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"THANK GOD FOR SLAVERY OR THERE WOULD BE NO JAZZ"

Black e-virality and the art of Arthur Jafa

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation's subject is *Love is the Message, the Message is Death (2016)* by Arthur Jafa, an 8-minutes long cinematographic collage made of images and videos found on social media that aim to visually mediate the Black experience in the same way Black music sonically does. The film's non-linear structure, akin to jazz improvisation, invites viewers to experience Blackness through a sensory engagement rather than a narrative one through a layered visual and sonic structure. By recontextualizing viral memes and historical imagery and anchoring them in a broader Western visual culture, Jafa offers a commentary on the presence of racial stereotypes in the digital realm and the dynamics of representation and resistance within a commodified digital culture. This dissertation draws on critical cultural theories, including Stuart Hall's exploration of racialized representation, bell hooks' concept of the "Black gaze" as a form of resistance against White supremacy, Paul Gilroy's ideas on cultural hybridity in the Black Atlantic, and Tina Campt's theory of "listening to images". This study will be based on a critical audio-visual analysis of Jafa's work rooted in semiotics and discourse, focusing on the visual lexis and syntax to understand how stereotypes and mythologies are communicated through this visual assemblage.

INTRODUCTION

Black Digital Humanities, often referred to as "e-Black studies" has emerged as a fairly new research field within Media studies. This field examines the intersection of the Black lived experience with social media, exploring how these experiences are mediated in online spaces, where texts, hashtags, images, and videos are constantly being produced and shared by Black users. This area of research focuses on how Black users operate within these spaces in relation to their broader social and cultural identities, while trying to see how digital spaces can reproduce the racialized and systemic violence that Black individuals face in "real life". Black digital Humanities are also interested in the way social media can be potential grounds of resistance in which power dynamics are re-negotiated, and may be spaces suitable for political mobilization and organization, while also countering the mainstream discourse regarding the representation of marginalized individuals.

Informed by the theoretical frameworks of e-Black studies, this dissertation will analyse Arthur Jafa's film *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016). This eight-minute art piece is composed of archival video materials sourced from social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. The videos that Jafa uses can be understood as Black viral content or "Black memes", thus testifying of a certain kind of Black digital praxis. However, while this study is anchored in the "e-Black" realm, we will focus more on the lived experience of Blackness. Indeed, we understand Blackness as being an embodied experience, through its epidermal nature at first, and then due to the weight that the visual marker of melanin carries socially. The experience of being Black is thus acknowledged by its visceral ontological nature. This is the root of the question that will dominate this research: Would it be possible to mediate this body-based experience, to share the unsayable, the physically felt before it can be thought or taught? This dissertation seeks to understand how such a deeply embodied experience can be mediated through media practices, and how the ineffable aspects of Blackness are shared and communicated via music and images in the context of Arthur Jafa's film.

In this study, "Blackness" will be specifically defined as referring to African-Americans — descendants of enslaved Africans living in the United States today. This definition draws on a sociological understanding of Blackness as a social and cultural identity shaped by the historical and ongoing experiences of (forced) migration, cultural hybridity, and survival within a White-dominated society. This research is informed by previous theoretical works on cultural hybridity,

Black digital practices, Black performance and performativity, as well as critical theories concerning the colonial gaze, cultural hegemony in mainstream media, and racialized representation. This theoretical foundation will guide the audio-visual analysis of Jafa's film, which will be grounded in semiotics. By employing this methodology, we aim to understand how Jafa mediates the Black experience through visual and sonic elements, and how these elements combine to produce a particular vision of Blackness. This dissertation, therefore, will not only examine what is represented in Jafa's film but also how it is represented, which means more specifically what visual and sonic techniques are used to convey to the viewer the bodily experience of "being Black.".

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with theories that have influenced Arthur Jafa's work as well as my understanding of it. This dissertation aims to understand what image of Blackness Arthur Jafa mediates and what visual and artistic means he uses to render this specific image of Blackness. In this theoretical chapter, we will therefore see some eminent theories specific to Black digital visual culture, especially related to social media, as well as Black music in the context of the diaspora and the question of the counter-hegemonic Black gaze.

Black Meme and Black digital virality

Arthur Jafa started his artistic career as a conventional filmmaker by working on the production of Julia Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1993). However, his practice quickly evolved into something more unorthodox. Jafa, before his cinematic endeavours, was and is still before anything else an images collector. In huge scrapbooks and catalogues, the artist collects, sorts and reassembles images found here and there in books, magazines, or the internet, creating mosaics of divers references that seem nonsensically attached together but make sense in a bigger assemblage. *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* can be understood as the video rendition of such practice. The film does not feature any original artwork from the artist; it is made instead of almost 200 found-footage clips, spanning African American history, memes, music videos, and other mix-and-match products of Black American popular culture. The videos are distinguishable by their overwhelmingly lo-fi nature, as they are sourced for the most part on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube where they have been repeatedly re-uploaded. The prevailing theme in Arthur Jafa's work is a "degraded" or "downgraded"

image. Most of those moments captured in video went viral and are what we could call “Black memes”. The notion of the Black meme has been explored by Legacy Russel in her seminal video-essay and book of the same name. For this sub-chapter, we will draw on her work.

Russel insists on the fact that the Black meme is by essence a “poor” image in the two senses of the word. It is a poor image of Blackness as the videos depicted are viral for their alleged humorous content. The digital image of blackness that is shared is one of goofiness, and unseriousness, while also conveying a discourse on Blackness as being the representative of the extravagant and the “over the top”, as a lot of Black memes are taken from the Queer black community. Oftentimes, those viral videos are taken in serious moments of tragedy and despair and then, by how they are reuploaded and shared through social media, are taken out of their context. This is the case for the meme that introduces Arthur Jafa’s *Love is the Message, the Message is Death.* In this video, we can see the reaction of a black man being interviewed about an abduction that happened in his neighbourhood. This video, taken out of its context, went viral. The Black people in those videos are laughed at the extent of their emotional and often visceral reactions to tragic or worrisome events. Furthermore, in the process of their virality, the Black people in those videos are deemed anonymous, and their identity and story are erased for the benefit of the audience who watches and the user who shares, while they are not benefiting financially or socially from the product of their labour.

This collective online consumption of Black memes and Blackness as a circulating commodity (Russel, 2024) invites us to form a Marxist critique of the Black meme. Indeed, the material condition of Black memes reinforces the inequalities created by a dysregulated capitalist society, as the ruling class, formed of White people in the US, exploits, feeds on and takes advantage of the Black body and Black forms of labour since the arrival of African enslaved individuals (Wilkerson, 2020). The individual becomes a face, a Black face, and the Black body is thus dismembered (Russel, 2024) and taken apart from what made the individual a whole and complete person who becomes a commodity to be used and passed around. and Black identity is shattered to make it more palatable for the consumption of a non-Black audience. This Marxists critique is even more relevant when one considers the fact that numbers of views and likes online turn into real valuable numbers: money. While the Black meme is essentially free and valueless, and available for all in unlimited quantity due to its immaterial form, by sharing a viral video, the user who reposts or reuses a form of Black meme can transform this free-for-all product into a personal monetary benefitting product. To add to that, the Black meme is one

of the most popular and lucrative digital commodities, as seen with the renegade dance created by Jalaiah Harmon, worth dozens of thousands, but from whom the creator is rarely credited or paid (Boffone, 2021).

In multiples, those viral videos create a narrative, a Foucauldian discourse about what it means to be Black, who is gazed upon, who has agency about their own's image and to what extent does own has ownership and a sense self-determination regarding its use and so on. We can note here that Russel points out that it is not the first time in America's history that the image of Black people's bodies is captured and vastly shared without their initial consent. Indeed, she reminds us of the virality of lynching postcards, that were shared and duplicated amongst a White American audience in the same way Black memes are today. Both share the same velocity in the way they were shared in immense numbers the second they were produced, so fast that the identity of the person is difficult to be found, if there is not an explicit desire to render the Black person depicted anonymous, a body without an identity or a story.

The other definition that we can give to those idea of a "poor" image is the fact that by their constant download and reupload by the audience-user, the image is continuously degraded, making the people depicted even less identifiable amongst the pixels. Furthermore, the omnipresence of the Black face in the digital realm reminds us of the technological and physic hyper-surveillance that Black people and other minorities are victim of in the US (Russel, 2024). As Russel puts it, there is an "*hypervisibility of Black social death*" (Russel, 2024), an omnipresence of the vulnerability and the pain of Black people. The consequence of that is "*a loss of social identity, a loss of social connectedness and losses associated with disintegration of the body*."(Královà, 2015). It is a given that upon their arrival in the US, African enslaved people were denied their ontological humanity, as they were treated as commodities to be traded, sold, and used until their death. The process of dehumanisation included a lack of social landmarks, stripped of any tradition or signs of identification to any social groups in their home environment, and dispossession of any sign of individuality or identity as the names were taken away. We can thus argue like Russel that the process of social death didn't stop with emancipation; in a globalized digital world ruled by neo-liberal practices of commodification and exploitation, racialized injustices are amplified.

We can also argue that the Black meme, by its comedic nature, is nothing but the descendant of the minstrel show. Indeed, the Black meme shows an exaggerated vision of Blackness: to go viral, humour

and ridicule should prevail. However, even if the humour could at first be located in the Black social vernacular and references, at one point in the virality of the meme, the demographic of the audience/users changes and becomes by default predominantly White. This sense of ridicule inherent to the black meme is, like lynching postcards and the minstrels, a form of colonial gaze and racialized violence.

Finally, this theme of over-reproduction of images calls us to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* Indeed, the action of incessantly reproducing Black image affects and reduces the "aura" of the said images. If we follow Benjamin's theory, this creates a lesser image of Blackness as its exploitation diminishes its quality over time, which impacts the audience's perception of Black people over time as well. Every time images are reproduced, according to Benjamin, they lose some of their aura, which we could also translate to uniqueness or authenticity. In the case of the meme, this aura is what makes it popular and viral in the first place. However, as its popularity grows, the Black moving image becomes devalued and loses its attractiveness while slowly becoming a disposable product. We can only wonder about the significance of someone's representation losing its aura and why the people who are the most victims of this process in the United States are Black people.

The Black Gaze as a counter negrophilic praxis

The popularity of the Black meme and the virality of videos in which a Black person appears on social media specifically is also the fruit of a long history of negrophilia and orientalism. Although this negrophilic and orientalist gaze developed with the active process of colonisation, the stereotypes it creates are still very much alive in our "postcolonial" societies. Stuart Hall abundantly explored the subject in *The spectacle of the Other* (1981). In this essay, Hall, drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), tries to understand and explain what makes difference, "the Other", so attractive while also placing the Other as inherently inferior and how those two sentiments can exist simultaneously in our contemporary visual culture. As Hall explains, to any kind of visual production there is a meaning attached to it, a discourse that can be applied to the broader population represented (Hall, 1981: 228, which is the root of our main critique regarding Black memes and Black viral videos. Visual productions carry implicit connotations, they "say" something about the larger group attached to the person represented. This is exacerbated when the person represented is racialized or gendered. Hall

goes and explains that racialised groups are often seen and represented in duality; we demand that they be two things at the same time: "*They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exoctice. And they are often required to be both things at the same time!*" (Hall, 1981:229). I would add to this list of adjectives the grotesque and the sublime, the monstrous and the desirable, which are stereotypes attached to Black people in the United-Satates, as seen with post-emancipation caricatures and minstrel shows. Difference and binary opposition all the stereotypes attached to that have been essential tools of the White dominating class in the US, as the Black Other was the foundation of the establishment of industrialization and capitalism in the country (Williams, 1944). showing once again the link between the material struggle of racialized minorities and their representation in the media. The stereotyping and the normalization of a degrading image of the other in mass and digital media alike was and is arguably still necessary for the preservation of White supremacy.

Those kinds of exaggerated dualities are prominent in the Black meme as seen earlier and are also the ground of Arthur Jafa's work, as according to him this imposed duality is the basis of the experience of Blackness in America, and this is why he chooses to represent those dualities in symbiosis as a way to mediate Blackness, in the same way blues music is defined by its capacity to convey a seemingly conflicting sense of beauty and despair at the same time. Hall further adds that images of racialized groups

> *"gain in meaning when they are read in context, against or in connection with one another. This is another way of saying that images do not carry meanings, they accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of text and media. […]At the broader level of how "difference" and "otherness" is being represented in a particular culture at any one moment, we can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated […]. This accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refer to another, or has its meaning altered by being "read" in the context of other images, is called inter-textuality."(Hall,1981:232).*

This idea can be applied to the discourse around Blackness that is fed by the virality of Black memes online but can also be an interesting framework for Jafa's work, as it is composed of videos and images interacting with each other, and as intertextuality is a key element to understanding his work. We will come back to this in the audio-visual analysis part of this work.

As a way to counter this negrophilic gaze, Arthur Jafa develops and apply a Black gaze to Black visual culture. Bell Hooks, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) eloquently articulates what a Back gaze can be and why it is necessary to decode mainstream Western visual culture:

> *"Indeed, a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?" (hook, 1992: 15).*

A Black gaze is counter negrophilic as it doesn't glorify nor villainize. It is not neutral either, as no gaze can be, but it does emphasise the positionality of this "Other" gazer, who is looking inwards from the margins, and consequently has a privileged view of the egregious means of representation and stereotyping that are used as a tool by White supremacy against racialized individuals through mass media.

What Jafa does as well, and what only a Black gaze can do when it's turning towards itself, is that it can truthfully critique its own social group. This is what the artist practices: a kind of radical awareness about the Black experience in America that makes him able to comment on it in a liberatory way and use media representation as a liberatory praxis. This is also true when we take into consideration the commodification of the Black affect through Black digital praxis and the Black meme. Arthur Jafa directly opposes and defies the negrophilic gaze as his Black gaze doesn't offer any space for commodification that is the norm is mass media and mainstream culture. he instead offer a defiant gaze, and by this perception and representation of Blackness, Jafa works against the hegemonic gaze of White supremacy. As bell hooks says :

> *"Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist."(hooks, 1992:18).*

To build on that, we can also quote Stuart Hall in Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation. In this essay, he calls for a defiant gaze to fight against the doxa, which is possible even though the

hegemonic nature of White supremacy makes it seem like there is no possibility for alternative means of representation:

> *"The error is not to conceptualize this white 'presence' in terms of power, but to locate that power as wholly external to us -- its extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin." (Hall, 1989)*

Another point brought up by hooks is the inherent invisibility of the gazer while the gazed-at suffers from hyper-visibility: while the gazed-at knows their situation, they cannot point back to who is gazing at them as they are protected by a system that refuses to allow them the necessary agency to do so. Here is the duality of the Black experience in the United States, where being *seen* is not equal to being *heard*. On the contrary, the spectacle of Blackness makes Black individuality and Black consciousness imperceptible, when it is not willingly erased for the profit of the said spectacle. hooks thus explains that:

> *"in a white supremacist society, white people can imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze. […]One mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better, less threatening servants. An effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centred around white control of the black gaze. Black slaves, and later servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality. These looking relations were reinforced as whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks (the better to dehumanize and oppress), of relegating them to the realm of the invisible."(hooks, 1992: 162).*

Paul Gilroy and the notion of cultural hybridity

To analyse any part of Black visual and sonic culture, a detour by Gilroy's The Black Atlantic is necessary. I'll introduce his theory by reminding us by something he points out in the introduction of his book: the interest given to Black culture has nothing to do with "*the lure of ethnic particularism*"(Gilroy, 1993: 4) or "*ethnocentrism*" (Gilroy, 1993: 5), two pitfalls in which we can imagine that cultural studies might fall into. The specific interest that others and myself have had in Black culture comes more from an interest for the specific kind of cultural hybridity that comes with

the Middle Passage, the kind of cultural dialogue between the host and homeland, and the fruit of this diasporic knowledge exchange between East and West, North and South. Regarding art and music specifically in the African diaspora, it is necessary for us as researchers to be mindful of any kind of self-orientalism or self-exoticism by linking Africa with this idea of a land of pure artistic sensibility, far from the austere Reason of the European Enlightenments. In this work, we will do our best to not fall into those kinds of pitfalls, and Gilroy can be of some help in this enterprise.

The beginning of Gilroy's theory is situated in the Middle Passage and the travel across the Atlantic, in a specific kind of spatial and chronological transition from one reality to another. This chronotope is the foundation of the cultural hybridity and "double consciousness" (the one of the Black man and the one of the White man living within the black man – we could also call Fanon or Du Bois on this subject) inherent to the Black experience. The Middle Massage and it means of travailing, the boat, is according to Gilroy one of the base of our conception of modernity in the West (Gilroy, 1993: 17). To put it succinctly, this kind of mass transportation, coupled with the industry of slavery embedded in capitalism, anchors the Black experience in the Western conception of material modernity and modern liberal modes and means of production. It is interesting to pay attention to that when we link the Black digital praxis of Arthur Jafa for instance, as it is a testimony of the over-lasting "modern" nature of Blackness in the Americas, always inscribed in a kind of futurity. This is described as Black modernism (Gilroy, 1993: 73) by Gilroy and englobed Black creative practices such as techno music or the Black digital praxis. This Black modernity is also embedded in duality as explained by Gilroy: Black cultural forms are modern since they have been marked by their "*hybrid, creole origins in the West, because they have struggled to escape their status as commodities*" (Gilroy, 1993: 73). The Black cultural praxis is thus modern because of the commodification of African people then, and of Black culture nowadays, as seen with our study of the Black meme.

On the other hand, as Arthur Jafa's work is also rooted in Black music, it is interesting to note Gilroy's take on it. Indeed, Gilroy's theory to explain the importance of music for the Black diaspora is based on the idea that music would translate the "unsayable" nature of the experience of slavery. This ontological factor is then coupled with the pragmatic difficulties regarding verbal communication on the plantation because the African enslaved individuals would not speak the same language at first, and because any kind of verbal communication would be surveyed and censored:

> *"The topos of unsayability from the slave's experiences of racial terror […] can be used to challenge the privileged conception of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness. The power and significance of music within the Black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language. It is important to remember that the slave's access to literacy was often denied on pain of death and only a few cultural opportunities were offered as a surrogate for the other forms of individual autonomy denied by life on the plantation." (Gilroy, 1993: 74).*

Non-linguistical oral forms is what Gilroy call the "*pre and anti-discursive constituents of black metacommunication"* (Gilroy, 1975: 75), which is still visible in the audio-visual Black digital praxis as well as in the work and theories developed by Arthur Jafa. Gilroy builds on this idea of anti-discursive means of communication, which is relevant to our study of a sonically, somatically and visually mediated Black experience by stating that:

> *"Music, the grudging gift that supposedly compensated slaves not only for their exile […] but for their complete exclusion from modern political society, has been refined and developed so that it provides an enhanced mode of communication beyond the petty power of words – spoken or written" (Gilroy, 1993: 76).*

For Gilroy, music when understood in the context of the Black experience, is just another plausible model of communication, another practice to mediate one's subjectivity (Gilroy, 1993: 76). Furthermore, Gilroy adds that in that specific proprieties of Black music are rooted in this desire to communicate and mediate as said earlier. Indeed, Black music is rooted in somatic and kinesis, as well as it is embedded in community as one of its most important characteristics is the "*call and response*"(Gilroy, 1993: 78), as well as "*improvisation, montage, and dramaturgy*" (Gilroy, 1993: 78), which are all still important aspects of Black music today and can be found in the work of Arthur Jafa. Also, to add to its relevancy to the work that we are analysing today, Gilroy notes that "*The major things Black art has to have are these: it must have the ability to use found objects, the appearance of using found things, and it must look effortless.*" (Gilroy, 1993: 78), which all participate in the construction of the aura of Black artistic and cultural productions.

"Listening to images"

Another framework that is indispensable to our audio-visual analysis of Arthur Jafa's work is Tina Campt's theory of "listening to images". Her theory, which she developed in her eponymous book,

is based on synaesthesia the phenomenon in which the senses are intertwined, which means that one can for instance "listen" to things they see. She thus offers another way to look at images by noticing characteristics that are usually associated with music, such as tonality, the range, and the "noise" that the image emits. She argues that this theory is developed through a way of reimagining our perception of visual culture through mediums that would be essentially Black":

> *"the choice to "listen to" rather than simply "look at" images is a conscious decision to challenge the equation of vision with knowledge by engaging photography through a sensory register that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound." (Capt, 2017: 6).*

She also argues that listening to images is a necessary way to engage with Black visual culture as, like we stated earlier, Black media are seen as "poorer" form of media. She argues that by listening to these "low" forms of visual media rather than simply looking at them, there is a new depth that is unfolded. She also notes that lower kinds of media like memes or family photography are practices that are preeminent in the Black diaspora, and that sounds are thus inherent to those practices, as music is embedded in the Black ethos. Listening to images makes even more sense when studying diasporic visual culture as the diaspora is defined by movement (as diaspora comes from the ancient Greek diaspeiro which means to scatter). A photography, an image, is just an action stopped and captured by the camera. Consequently, in an image, there is always a sense of movement that is held in suspension. Thus, when we understand the visual culture of the diaspora, we can only read the images as sound and movement suspended by the camera. There is a lot of movement and sound in one image: the movement of the traveling, of the Middle Passage, the sound of both the host and home land, the movement of the in between. This can be understood as the "aura" or the frequency of the diasporic Black visual culture, embedded in fugitivity, sounds and movement.

This bring us to the theory that Arthur Jafa developed while being inspired by Tina Camps, which is the theory of the Black Visual Intonation, which is the idea of visually portray the black experience on screen and "*replicate the power, beauty, and alienation of Black Music*" (Campt, 2017) through a visual medium, which operates once again by dialoguing between hearing and seeing. Finally, with Tina Campt, they both theorized the idea of a "*Visual Frequency of Black Life*" (Campt, 2019) – as jazz-inspired "*irregular rates of vibration that register the differential value of the black experience*" (Campt, 2019), which is not a theory but rather a term to describe a film that effectively mediate the Black experience such as Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message, the Message is Death.*

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

This chapter aims to provide an analytical framework as well as an efficient research method for analysing *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, a piece of visual and sonic media. As our research is embedded in critical cultural studies as well as Media and Communication studies, our critical audio-visual analysis inspired by semiotics and the notion of discourse. I will base my analysis on the work of Gilian Rose (2012), Barthes (1972), Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001), along with analytical framework theorized by both Campt and Jafa, which were discussed in the earlier theoretical section of this work.

Critical discursive and semiotic audio-visual analysis

Gilian Rose emphasises the importance of representation as a way of interpreting the world in the wake of the omnipresence of visual technology in our western visual culture (Rose, 2016: 2). As Gilroy argued that Black culture is rooted in kinesis and sounds, Rose argues that our Western culture is before anything else visual. She then argues that due to the social and political forces linked to any kind of society, our capacity to see, what she refers to as "*our vision*", is suggested to influence. Thus, our vision is shaped into a *visuality*, a *way of seeing*, a vision that is socially constructed (Rose, 2016: 2). These are the fundamentals of a discursive audio-visual analysis. It is also important to note the impact of Jean Baudrillard's work on the theory developed by Rose, as well as for our work. Indeed, the author draws on Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum and explains that in our postmodern world, "*it is no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and the unreal; images had become detached from a certain relation to a real world with the real world with the results that we now live in a scopic regime dominated by simulations, or simulacra*"(Rose, 2016: 12). This will be useful for our analysis, as we can wonder how potent, and real the viral videos that Jafa uses are, or if it is only a simulacrum of the Black experience in America. We can finally note the author's comment on multimodality, how images "*always make sense in relation to other things, including written texts and very often other images*"(Rose, 2016: 12) in order to understand the different layers of understanding of those viral videos as the reflect an experience that is as multi-layered and complex.

On the other hand, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, in the *Handbook of visual analysis* (2001) while citing Barthes, shed light on the question of "*representation (what do images represent and how"* and the

question *"of 'hidden meaning' of images (what ideas and values do the people, places, and things represented in images stand for?)"* (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 92) . Some questions that the viewer can ask themselves while watching *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* by Arthur Jafa could be influenced by the followings interrogations:

> *"Who and what are the people, places and things depicted in these images, and how do we recognize them as such? What ideas and values do we associate with these depicted people, places and things, and what is that allow us to do so ?" (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 92).*

Because our subject is a "cut n mix" of found footage found online, we also must "*pay attention to the context in which the images produced and circulated*" (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 93). This brings us to focus on the "*visual lexis*" (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 93) of the images represented. The visual lexis is the Barthesian idea of "denotation", what is *seen*, the *signs*, linked to their "connotation", what is *unseen* but implied, *signified*. The visual lexis helps us understand how the hidden meanings are communicated, and what visual signs are used to convey those hidden meanings. Van Leeuwen and Jewitt build on this Barthesian idea and invite to analyse what they call the "*visual syntax*" (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 93), which is how those people and things are placed together. This will be particularly useful in our study as we are analysing a video made of a rhythmic assemblage of other shorter videos. The authors also emphasis the importance of our tendency to categorise people, things, and places " (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 95). Sorting out people means reducing them to a type that is linked to a specific mythology. Those mythologies are another concept theorized by Barthes and can be defined as being the "*very broad and diffuse concepts which condense everything associated with the represented people, places or things into a single entity*" " (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 97) such as Blackness. However, the authors point out that those types can quickly turn into a stereotype according when the people studied are racialized or of any other kind of minority, as in our study.

Reflexivity

The images used by Arthur Jafa are often crude, raw, and intense, reflecting the experience of being Black in the United States. The work analysed is a work that depicts images of racialized violence embedded in a long history of dehumanization, prejudice, murder, and torture. Even though no

gruesome images are depicted, this work stile evokes and references this violent history. This raises an ethical concern about how such imagery is presented and consumed by the audience; and here lies my ethical concern regarding this dissertation. Moreover, in his artistic practice, Jafa works in a way to counter the negrophilic gaze that is present in the hegemonic means of representation of Blackness in mass media and mainstream culture. However, even though he purposely depicts Black people in sometimes their worst light, we ought to preserve a gaze that is intentional in its empathy and understanding of the brutal imagery and representation of Blackness that is presented to us.

AUDIO-VISUAL ANALYSIS

This chapter provides an analysis of 6 sequences of *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) presented in their chronological order. This is followed by a thematic discussion about broader themes and techniques used in the making of the film. We will at first provide an audio-visual analysis of sequences of the film based on the theories that we saw in the first chapter of the film. In in the second part, we will discuss how Arthur Jafa used the art of sampling, archiving, and free jazz in his film, while also formulating a Black feminist critique of his work at the end. As the work that is analysed consists of almost 200 excerpts, we cannot try and analyse every one of them. The choice is given to our discretion to select the excerpts that, to us, seem to *say* the most.

Figure 1 0:10

The opening sequence of Love is the message, the message is *Death is a Black* meme, a video that went viral on twitter in 2015. We can see a Black man being interviewed about an abduction that happened in his neighbourhood (Figure 1, 0:10). He is the one who called the police, as he saw "a *little pretty white girl run in a black man's arm*" and knew that "*some was wrong here […] dead giveaway, dead*

giveaway". This video opened the door to a myriad of discussions on social media about the lack of self-love and self-respect in the Black community as the man interviewed clearly denigrates a fellow Black man. As we stated earlier, this video was taken out of its context when it gained in popularity, and the experience of this man was turned into a humorous catchphrase, inscribing itself in the ongoing process of the digital commodification of Blackness and the Black experience on social media. By opening his film with this sequence, Jafa invites us to reconsider its original context, forming here a meta-commentary on said commodification.

Sequence 1 (00:19-1:00)

The next footage invites the viewer to reflect the progress made by the Black community in their struggle towards liberation. Indeed, on one hand we see a little Black boy crying, being pushed by a severe White man in a courtroom filled of White spectators in 19th century attires (00:48) This footage is taken from the film *Birth of a Nation* (1916), infamously known for glorifying White supremacy and the Confederate South. The next footage offers a striking parallel, showing Barak Obama standing in the spot where the little boy was the standing second before. In this footage, the former US President is surrounded by representatives of the Black Methodist Church (Figure 2, 0:54). As *Ultralight Beam,* the song by Kanye West that will accompany the 8 minutes of the film, goes quiet for a moment, Obama begins to sing the opening lines of "Amazing Grace", a staple of the Black Church since the times of slavery, notably due to its redemptive allusions, a theme that is popular amongst Negro Spirituals. The parallel between past and present is then amplified by a return to *Birth of a Nation*, with a footage of a White preacher sermonizing to a Black audience (Figure 3 0:58). The preacher is again centred in the middle of the frame, mirroring the little Black boy and Barack Obama, therefor offering a contrasting view of what is and what has been. These parallels invite us to question the liberatory power of religion and the (un)stability of racialized power dynamics in American society. To add to that, in *Ultralight Beam*, Kanye West is accompanied by a Gospel Choir, and the song can be inscribed in the tradition of the Negro Spiritual. This musical genre, specific to the Black experience in the United States, is representative of Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic and cultural hybridity. Indeed, the particular rhythm of the genre takes its roots in West African music with the call-and-response technique that we touched on earlier. It is also one of those forms of communication that non-discursive and rotted in somatic and kinesis that is specific to the African diaspora as well. On the other hand, the Christian theme is taken from Western Christianity, specifically Protestantism. The enslaved individuals appropriated the Christian themes of the songs and changed certain meanings to make it specific to their experience, which created a new specific kind of Black Christian music. Here, we can see an homage to Black musical creativity and the complex context surrounding it.

Figure 2 00:54

Figure 3 0:58

Sequence 2 (1:06-1:50)

Then, the artist focuses on footages demonstrating a sense of Black joy and Black creativity through performance, featuring images of Michael Jackson dancing (1:23), Aretha Franklin singing (1:29) or James Brown performing (1:34). Then, the sequence concludes with Beyoncé dancing in her 7/11 music video in front of an American flag (Figure 4, 1:42), demonstrating an image of so-called "Black excellence" in a post-Obama society, an ostensibly post-racial world where wealth and status is not determined by race anymore but rather by class and "merit". This discourse on Black success only

reinforces the myth of the American dream, embedded in liberalism and capitalism, which are the very systems that originally fuelled the enslavement of African people and the exploitation of their labour. However, in between this footages, we can see for a short moment a video of a man in blackface (Figure 5 1:20), as a way to make the viewer remember that even though success by entertaining and performing is something that is deemed achievable and respectable in the Black community, the historical roots of this success has been mockery and dehumanization. This point is reinforced by our earlier study in the theoretical part of this work on minstrel shows and their connection to the commodification of Black culture through the Black meme. This aligns with Stuart Hall explains in the *Spectacle of Others* (1983), as performance as a racialized person always plays on the spectacle of exaggerated difference, which itself is rooted in necrophobia and negrophilia. Jafa, building on this idea, opposes this mythology around Black performance and use his Black gaze to critique of the post-racial discourse and reminds us of how dehumanization and the commodification of Black bodies – especially through performance – are always interlocked. As *“image makes sense in relation to other things*” accorder to Rose, Black performance is always to be understood in relation to its racist and colonial past, especially in the American visual culture.

Figure 4 1:42

Figure 5 1:20

Sequence 3 (1:50-2:08)

The following sequence offers a commentary on the systemic violence that is exerted upon the Black community, while simultaneously formulating a critique of the post-racial myth, which was already challenged in the previous segment. The sequence opens with the video of a child slapping his own mother who is under the influence of drugs in an effort to wake her up (1:52). This scene explicitly alludes to the drug epidemic disproportionality affecting working-class Black communities, exposing the socio-economic conditions that perpetuate cycles of substance abuse in the United-States. In effect, the child's action itself is representative of the systemic issues that perpetuate inter-generational trauma within Black families. Then, we can see a Black man being beaten by the police (Figure 6, 1:53). As he falls, the video cuts to images of Black dancers performing a "death drop" in a ballroom setting, a dance move that originated in Queer Black communities (Figure 7, 1:58). The sequence then returns to *Death of a Nation* once again, as we see a Black man being attacked by a Klan mob, referencing historical organized violence against Black bodies. The juxtaposition of these images, connecting once again past and present, serves as a visceral reminder of the persistent threat of police brutality and White supremacy looming over Black bodies. In the same way that Tina Campt explained that there is always movement in suspension in images, by "listening" to those images we can sense the different layers violence in suspension in those footage. Violence is ever present, even in stillness. The viewer is therefore always "kept on their toes", as violence can erupt anytime and anywhere. The death drop, in its theatricality, acts as a metaphor for the precariousness of Black life – a life constantly

at risk to be cut short by systemic violence and social neglect, thus embodying the notion of "social death" highlighted earlier. The specific mode of production of the bodycam and the dashcam, its specific grain and angle (that is often a "poor" image), as we "listen" to them, are akin to conveying the specific kind of violence that is systemic, police-based brutality, as well as the hyper surveillance that is imposed on Black bodies.

Figure 6 1:53

Figure 7 1:58

Sequence 4 (2:43-3:40)

As Kanye West comes back to his chorus, singing "*This is a God's dream*", we can see Martin Luther King Jr waving at a crowd (Figure 8, 2:45), followed by a video of a little girl sleeping and, we assume, dreaming (2:50). As a choir sings "*Trying to keep my faith"* in the background, the image pivots to a Black gospel choir singing passionately, before the sequence abruptly ending with a video testifying of police violence (3:17). This episode reaffirms the necessity to "keep faith" and "keep dreaming", messages that have been relevant many times in Black history. The juxtaposition of hope and violence reinforce the idea that hope for marginalized groups is not just a feeling but a radical, political, liberatory practice. In the video, we see an older Black woman being forced out of her vehicle by a White policeman, and then being arrested while she relentlessly asks what is wrong (Figure 9, 3:37). The scene intensifies as we see her child going out of the car with his arms raised while we hear his mother pleading the policemen to stop as they are "*terrifying [her] children*". This echoes the ongoing history of brutal and prejudiced police practices against the Black community in the United-States. Here, the choice of the music and the videos, in the spirit of the racialized binaries popular in mainstream media as explained by Stuart Hall, echoes the duality between faith and violence, hope and repression. These specific binaries were and are still a prominent discourse among the Black community.

Figure 8 2:45

Figure 9 3:27

Sequence 5 (3:59-4:38)

The sequence opens with a speech by Malcom X (3:59), followed by images of civil rights era and contemporary riots, both being violently repressed by the police (4:01-4:05). Then we can see a Black American footballer running in triumph, the ball under his arm, smiling, towards the camera, as a gospel choir sings "*You persecute the weak because it makes you feel so strong"* (Figure 10 ,4:09). This juxtaposition of systemic struggle and brief moment of athletic wins conveys the idea that Blackness is celebrated in certain contexts while being persecuted in others. Following that, the actress Amandla Steinberg appears on screen and says, "*I wonder what society would look like if America loved Black people as much as we loved Black culture*" (4:10), drawing further on this idea. Then, we see a footage of a Black child screaming for his mom as a policeman arrest him in his house (Figure 11, 4:18), revealing how, while Black bodies are commodified and made visible in a spectacle in certain contexts, violence and trauma are still the norm. The sequence goes on with images of runner Derek Redmond struggling to finish his race in the 1992 Olympics after tearing his hamstring. His father descends on the line to help him finish the race, conveying once again an image of a Black ability to resist and strive against pain and adversity (Figure 12, 4:25). Once again, Jafa shows us that resistance is thus deemed acceptable in specific context that benefit the Nation-State as a whole, such as during international sport events. After that, we see an extract of the video of the viral video of Dajerria Becton, who was

violently tackled to the ground, her braids pulled, and her head slammed on the pavement by police officers while in a swimsuit at a pool party in Texas in 2015 (Figure 13, 4:28). This sequence offers a kaleidoscopic view of the Black experience, playing on the “highs” and the “lows” of it, while also offering an image of it that is far from being homogeneous while at the same time being united by shared feelings or experiences. Those feelings and experiences can be summarized by being victim of an organised and racialized system of brutality, while preserving a kind of “willpower” that is celebrated in certain situations. Here, we can only wonder if Jafa, by playing on this duality, entertains a kind of ethno-particularism defined by this characteristic of so-called “resilience”. In fact, since the times of slavery, resilience has been a definite characteristic of Blackness, which in the long term can be hurtful as it infers that the Black community is uniquely capable of enduring more pain than other races due to their “stronger bodies”, thereby normalizing and legitimizing the pain inflected on Black bodies. Alternatively, it is possible that once again, the artist is only doing a meta-commentary on said stereotype by challenging the viewer to analyse their own internalized stereotypes and the danger of reducing the Black experience to a single narrative of so-called strength amidst pain and adversity.

Figure 10 4:09

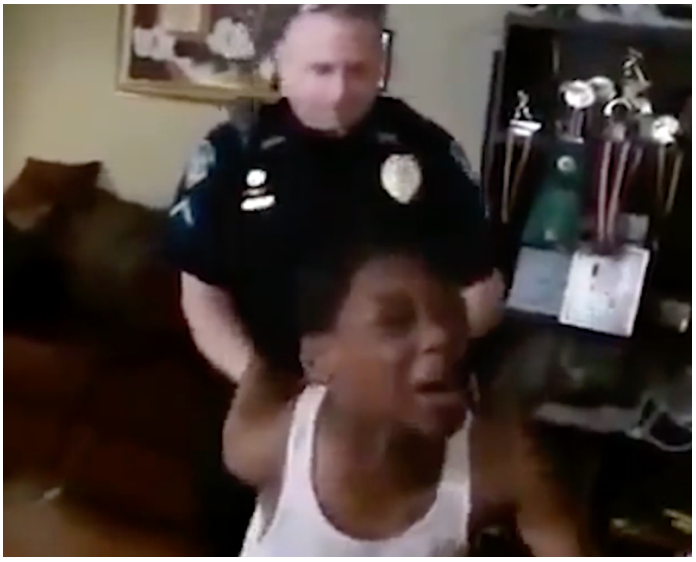

Figure 11 4:10

Figure 12 4:25

Figure 13 4:28

Sequence 6 (5:48-7:02)

The last sequence focuses on Black dancers and moments of Black joy while being interrupted with images of a blazing sun, as Kanye West repeats "We're on an ultralight beam". We can see Serena Williams doing her famous dance moves (6:11), Jimi Hendrix and Louis Armstrong performing (6:25 and 6:29 respectively), Mohamed Ali defeating his opponent (6:34) and members of the Black Church falling in ectasis. Those moments of glee are dispersed by a prolonged video of a toddler, stripped down, filmed in a mug-shot fashion, as his father instructs him to place his hands on the wall (Figure 14, 4:48) and he explains to him that "*This is what the police is gonna do to you*". The child complies. To the viewer, this image evokes a future marked by systemic surveillance and over-criminalization. This footage is the longest in the whole film and creates a disturbance in the broader rhythm and cadence of the piece, reminding us of the repeated process of social death that Black people are victim of. The lens of the camera reminds us that Black individuals are viewed through the same lens of criminality and threat in a White dominated society. The visual lexis that is once again used here conveys the idea of a Black experience that, even when shining like a blazing star, always comes back to the roots of suffering and systemic oppression. This is also conveyed by the visual structure that is used: the joyous footages are always cut short by the ones showing violence, before going back to more uplifting images. This montage technique forms a cycle that is neither vicious nor virtuous, a tension that never fully resolved, mediating through images this complex narrative around the Black experience in the United States. Finally, the blazing sun that repeatedly appears in the film conveys the idea that even though Black people can shine through their achievement, the same light that expose their success has the potential of hurting them. The brilliance of Black achievements can always be overshadowed by societal oppressive forces.

Figure 14 4:48

The camera at work: an anti-colonial way of seeing?

Arthur Jafa's montage and production techniques draws deeply in the Black tradition of sampling, as he reactivates digital archives to reinvent them, in the same way that hip-hop producers sample influential tunes to reimagine them in new music. Jafa inscribes his video work in the Black musical tradition by reimagining musical techniques in the visual realm. He thus also plays with the notion of what makes a work "original", as well as flirting with copywrite laws, in the same spirit that hip-hop producers used to do in the 1980s. The digital and media-based nature of his work make us question what constitutes "low" culture and how much our perception of that has been influenced by White supremacy. *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* make us wonder what is included in the western conception of a film, as there is no proper narrative or chronological structure in this artwork, and the film must be understood in resonance between each chosen footage. Finally, the artist only alludes to certain subjects, making certain images speak, inviting the viewer to "listen" to them and wonder for more. To put it briefly, the film sparks a conversation about Blackness in America without providing any answer. Maybe more than the content, it is in its production method that *Love is the Message, the Message is Death is* essentially Black.

To add to this idea, we can note that camera has often been perceived as oppressive by nature, as Bell Hooks (1991) and Stuart Hall (1981) note. Indeed, it has been the principal tool of the colonizer as its first use was classification and categorizing of human beings into sub-categories to better rule the colonial empire. Now, in *Love is the message, the Message is Death, Arthur* Jafa shatters the dominating aspect of the camera by making the point of views so scattered and divers. There is no oppressive gaze as the gazes are multiple. The production can be interpreted as "grassroot" as the images were produced by the community for the community as part of the broader Black digital praxis. The Western concept of the filmmaker as an *auteur* disappears, and the subjective nature of the camera becomes obvious. This process allows the images that are shown are to be recalled to their ontological nature and to simply be what they are: images.

Jazz to mediate

As stated earlier, this piece of media lacks a conventional narrative structure. The film is more rhythmically interwoven with the music, echoing and responding to it, developing in a way that is adjacent to it that does not follow the typical narrative order. This is where the comparison to Jazz

emerges. The images are free in the way there is no pierceable structure or emerging pattern. However, by paying attention not to each individual sequence but rather immersing ourselves in the larger hymn, we can sense a certain common visual tonality. Inspired by the idea theorized by Campt, by "*listening to images*", the images embody different notes, each possessing their own particularity and tonality, all fitting together smoothly in the bigger assemblage.

Understanding and feeling Jafa's work is thus achieved in the same way one nourishes an appreciation for jazz: not by focusing on the tonality of each note but by losing oneself in the broader harmony of the work, as we follow Arthur Jafa's synesthetic vision as he tries to mediate what can be understand as the essence of Blackness made fathomable. The movie offers a mosaic, painting a portrait Black America that includes all its divergent parts merging into one surprisingly harmonious eulogy. With this exercise of visually recreating a musical process, Jafa activates the senses of the viewer, trying to make them feel Blackness as one could by listening to Jazz or Blues. This process allows the artist to re-centre the body in its ability to receive the information that he is trying to transmit, encouraging the viewer to "listen" to the images and thus anchoring the Black experience as not being "thought" but rather felt.

What about the Black woman?

To finish, it is necessary to comment the representation of Black women in Arthur Jafa's film, while also interrogating his own positionality as a Black man and the implications this has for his portrayal of women. Throughout the film, Black women are shown in various historic moments, as seen in the Civil Rights protests footage (Figure 14, 0:27). The idea conveyed is that Black women were on the frontline of pivotal and historical moments of struggle in resistance. There are also some images of the Black scholar Hortens Spillers, although her profession and her position as an intellectual is not indicated or signalled in any way. In contrast, in a contemporary setting, most images that we see are those of Black women twerking or being overly sexualized (Figure 15, 4:45). While Jafa tends to convey a discourse on Blackness that is complex and rich, it seems that the image of Black woman that he conveys through his film is a more stereotyped one, aligned with the hegemonic mythology around Black women that can be seen in mainstream media. The visual lexis that is used helps to signify to the viewer that Black women are still primarily defined by their bodies and their sexuality, and not much else is conveyed by the images seen on screen. Jafa, in this film, seems to a reductive image of Black women echoes to the Jezebels stereotype – a promiscuous temptress stereotype of a Black woman

taking its roots in White’s men colonial desire for Black women during slavery, thus justifying the exploitation – when they are not providential “strong Black women”. Here, Jafa might exercise a Black male gaze in order perhaps to denounce the treatment of Black women within the community. However, he doesn’t exercise a radical one as the representation that it gives to Black women reproduces the very same heteropatriarchal views popularized by a White supremacist visual culture and is thus, not liberatory for non-male individuals.

Figure 15 0:27

Figure 16 4:45

CONCLUDING NOTES

In this dissertation, we saw how diasporic cultural hybridity combined with a gaze that comes from the margins and an artistic visual praxis rooted in the different senses as well as a montage technique that plays with the political power of our emotions allows Arthur Jafa to mediate through music and film the body-based experience of being Black in the United States. In an age where the political use of social media becomes exponentially important, as seen with Black Lives Matter, it becomes necessary to reflect on Black digital archives. Being informed by that, through our audio-visual analysis, we came to the conclusion that *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* offers a challenging definition of Black cultural legacy. Jafa plays with hegemonic discourse on Blackness by not denying it but conveying the message that there is something more, something unsayable that must be felt before it is articulated. The image of Blackness that the artist mediates is as complex as its lived experience. Indeed, while playing with digital archiving methods, Jafa offers a Black visual gaze that shows Blackness "as it is" and is radical by this kind of neutrality that the White mainstream gaze and means of representation cannot have. By offering neither a negrophilic nor negrophobic representation of Black people, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* is liberatory, as it frees Blackness from the shackles of specific modes of representation that take its roots in the colonial gaze and White supremacy. Also, the specific montage technic used as well as the diversity in the videos used provoke a body-based feeling that, in a way, effectively mediates the so-called Black experience. Nevertheless, we ought not to forget that last segment of our research leads us to think about how we could bring this Black radical imaginary further in terms of narration and representation while also dismantling hetero-patriarchal views that has are known to be hurtful towards women and non-male racialized individual.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation was written around the time of the murder of Sonya Massey on July 6th 2024, killed in her own living room after she called the police and asked for their help. She was shot in the head by the officer who instructed her to remove a pot of hot water from the oven. She died kneeling, hands in the air, apologizing for touching the water. The footage of her murder, captured through the police officers' dashcams, has gone "viral". She is the 99th unarmed Black person killed by a police

officer this year in the United-States as of August 2024. This dissertation is dedicated to her life taken too soon.

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