube, they would be framed by an advocate, a descriptive title, written comments. Confronting viewers with a high-speed assembly of largely wordless clips, powered by the sound of ‘Ultralight Beam’, *Love Is the Message* both frustrates and repurposes our urge to ascribe meaning to every image.

The curator Okwui Enwezor has noted that, in contemporary political art, certain aesthetic devices now automatically signify moral concern. The revolution in communication technologies, he argues, may also help to explain why art now attends more closely to the conditions of social life, from environmental justice to civil rights—issues that are often represented in documentary form.⁶ Many of the images in *Love Is the Message* point to pressing political concerns. Yet while documents attest to actuality, on their own they rarely amount to a message, in the sense of a clearly formulated position—even as these images in part create, as Enwezor suggests, a longing for precisely this kind of position-taking. To some extent, this longing can be explained by the sheer volume of un-framed, un-supervised documentary fragments in circulation: the need to navigate them on a daily basis feeds our desire for exposition. A related phenomenon is the increasing fusion between statements and repurposed visual documents, in that tweeting, sharing, re-posting or quoting documentary fragments increasingly stands in for reasoned position-taking. The practice of displaying images, as an alternative to spelling out one’s perspective on issues of the day, also serves to complicate Enwezor’s diagnosis of new links between the visual and the political. More and more, it is through individual displays of onscreen documentary images—a slow personal montage of sorts—that one becomes informed, engaged in or alienated from world events.

⁶ Okwui Enwezor, ‘Documentary/Vérité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights and the Figure of “Truth” in Contemporary Art’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2004, p. 20.

The recent explosion in moving-image production corresponds to a shift in the nature, scale and purpose of visual documentation that had been underway for some time. A turning point came as early as 1991, over a decade before the smartphone universalized the idea of the camera-ready citizen. Seeing LAPD officers beating Rodney King, George Holliday, a neighbour, seized his new Sony Handycam to record the scene from his balcony. Disseminated across the globe, the images produced by this then-rare act of video witness helped fuel the 1992 Los Angeles uprising after the officers were acquitted. Holliday's short film provided incontrovertible evidence of a pervasive yet under-documented form of racialized violence. Twenty years later, the Arab Spring uprisings were publicized by thousands of anonymous citizens' videos, circulating online, marking the first time that large numbers of participants took it upon themselves to film, narrativize and broadcast their efforts to overthrow an oppressive regime. More than simple testimony, this act of mass self-documentation was a central factor in the mobilizations.⁷

These technological changes create the impression of a correlation between filming with one's phone camera and uttering a truth. Yet these two acts clearly are not the same. Another way of putting this would be to ask: when evidence is everywhere, to what does it testify? How does one draw attention to something specific—and is it in this manner of pointing that authorship now lies? Conventionally with documentary recordings, for instance in TV news, this was vested in the 'authority' of the commissioner or commentator, rather than the cameraman. This was already the case in the early years of cinema: the Lumière Brothers are still considered the authors of the 1,500-plus *actualités* that were shot by their company's filmmakers around the world. For a long time, the law only identified scenarists—rather than directors or cinematographers—as the authors of films, pointing to an ongoing struggle to associate style and meaning with the fundamentally visual aspects of moving-image production.⁸ Evidently, these relations have been revolutionized by the advent of mass moving-image production and distribution in the 21st century. But where do they now stand? Here it may be helpful to consider Jafa's own trajectory as an artist, in its striking combination of black

⁷ On these videos' intertwined political and aesthetic processes, see Peter Snowdon, *The People Are Not an Image: Vernacular Video after the Arab Spring*, London 2020.

⁸ On this subject, see Marc Ferro, 'Le film, une contre-analyse de la société?' [1977], in *Cinéma et Histoire*, Paris 1993, pp. 31-62.

cultural theory, cinematography and multimedia video practice. His idiosyncratic career path has been marked by a transition from cinematography in the film industry—both commercial and experimental—to an independent art practice rooted in the assemblage of found footage; virtually the inverse of shooting film.

A different light

Jafa was born in 1960 in Tupelo, Mississippi, the son of two teachers and the eldest of four boys. He grew up between newly desegregated Tupelo and Clarksdale, a hundred miles to the west, a relic of the old South. He entered Howard University in the late 1970s to study architecture—this was the period of Scott Brown and Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas* and Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*—but soon migrated to Film Studies, where cinephile Africanists like Haile Gerima and Abiyi Ford were electrifying the debate about what a black cinema could be. In 1980, Gerima dispatched the young Jafa to Los Angeles to work with Charles Burnett and his assistant director, Julie Dash—both, like Gerima, graduates of the LA Rebellion group of radical black filmmakers based around UCLA—on Burnett's second film, the low-budget *My Brother's Wedding* (1983).

Still in their twenties, Dash and Jafa then embarked on the eleven-year film project that would produce *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), with Dash directing and Jafa as cinematographer. Set in the early 1900s, in the bright, sandy light of Saint Helena Island's marshlands on the coast of South Carolina, the movie tells the stories of three generations of Lowcountry Gullah women as they debate whether to migrate to the North. Jafa here trialed cinematographic techniques that he had been elaborating since Howard: instead of using the traditional large aluminum sheets as reflectors, he created multiple smaller reflectors that could better render the range of darker skin tones, and pioneered the computerized melding of slow-motion footage with film shot at regular speed, all on 35mm, to create the effect of a camera that responds like a fellow player to the rhythm of the scene. The outcome was a unique aesthetic, gaining a steely edge from the protagonists' hard-fought arguments about African-American history and what it meant 'to cross over to the mainland'. The visual world of the film, its distinctive style, was built not only on its script and décor—Dash and Jafa worked with the artist Kerry James Marshall on production design—but on everything that falls under the cinematographer's purview: the low-angle shots

framing faces against straw parasols, the lustrous colours, intense but diffuse Deep Southern sunlight, fades-to-white, the rhythmically floating camera that turns each scene into a tableau.

Jafa's goal, as he frequently stated, was to create a black cinema that would share the power, beauty and alienation of black music. A sophisticated theorist as well as a practitioner, Jafa has long speculated on how to marry the core experiences of black culture to the highest achievements of world cinema—imagining a life of Little Richard as filmed by Tarkovsky, or a Martin Luther King biopic in the style of Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*.⁹ Jafa has envisaged ways in which the tonalities of African-American music—'worrying the note' in blues and jazz, where musical notes are treated as inherently unstable sonic frequencies, rather than fixed phenomena—might be brought to bear in the visual arts. He has proposed the concept of Black Visual Intonation, playing with the use of 'irregular, non-tempered camera rates', like those produced by the hand-cranked cameras of the silent era, arguing that these disjunctions in the rate and regularity of frame replication helped to lend early cinematic movement its transfixing power. 'Alignment patterns' of frame replication, he suggested, might offer visual equivalents of vibrato, rhythmic patterns, slurred or bent notes, samba or reggae beats. Another Jafa concept is 'polyventiality', as a black preoccupation—'multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings'—and a tool for understanding the coalescence of 'retained' African cultural modes with 'the experiential sites of the New World'.¹⁰

These ideas were first trialed in *Daughters of the Dust*. Shot on a PBS budget of \$800,000, the movie was immediately acclaimed as a path-breaking contribution to black cinema, but by the same token denied mainstream theatrical release. Dash and Jafa had foregone their financial interests in the film to secure further PBS funds for the edit, and for the next twenty years, neither could get funding for a second feature. For most of the 1990s and early 2000s Jafa scraped by in New York, making short documentaries, music videos, TV commercials, video art (some of which was shown in 2000 at the Whitney Biennale), alternating this work

⁹ Arthur Jafa, 'Black Visual Intonation', in Robert O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, New York 1998, pp. 264–8. Jafa's playful black-cultural multimedia comparativism started young; as an undergraduate he dreamed of designing a car modelled on Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*.

¹⁰ Jafa, 'Black Visual Intonation', p. 267.

with stints as a professional cinematographer. He was director of photography for widely distributed films such as Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994) and for artists' films such as John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993). He was New York second-unit director—hired to direct a discrete set of sequences—for Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), the last movie by one of the directors Jafa most admired. Intriguingly, many of the films on which Jafa worked elicit meta-considerations on the role of the camera. Akomfrah's *Seven Songs* combines an array of footage types and textures to portray Malcolm X as the first great 'media' political leader. Jean-Philippe Tremblay's *Shadows of Liberty* (2012) examines the impact of corporate media ownership and perception management on understandings of current events—the Iraq War, for example—highlighting the role of cinematography in shaping political narrative.

In 2010 Jafa moved to Los Angeles, still freelancing on TV projects, and there by chance got the breakthrough that he has described as 'the beginning of the work I'm doing now'.¹¹ The video work *Dreams Are Colder than Death* (2013) was commissioned as a German-funded documentary for ZDF, on the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington. In Jafa's hands, it became a 52-minute meditation on the meaning of blackness, half a century after King's speech—when 'we have a black president, but this don't seem like a golden age'. Unromanticized footage of black Americans in everyday life, slowed to a mesmerizing pace and intercut with archive images, is overlain with the voices of Jafa's friends and interlocutors—Fred Moten (NYU), Hortense Spillers (Vanderbilt), Saidiya Hartman (Columbia), Rich Blint (New School), the filmmaker Charles Burnett, artist Wangechi Mutu, educator (and Jafa's father) Arthur Fielder—who offer voiceover reflections on contemporary black experience.¹² Jafa has ascribed the ease and expansiveness of these contributions to the fact that he wasn't filming the speakers: a camera pointed at a black person always operates as a white gaze,

¹¹ Calvin Tomkins, 'Arthur Jafa's Radical Alienation', *New Yorker*, 21 December 2020.

¹² From different backgrounds and generations, these thinkers largely shared Jafa's understanding of a core experience of 'blackness' in American society, grounded in the horror of slavery and its long afterlives. In terms of the debate between the constructionists of critical race theory and the ontologists of Afro-pessimism, Jafa has playfully described himself as an 'anti-anti-essentialist', indicating the centrality for his thinking of the material-cultural continuities of African-American life from the Middle Passage on.

triggering survival mechanisms, he has argued, even when there is a black person behind it.¹³

Produced in the same period as *Dreams Are Colder than Death*, Jafa's video work *APEX* (2013) sharply contrasted in pace and tone. Around 1990, the artist had begun a practice of cutting out print images, mainly from magazines, and arranging them in ring-binders (in recent years they have been exhibited as *Untitled Notebooks*). From the early 2000s—'as soon as I got my first laptop'—Jafa began supplementing this paper-based collection with a digital equivalent, building up a massive bank of still images which he would organize in the media-management application Adobe Bridge, where thumbnails of thousands of files can be manipulated and previewed all at once. Working with the cinematographer Malik Sayeed, Jafa set the images to run in rapid succession over a soundtrack of Robert Hood's pulsing electro-techno beat. The 8 minutes 22 seconds of video contain nearly 800 images, with Jafa repeatedly revising their combinatorial rules, keeping the work in partial flux for years. It can be read as a transitional piece between the artist's image-collecting practice and his found-footage montage films.

Jafa's new work coincided with the first wave of Black Lives Matter protests in late 2013 and early 2014, after the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer. The torrent of images of police abuse of African-Americans was the spur for *Love Is the Message*, put together in early 2016. Jafa has described how he started off without a script, simply as 'a response to the influx of footage of black people getting assaulted.' When the work was almost done, he heard Kanye West's 'Ultralight Beam' on *Saturday Night Live* and borrowed it for the soundtrack, without asking permission. Jafa showed the completed work to close friends and held a few screenings in LA and one at Art Basel, where Gavin Brown saw it. It was then, only in 2016, that Jafa first became represented by a gallery, Gavin Brown's enterprise. At the same time, the black-historical aesthetic of *Daughters of the Dust* experienced a cultural renaissance, after serving as a visual inspiration for Barry Jenkins's movie *Moonlight* as well as for Beyoncé's concept album *Lemonade*—Jafa was also hired to collaborate on the music video for 'Formation', one of the album's songs. Dash's film was restored and colour-graded, under Jafa's supervision, and enjoyed a

¹³ See Jafa's discussion with bell hooks at The New School, 16 October 2014, available on YouTube.

lavish second release, diffusing its style across a vast range of artworks and cultural products, from *Vogue* fashion shoots to social-media pages, music videos and exhibition posters.¹⁴ In the case of film, style—the etymology of which relates to writing tools—is typically credited to the touch of a director or screenwriter. Here, though, was a rare case where it was recognized as anchored in cinematography.

Readings

Jafa's work has already become the focus of notable new scholarship, not least in African-American studies. Tina Campt has situated Jafa's practice within the framework of 'radical refusal', as a strategy for theorizing everyday practices of struggle. Campt casts his work as a 'radical modality of witnessing' that 'refuses authoritative forms of visibility', which themselves function to refuse blackness.¹⁵ The artist Aria Dean has also focused on the mutation of time in Jafa's work, reflecting on his own theorizing of Black visual intonation. For Dean, the sense in Jafa's practice that 'everything has always been happening all at once' offers a visual counterpart to Christina Sharpe's discussion in *In the Wake* (2016) of 'living in the wake of slavery' and constantly encountering 'a past that is not past', a development of the Afro-pessimist ontology of blackness originally elaborated by Cedric Robinson and Frank B. Wilderson III. This Afro-pessimist emphasis is disavowed by Alessandra Raengo in her interpretation of Jafa's *Dreams Are Colder than Death*, which convincingly shows that the film's very structure—its jumps through time, with the complex editing of sound—enacts the logic of an 'Afro-optimist' position, embodied by movements such as Black Lives Matter, in which grief, grievance and solidarity coalesce.¹⁶ Understandably, many of these approaches take their lead from Jafa's own theorizations of black cultural

¹⁴ Jafa's work with the Knowles family also expanded to include cinematography on Solange's videos 'Don't Touch My Hair' and 'Cranes in the Sky' and directing the video of Jay-Z's mega-hit apology to Beyoncé, '4:44'. In the summer of 2020, just as the major institutions of the art world put their collective weight behind *Love Is the Message*, Jafa reworked some of its key images in the music video he directed for Kanye West's 'Wash Us in the Blood'.

¹⁵ Tina Campt, 'Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2019, p. 79.

¹⁶ See respectively Aria Dean, 'Worry the Image', *Art in America*, 26 May 2017; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham 2016, p. 13; Alessandra Raengo, 'Dreams Are Colder than Death and the Gathering of Black Sociality', *Black Camera*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2017, pp. 120–40.

politics. They attempt to define Jafa's editing by matching it to a grammar, by giving a voice and a politics to the non-linguistic ways in which he articulates images.

An art practice based on the articulation of found footage and mass-circulated material further raises specific formal questions. An immediate issue, touched upon above, is the documentary character of many of the images he uses and hence their relation to context and meaning. Art that relies on the montage of found material is particularly susceptible to being read as commentary, partly because it sheds new light on familiar materials by reconfiguring them, and partly because it is in turn often widely circulated. The history of photomontage in particular is associated with a rhetoric of dissent created through juxtaposition, as in John Heartfield's anti-fascist collages, which set the tone for various issues of the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* between 1930 and 1938. Martha Rosler's *Bringing the War Home* series (1967–72), another landmark artistic intervention based on splicing, made literal the ongoing 'living-room war' by placing photographs of maimed Vietnamese citizens within images of affluent American interiors gleaned from aspirational magazines.

Jafa's work, too, invents new ways of conjoining images. The complex, musically derived patterns that guide his editing intentionally remain a secret. Their effect is to engage, through sequencing, with some of the most sensitive and significant aspects of African American life—without, however, purporting to make explicit statements about them. In other words, the reconfiguration of existing data in these works does not quite contain an explicit political message. Suffering and joy grate against each other, yet these sometimes-unbearable juxtapositions do not aim to spell out a slogan or delineate a systematic alternative. This does not mean, of course, that Jafa's practice is not addressing highly political themes.

In 2019, the work that brought him the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale was *The White Album*, a 29-minute video work that might be summarized as an exploration of whiteness in America. It opens with fragments of a music video by Oneohtrix Point Never, featuring a characteristically shirtless and sickly-yet-entrancing Iggy Pop, in CGI. As he sings, slowly, 'The pure always act from love, the damned always act from love', the image cuts to CCTV footage of a young man parking his car and entering a building, on 17 June 2015. Cut back to the music

video, a scene in which actor Robert Pattinson faces the fury of a wolf-like, blood-covered creature. The CCTV footage resumes: the sun has set, and the same young man is calmly leaving the building. Viewers who recognize the indicated date, or the man—white supremacist Dylann Roof—or the building, the Emanuel African Methodist Church in South Carolina, will know that the ellipsis in the CCTV footage corresponds to the killing of nine worshippers in what is now known as the Charleston massacre. This sequence of montage is horrifying, and resists transcription. The scene with the beast is scarcely a metaphor for the act of terrorism in which place it stands, just as the disturbing timing of the song's lyrics is no suggestion that Roof's actions could have stemmed from love. And yet the editing demands that we take in these elements in this specific order.

A long YouTube monologue breaks the troubling spell of this opening sequence with the imposing face and Southern twang of Dixon White, a reformed 'redneck racist' who became famous for posting videos that condemn white supremacy in rambling, earnest, profanity-filled speeches. He repeatedly shouts at us: 'Do something! Say something!'. The pace of *The White Album* is slower than *Love Is the Message*. Instead of being mesmerizing, it is exacting. Having seen the work multiple times in its large-screen gallery format, rarely did I find fellow audience members sit through its full length. It confronts the largely white audiences of contemporary art with ellipses that are both inscrutable and hard to bear, intercut with extreme close-ups on white faces and voices of the type they probably usually avoid.

The White Album is not a summation of whiteness, although its provocative power lies in this insinuation. It is a fragmentary portrait of what whiteness looks like when, as Jafa puts it, it is saturated with blackness, a comment reminiscent of James Baldwin's insistence that America's interracial turmoil yields not only new black identities, but 'a new white man, too'.¹⁷ With Jafa, this new figure emerges partly via the form of YouTube monologue, including a segment by a young woman delivering an aberrant speech on 'reverse racism'. As she complains about the difficulties of being white in America today, Jafa cuts to an ambiguous close-up of a black hand sliding between another person's legs, touching them over their clothes in a way that, as the shot soon reveals, is guided

¹⁷ James Baldwin, 'Stranger in the Village', *Notes of a Native Son* [1955], Boston 2012, p. 249.

by their white hand. The first instinct is to read this scene as an illustration, perhaps ironic, of the woman's words now turned voiceover, but soon what feels aberrant is any attempt to inject these sexual images with wider significance.

White people here are often violent. A man in handcuffs shouts the N-word to a black police officer over fifty times; the vicious protagonist of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* stares at the camera. White people are also ridiculous: a hysterical Celtic fan breaks out dancing to Bon Jovi's 'Livin' on a Prayer'; young cybergoths dance frantic tecktonik moves, their faces by contrast comically apathetic. But Bon Jovi's song is also a heartfelt working-class ode, and the moves of the goths, with their soundtrack switched to the deep voice of rapper Future, appear more spellbinding than awkward. Whiteness is made strange, such that it can be seen *as* whiteness rather than a default. Interspersed among these characters come scenes of Emily Bates, co-director of the gallery that represents Jafa. These simple glimpses, presumably filmed by the artist (like those of his daughter in *Love Is the Message*) show a white woman shying from the camera while exchanging smiles with the person behind it. The only non-ready-made clips in the work, these are unmistakably images of friendship—in this context they become deeply moving, as if by magic. Yet the racism portrayed in the work also permeates these scenes, unbearably, so that we witness the affection between the two of them and wonder what might be wrong with it.

Alienate and Ravish

Reflecting on earlier debates about montage and narrativity, Christian Metz remarked that it is not because 'the cinema is language' that it can tell such fine stories; rather, it has become language because it has told them.¹⁸ Likewise, it is because Jafa's films propose new modes of storytelling, or perhaps rather a new model of address, that we tend to receive these forms as language. Historically, descriptive realism—typically, the long shots of observational film—and what Metz, quoting Rossellini, called the 'all-powerful manipulation' of montage have been at odds with each other. Eisenstein was the supreme theoretician of a form of 'intellectual montage' that would end the conflict between the 'language of logic' and that of images: just as 'cognition is construction', so montage

¹⁸ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Chicago 1991, p. 47.

would advance the understanding of life by reconstructing it.¹⁹ But Jafa's work, with its combination of editing *frissons* and descriptive footage torn from context, offers a more ambivalent, hybrid approach, which points to new paths for engaged filmmaking.

Different tendencies have marked recent political art. In telegraphic form, we might say that after the 'resistance' model of happenings and guerrilla theatre in the 1960s, the merging of performance with protest in the 1970s and the alliance of art making with AIDS activism in the 1980s, art as 'intervention' set the tone from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Some of the latter practices have been called 'parafictions'—situations in which artists present a fiction as fact, making it intervene in the fabric of reality in order to disrupt, like a prank, our structures of belief and what we deem acceptable.²⁰ More recently, in the 2010s, however, the emphasis has been on reparative forms of representation, especially concerning marginalized identities. In some respects, Jafa's work might be inscribed in this effort, though the link between it and his videos, at once re-constructive and descriptive, is sinuous.

It would be a mistake to read Jafa's work as an unmediated reflection of 'black life'—to reduce complex visual articulations to the conditions informing them, as Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson have put it.²¹ At the same time, starting with his cinematography for *Daughters of the Dust*, his work has been shaped by a profound commitment to black culture. His practice relies on taking cultural identities very seriously. Yet he is also distinctly playful with these categories, whether through the palpable humour in some of his edits or, for instance, his idea that Hannibal Lecter and Jeff Koons are secretly black and passing. (As a cultural strategy borne from disenfranchisement, in which the deadly serious must cohabit with the absurd, this recalls Lenny Bruce's famous 1961 'Jewish-Goyish' routine, which explained that Ray Charles was Jewish, B'nai Brith was goyish and that all Italians were Jews.) Jafa has said that his work is only addressed to black people, but that white people might listen in—just as Eric Clapton's 'Layla' was only sung for Pattie Boyd, but the rest of the world could listen.

¹⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form', *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works, Volume I*, Indiana 1988, pp. 161–180.

²⁰ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 'Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility', *October* 129, 2009, pp. 51–84.

²¹ Leah Dickerman, David Joselit and Mignon Nixon, 'Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', *October* 162, 2017, p. 12.

Stuart Hall famously argued for an understanding of identity not as an already accomplished historical fact, but as 'a production' in and of itself, including a cinematographic one.²² While Jafa hasn't entirely stopped filming, it is remarkable that through editing he is now contributing to shaping cultural identities that, in the sense meant by Hall, are always made within, rather than prior to, representation. But perhaps this renewed power of montage is unsurprising in a context where making moving images has become central not only to daily social existence but to the mobilization of vast political movements. Art that can rearticulate all that we have already filmed is art that shows us how we are, always in process and through representation, coming up with who we are.

On the first page of her own *White Album*, Joan Didion suggests that we live 'by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.'²³ What kind of experience would correspond to doing the opposite of that? Sharing the story of his own first aesthetic shock, seeing Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* as a child, Jafa explained that he is still searching for art that could match the effect the movie had on him, 'the ability to simultaneously alienate and ravish'.²⁴ Works like *Love Is the Message* explore this coexistence—two reactions, stemming from the same root—through Jafa's formal solutions for rendering joyful, painful simultaneities. Such works perform the shock in the face of all these things happening at once in the world: the shooting of unarmed black teenagers; Serena Williams, dancing for joy on the tennis court; people wading through flood water after Katrina; bodies forever finding new ways of dancing. Teaching the basics of montage analysis to students often involves trying to find translations for the various cuts that separate shots. Some cuts suggest a 'therefore', we say to them, others might be a 'meanwhile, elsewhere', some simply an 'and then', or 'and now, as seen through this person's eyes.' With Jafa, editing is about the bewilderment within the cuts, whose nearest and imperfect translation is not in the words—those things that we understand—but in the astonishment that lurks behind the 'and, and, and . . .'.

²² Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989): p. 68.

²³ Joan Didion, 'The White Album', *The White Album* [1979], New York 1990, p. 11.

²⁴ Tomkins, 'Arthur Jafa's Radical Alienation'.