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The Visual Frequency of Black Life

By Peter L'Official July 2018

ARTS & CULTURE

On Arthur Jafa's video collage Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death.



ARTHUR JAJA, LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH. INSTALLATION VIEW, GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, ROME, 2018.

One of the most striking moments in Arthur Jafa's transcendent 2016 video collage, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, is also one of its most recognizable. Barack Obama stands behind the podium at the TD Arena in Charleston, South Carolina, having just delivered a eulogy for the Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, the slain pastor of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, a week after nine of its African American worshippers were killed in an attack by the white supremacist Dylann Roof. The scene is a tableau of purple paraments and vestments and other decorous trappings of church and state. In the midst of perhaps the most solemn and pregnant silence of his presidency, Obama casts his head downward and, with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, launches softly into the opening refrain of "Amazing Grace."

If you have seen this footage elsewhere, then you know that the crowd, beginning with the AME preachers seated onstage behind the president, stands and joins him in singing the hymn.

What you might not have noticed—and what Jafa's masterfully sequenced seven-minute video symphony illuminates—is the reaction of one of the AME preachers, in sunglasses and seated in the second row behind Obama in the left of the frame. On hearing the first two gently delivered notes, the preacher realizes, in a flash of recognition, that the nation's first African American president has begun to sing for the congregation and all the watching world. Four fluid gestures occur in an instant: the seated preacher looks to his left, meets the eyes of a fellow clergy member, strips off his sunglasses with awe and pride and exultation, and leaps to his feet. Captured in this seconds-long space is the president's call to song and the affirmatory response of the oldest AME church in the Southern United States. Very little of this one man's subtle, then soaring emotional response is perceptible in the available footage of Obama's eulogy. Seen in real time, it simply happens too fast.

Not so in Jafa's work. Real time, in Jafa's video, is often bent and stretched like a musical blue note. It is difficult to know exactly what Jafa does with this stolen moment (he is particularly secretive about his technique), but by manipulating frame rates that illuminate the microtones of movement, as a musician might along the pitch

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spectrum, Jafa reveals and expands what we normally miss. We see and feel moments within moments that detail a succession of emotions as we might otherwise hear subdivisions of octaves; we see and feel a barely perceptible warping of time that radiates warmth and releases kinetic, expressive energies charged within and between black bodies. If motion can be said to have a kind of pitch, Jafa is both preternaturally sensitive to it and a master of shifting that visual pitch to express—as does the blues—tragedy and ecstasy, eros and pain, joy and loss. When the preacher stands, one has the sense that it is not merely the congregation nor simply the nation at large that rises with him but rather that he stands with the indomitable grace that generations of black folk before him have possessed, and we might imagine they now rise with him in spirit. Rapture, here, has rhythm.

Jafa's video enacts a visual illustration of what the nameless narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* deems "invisibility": a condition that gives one "a slightly different sense of time," a sense of being "never quite on the beat." Invisibility is a concept that Ellison's narrator claims is also perceptible in the music of Louis Armstrong: "Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around." This Ellisonian sense of time, of slipping into its musical breaks and looking around, is another way of describing what Jafa calls "black visual intonation"—a rich, multilayered concept that sits at the heart of his artistic and filmic practice and which informs a massive new exhibition catalogue of his work.

That catalogue, *Arthur Jafa: A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, was published to accompany Jafa's exhibition of the same name at London's Serpentine Galleries last year; the show traveled to Berlin's Julia Stoschek Collection last February, where it remains on view until November 25. The book is a catalogue-as-archive: a compendium of more than three hundred found and new images strikingly juxtaposed and interspersed with some three dozen excerpted, sampled, and newly commissioned essays from a dizzying array of writers, artists, and academics, including Tina Campt, Greg Tate, Sylvia Wynter, Dave Hickey, and the recently departed Cecil Taylor. As the artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah notes in the first line of his essay: "Anyone who has known Arthur Jafa long enough will tell you the same thing: collecting images holds a special fascination for him; it is his forte, if you will."

Jafa's obsession with collecting and collating images might seem pathological if it didn't produce such an affective and allusive form of montage. With this catalogue, Jafa, who has worked for three decades as a filmmaker, cinematographer, and artist, has created a work of such overwhelming intellectual, aesthetic, and quite literal weight (the book is 848 pages and sits in your lap like an elegantly appointed concrete block) that it could easily serve as a sober retrospective monograph of some long-past artist—that is, if Jafa's work, and the artist himself, didn't thrum with life. For that reason, the catalogue is an active representation of Jafa's abiding investigation of the notion of black visual intonation.

Both theory and formal practice, black visual intonation—as evidenced by *Love Is the Message*—explores the manifold aesthetic articulations of black life, black visibility, and, indeed, blackness itself. *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions* might be thought of as its sourcebook, but one which does far more than merely introduce its central conceit. The catalogue performs the concept; the sequenced archive, in many respects, is the art.

Jafa has explained the broader theory of black visual intonation—developed alongside his partners Elissa Blount Moorhead and Malik Hassan Sayeed, who together form the studio collective TNEG—as "the use of irregular, non-tempered camera rates and frame replication to prompt filmic movements to function in a manner that approximated Black vocal intonation." We might then understand black visual intonation as the answer to a question that has underscored much of Jafa's wide-ranging artistic practice: How can visual media transmit the "power, beauty, and alienation" that is so familiar to black musical forms? *Love Is the Message* and one of Jafa's earlier film-and-sound installations, *APEX* (2013), are, in part, visual illustrations of the principles of black visual intonation, but they are also manifestations of what is necessarily an uncertain concept. Uncertain because, as the critic Ernest Hardy writes in another catalogue essay, part of what makes Jafa's "monstrous cinema" so powerful is that it is structured and driven by the knowledge that the powerful forces of antiblackness in the world are "constantly shape-shifting"; it is necessary because that antiblackness "cannot be tamed or conquered, and yet absolutely must be taken on." Monstrousness for Jafa is "to be a thing or person that doesn't respect boundaries." The power and potential of black visual intonation is realized by Jafa's optic bending of that singular moment in Obama's Pinckney eulogy—itsself a somber, stunning rebuke to the violent antiblackness that prompted the occasion—to reveal all the rhythm, dynamism, and poetry of movement inherent within it. But how might the blackness of black music and the blackness of black film work on the page? How can blackness be spoken, written, or otherwise brought into being, in the same way that black music sings, shouts, or otherwise syncopates that blackness into unique yet recognizable and enduring forms? That is, what should a black book look like?

In his essay for the catalogue, the black poet and scholar Fred Moten includes fragments of a conversation between him and Jafa, who briefly conjures Ellison's concept of invisibility in explaining the ethos of the exhibition and catalogue's title: "The opposition of 'improbable and extraordinary' is intentional and characteristic (in my opinion) of a certain sort of inability or unwillingness of the white imaginary to accept the black being ... And this refusal of black being is inextricably bound up with our so-called invisibility which is in fact their blindness." For Jafa, as for Ellison, that invisibility is characterized by a refusal by whites to accept the black body, but invisibility's special, and spatial, "sense of time"—the "breaks" Ellison's narrator suggests can be slipped into in order to "look around"—also

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has its uses for black folk as a potential locus or mark of resistance, revelation, and refusal all their own. Blue notes signify a refusal of equal temperament in Western diatonic harmony, and it is within these in-between spaces on the musical scale that they do their work. Black visual intonation, too, works within these spaces, and space is what Jafa suggests his assemblages and juxtapositions manipulate or disrupt. “Think about a river,” he says in the Moten essay. “The river ain’t the bank and it ain’t even really the water. Black Visual Intonation/Dynamic Visual Phenomena ain’t really about the images or what they contain.” The blackness of blackness—or what Campt describes as “the visual frequency of Black life”—is, for Jafa, all about flow.

There are many arresting individual images presented within the flow of these pages, but as Jafa himself suggests, it is out of their juxtaposition—what Akomfrah has called their “affective proximity” to one another—that the totality of Jafa’s concept emerges. An 1868 photograph of enslaved blacks and their captors on the deck of the HMS London precedes an Annie Leibovitz portrait of the legendary Mississippi hill-country fife player Othar Turner, one of the last survivors of a musical tradition older than the blues and with roots in syncopated rhythms that reach back to Africa. A somber 1983 Ari Marcopoulos photo of Jean-Michel Basquiat, alone in a bathtub, is succeeded by a photo of Jafa and the artist Kerry James Marshall sharing a joyful embrace. A series of photographs taken with a scanning electron microscope, interspersed throughout, suggest at once the atomic and the cosmic, while every photograph of Miles Davis conveys either galactic calm or menace, a reflection of Davis’s legendary countenance, which seemed to suggest both expressions at once. A haunting still of the rapper Nas’s eyes glowing green, taken from the opening sequence of Hype Williams’s 1998 film *Belly* (shot by Jafa’s TNEG collective partner Malik Hassan Sayeed), is the book’s final image.

In writing about the practice of the artist Frida Orupabo, whose work was a part of the Serpentine show, Jafa also succinctly describes his own: “In its unhurried, yet temporaneous delivery of ‘pictures’ (material instantiation of images), one is left with (to my gut) an affective field, which is as black and unprecedented as anything ever produced under the regime of what is clearly some form of proto cinema.” Though he continues in describing Orupabo’s Instagram feed, we might also understand his words as a gloss on the very object in which they appear: “This is nothing short of a mobile repository, a litany of residua, a voluptuous trail of black continuity, pyramid schemata as densely inscribed as any book of the dead, not so much an archive as an ark, a borne witness to the singularity that is blackness.”

Jafa has invoked Ishmael Reed in describing the difficult months-long assemblage of documents and images by noting of the catalogue, “It Jes Grew.” In its gesture to the rigors of academic and archival research, Jafa’s book bears similarity to Reed’s classic 1972 “Neo-HooDoo” novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, which famously supplies a “partial bibliography” and whose spirit of “Jes Grew” is, like black visual intonation, an expression of the ineffable, and certainly viral, allure of black cultural forms.

Jean Toomer’s 1923 work, *Cane*, another supremely black book, might be a more apt literary forebear for Jafa’s *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*. *Cane* is a novel in name only that fuses poetry, experimental prose, and drama in an enchanting montage; similarly, Jafa’s catalogue—and in many ways the concept of black visual intonation itself—resists classification. It is a sui generis synthesis of image and prose, and like Toomer, who believed his work to be a form of preservation for ways of black life that were under threat, Jafa attempts to recover what might otherwise disappear or die. He has also joked that the catalogue is a collection of “everything that I like”—a line that unintentionally echoes the refrain (“this is everything”) from the contemporary hymn, Kanye West’s “Ultralight Beam,” that underscores *Love Is the Message*. Jafa’s book, an anthological treatise on the capaciousness of blackness in the twenty-first century, is everything.



ARTHUR Jafa, *LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH*, 2016, STILL FROM A COLOR AND BLACK-AND-WHITE VIDEO, 7 MINUTES 30 SECONDS.