

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Danny King, "Arthur Jafa Distilled the Black American Experience Into a High Art Music Video," *The Village Voice*, December 27, 2016



## Arthur Jafa Distilled the Black American Experience Into a High Art Music Video

BY DANNY KING

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*Love Is the Message* is stitched together from hundreds of clips, including Panthers quarterback Cam Newton rushing...

*Images courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/Rome*

Four minutes into Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, the actress Amandla Stenberg asks, "What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we loved black culture?" It's a question that lingers over the entirety of *Love's* seven-minute, thirty-second runtime. In a year when the black culture made by black people has raised questions of categorization — should Beyoncé's *Lemonade* be eligible for movie critics' best-of-the-year polls? should Ezra Edelman's miniseries-that-was-released-into-theaters, *O.J.: Made in America*? — Jafa's seismic work is decidedly A Whole Bunch of Things at Once. It is a music video (set rhapsodically to Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam"), an installation (currently on view, through January 28, at Gavin Brown's Harlem location), and a supercut (its pieced-together images culled from a deep well of online sources that Jafa often cites onscreen). It's also, probably, a movie, a video essay, and an act of protest. Some dancemakers might even sense in *Love's* carefully ordered, movement-aplenty montage a choreographer's sensibility. Such ambiguities of classification are likely to excite academics or confound rabid

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year-end pulse-takers, but on December 10, in a "listening session" at the Harlem gallery with the Barnard professor Tina Campt, Jafa didn't care to parse such generalities. He wanted to talk about a shoelace.

The shoelace appears about a minute into *Love*. The image, presented in slow motion, shows a boy — Jafa's own son, introduced in midair and shot from behind — leaping from a brick path to a sidewalk that sits a little lower. The shot lasts for barely three seconds. In most scenes in *Love*, Jafa explained, "you get a sliver of what's happening," a quick snippet that usually involves an unexpected pivot of some kind. Here, it's the loose shoelace, fluttering out of place in the slo-mo framing; later, in a three-second clip of Angela Davis walking toward the camera, it comes in her lightning-fast change in expression, from a content smirk to something more serious — an almost-growl.



...Biggie Smalls rapping...

In *Love*, Jafa's aptitude for cutting, for compilation and curation and pinpoint editing, differs from his better-known art of composition. He made his name serving as director of photography on Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), regularly cited as a landmark in the visual representation of black life on celluloid. In the November 16 issue of the *Voice*, Melissa Anderson wrote that *Daughters* — the recent recipient of a 25th-anniversary digital restoration and a long-time-coming critical embrace — "abounds with stunning motifs and tableaux, the iconography seemingly sourced from dreams as much as from history and folklore." (Jafa also did second-unit DP work on Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, from 1992, and Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, from '99.) *Daughters'* influence on *Lemonade* was widely noted, and almost certainly helped drive the push for a proper rerelease. More recently, Jafa shot two music videos for Solange Knowles ("Don't Touch

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My Hair," "Cranes in the Sky"), using similarly emphatic and empowering imagery of black women. "*Lemonade* gave Dash an overdue introduction into mainstream black popular consciousness," Cassie Da Costa wrote in October for the *New Yorker*, "and perhaps Solange's videos will do the same for Jafa."

But in *Love*, which has garnered him a fair amount of praise (and press), Jafa draws from clips and images that, almost uniformly, originate elsewhere — uncommon waters for a practiced cinematographer. He thinks and works digitally, frequently addressing the provenance of his chosen pixels via logos and watermarks. In one clip from June 2015, "YouTube/Brandon Brooks" and "WSJ" are splashed over footage from Texas of a white police officer manhandling a teenage black girl in a swimsuit. In another, the C-SPAN logo hovers as President Obama breaks into "Amazing Grace" during his eulogy for the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church pastor who was gunned down last summer in South Carolina along with eight other African-American worshippers. In a third, NBC's peacock floats up above as Serena Williams does the Crip Walk on a tennis court's sidelines.



...run-ins with the law...

Jafa stitches together these images of triumph and tragedy — of black entertainers commanding the stage, black athletes defying gravity, black churchgoers losing themselves in a "spiritual falling out" (Jafa's term), black citizens sustaining abuse from ruthless bureaucratic forces — to tell a dazzling, painful, and ultimately uplifting story of resilience. At the December 10 talk, Jafa paused on a clip in which the Los Angeles-based artist Martine Syms says, of black people, "We

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are not aliens." Jafa expressed his admiration for Syms before voicing a kind of disagreement. The next clip in *Love* shows a one-handed, reaching-backward Odell Beckham Jr. catch that went viral in 2014. "That's some alien shit right there," Jafa said as the footage of the New York Giants receiver rolled. Scenes like these are relatively easy to recognize, but other sections of *Love* are harder to identify. Part of the value of Jafa's live reading of the work was the fact that he ended up delivering what was essentially a beat-by-beat bibliography. The first words spoken in *Love*, Jafa informed the crowd, are uttered by Charles Ramsey, the Ohio man who was instrumental to the discovery of three female kidnapping victims in his neighborhood in 2013. ("I knew something was wrong when a little pretty white girl ran into a black man's arms," Ramsey tells a television reporter. "Something is wrong here. Dead giveaway.") The second scene, of a gesticulating crowd at a basketball game at Howard University (Jafa's alma mater), depicts the "swag surf" — what Jafa described as a "black variation on the wave." Jafa identified the woman walking alone down a hallway in the following clip as Deborah Johnson, fiancée of Fred Hampton, the charismatic young Black Panther assassinated in a police raid in 1969.

"If much of the black American archive is nonexistent or lost," Da Costa continued in her *New Yorker* piece, "then a black aesthetic does not simply materialize but needs to be decided upon and situated in time and space." Listening to Jafa contextualize these fragments was an inspiring and informative realization of this challenge — a *Genius*-style annotation in real time, as well as a rousing reclamation of cultural history. Seated next to Campt in front of a giant MacBook monitor, Jafa rewound, paused, and sped forward, his observations ranging from the anecdotal to the analytical. "I remember crying while I was putting [the movie] together," he admitted.



...Beyoncé dancing...

Early in the talk, Jafa also dived into his longtime fascination with music. He phrased one of his fundamental projects as an artist in the form of a question ("What is it about black music that is so specifically powerful?"), hinting at the musical

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curiosity that made him such a perfect fit for the Solange videos, and that made *Daughters* such a potent touchstone for an artist like Beyoncé. (Jafa also told the crowd that "90 percent" of the cutting on *Love* was completed before he settled on "Ultralight Beam" as the guiding song — an astonishing statistic, given the piece's exquisite dovetailing of sound and image.) This query sent Jafa into considerations of "rhythm," "flow," and "Afro-American social dance," motion-centric subjects that allowed for segues into more of *Love*'s constellation of gestures: anonymous youngsters grinding on each other in a nighttime setting; Jafa's son dancing at Jafa's daughter's wedding ("My son, he thinks he can dance"); silent-movie footage of the Caribbean-American vaudevillian and entertainer Bert Williams (in blackface) falling backward into a herd of police officers.

Seen amid a climate in which unjust violence directed toward black bodies has become — or, more to the point, remained — customary, what pierces most immediately in *Love* is the horror of Birmingham protesters fleeing from armed mercenaries, or the sorrow of dash-cam footage of a black mom wailing at police officers at a traffic stop ("We don't have a gun! My kids! They're six and eight!"). But Jafa's exuberant live reading, in its thrilling sense of second-to-second discovery, encouraged a different message: Jafa, despite his movie's inherent sadness, sought to be a messenger of joy.



...and the civil rights movement.

In Obama's "Amazing Grace" clip, Jafa focused not on the horrific event that led to the occasion, but on a pastor in the background whose sunglasses magically fall from his face as he stands up to join the president in song. Jafa conceded the disturbing continuity in the footage from Birmingham and Ferguson ("black people running for their lives," then and now), but followed those images with a slow-motion clip of Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton sprinting ahead — another black person running for his life, "but," Jafa noted, "with joy." And in the scene from Texas, of the white police officer throwing the black teen to the ground, Jafa emphasized not the grossly excessive level of enforcement but the presence of the attacked girl's friends coming to her aid, badgering the cop. "He got a gun," Jafa said of the officer. "They in bikinis with fucking towels." The fearless incongruity of the situation — teenagers in swimsuits surrounding a uniformed man wearing a belt of weapons — spoke to another of Jafa's memorable sentiments: "Black people keeping each other up, you know?"