Arthur Jafa

69

When I was thinking about what I wanted to do at this conference, the first thing I thought about was giving my talk with my back to the audience as a sort of allusion to Miles Davis, you know, postural semantics and all. But then I had this dream, which I'm going to tell you about.

I was in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where I grew up. I was in my bedroom, the room I remember growing up in, sitting and listening to music—the kind of music my mom used to call psychological music. You know, jazz, rock, reggae, anything that was strange (to her). And I was sitting in the room with The Alien—I don't know how many of you saw the movie *The Alien*—and we were just chilling, you know, just grooving, like me and my friends did when we were growing up. And my mom pops her head in the room occasionally like she did when I was with my friends and smiles and sort of steps back out. And my father creeps in without saying anything and turns down the volume on the music. Eventually, my friend The Alien gets up and splits. And then my father comes in and says, "Who was that big-headed nigger you were in here with?"

I don't want to be a big-headed nigger, so I'm not going to do this with my back to the audience. But, I am going to use digressions like Marlon Riggs did in his talk. One thing that's been interesting for me to see so far in this conference is the anxiety around what I would call the performative. The very first night Stuart Hall stood up and gave his talk, and I felt a little bit like that guy in the Memorex commercial. I thought, damn, he's relentless. I mean, I turned to the people next to me and said it was like listening to John Coltrane—it just didn't stop. And then after that Cornel West came out and did his thing, you know, "Give me an Amen!" He doesn't say it, but you know what he wants. Then bell hooks came on, and she did her thing, and Marlon did his incredible thing. And then there was Hazel Carby. She was interesting. She was the only

person who got the "oooh" effect. She got this effect when she was pointing out the relationship between certain male academics and Zora Neale Hurston.

My primary interest is in Black film. When I first got into film at Howard University, the people who were there—Haile Gerima, Alonzo Crawford, Abiyi Ford—were very much concerned with questions around Black cinema and with defining what it was. At that time, they would have probably defined Black film as something like "We're against Hollywood," which is interesting because that definition allows you to get to certain kinds of places, and it's clear. But eventually I started to ask myself, well, is that enough? It seems they had put us in this binary opposition with Hollywood that can be kind of limited. I thought we had to ask more sophisticated questions about what Black cinema was and, in fact, could be.

One of the first things I asked was, well, if this work is supposed to be Black film, why does it use what is essentially strictly classical Hollywood spatial continuity? You know, was it significant that you respected all of the 180-, 360-degree rules around spatial organization? Was that arbitrary?

They would show the work of Oscar Micheaux, whom anyone who's interested in Black cinema, or American cinema, for that matter, should be familiar with. (I find it incredible that Black filmmakers don't know Oscar Micheaux. That's kind of like being a jazzman and not knowing Louis Armstrong.) And they would always present Oscar Micheaux's work as an example of what not to do. I got this a lot: it was incompetently realized; its class and color politics were all messed up. But I felt like they never really looked deeply into his work and saw what was worth studying.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson did a very interesting analysis of Ozu, the master Japanese filmmaker. They demonstrated that the spatial paradigm Ozu employed wasn't a deficient control of a Hollywood spatial paradigm, but that, in fact, it was an alternative paradigm—which oftentimes ran parallel to the Hollywood one, but just as often would transgress it.[1] Donald Ritchie, who is considered an early expert on Ozu, would say, "This is a guy who's considered one of the most controlled formal filmmakers in the world, but he got sloppy at those moments." Right.

But what was interesting about Bordwell's and Thompson's analysis was that it provided an entree into analyzing Black film. And I started to look at Micheaux's work and said, wow, this is not an accident; this is consistent over

the course of his career (and I think he made more than thirty-eight feature films). It just got badder and badder and badder.

I'm going to do a little jump right here.

I had read the anti-essentialist position in that last cinema issue of *Screen,*[2] and I said, wow, I really don't agree with some of the things that the anti-essentialists are saying. I mean, I had a hard time understanding (and perhaps it was my misunderstanding) what they were trying to say. So I said, well, I must be an essentialist. And then I read what the essentialists were saying, what they were supposed to be saying, and I said, well, maybe I'm just an "anti-anti-essentialist." What I've come to now is what a friend told me when I asked how she would describe me. She called me a "materialist retentionist" (something like that).

What that means is that I have a belief in certain levels of cultural retention. People carry culture on various levels, down to the deepest level, which I would call a kind of core stability. Nam Jun Paik, the godfather of video art, has this great quote: "The culture that's going to survive in the future is the culture that you can carry around in your head." The middle passage is such a clear example of this, because you see Black American culture particularly developed around those areas we could carry around in our heads—our oratorical prowess, dance, music, those kinds of things. There are other things not so easy to carry. Architecture, for example. When we got here, we didn't have an opportunity to make many buildings. Not right off, at least. So I have this notion of core stability and how that informs what we do, of cultural sophistication and how we apply that to the task of constructing Black cinema.

I like to think about films and the kinds of things that are possible. For example, I want to do Martin Luther King's life in the style of *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima's amazing hard-core feature). I want to do Malcolm X's life as a series of moments—Malcolm arriving home at two o'clock in the morning and looking in at his little girls asleep. I like the stories that Bruce Perry tells in his biography of Malcolm X—like when he says that Malcolm X was, in fact, in love with another Betty. And in his anxiety about whether Betty was actually going to accept his proposal of marriage, he asked Betty Shabazz to marry him instead. A few weeks later, he ran into the first Betty's brother, and was being congratulated by him, you know, "Congratulations on your marriage, brother Malcolm. But why didn't you ever call our sister back? She's

been waiting for you. She wanted to accept the proposal." And Malcolm X broke down and started crying.[3] That's the Malcolm X I want to see. And I would like to know what kind of version of Little Richard's life Andrei Tarkovsky would do.

I think understanding culture and having a sophisticated understanding of applying culture to the construction of Black cinema means we have to understand how culture gets played out in various arenas. And we have to be able to look at these arenas to see how Black people have intervened to transform them into spaces where we can most express our desires. A classic example, of course, is basketball. Like the question that went around for a long time (before Michael Jordan made it irrelevant) about who was the best basketball player, Magic Johnson or Larry Bird. That depends on what you mean by best, obviously. If you use a rational Western evaluation of what's best, then you come up with the statistical, which means who can put the most balls in the hoop, right? And by that definition, certainly Larry Bird can be measured with the best there's ever been. Bird can put the ball in the hoop. Anybody that tells

you he can't has got a serious racial anxiety thing happening. But then you have to ask yourself, if Black people enter into this game, which was invented by Dr. Hans Nasmith (and we know he certainly didn't create it with Black folks in mind), how has it been transformed? And how many levels does that play itself out on? I mean, is it just that we function as players, or have we affected other aspects of the game? And if you ask yourself these kinds of questions, then the question of who's the best basketball player becomes irrelevant. What you're going to end up with is Larry Bird coming down the floor, going up for a shot. Two points. He comes down again. Two points. Then maybe he'll shoot one of those long ones he's good for. Three points, you know. But then Michael Jordan will come down, spinning acrobatically in apparent defiance of all known laws of gravity. Ten points.

Black pleasure (not joy)—what are its parameters, what are its primal sites, how does Black popular culture or Black culture in general address Black pleasure? How does it generate Black pleasure? How do those strategies in Black music play out the rupture and repair of African-American life on the structural level? How do they play out the sense of the lost and the found? How are Black people preoccupied with polyventiality (a term of mine)? "Polyventiality" just means multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings, multiplicity. Why do we find these particular things pleasurable? How do African retentions coalesce with the experiential sites in the New World, with new modes of cultural stability? What does Wesley Brown's "tragic magic" mean when he says, "I played in a Bar Mitzvah band. And it was a great job until I got hit by that tragic magic, and I start playing a little bit before the beat, a little bit behind the beat. I couldn't help myself. I lost the job." This whole question of addressing Black pleasure is a critical thing.

I've heard people talk about issues of representation and the content of culture. But I'm trying to figure out how to make Black films that have the power to allow the enunciative desires of people of African descent to manifest themselves. What kinds of things do we do? How can we interrogate the medium to find a way Black movement in itself could carry, for example, the weight of sheer tonality in Black song? And I'm not talking about the lyrics that Aretha Franklin sang. I'm talking about *how she sang them.* How do we make Black music or Black images vibrate in accordance with certain frequential values that exist in Black music? How can we analyze the tone, not the sequence of notes

that Coltrane hit, *but the tone itself,* and synchronize Black visual movement with that? I mean, is this just a theoretical possibility, or is this actually something we can do?

I'm developing an idea that I call Black visual intonation (BVI). What it consists of is the use of irregular, nontempered (nonmetronomic) camera rates and frame replication to prompt filmic movement to function in a manner that approximates Black vocal intonation. See, the inherent power of cinematic movement is largely dependent on subtle or gross disjunctions between the rate and regularity at which a scene is recorded and the rate and regularity at which it is played back. Nonmetronomic camera rates, such as those employed by silent filmmakers, are transfixing precisely because they are irregular. The hand-cranked camera, for example, is a more appropriate instrument with which to create movement that replicates the tendency in Black music to "worry the note"—to treat notes as indeterminate, inherently unstable sonic frequencies rather than the standard Western treatment of notes as fixed phenomena. Utilizing what I term alignment patterns, which are simply a series of fixed frame replication patterns (and I have 372 at this point), the visual equivalencies of vibrato, rhythmic patterns, slurred or bent notes, and other musical effects are possible in film. You could do samba beats, reggae beats, all kinds of things. This is just a beginning for trying to talk about certain possibilities in Black cinema.

1. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu," *Screen* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1976), 41–73.
2. *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Fall 1988).
3. Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1991). Distributed by The Talman Co.