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Tavia Nyong'o, "Arthur Jafa's Glorious Vision and Kanye West's Gilded Faith," *NPR*, July 07, 2020



REVIEW MUSIC REVIEWS

Arthur Jafa's Glorious Vision And Kanye West's Gilded Faith

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You may have already forgotten that Kanye West's most recent promotional campaign— including a deal with the Gap and a long-shot political campaign — kicked off on June 30, with the release of a new single and music video.

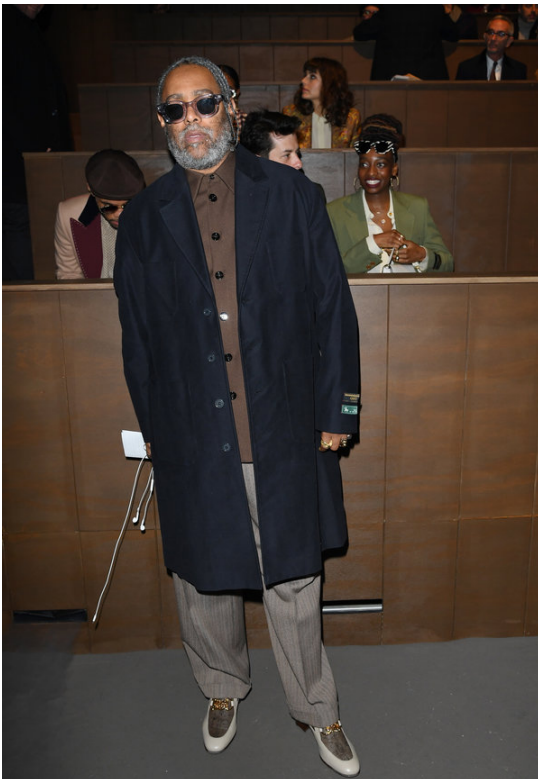
West's "Wash Us In The Blood" features his erstwhile rap protégé, Travis Scott, and comes to us from his forthcoming album *God's Country*, ostensibly arriving this fall. At once recalling the sound of 2013's *Yeezus* while building upon the religious themes of his most recent album, *Jesus Is King*, "Wash Us In The Blood" toggles between a jeremiad — against slavery and genocide as our event horizon — on the one hand, and the redemptive blood of the lamb on the other.

The song is moved with a jolting and hypnotic montage, featuring jarring police body cam clips, footage from recent uprisings, video game play, footage of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and gospel soloist Lateria Wooten singing with the Thomas Whitfield Company. West himself appears only intermittently, his face breaking through a CGI mask on split screen. But rather than feel rushed to meet this moment, it is clearly the work of a refined and mature artistic practice. The video was directed by Black film auteur Arthur Jafa, and allows West's song to resonate both with its moment and with the insurgent cinematic movement Jafa has been spearheading for decades. Jafa has long described that movement as the search for a Black cinema with all the "power, beauty and alienation" of Black music.

Jafa's approach to the video for "Wash Us In The Blood" samples imagery the way hip-hop samples sound, plumbing history to recontextualize and revivify it. He draws

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from a deep archive of footage, both his own and found or archival imagery, and reworks them into poetic meditations characterized by arresting juxtaposition and haunting interplay. Jafa has described his work as seeking a "visual intonation" akin to Black speech, giving it a signature flow. His seven-and-a-half minute short film *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, from 2016, is perhaps the best entry-point into his work and, with Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" as its chopped-and-screwed soundtrack, the piece that most clearly precedes his present collaboration. A visual essay furiously overstuffed with everything from clips of president Obama singing "Amazing Grace" to a teenage Biggie Smalls rapping on a corner to voguers showing out on the dance floor to science fiction aliens and astrophysical footage of sun flares, *Love Is the Message* makes effective use of West's repeated invocation — "this is a God dream" — to hold its incandescent rage and beauty together. At once maximalist and minimalist, a viewing leaves you breathless and eager for more.



Arthur Jafa, photographed in Milan, Italy on Jan. 14, 2020.
Daniele Venturelli/Daniele Venturelli / Getty Image

Besides working with West, Jafa is enjoying a career peak of late: *Love Is the Message* was livestreamed continuously by 13 museums worldwide during the last weekend in June, making a film that many describe as one of the first masterpieces of the new century available to a global audience. Jafa won the Golden Lion for best artist in last year's Venice Biennale for his film *The White Album*, which employed his now-signature use of appropriated footage to reflect a Black gaze back upon the problem of "whiteness." This recent embrace of Jafa by the art world, who has been working professionally since the early 1990s, is both telling and symptomatic of the whiteness he cross-sects —

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and dreams of abolishing — in *The White Album*. On the one hand, museums and galleries have afforded an ideal context for Jafa to break with the conventions of the commercial film industry that he believes stifle the potential of Black cinema. On the other, the art world has itself been rocked by a series of reckonings with its own structural white supremacy, a topic that Jafa (also an incisive writer) dealt with in a recent pamphlet, "My Black Death." The belated, deserved recognition of Jafa's work by an art world now seemingly and suddenly desperate for Black representation could oversimplify his originality, and risks reducing the richness of a work like *Love is the Message* to a depiction of Black suffering. At the same time, Jafa is in no way eager to shirk the task of depicting Black suffering. At the close of that pamphlet, in a Black *hagakure*, or spiritual code for a warrior, Jafa puts things this way: "The central conundrum of black being (the double consciousness of our ontological existence) lies in the fact that common misery both defines and limits who we are." (His feature *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* features Black studies luminaries such as Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman in dialogue on this topic, and is worth seeking out).

This metaphysical conundrum has led both Jafa and West in recent years down a converging path towards the gospel, as a location where generations of African-Americans have found meaning and transcendence amidst terror and suffering. For West, it seems to be at once sincere faith and a grandiose god complex, a tension that the song "Wash Us in the Blood" doesn't resolve. The video closes with footage of his daughter at a rehearsal for one of the family's exclusive Sunday Services, performances often based on gospel versions of West's music, that the Kardashian-West family has been hosting since 2019. It is a little reminder that celebrity remains our national religion. For Jafa, by contrast, the gospel appeals as an aesthetic of the ensemble, within which the opposition between individual and collective is overcome.

If West's turn to faith only burnishes the construction of his myth, Jafa takes a more circumspect approach. The Black gospel tradition, in all its permutations, is the subject of his feature-length film *akingdoncomethas*, from 2018. Seen in a gallery

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space, the epic scale and scope of the assembled footage of *akingdoncomethas* brings the viewer into the ecstatic of collective worship and holds her there, mesmerized. These services happen anywhere and everywhere in Black America, including — and here's the rub — inside the gated compounds of the one percent.

Although he claims no religion, Jafa has put it this way: "I believe in Black people believing." What makes Jafa an artist of our times is his ability to show that belief in so many kaleidoscopic forms. Being held in dispersion, striking a Black pose against a white background, spitting fire in the cypher and throwing praises as blood rains down: these are some of the vital elements of Jafa's montage. Remixing is, by now, a global lingua franca — what makes Jafa's work stand out, and stand together, is what he has to say.