

Calvin Tomkins, "Radical Alienation," *The New Yorker*, December 21, 2020

# THE NEW YORKER

PROFILES

## RADICAL ALIENATION

*Arthur Jafa left an art world he found too white. Years later, he made a triumphant return.*

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

**T**he most spellbinding art work of the past decade is a seven-and-a-half-minute film called "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," by the artist and filmmaker Arthur Jafa. Word spread quickly after its New York premiere, in November, 2016, at Gavin Brown's gallery. People crowded the gallery to see it, but nothing they had heard prepared them for the rapid-fire sequence of a hundred and fifty film clips of Black people in the maelstrom of American life: a teen-age girl being thrown to the ground by a white police officer, burning cars and hip-hop dancers, Martin Luther King, Jr., in an open car, a man being beaten by several uniformed policemen, LeBron James soaring in for a gorgeous dunk, Barack Obama singing "Amazing Grace" at a memorial service in Charleston, a woman saying, "What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?" Most of the images are found footage, taken from YouTube. Their emotional impact comes from the way Jafa has put them together, shifting and editing and choreographing to create a flow of deeply resonant juxtapositions, over a soundtrack of Kanye West's ecstatic "Ultralight Beam."

For Jafa (pronounced Jay-fa), who turned sixty in November, the film's reception was startling. A dozen major museums in this country and in Europe acquired copies of "Love Is the Message," and many more borrowed it for special screenings. As Jafa's friend John Akomfrah, the British artist and filmmaker, said to me, it was ironic that "this figure who was heralded for a long time as a kind of prophet in the world of cinema would turn out to be the savior of the art world." Jafa had a lively interest in contemporary art, and from 1999 to 2005 he had shown sculptures and other works in art galleries here and abroad, but cinema had been his primary focus since the seventies, when he was an un-

dergraduate at Howard University, in Washington, D.C. Howard had an excellent film department, and in Jafa's third year there his interest had shifted from architecture to film studies. Incurriously curious and hugely ambitious, A.J., as everyone called him, identified his goal very early: "To make Black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music." Jafa was not the first to stake this claim, but, as Akomfrah said, "somebody needed to articulate it for our generation, and A.J. was that figure."

Jafa's thinking was based on a concept that he calls "Black visual intonation." "Something I've pointed out a million times is that, if you look at Black folk and our visual expressivity, it's very, very undeveloped in comparison to what we've been able to achieve in music," he told me, one day this summer. "It's undeveloped despite the fact that we come from a visual tradition that's just as rich as the musical one. There is no contemporary art without African descent. Cubism is Picasso trying to understand African artifacts." Africans brought music with them on the slave ships, he said, and the music changed and developed in response to the new context, and this led to "everything from Billie Holiday to Jimi Hendrix to Motown, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk—you can go on and on." But nothing comparable had happened in African-American visual expression, and when Jafa's teachers in the film department at Howard introduced him to the idea of cinema devoted to Black lives, he said, "I was very excited. It sort of fired my imagination."

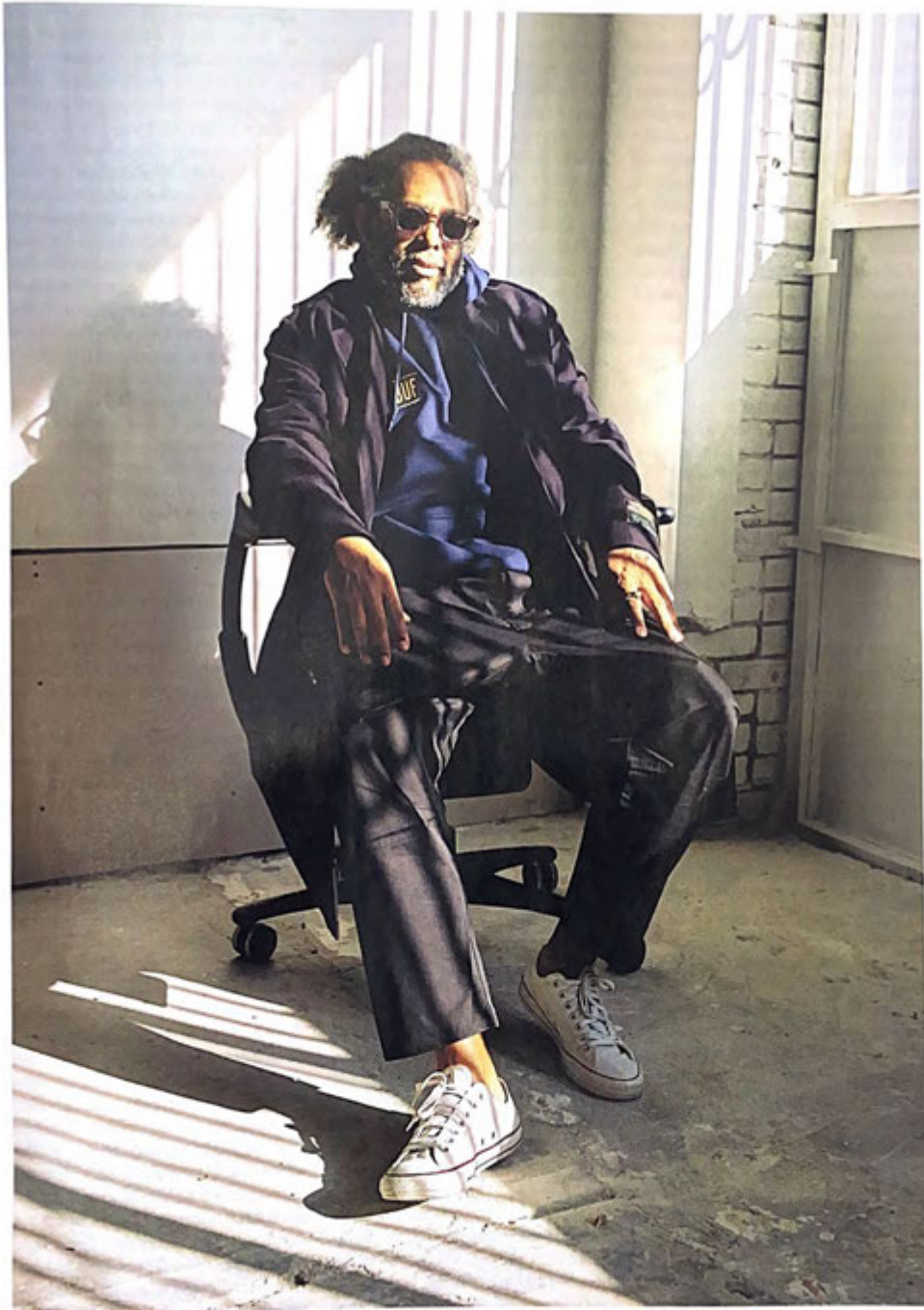
"Love Is the Message" is the closest he has come to realizing the goal he set for himself forty years ago. "I think what the film captures is the Black struggle to live," the writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman, who has known Jafa for many years, said to me. "It's a series of iconic images that show the brilliant virtuosity

of the Black thinkers, artists, and athletes that ordinary Black folk have given to the world, alongside some of the forces that have negated Black life. You don't have to know the exact reference for each image to feel the work's density and power." The poet Fred Moten, another friend of Jafa's, talked to me about the "entanglement of absolute joy and absolute pain" that is fundamental to Black art and Black music. "Love Is the Message" has all of that, and you know it immediately," he said. "It's in every moment. There is no break, and this is why it's good that it lasts only seven minutes, because that's as much as anyone can take."

**T**wo of Jafa's teachers at Howard, Haile Gerima and Ben Caldwell, were recognized independent filmmakers. Gerima, who was born in Ethiopia, had been a leader of the L.A. Rebellion, a group of cinema students at U.C.L.A. in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, whose rebellion, in Gerima's words, was against "the white supremacist vocabulary" of mainstream Hollywood. Gerima was Jafa's mentor and role model. His films ("Bush Mama," "Ashes and Embers," "Sankofa"), along with those of Caldwell, Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, and other pioneers of L.A.'s Black film movement, opened Jafa's eyes to the boundless possibilities of cinema, but he gradually came to feel that something was missing in their approach. "It seemed to me early on that it wasn't enough to say a Black person made the film," he said. "It had to be something more. And, in trying to think about what I consider fundamental Black aesthetic values, one of the things that came up was rhythm. Most people will say Black people have rhythm—they seem able to do things with time. So I became interested in how cinema could be inscribed with a more idiomatic sense of timing."

Jafa had been an omnivorous reader

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*"It seemed to me early on that it wasn't enough to say a Black person made the film. It had to be something more," Jafa says.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRANDON HICKS

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since he was seven or eight. In the Howard library, where he spent much of his free time, he discovered a citation, in a musicology book, about a missionary who had listened to the music in African villages and had tried to transcribe it. "One of the things I remember is the missionary saying that the difficulty in studying the music of the Negroes is their tendency to worry the note." He paused, and rubbed the graying thatch of beard on his chin. "Worry the note," he repeated. "Basically, what he means is that, in most African music, and in fact many musics of the non-Western world, the thing you call a note, which in Western music is a pure sound that vibrates in a measurable fashion, is neither pure nor measurable. A B-flat has a very specific tonal vibration. But what you hear in a lot of African and non-Western music—certainly in Black music—is a vibrational frequency that fluctuates. So when this guy tried to notate their music, he'd say, 'That sounds like a B-flat to me,' but in fact it was never only a B-flat. There is a certain quiver in a Black person's playing. Even M.L.K.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech is a combination of the words and the thing he's doing with his voice." Jazz historians and other musicologists may well dispute aspects of Jafa's analysis, but it gave him the insight he needed. "What I realized," he concluded, "is that there must be techniques, ways to get visual movement in cinema that has something of what Black vocal intonation does in Black music."

Gerima remembers Jafa as a "very noticeable" student, "brilliant, energetic, and full of imagination." Jafa says he gave Gerima and his other teachers a lot of trouble. "I argued a lot," he told me. "It bothered Haile that I was swinging my Super 8 camera around and just burning film—I was being Jackson Pollock." His talent was unmistakable, though, and in the summer of 1980 Gerima sent him to Los Angeles to work with Charles Burnett on his new film, "My Brother's Wedding." Jafa thought Burnett's previous film, "Killer of Sheep," a deeply evocative study of working-class people in Los Angeles, was the best movie yet made by a Black director. "My Brother's Wed-

ding," about a quiet young man and his reckless best friend, received a poor review in the *Times*, because the producer had shown the film before Burnett had finished editing it. But Jafa learned a great deal about cinematography from Burnett, who shot his own films, and he fell in love with the film's assistant director, a dazzlingly gifted woman named Julie Dash.

Eight years older than Jafa and a graduate student at the U.C.L.A. film school, Dash had already made three films of her own, and she was working on a series of shorts about Black women in America at the turn of the century. When their time on the Burnett film came to an end, Jafa moved in with Dash. (Although he went back to Howard a few times after that and took classes, he never graduated.)

"A.J. admired my independent spirit," Dash told me. "When we first met, he thought I was gay. Why? I don't know. We'd have conversations that went long into the night, so long I'd sometimes go to sleep. We wore each other's clothes. Everybody we knew wore surplus Army khakis, and we were actually the same size." Jafa urged her to put aside the series of short films so that they could concentrate on one of them, about Black people in an isolated Gullah community on an island off the coast of South Carolina. Dash was persuaded—her father's people had come from this region. The result, eleven years later, was "Daughters of the Dust," one of the enduring classics of independent cinema.

The script for "Daughters" called for a large cast—three or four generations—and required serious funding. Dash had managed to raise about thirty thousand dollars, enough to start putting together a production team. Jafa was the cinematographer, and he brought in Kerry James Marshall, a young artist he had never met, to be their production designer.

"I'd just had a show in Los Angeles, and A.J. read an interview with me in the paper and called out of the blue," Marshall recalled. "We were on the phone for a couple of hours. I said, 'Why don't you come by?,' and a few days later he came and we stood near the door

talking for another two hours before we sat down. He is a talker. One of the things that really got us together was my deep interest in Mississippi Delta blues. I was always trying to paint a visual equivalent to things like the Robert Johnson songs 'Cross Road Blues' or 'Devil Got My Woman,' and when I read Julie's script that's what it sounded like to me. I hadn't had any experience at all in making a film, but, as it turned out, I had the combination of skills they needed to help that happen." Marshall became an essential third figure in the collaboration, and his wife, the actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce, played the role of Viola Peasant.

Dash and Jafa married in 1983, and their daughter, N'Zinga (named for an Angolan queen), was born a year later. They moved from Los Angeles to Atlanta in 1986, to be closer to where "Daughters of the Dust" would be filmed. Jafa's parents, who had recently moved there, were delighted to look after N'Zinga—they called her Zing—while Jafa and Dash scouted locations. They were still far short of their funding goal, which was eight hundred thousand dollars, but in the fall of 1987 they assembled a small team and went to the island of St. Helena, South Carolina. They managed to shoot a trailer and some of the film that fall. Soon afterward, Lindsay Law, the executive producer of PBS's "American Playhouse," saw the trailer and loved it. He arranged for "American Playhouse" to give Dash and Jafa eight hundred thousand dollars, which allowed them to go back to St. Helena in 1989 and reshoot the film from scratch, with new costumes and equipment.

Jafa rented two 35-mm. movie cameras, and a computer that allowed him to weave together normal-motion and slow-motion footage. "He wanted the camera to move through space like Michael Jordan driving through the lane," Marshall said. Jafa also had specific ideas about lighting that would bring out the subtle variations in Black skin. He made his own reflectors—instead of using the usual large aluminum sheets, he cut out small, handheld ones that threw light on the actor's face. When they finished shooting, though, the money was gone, and there was nothing left for the editing. "We went back to 'American Play-



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house," Jafa said. "They gave us the money to edit, but in return we had to give up most of our financial interests in the film."

"Daughters of the Dust" premiered in 1991 at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize, and Arthur Jafa won the award for Excellence in Cinematography. But the film's nonlinear narrative structure and the fact that some of its dialogue was in the Gullah language made distributors nervous, and none of them would go near it. Jafa eventually negotiated an agreement with Film Forum, the art-house theatre in Greenwich Village, which showed "Daughters" in 1992. Dash went on the "Today" show, and when the film started drawing sellout crowds the run was extended. "Daughters of the Dust" was the first film by an African-American woman to get a theatrical release.

"That was a weird time," Jafa said. "Daughters" was the toast of the New York film community, but we'd given away a large part of our financial interests, and knew we weren't going to make any money on it. Plus, Julie's and my relationship at that point was not in the best place." By 1991, they had separated. "I was struggling with some personal stuff, psychological stuff, and Julie, what with the child and the movie, couldn't help me," he said. "I was just very immature." He also said, "I didn't want to become Mr. Dash."

Talking on Skype, as Jafa and I were obliged to do because of the pandemic, has unexpected limitations. I was on the East Coast, and Jafa was in Los Angeles, and it took me three sessions to realize that Jafa's brother Boston was sitting across the desk from him, working quietly while we talked. I finally "met" him when he got up and walked into view and waved. The brothers don't look alike, but they sound very much like brothers, with Deep South accents. A.J., who is interested in clothes and gets invited to openings at Gucci, wears a small diamond stud on his right eyebrow, and another one just under his lower lip. "I've had the studs for more than twenty years," he told me. "People used to think the one below my lip was a crumb—before COVID, they'd try to brush it off."

Jafa usually sat with his back to a window, so on bright days he was in shadow, and only gradually did I become aware of his tattoos. They were more or less everywhere: a black panther on his neck; a drawing of an early work by Zaha Hadid, "The Peak," which was never built, on his left arm; "FRODO," from "The Lord of the Rings," in capital letters and also on his left arm; Krazy Kat on the back of one hand. There were a lot more of them, he said, and a story to go with each. So, Krazy Kat? "People have pointed out to me that it's ironic, because I don't like cats," Jafa said. "They don't respect your personal space. But Krazy Kat at one point was the biggest thing in American popular culture, and the artist who drew him, George Herriman, is such an interesting figure to me—his own kids never knew their father was Black."

When Jafa tells stories, the words come slowly at first, in a baritone drawl, but as he gets going the pitch rises and the tempo accelerates. "The cat loves the mouse, the mouse hates the cat," he said. "The dog, Officer Pupp, loves the cat, but the cat can't see him because the cat loves the mouse. And what makes it worse is that the mouse keeps throwing a brick at Krazy Kat's head, which is an act of violence, but the cat sees the violence as an act of love, and so the circle continues. The absurdity of it strikes

me as being as good a model of Black love and hate in white society as we've ever seen, a profound and absurd meditation on the thin line between love and hate."

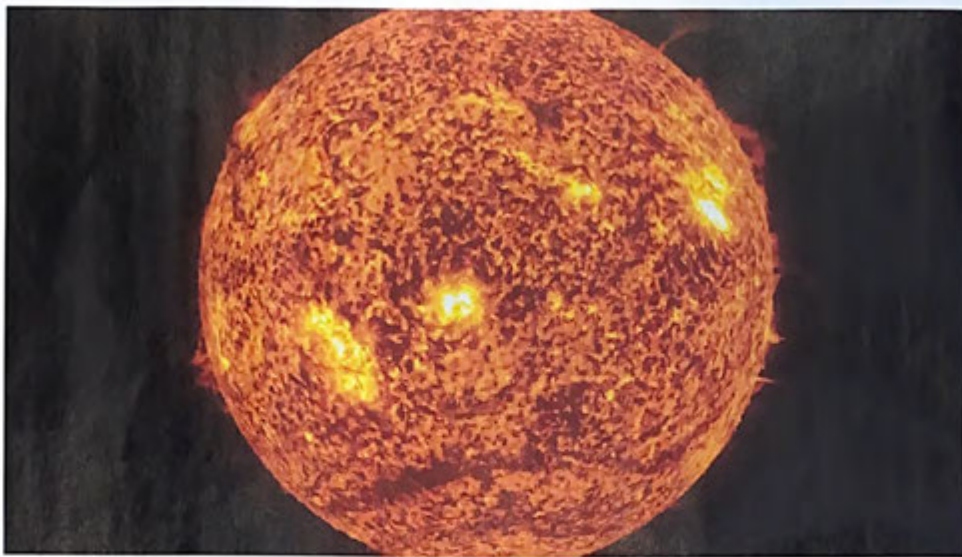
Jafa was born in 1960 in Tupelo, Mississippi, the birthplace of Elvis Presley. "My mom was born in Tupelo, and so were my aunt and uncle, and my grandparents grew up there," Jafa told me. His aunt Nettie has served on the Tupelo City Council since 2001. Jafa's full name is Arthur Jafa Fielder; he dropped Fielder (as his grandfather, another Arthur Jafa, had done) when he was in his early twenties, but his family ties have never weakened. Arthur and Rowena, his parents, were teachers, and his siblings—three younger brothers—have all found arts-related careers: Boston, the second oldest, is a musician and a filmmaker. (Named for their father's cousin, Ralph Boston, he was called Ralph until he got to high school, where everyone started calling him Boston.) Jim teaches film production in New York City high schools, and his twin brother, Tim, writes graphic novels.

Jafa's school integrated the year he entered first grade, and he was one of a handful of African-Americans in his class. Two years earlier, the family had moved to Russellville, Alabama, but Jafa was sent back to Tupelo to live with his



*"And you're honestly not feeling any transference?"*

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Stills from Jafa's film "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," for which there was no concept and no script.

grandparents so that he could go to school there. When the Ku Klux Klan burned down their house in Russellville (Arthur had been named football coach of the recently combined white and Black high schools), they returned to Tupelo. The whole family moved again, less than a year later, to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Arthur and Rowena had been offered positions at Coahoma Junior College, an innovative school for Black students. Arthur taught physical education and coached football and basketball; Rowena, who taught business administration, became the school's financial director.

Clarksdale is in the Mississippi Delta, which Jafa describes as a Black Jurassic Park. "I grew up in a region where some of the more horrific acts in the century occurred," Jafa said. "Emmett Till was killed, the three civil-rights workers were killed, people were tortured and murdered and nobody was brought to trial." Unlike Tupelo, Clarksdale had held on to hard-core segregation long after it became illegal. And yet, growing up in a supportive family and on a college campus, the Fielder children felt protected and encouraged. For the first few years, the family lived on the campus in a blue-and-white trailer with three bedrooms. "Art and I shared a room,"

Boston recalled. "It was filled with Marvel and DC comic books, and boxes of the magazines that Art cut pictures out of and pasted in notebooks. He slept in the top bunk, and I was on the bottom. We'd tell each other stories and make drawings—he'd draw something and hand it down to me, and I'd hand one up to him."

"The move from Tupelo to Clarksdale was mainly a change in soundtrack," Jafa said. "In Tupelo, the radio was dominated by Elvis Presley. I remember my grandmother telling stories about Elvis. They knew him in the Black part of town—that's how poor he was. When Elvis was a kid, he would sit on the porch of a nearby house and play guitar." Jafa was never a Presley fan. In Clarksdale, where the soundtrack was Memphis soul, all four Fielder boys went to Catholic school, because their non-Catholic parents thought they would get a better education that way. (Their father eventually converted to Catholicism.) Jafa was an altar boy and a straight-A student, and in high school he became a National Merit Scholar. "I was just elated to know that I had one student, just one, who could have gotten into M.I.T.," Olenza McBride, his social-studies teacher, recalled.

Jafa read all the time—first comics,

then science fiction, the World Book (his parents bought the series, and later they added the Encyclopædia Britannica), history, sociology, and world literature. "Our neighbor was head librarian at the college," he said. "She would let me stay there after hours—I'd fall asleep in the stacks, and my dad would come to pick me up at two in the morning." Jafa and Boston saw every movie they could get to. One Saturday afternoon, when Jafa was ten, their parents dropped them off at the white people's theatre on the other side of town to see Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey." The theatre was empty except for a few white couples, who left before the intermission. "The lights go down, the movie begins, and it's like being buried alive," Jafa wrote, in a 2015 essay called "My Black Death." "Even now, I'm still searching for an art experience capable of matching the effect this film had on me." When it ended, he and Boston walked out in a daze to the empty lobby, where the white theatre manager sat in the ticket booth reading a newspaper. "At this point in my life I didn't have un-chaperoned interactions with white people, young or old," Jafa wrote. "He was sitting in the ticket booth with the door open, so I

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GLADSTONE GALLERY

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*"It was a response to the influx of footage of Black people being assaulted, which I had just been throwing in a file," Jafa says.*

walked over to him and said, 'Excuse me, sir, I've just come out of the movie, could you tell me what it was about?' He looked at me over his paper, paused a moment, and said, 'Son, I've been looking at it all week and I haven't got a clue.'"

There was a coda to the experience. In the mid-nineties, when Jafa was working as a cinematographer, Kubrick hired him to be a second-unit cameraman for "Eyes Wide Shut." Kubrick shot most of the film in England, but it was set in New York, and Jafa spent a lot of time filming locations there. "We were constantly shooting things over and over, because Kubrick kept sending notes saying would we try it again three degrees to the left, or three degrees to the right," Jafa recalled. "He called many times a day, and occasionally the assistant director would say, 'Stanley's on the phone, he wants to say hi,' and I would say, 'Not now, I'm shooting.'" In 1999, returning from Europe to attend the film's New York premiere, Jafa saw a newspaper headline: "STANLEY KUBRICK DIES AT 70." "Stanley Kubrick was one of my heroes," he said. "There was so much I wanted to say to him, and I'd had this fantasy that when we finished shooting we'd be able to have a proper conversation. I went to the

première and got very depressed, trying to figure out why I had never spoken to him."

Shooting other people's films was always, for Jafa, a stepping stone to shooting his own. "I love cinematography, but once I'd mastered the craft it was never fulfilling on its own," he told me. "Daughters of the Dust" had brought no directing offers, though, and until recently neither Dash nor Jafa could get funding for a second feature. Hollywood producers had financed and profited from nineteen-seventies blaxploitation films, some of which had Black directors, but the first Black filmmaker of Jafa's generation to break into the Hollywood system and establish a career on his own terms was Spike Lee. Lee went to a screening of "Daughters" and as he was leaving the theatre he introduced himself and asked if Jafa would like to work on a film about Malcolm X. Jafa said yes, and his skill as a cameraman on the movie led to his becoming the cinematographer for Lee's next feature, "Crooklyn." "Spike changed my life," Jafa said. "He put me on the path to being a legitimate entity in the film universe." "The two of them didn't get along, though, and they haven't worked together since. Lee had no interest in Jafa's urge to experiment on "Crooklyn"

with lenses and film speeds, cinematic rhythms, and nonlinear storytelling. "We had a rocky collaboration, but we've finally reached a rapprochement, and I want to keep it that way," Jafa told me.

I asked him to name the filmmakers he most admired. "I like films more than filmmakers," he said. "But, anything Andrei Tarkovsky ever did, especially 'The Mirror' and 'The Sacrifice,' his last. Tarkovsky's films are philosophical meditations on life, time, aging, things like that." Yasujiro Ozu, he said, was "right up there, not quite as high as Tarkovsky. Ozu will sit with things." "The Italians? I love Fellini, Pasolini, Antonioni. Antonioni is a great filmmaker, but to me that really does come down to 'L'Avventura,' the film where he plays with dimensions of dramatic time and space. There's a scene with Monica Vitti in a hotel corridor. She walks into the frame, and then out of the frame, and in a Hollywood film you would cut, but the camera just stays on that long, empty hallway."

Jafa respects Ingmar Bergman, but, he said, "I don't know if his films have aged so well, even 'Persona,' which is clearly a great film." He likes Godard more than Truffaut, and, he said, "Bresson is above anybody we've mentioned, except Tarkovsky—Bresson is the Beethoven and Bach of cinema." He also paid homage

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to Oscar Micheaux, whom he called "the godfather of Black American cinema." I asked him about Andy Warhol. "Neck and neck with Bresson," he said, to my surprise. "Every moment in a Warhol film is an extended moment. You think of Miles Davis, the speed at which he improvises. His notes sit in the air like they're unfurling in slow motion. They always feel introspective, considered, not in the moment." Jafa puts "The Godfather: Part II" in his top ten films, "but Coppola is not in my top ten directors."

From the early nineties to 2000, living in New York, Jafa shot documentaries (on Audre Lorde and W.E.B. Du Bois, among others), music videos, and television commercials. "The early nineties was when you started to see more Blacks in Hollywood movies," he said. "I wanted to direct music videos, and I was very unsuccessful. I could never crack it. I guess I could have moved to Hollywood and done what everybody else does, but I didn't see that." Ideas for films proliferated in his head. The school-boy notebooks in which he'd pasted images from comic books and magazines when he was ten had been succeeded by three-ring binders filled with movie stills, advertisements, news photographs, and reproductions from art books and countless other sources—images that he liked to show to people. He often had binders with him. "A.J. was always a great storyteller of his own film ideas," the writer and critic Greg Tate recalled. "He would act out all the parts." Tate and Jafa connected when they were both returning books to the Founders Library at Howard. They talked for six hours on the library steps, and the conversation has been going on ever since.

Jafa also spent time in art galleries and museums, and immersed himself in art history and theory. His fascination with Marcel Duchamp kept surfacing in our conversations. "My whole understanding of Duchamp has to do with African artifacts, aesthetic artifacts, and their profound effect on Western art," Jafa said. Picasso, Matisse, Derain, and other artists in Paris during the early years of the twentieth century had discovered African sculpture at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, and it had changed the way they saw the world. "All those people used African artifacts to make

paintings, because they had certain spatial and formal implications, and the missing of those implications produced Cubism," Jafa said. "Duchamp made paintings in that modality—'Nude Descending a Staircase,' where you see the figure multiple times at the same moment and from different vantage points. But Duchamp was smarter than anybody around. I think he realized that a lot of the energy produced by African objects came not from their formal and spatial qualities but from their being what I would call radically alienated. It was contextual. An African artifact in a white museum space, with all this baggage of ideas about painting and contemplation, was deeply alien."

Jafa believes that Duchamp's 1917 "Fountain," a porcelain urinal from a plumbing-supply store, turned upside down and signed "R. Mutt," was directly influenced by African sculpture and drew its undeniable power from the same sort of radical alienation. "What Duchamp did better than any other artist was to take something that existed and turn it into another thing," Jafa said. "He didn't make it—he turned it into something else. It's like what I say about Black people and basketball. We didn't invent basketball, but we created it. One of the more telling things about Black people is that we do things that don't make our job easier. Why do a three-sixty before you land a basketball? You don't get more points—it just raises your level of difficulty. What is that about?" (His voice went up about an octave.) "Folks argue that it's entertainment, but it's central to who we are. It's refusing the structures that want to turn the game into a business. We know it's a business—winning—but we refuse to acquiesce in the elimination of play. And I don't think it's a big leap to say that's central to Duchamp's entire practice. For all the intellectualism around Duchamp, what did he always insist on? That it was playful. His tongue was definitely in his cheek."

So was Jafa's when he revealed his "secret theory" that Jeff Koons is "a very light-skinned Black guy passing for white." He argued, "Look at the works that made his reputation. The vacuum cleaners refer to Black women, domestic workers. The two basketballs floating in vitrines, I insist, are testicles, connoting everything from castration to Black sexual prowess. The bunny rabbit,

which most people say is his masterpiece, is clearly Brer Rabbit." Jafa went on in this vein for quite a while before returning to Duchamp.

"He is one of the non-musicians I would put in the company of John Coltrane and Miles Davis," he said. "There were occasionally white people at our family reunions, in-laws and white friends of my parents. Duchamp is one of the people we will always reserve a seat for."

In 1999, Jafa decided to quit the film world. He wasn't getting any closer to directing his own films, and it seemed to him that the art world offered more opportunities to realize the ideas swarming in his head. He'd been interested in art since his second year at Howard, when one of his architecture teachers sent the class to see I. M. Pei's new East Building, at the National Gallery of Art. "There was an exhibition of Mark Rothko, eight brownish paintings that all looked the same to my untrained eye, and they infuriated me," Jafa recalled. "I told the instructor it was bullshit. I was irate. I went back to that show ten times, kept going back, couldn't get it out of my mind. I was obsessed. He's still my favorite painter."

Twenty years later, when Jafa decided to do "this art thing," success came almost immediately. A group of his short videos appeared in the 2000 Whitney Biennial—one of the curators, Valerie Cassel Oliver, described them in *ARTNETS* as "very subtle, very poetic." Jafa's "Tree" was included in the Whitney's "BitStreams" exhibition a year later; it's an eight-minute video of a blurry, constantly moving tree that looks like it's escaped from a Monet painting and gone off on its own. Other art works by Jafa appeared in group shows in this country and abroad: a metal bench he had found on a visit to Bamako, Mali; a Pontiac Firebird Trans Am, resting on a frame that gave it the appearance of floating; a video of a man in a yellow jacket lying on a sidewalk with people walking past. By 2005, though, the overbearing whiteness of the art world had driven him back to filmmaking. "I was invited to parties where I was the only Black person," he recalled. "It just didn't feel right, so I walked away from the art world."

In 2002, at a New Year's Eve party in New York, he met Suné Woods, a young woman on her way to becoming an art-

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ist. "It was almost like a force turned me around, and I said to Greg Tate, 'Hey, man, who is that? I'm going to marry her.'" Woods and Jafa never married, but in 2004 they had a son, Ayler. "Then we just fell apart," Jafa said. "Suné said she was going to graduate school in San Francisco and taking Ayler with her, and that was terrifying to me, because I'd had the same experience when I split up with Julie." Jafa commuted between New York and San Francisco for two years, before moving to Los Angeles in 2010. He wanted to be closer to Ayler, and also to N'Zinga, who was living with her mother in L.A. Dash had built an impressive reputation as a director of film biographies (she's currently doing one on Angela Davis), and she and Jafa had never been out of touch. ("We're still best friends," Dash told me recently. Their first grandchild, Adrian Julian Arana, born to N'Zinga in 2017, brought them even closer.) When Jafa moved to Los Angeles, his self-confidence was at a low ebb. The film industry seemed less and less interested in hiring him. He was approaching fifty, and he felt as though he hadn't achieved any of his goals. His friends were worried. "He was like a falling star," John Akomfrah said. "He'd always been a figure of such promise. All of us expected something great to happen, and as the years went by some people were thinking maybe it wasn't going to come."

In 2011, he hit rock bottom. Depressed and suicidal, he went to stay with his parents, in Atlanta. ("You can always come home," they had told their children.) After the breakup with Dash, Jafa had dealt with his depression by going into therapy. This time, the film world intervened. Sitting in his parents' living room, wondering what to do with his broken life, he got a telephone call from Paul Barnes, a Hollywood producer who worked with the showrunner Salim Akil. "Paul said I was like a mythical beast, because everybody out there had heard of me but nobody knew me," Jafa told me. He had called to see if Jafa was available to shoot the pilot for a new TV series, a comedy-drama like "Entourage," about Black people, that Akil was directing. "Available? I was broke and out of work. The producers must have liked the pilot, because they asked me to shoot the series—for a shitful of money. I thought, Well, maybe just



*"I'm a huge proponent of control over speed."*

grow the fuck up and take the money."

Jafa used the forty-five thousand dollars he'd been paid for the pilot to buy a new Prius and to rent a small apartment in L.A. The series wasn't picked up, though, and he had to find something to do right away—he was determined not to sink back into despair. Kahlil Joseph, a filmmaker and a close friend, called to say that ZDF, a German public-television network, had commissioned him to make a documentary about the March on Washington, whose fiftieth anniversary was coming up in 2013. Joseph had scheduling conflicts. Would Jafa be interested in directing it? Jafa said he would—and he had ideas about how. "I wasn't interested in looking back," Jafa told me. "I was interested in where Black people are now. I wrote a really insane, crazy treatment that had very little to do with the March on Washington, and they gave me the money and I went off and did it. And that was the beginning of the work I'm doing now."

Jafa's film, called "Dreams Are Colder Than Death," is a fifty-two-minute collage of brief and not so brief interviews with African-American artists, writers, filmmakers, academics, and

friends, alternating or coinciding with images of houses and back yards, waves breaking over rocks, Civil War photographs, extreme closeups of eyes, mouths, and faces, photographs of Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin. The speakers pull no punches, and what comes through is an orchestrated assault of incendiary thinking about racism. There were financial disagreements with a producer, and "Dreams" wasn't televised in the U.S. But it was shown in 2014 at the BlackStar Film Festival, in Philadelphia, and at the New York Film Festival. By then, Jafa had started working on a project that he called "APEX."

Close to eight hundred separate images flash by in "APEX's" eight minutes and twenty-two seconds, against a pounding techno beat: a man's deeply scarred back, Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse, the fiery surface of the sun, a cartoon shark, lynchings, Sojourner Truth, Aretha Franklin, a cross-legged monk on fire, movie stills of white actors in blackface, Black people being fire-hosed, a 1920 Harlem street parade beneath a sign that reads "The New Negro Has No Fear." Jafa worked on "APEX" for four years, off and on, without knowing what it was. "I didn't understand it as a



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film, or as art," he told me. "I assumed it was an internal document that I showed to my friends."

Early in 2016, working again as a cinematographer and staying in a New York hotel room between jobs, Jafa put together the basic elements of "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death." There was no concept and no script. "It was a response to the influx of footage of Black people being assaulted, which I had just been throwing in a file." A week later, he heard Kanye West's "UltraLight Beam" performed on "Saturday Night Live" and decided to use it as the soundtrack—without notifying West or getting permission. (West's reaction, when he and Jafa met, in 2020, was to say that Jafa's film had brought him "back to life," and to hire him to direct a music video for the song "Wash Us in the Blood.") Jafa showed an early version of "Love Is the Message" to Greg Tate, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, the cinematographer Bradford Young, and other friends. Tate said, "There's something about the construction of it, the flow and the velocity, that's very much the way young people experience the Internet. It resonates with this generation's hip-hop culture."

Jafa wanted to post the film on YouTube, but Kahlil Joseph urged him not to give it away. Joseph screened it several times on film nights at the Underground Museum, in Los Angeles, as an

unannounced opener for the main feature. Soon afterward, in June, Joseph showed it to a small, private audience in Switzerland during Art Basel, the international art fair. Gavin Brown, a British-born artist who had become a New York art dealer, and who had a long history of finding and nurturing new talent, saw it there. "I remember being stuck to my chair, eyes wide, trying to keep up with it, and then as it ended I felt the air being expelled from my body," he said.

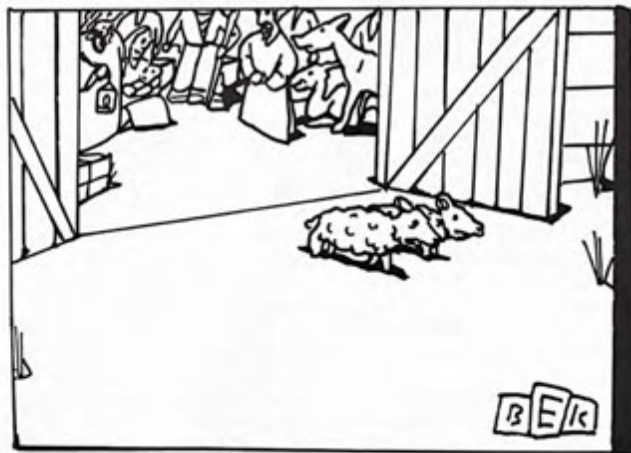
Brown had never heard of Jafa. When he got back to New York, he tracked down a number and called him. Jafa was in Los Angeles, driving Aylor to school. Brown started to introduce himself, but Jafa broke in and said, "I know who you are. I'm coming to New York next week—we should meet." They met at Brown's gallery in Harlem, and walked to Maison Harlem for a four-hour lunch. "It was like being in a storm," Brown recalled. "Toward the end, he said, 'What are we doing here? Why are we meeting?' I told him I would love to show his film. He said, 'Nah, I don't want that,' but then we talked some more, and he asked, 'When would you want to do this?' I said, 'In a couple of weeks.' He said that was crazy, and then he left, and the next day we talked and he said, 'Let's do it.'"

"Love Is the Message" opened at Gavin Brown's gallery on November 12th, four days after Donald Trump was elected President. "Everybody was

stunned by what had happened to this country, or by what this country really is," Brown said. Projected onto a large wall in an empty, darkened gallery, the images of "Love Is the Message" were larger than life, and the sound was enveloping. Several viewers wept openly. Jafa hadn't expected this response, and, later, when he kept hearing about the film making people cry, he felt uneasy. "Why are tears the metric of having a critical or productive engagement with it?" he wondered. "I don't know if I completely understand." That his success had come in the art world, which he'd given up on more than a decade earlier, made it even more unexpected. The art world had changed since 2005, and many more Black artists were being shown—Jafa among them. The Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, had exhibited sixty-three of Jafa's three-ring binders in its 2016 "Made in L.A." show.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, the director of London's Serpentine Galleries, saw the Hammer show and gave Jafa a large solo exhibition in 2017; it was a retrospective, although many of the works in it were new. In June, "APEX" made a sensational debut at Art Basel. Jafa had his second show at Gavin Brown's gallery a year later. It occupied three floors, and included a sculpture of two eight-foot-high truck tires wrapped in heavy chains; a mural-size montage of the eight hundred images he had used to make "APEX"; and a new, two-hour-long film called "akingdoncomethas," which was devoted largely to footage of preachers and gospel singers. When asked by a young woman in a lecture audience whether he had now chosen the art world over the film world, Jafa laughed and said, "I didn't choose the art world, the art world chose me. I thought I was done with it."

Jafa's next film, "The White Album," won the Golden Lion, the top prize at the 2019 Venice Biennale. As a political document, it overpowers "Love Is the Message." A fat, middle-aged white man delivers an anguished mea culpa on white supremacy: "We're scared of Black vengeance. We're scared shitless, and we always have been. Since Day One, we've put our hands on Black people, grabbed 'em, snatched 'em up, put 'em on a boat, and made 'em our own friggin' personal slaves and assistants for no pay. We did all that. You're goddam right we're



"I just never got into the whole Nativity scene."

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scared.... So we got a lot of fuckin' fear, man." A blond Valley Girl type, echoing Trump, tells us that she is "the farthest person from being racist," and complains that "white people have the hardest time nowadays because we try so hard.... Have some respect for white people, O.K.?" Nearly all the speakers are white. At one point, we're airborne, watching bombs explode on the ground and people flee machine-gun fire from a helicopter. In another sequence, a handcuffed white man sits on a curb yelling "Niggah, niggah, niggah" and "Fuck you" at an impassive Black policewoman. The film, to which Jafa keeps adding, also offers brief glimpses of Gavin Brown and other white people Jafa loves and respects. "Like many of my best ideas, 'The White Album' started as a joke," he said. "Echoing the Beatles' title was super-intentional. But a very thoughtful friend of mine said, 'Man, this is something huge. White folks are going to love it.'"

The horrifying death of George Floyd, in May, has had lasting repercussions. "I was tremendously moved the first time I saw images of the protest marches in Paris and London and other places," Jafa said recently. "I was moved, but I was also very reticent to unblock my heart. We've been living with this for so long." A week later, his thinking had shifted: "This is such a complex moment. I don't know if we've had a moment like this, where we have a pandemic and on top of that an insurrection. George Floyd's murder is as close to a straight-up lynching as anybody has seen. So many of my friends have parsed and dissected over and over why this particular instance of something that Black people have been complaining about from time immemorial—what is it about this instance that triggered people? One of the things I've heard, and that I think is true, is the unflinching nature of George Floyd and the cop looking at the camera. It's that rare instance of white America looking into a mirror and being frightened by what it sees staring back. Cornel West says there are certain things that Black people cannot not know in America. We know these things, even though they are fearsome, horrible things. And I've hardened my heart, because I don't want to be debilitated by the lack of empathy for Black people. But I think maybe people are starting to realize that the way we

have been treated for the last couple of hundred years doesn't just diminish the collective lives of Black people—it diminishes the living force of everybody. I think they are starting to get that."

There is no longer a separation in Jafa's work between filmmaking and art. A large Jafa retrospective is scheduled to open in January at the Louisiana Museum, in Denmark. Many of his recent films will be on view, and the show has given him the chance to fabricate new works that he's been thinking about for years. A film made with computer technology alone (no camera was used) conjures up what looks like black, turbulent water endlessly plunging and crashing in on itself. A series of long, wall-mounted sculptures that resemble railroad tracks, in varying lengths, relate to something Jafa talked about with David Bowie thirty years ago: "The idea of taking things that don't have any value, that are detritus, and making something magnificent of them. They feel like found objects, readymades, but they are imagined and generated."

Jafa also has several full-length films in development. In 2014, he and two friends, the cinematographer Malik Sayeed and the curator Elissa Blount Moorhead, joined forces in a film production company called TNEG, but it never quite got off the ground. "I couldn't decide whether I wanted to be Walt Disney or Mickey Mouse," Jafa joked. The attention paid to "Love Is the Message" wasn't lost on potential backers, though, and early in 2020 Jafa, Gavin Brown, the Hollywood producer Melinda Nugent, whom Jafa has known for twenty-five years, and the Swiss collector and entrepreneur Maja Hoffmann started a company called Sun-Haus to support Jafa's projects and also to develop film work by other artists. "Our funding is coming from the art world, and we're confident that we will be able to control the process," Nugent told me. An investor has pledged enough money to keep them running for three years.

Jafa had planned to start work this past spring on "Cudhial," a narrative film, set in the Mississippi Delta, about a love affair between a seventeen-year-old high-school student and his teacher. (The

pandemic intervened; he will try again next spring.) This is the kind of film that Haile Gerima has always wanted Jafa to make: personal, relational, and deeply felt. "Daughters of the Dust" had been a "promissory note" for both Jafa and Dash, according to Gerima—a preview of the storytelling talent they shared in such abundance. Jafa read the "Cudhial" script to Gerima thirty years ago, on the phone; it took hours. "The first script was lost," Jafa said. "I moved so many times over the years." He is rewriting it, with help from Boston. "A lot of my feelings about Julie Dash are bound up in 'Cudhial,'" he said. "She was the most beautiful, the most sophisticated...." His voice trailed off. "She taught me so many things."

"Cudhial" (pronounced "Cu-jul") is a word Jafa made up. He does this now and then, if the language seems to need it. "I used to have a tight grasp of what 'Cudhial' meant, but now it's just a feeling, a kind of nostalgia—not longing for a moment as much as ambivalence about a moment," he said. "I think it's about my personal notion of Black being. It's like saying, 'That painful experience I went through made me who I am. I wouldn't want to relive it, but I constantly return to it, and I luxuriate in it in a certain way. But the parts that were amazing, the parts that were pleasurable, are strictly bound up with the parts that were painful.'"

In a remark that was widely misunderstood, Jafa once said that he wasn't addressing white people in his work. "I never said I don't care what white people think about it," he told me. "I'm super-pleased when white people like my work, or are interested in it, or provoked by it. But I'm talking to Black people, not to everybody. I'm certainly not trying to talk to white people, and I don't think it serves white people to be spoken to. It makes them feel like they're the center of the universe, in a way that is profoundly problematic. In Eric Clapton's 'Layla,' which I think is the greatest hard-rock love song ever, he's not singing to everybody. He's singing to Pattie Boyd. He fell in love with his best friend's wife, and he's singing to her. And everybody else is listening in." ♦

