

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Aruna D'Souza, "A 'Taxi Driver' Remake: Why Arthur Jafa Recast the Scorsese Ending," *New York Times*, April 5, 2024

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A 'Taxi Driver' Remake: Why Arthur Jafa Recast the Scorsese Ending

The artist has gone back to his filmmaking roots, re-examining what he sees as racial undertones in Martin Scorsese's classic 1976 movie.

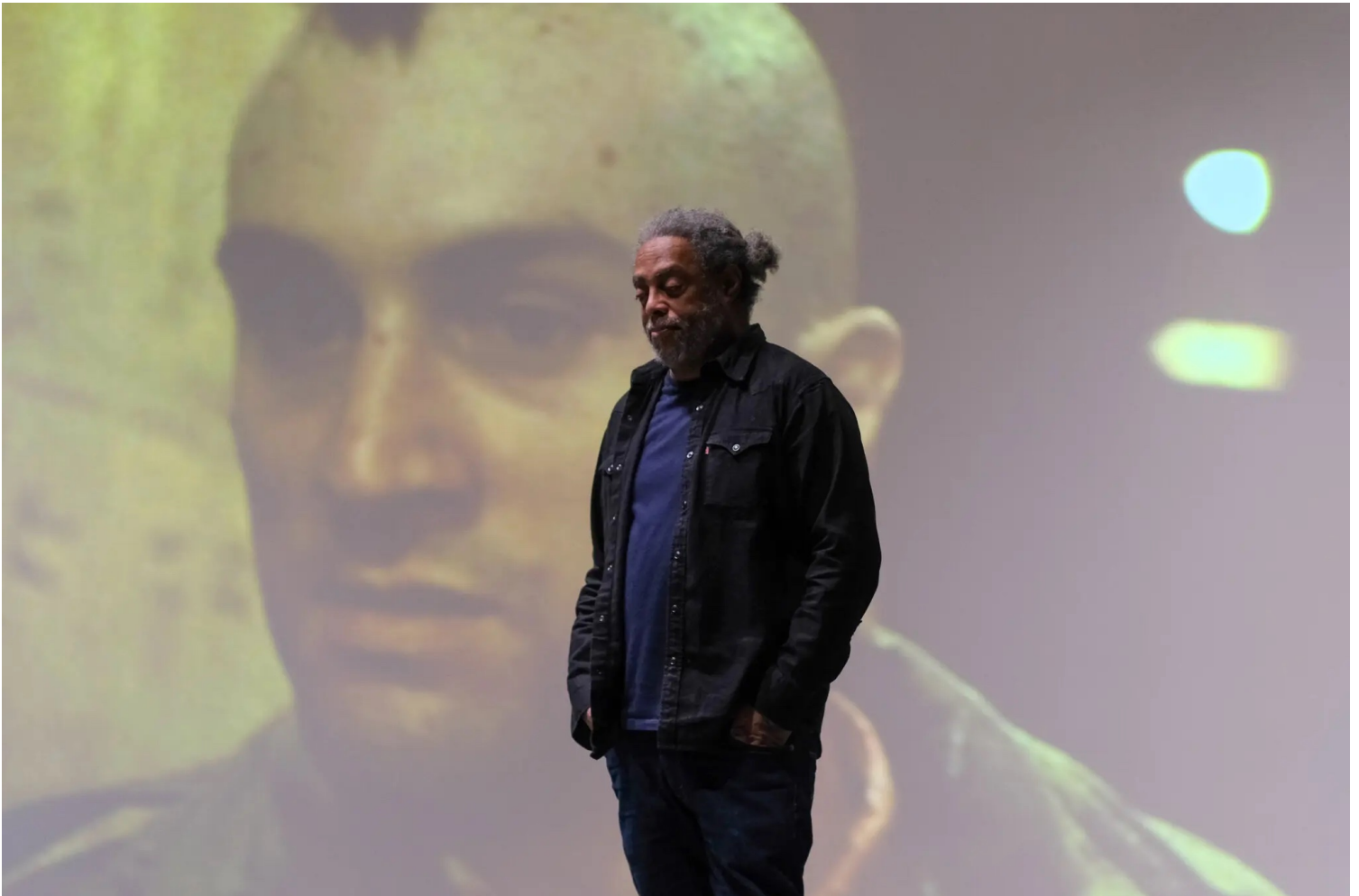


By Aruna D'Souza

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Call it a return to his roots. The artist Arthur Jafa began his career as a cinematographer, working with his then-wife, Julie Dash, on the acclaimed "Daughters of the Dust" (1991) and with Spike Lee on "Crooklyn" (1994), before garnering art world fame, including a Golden Lion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, for "The White Album," a snapshot of Black life in the United States created from collaged video footage. Jafa's practice has embraced film and video, sculpture, installation, and even painting.

His newest film, which goes on view Thursday at Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, has a provocative conceit: Jafa has remade the shockingly violent climax of a classic of American cinema — Martin Scorsese's "Taxi Driver" (1976) — in which the main character Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro, storms into a seedy Times Square brothel and kills everyone in sight in order to save Iris, a child prostitute played by Jodie Foster, then 12 years old.



Arthur Jafa before a screen at the Gladstone Gallery in New York showing an image of Travis Bickle. Jafa recast the climactic ending of Martin Scorsese's "Taxi Driver," replacing all the characters -- except for Robert De Niro and Jodie Foster --- with Black actors and adding two original scenes. Credit Laylah Amatullah Barrayn for The New York Times

In the original movie — what Jafa calls the “redacted version” — these characters, including Iris’s pimp Sport (played by Harvey Keitel), were white. That never felt right to Jafa. When he discovered that the film’s celebrated screenwriter, Paul Schrader, had intended Sport to be African American, he decided to “restore” the movie by introducing Black actors, except for De Niro and Foster. In the 73-minute-long film, titled “*****” — or as the artist pronounces it, “Redacted” — we see this recut version of the bloody climax over and over, each time slightly but crucially different. The result is extraordinary — both technically and conceptually — and brings to the surface the racist animus long accepted as underpinning Bickle’s barely contained rage. (Quentin Tarantino also criticized the decision to change the character to white in his 2022 book, “Cinema Speculation.”)



Arthur Jafa cast a replacement actor, right, as the pimp in “Taxi Driver;” originally played by Harvey Keitel, then skillfully wove in the new footage and rerecorded the voices. via Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery

Schrader, who is still making movies at 77, said in a recent telephone conversation that the change to his original vision was the right call. “Someone at Columbia Pictures said to Marty, ‘we’re going to have a riot in the theater if we cast Sport as Black,’ and I realized they were completely right.”

“I think it would have been a much more vile and revolting film if his hatred was directed completely at people of color,” he added. “You can’t make something that is so off the meter that it can’t be seen or that people simply can’t bear watching.” (Martin Scorsese did not return several calls seeking his comment.)

Jafa is also debuting another installation, “BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG,” at 52 Walker in TriBeCa this week. It will include paintings, sculpture and a film titled “LOML” (2022/24), a homage to the musician and cultural critic Greg Tate, who died in 2021. (Its title is an acronym for “love of my life” — the two were dear friends.) He took a break from installing the two shows to speak about “*****.” The conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Why “Taxi Driver;” and why now?

It’s literally a 30-year-old idea. I saw “Taxi Driver” when I was a senior in high school, and in a lot of ways, it went over my head. I remember seeing it and being mesmerized by the filmmaking, but also being very disturbed by it. I knew something was off about it. But I didn’t really know the sort of cinematic worldview it was trying to express.



Harvey Keitel (left) as “Sport” Matthew, a pimp, and Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle in “Taxi Driver,” the 1976 film directed by Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures

And what is that context, as you now understand it?

It was a remake of “The Searchers” on one hand [a 1956 film starring John Wayne about a man who saves a young white woman who has been kidnapped by Native Americans]. And it was a response to two things happening in the ’70s: the impact of foreign films in Hollywood, and blaxploitation.

Blaxploitation sort of saved Hollywood at the end of the ’60s. You had the sexual revolution and feminism and the whole civil rights movement happening in the streets, but Hollywood was making these films that seemed almost willfully in denial of the major cultural shifts going on. Then all of a sudden you get “Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song” [1971] and “Shaft” [1971] and “Superfly” [1972] and after that it’s a tidal wave — the studios had been struggling, and these films were bringing in audiences.

But at the same time, to be frank about it, they were also taking up space that had been reserved for white men till then. Resources, but also a lot of psychological space. You hadn’t seen much unmediated, unconstrained depictions of Black men in Hollywood up until that moment

Do you read “Taxi Driver” in part as Martin Scorsese’s and Paul Schrader’s response to blaxploitation films?

Yeah. When you say Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola and then George Lucas and Steven Spielberg saved Hollywood, in a way, they actually saved Hollywood for white men.

There are almost no Black people in “Taxi Driver.”

There’s something slightly perverse about the way Blackness is both there and not there in “Taxi Driver.” There aren’t that many depictions of Black pimps in American cinema in the ’60s — pimps had too much agency for white people to want to make movies about them. But then here comes a film that shows this pimp character — and he’s white. It threw you off the scent a little bit, even though the rest of the film reflects the ethos of Travis, which seems pretty clearly racist.

When I read that Paul Schrader had originally conceived the Sport character as Black, a lightbulb went off — I said, “Wow, it’d be so cool that to replace the white characters with the Black characters they had intended.” But it was really just a fantasy at that point — it wasn’t anything that I thought was possible technically.



Film still from Arthur Jafa's "*****," 2024. The artist's recut version shows the bloody climax over and over, each time slightly but crucially different, with Black actors added in the roles of the night manager (shown) and pimp. It opened in a new exhibition at the Gladstone Gallery. via Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery

What changed?

I was starting to see all the facial replacement effects on Instagram, and it got me wondering if I could finally make this idea happen. But none of the existing consumer software would work. So we had to restage all the shots where we were replacing the actors. It was a very intricate technical exercise. We tried to replicate the optics, the angle, the distance of the subject from the focal lens, the actual lenses, these kinds of things, so that it would just fall into place seamlessly.

But you can't just pop the new piece in, because as soon as you introduce Black people, Black men in particular, it just doesn't operate the same way. For example, with the night manager, we had planned to use the original sound, but it's so incongruous hearing this Italian guy's voice come out of a Black guy, so we replaced that audio.

In your film, Travis Bickle ends up coming off like Dylann Roof, the white supremacist who walked into a Black church in Charleston in 2015 and killed nine parishioners. You used footage of Roof in your earlier film, "The White Album," which won a prize at the Venice Biennale.

My Travis Bickle is Dylann Roof. I think he always was Dylann Roof. It just got muddied up [in the original] because Scorsese and Schrader had him killing these white folks.

You include a scene in which the pimp sings along to Stevie Wonder's "As," from his album "Songs in the Key of Life" which came out in 1976, the same year as "Taxi Driver."

That album was really like the soundtrack of Black America when it came out — the preachers and the pimps and everybody was listening to it. The idea that this pimp would be standing and humming a Stevie Wonder tune — it's period accurate, but an alternative reality, in a way. I don't think it would've changed the world if the pimp had remained Black, but I think it would've landed in a completely different way if the "Dylann Roof moment" had been seen for what it truly was.



An actor playing a pimp opens fire in Arthur Jafa's film. via Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery

You introduce another scene that doesn't appear in the original movie, in which the pimp — whom you renamed “Scar” in reference to a character from “The Searchers”— delivers a monologue, or maybe a soliloquy.

I think my character of the pimp is a lot more like the pimps I knew or saw. Having Scar listening to Stevie Wonder — I hate to say it — humanizes a type of person of whom most people have a very narrow understanding.

I always insist white folks have no idea what's going on in Black people's heads. But when Scar talks, he quotes Du Bois, he quotes Samuel Delaney's “Dog in a Fisherman's Net,” there's all kinds of other stuff that's floating through his head.

What do you make of one of the earlier scenes in the film, in which Scorsese himself plays a passenger in Travis Bickle's cab, and spouts some pretty offensive things about Black people — and definitely makes clear the world Bickle is operating in.

I thought the character he played was nominally racist. Meaning it was contextually driven. Scorsese playing the part himself was one of the more audacious things in the film. As if he knew the unapologetic virulence of the character had to be explicit and not undermined by an actor's need to be liked. So he took it upon himself to get the needed performance.

What do you think is the end result of doing this remix?

My brother said, “It rewires your brain a little bit. It's going to be hard to look at ‘Taxi Driver’ again without thinking, ‘What we got back then was the redacted version.’” And this is maybe not an unredacted version, but I think it's definitely restored to something closer to the way it was conceived.

So, in your opinion, is “Taxi Driver” a racist film?

I know there's an argument, is this a film about a racist or a racist film? Racism is just part of the paradigm and the structure will lead you to it. Unless you are very consciously trying to counter those tropes, you'll inevitably find yourself in that place.

With "*****," it's like I'm polishing a troubled artifact. Part of the (perhaps waning) superpower of Black people is our ability to see stuff for what it is, not to be in self-imposed denial about it. I'm seeing "Taxi Driver" for what it is.

Aruna D'Souza writes about modern and contemporary art and is the author of "Whitewalling: Art, Race & Politics in 3 Acts." In 2021 she was awarded a Rabkin Prize for Art Journalism. [More about Aruna D'Souza](#)