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ARTICLES

Black Visual Intonation in Arthur Jafa's Audiovisual Experiment / *Entoação visual negra em experimento audiovisual de Arthur Jafa*

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to study the idea of black visual intonation in the video-essay Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death (2016) by visual artist Arthur Jafa. With the aim at discovering the singularity of black cinema in filmic composition, the artist carried out an experiment to examine how embodied memories emerge in the form of songs and dances, recovering traditional cultural features that the Afro-Atlantic diaspora dissipated. We find that the aesthetic-political singularity of black cinema emerges in the black verbal-vocal-visual intonation, which externalizes interactive inner energies and organizes a critical-discursive space in which black people can talk about themselves, their desires, dreams and sorrows.
KEYWORDS: Black cinema; Audiovisual discourse; Black visual intonation; Aesthetic-political form; Voice

RESUMO
O objeto de estudo do presente artigo é o conceito de entoação visual negra formulado pelo multiartista Arthur Jafa no vídeo-ensaio Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death *(2016). Com o objetivo de descobrir a singularidade do cinema negro na composição fílmica, o artista construiu um experimento e examina como memórias encarnadas afloram sob forma de cantos e danças, realinhando formas culturais tradicionais que a travessia diaspórica dispersou. Conclui-se, assim, que a singularidade estético-política do cinema negro emerge na entoação verbi-voco-visual negra que, assim, exterioriza energias interiores interativas e organiza um espaço crítico-discursivo no qual pessoas pretas podem falar de si, de seus desejos, sonhos e aflições.*
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Cinema negro; Discurso audiovisual; Entoação visual negra; Forma estético-política; Voz

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Statement of the Problem

Black[1] visual intonation presents partial findings of research on the aesthetics of black cinema. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the concept of Black Visual Intonation (BVI), coined by visual artist Arthur Jafa (1998, pp. 264-9; 2016; Campt; Jafa, 2017, pp. 1-10), as a hypothesis for aesthetic investigation of the relation between black cinema and the US Afrodiasporic culture.

With the video-essay *Love Is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) – the experiment subject-matter of this study – Jafa elaborated the notion of black visual intonation by examining photos, scenes from archives, and also by recording events he witnessed. In such materials, there are testimonials, marches, protests, violences, ritual songs and pop music, games and dances, as forms of manifestation of the black body in action, moving physical energies and embodied historical-cultural memories. These are all raw materials for the video, which discusses ideas in its performance. The video combines different concepts, positions, confrontations in socio-interactive actings, while it experiments the constitution of principles that are common in both aesthetic and in political forms – two sides of a composition of aesthetic and ethic acting, which defines Jafa's creative black art. The artist's goal is precise: to reach the aesthetic-political singularity of black cinema as a critical space of audiovisual discourse, a space in which black people can talk about themselves, with the verbal-vocal-visual intonation they carry, regardless the historically imposed subjection.

At the time Jafa designed his project,[2] he was displeased by the roles assigned to black actors in Hollywood films. He was annoyed by the fact that Hollywood never bothered to elaborate an elementary notion of black cinema. This propelled his idea that black cinema was a distinctive filmic experience, born *from* and *in* black culture, without intermediation, and outside categories established by mainstream cinema. He was aware

[1] In our studies, we have adopted, preferably, the words *preta/preto/pretitude* (black /blackness) and their plural variations in the characterization of people from the African diaspora, in the present scenario of struggles for space and civil rights. We use the words *negro/negra/negritude* (nigger/niggerness) when they are part of an expression or concept, historically conventionalized, such as black (nigger) movement, black (nigger) culture and black (nigger) cinema. In critical-theoretical texts, we have found: *negridade* (Silva, 2019; Gadelha, 2022) and *prete* and *pretitude* (Moten, 2021; 2023). See also: Bernd, 1984; Ferreira, 2006. T.N. In Portuguese, the word negro/negra (nigger) does not have the same derogatory reference as it does in English.

[2] Information on the artist, as well as analyses of his projects and works, can be found at the site *liquid blackness*, available at https://liquidblackness.com/arthur-jafa. Access on Jan 20, 2024.

of the fact that the notion and practice of black cinema would demand experiences beyond the narrow vision of binary oppositions, typical of Hollywood filmmaking. He understood that such opposition never ensured a definition of the nature and forms of black filmmaking, valued in its differentiated quality. Furthermore, he knew that Hollywood had been responsible for perpetuating different stigmatizing discriminatory forms. According to such logic, if black cinema existed, it would be a mere bastard son of Western Europe, assimilating ideas imposed on black people. Nevertheless, Jafa believed that none of this was legitimized by the black communities around him. Such scenario was not enough to meet the artist's demands, as all possible achievements by the black population in the US always stemmed from struggles waged on several fronts. He had to look for alternatives.

His first initiative, which resulted in a course of experimental productions, was the film/essay *Dreams Are Colder than Death* (2013). [3] In this experiment, the construction process was based on Jaja's interest in elaborating interpretative avenues for an ontology of blackness, directed towards the conception and construction of a black aesthetics constructed by black voices, their ideas and community positionings, overstepping the domination of Hollywood cinema with a radically innovative proposal. This proposal started with an essay-like debate of ideas, audio-visually constituted.

Driven by the preoccupation with creating aesthetic procedures which would be committed to the paradoxes of diasporic black lives, Jafa entertained the possibility to construct audiovisual art in which the aesthetic organization was embedded in the political forms of black culture in the USA. In order to achieve such purpose, he studied the struggles of African-descended people against racial segregation and the encroachment of humanitarian civil rights, due to the colonial project. He observed that the strict inhumane control during slavery, with all its system of constraints and subjugation, did not prevent the construction of interactive processes and the emergence of new cultural expressions, which were decisive in the constitution of U.S. black culture, whose exponent was manifested suitably in music, in singing and dancing. This resulted

[3] The film has been analyzed in a specific paper: Ontology of Blackness in Audiovisual Experiments (Machado, 2024, forthcoming).

from Jaja's dedication; he attended workshops of creators of experimental performances and participated in collective projects with audiovisual artists, such as TNEG.[4]

A favorable path towards the development of Jafa's creative restlessness appeared in the seventies, when he started studying with filmmaker Larry Clark about experiences of filmic montage based on "jazz cadence." Clark believed it was possible to adopt, in the cinema, jazz procedures in what seemed to him to be its foundation: harmonic variations. He considered that when chord resonances lost force in melodic phrases, there was space for improvisations, with the vigor of new elaborations – which would also be possible in audiovisual montage. Such exercise resulted in the film *Passing Through* (1977),[5] in which the movement of audiovisual art arises from free combinations, with displacements of dramatic emphases, both of visual composition and of compositions by a jazz trio that participated in the narrative.

According to critic Richard Brody (2022), it as procedure in which Clark "dramatized the world of jazz from the inside: he showed that the practical struggles of jazz musicians are inseparable from the inner life — the spiritual essence — of the music," which enabled the experiment of a dramatic form, regarding the historical roots consolidated in the process of racial segregation. One of such roots, very specific in the music universe, directly addressed the antagonisms in the lives of musicians who were hired in night clubs — visited by white customers — solely as entertainers, to perform their tasks. Outside, they were ordinary black people and, as such, they were prevented from going to clubs and staying at hotels. Louis Armstrong himself and his band, for a long time, were not allowed in hotels after late nights of acclaimed musical performances. Brody reports that even record companies refused black musicians' compositions. Even if they accepted them, the records were likely to seized, which was a constant threat.[6]

[4] Jafa acted as cameraman in movies by famous filmmakers, such as Charles Burnett, Spike Lee, Stanley Kubrick, among others. In the 90s, he worked with photography director Malik Hassan Sayeed in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999, United Kingdom, directed by Stanley Kubrik), and together they founded the producer company TNEG. Information on the production of artists and filmmakers is available at the sites of Black Avant-Garde Cinema:
https://ktt2.com/new-black-avantgarde-cinema-arthur-jafa-malik-hassan-sayeed-112890
https://www.impossibleobjectsmarfa.com/fragments/tneg. Also in our paper, as cited (Authors).

[5] In Brazil, the movie was called *Dando um rolê* [Outing], by Moreira Salles Institute (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro), in 2019, as part of L.A. Rebellion film series. Information is available at https://ims.com.br/filme/dando-um-role/. Access on Jan 20, 2024.

[6] About the theme, it is important to remember *Strange Fruits*, bravely interpreted by Billie Holiday, under the protest of recording companies and the public (Margolick, 2012).

Clark's film focuses on such context and enters the musicians' universe without separating their creative talent from their history. *Passing Through* reconstructs episodes in the life of saxophonist Eddie Warmack — played by Nathaniel Taylor — recently released from prison and exposed to the rage of crowds against jazz musicians. The film demonstrates the racial environment in the musical scene of Los Angeles and the passionate aesthetic involvement of those in love with music, manifested in all their activities. Brody (2022) states that Clark's inventive process was concentrated on scenes of the past, like a recurring nightmare: the past as a possibility of creating an "audiovisual presence." By superimposing narrative sequences, which blurs past and present scenes, Clark's experiment inserts dramatic episodes in the form of parallel narratives. An example cited was the sequence of war photographs of the conflict in Guinea-Bissau, taken by a photographer who had been killed at the front. The parallel montage emphasizes the wounds in confrontations. The deaths registered gain audiovisual exhibit and, therefore, the violent episodes that were common in the daily lives of black people in the US were made present. This presence constructed through the parallel montage of photographic arrangement gives a sense of a clearly audiovisual procedure, i.e., as an audiovisual image that "exists *in* and *for* the film,"[7] according to Jean-Claude Bernardet (1981, p. 29), in a study about Brazilian black cinema.

Clark showed that the dramatic intensity of the procedure was more expressive in episodes whose audiovisual feature resonated other chromatic intensities, both sonic and visual. Brody (2022) also states that, when a sonic arrangement is potentialized by jazz cadences, the very montage is conditioned to follow the rhythmic articulations of jazz music. Therefore, modern tones are realized, as jazz is the performing place of musicians whose "rapid fingering of a saxophone and the angular athleticism of drumming are superimposed to give visual identity to the music's rhythms." A filmic composition constructed as such can only be the result of a compositional organicity between sonority and visuality, which reveals great creative potential to be explored, all because of the "jazz influence."[8]

Jafa, impressed by the aesthetic qualities devised by Clark, found creative possibilities in *Passing Through*. If such possibilities did not meet completely his needs,

[7] In Portuguese: "só existe *no* filme e *para o* filme."
[8] *Influência do jazz* (Jazz Influence) is the title of a song by Carlos Lyra (2000).

at least they pointed to interpretative approaches for his uneasiness. For starters, there was the interference in patterns of tonalities in the composition of lights, creating a kinetic sensory, typical of experimental audiovisual language.

With closed framings, the contrasts of white light interact with the dark skin and create effects that move in the dark/light gradient. When lightness patterns are valued on black bodies, the skin becomes the generating source of photosensitivity, which goes against the lightness patterns that make white skin reference to define the logic of visibility of white light in photography and in film. The dark skin absorbs the light and plays with the chromatic scale of brightness. Therefore, it becomes a photosensitive layer of processes that generate meanings, which can be construed by black cinema as distinctive features of its aesthetic-cultural constitution. In sum, it is about recognizing a wealth of creativity, open to enhance aesthetic qualities of sensitivity experience, which finds, in the skin of black bodies, its natural sources of meaning.

Jafa could not be indifferent to this process. *Love Is the Message* is a response. Hence, it is important to understand the role of aesthetic experiments of black culture and the social-historical-political contexts of its development in the USA, which formed the specific Umwelt,[9] pursued by artists in their line of work.

Jafa interpreted and aesthetically expanded such studies, by asking which body agents, beyond the skin surface, would be able to reproduce not only the same audiovisual effects, but also the features of the black body that could shape cultural heritage. Such experimental journey led him to the voice which, in black culture, is intonation, vibration and resonance of the embodied culture.

Although Jafa did not theoretically develop intonation as resonance of culture, his practice is close to the concept formulated in the context of dialogism by M. M. Bakhtin (1984, pp. 87-114)[10] and V. N. Vološinov (1973, pp. 152-153), in examining how ideas can be materialized in discursive forms, as we argue in a specific study (Authors, 2021). In such study, we discuss how ideas that support points of view on contexts of experiences and socio-historical ones constitute utterance forms in their own right. Vološinov was

[9] *Umwelt* is a concept by biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll (2001). It refers to the specific environment in which a species lives, in relation to other species. With this concept, studies of ethology were started, with the incorporation of human communication in socio-cultural milieus, integrated to the universe ecosystem.

[10] BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press,1984.

dedicated to studying the role of accents in the construction of standpoints, which he synthetized in the concept of ideologeme. Bakhtin explored the artistic processes created by Dostoevsky in order to understand how ideologists construct ideologemes in dialogical contexts of multi-accented discourses, in which ideas emerge and experiment their own possibilities and unfinishedness, interspersed with shocks and instabilities.

In the video, Jafa constructs ideologemes with the fragmented scenes from milieus of confrontation, where diasporic African-descended people live in the US. In such scenes, he places his ideas and positions in the arena of many other discourses that emerge from one another. Therefore, the voice arises from songs that evoke desperate outcries of those who fight for equality, as well as of those who echo their ancestors' sorrows. With the intonations of these ideologemes of black culture, Jafa organizes the discourses in the multi-accentuation of their meanings. This is what we look into in the next section.

1 Modeling of Filmic Language by Black Culture

Jafa never denied that black cinema was placed in the foreground of his artistic interests. While his colleagues at Howard University were constrained by the binary opposition to Hollywood they had adopted for defining black cinema, Jafa did not believe the binary opposition Hollywood/anti-Hollywood was sufficient. He claimed it was necessary to ask more complex questions, starting from questioning the paradigm of mainstream cinema (Jafa, 1998, p. 265), like David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (1976, pp. 41-73) did when they examined the mastery of Yasujiro Ozu's cinema in challenging canons. For many, Ozu's cinema was outdated, but for Bordwell and Thompson, the Japanese filmmaker produced a unique concept of space, outside the classical continuity, when he moved away from paradigms. The critics add that Ozu's filmmaking is no longer considered in an isolated category and is inserted in the dynamics of correlations among historical systems, like Russian formalist Yuri Tynianov (1976) formulated in a study on literary evolution in history.

Bearing in mind that Bordwell and Thompson's study contributed to Jafa's considering black cinema outside any paradigm and with historical correlations, it is worth clarifying that, for Tynianov, a production that does not take into account correlations among works of the same scope and within a broader cultural system, is

destined to limited signification and eradication of the evolving process. The deviation from the model would be the creating mechanism of dynamics and transformations with a wider range of historical configurations, as the tension alters functions and promotes the replacement of systems (Tynianov, 1976, pp. 106-118).[11] For Jafa, the deviation is triggered when the medium is interrogated in its pragmatic functions. The creative exercise entailed an orientation[12] for black culture, which remained on the margins of filmmaking. Therefore, turning to black culture meant seeking correlations with tradition through cultural memory, which moved African-American culture in the US. This can be confirmed in the following statement:

> 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 cultures that's going to survive in the future is the culture that you can carry around in your head" (Jafa, 1998, p. 266).

The effect of such quote led Jafa to look for the vital arteries of black cinema in the legacy of African peoples' cultures, i.e., in the discourse realized by the body through voice, dancing and music. According to him, it was necessary to understand "how culture gets played out in various arenas" (Jafa, 1998, p. 266), in order to construct transgression spaces where black people could have the pleasure to talk about themselves, their African ancestors from whom they descend, and express their desires. Black pleasure "is a critical thing" (Jafa, 1998, p. 267). Accordingly, in the film-essay *Dreams*, he and his colleagues from TNEG gave black people their microphones so that they could talk about themselves, transgressing the canonic form, in which there is an authority talking on behalf of others. In *Love Is the Message*, images of scenes and sonic events taken in the heat of the moments fulfill the same purpose.

In one of such spaces, I saw Arthur Jafa's aesthetic creation for the first time, when I visited the videographic facilities APEX (2013, 8'12"), in the exposition *O Tempo Mata* [Time Kills] (SESC-Paulista, São Paulo, 2019). The video, produced with

[11] Tynianov, Yuri. On Literary Evolution. *In*: MORSE, A. REDKO, P. *Permanent Evolutions*: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film. Brookline: Academics Studies Press, 2019.
[12] For Tynianov (1976), the word orientation is deviated even from the mere intention to designate "correlation with social life." For reference, see footnote 25.

photographic collage from personal files, operates a montage with cuts, with flashes that reverberated the cadence of electronic music in the room, filling the space and creating unusual acoustics. On the one hand, it demonstrated the transposition of photography into video electronic image, formulating a composition in which there was a time-based dynamics of the digital-electronic age, deviating from its original state and, therefore, modifying the expression of photography itself. On the other hand, it met the reflection proposed by the curator of the exposition, whose theme gathered time-based media art.

APEX inserted time-based dimension in the space of the room, by moving visitors from a contemplative state to a sensory experience of exchanging great kinesthetic stimulation of reverberation, whose waves touched the body and stimulated rhythmic beats. Music was no longer only a sequence of notes. The sheet music follows the audiovisual composition to create direct resonance, capable of reshaping the articulation of everything in the environment. Thus, it redesigned connectivity patterns, as the vibration was not limited to the screen. It was spread onto the bodies in the environment of the exposition. By going through bodies, the live experience of the reverberation of sonic and bright events altered sensitivities and provoked a sense of entering a kind of trance (Machado, 2021, pp. 218-222).

With such work, not only did Jafa fulfill the curator's purpose, but he was also able to exercise his idea of black cinema whose roots are nourished by the culture that moves in different arenas. Jafa named such experience as "polyventiality," which means adopting procedures that construct "multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings, multiplicity." That is how he interrogated the medium (Jafa, 1998, p. 267). Accordingly, his creative process became interrogative and his question articulated some of his hypotheses, such as:

> How do we make Blake 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? (Jafa, 1998, p. 267).

In *Love Is the Message,* Jafa experimented the possibility to explore the notion of intonation in visual image, in the movement of people and in the very montage of plans according to sound intonation of singing and of the song *Ultralight Beam* by Kanye West.

This exercise expressed the transposition of the song into the film, producing black visual intonation. The artist interrogated the medium by exploring, in camera, the possibility of interfering in the process of camera capture rate, as stated in the following passage:

> 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 (Jafa, 1998, p. 267).

With this direct intervention in camera capture rate, the codes of audiovisual language are modeled by the intonation of the voice which sings and of the body that moves, considering the frequency of sonic and visual movements, as we further examine. Intonation conceived as such becomes procedure of audiovisual language, modeled by voice and by body.

The concept of modeling comes from a semiotic approach of culture, in that it is possible to observe approximations and translations among sign systems, so that signs from a certain cultural sphere can contribute to the performance of signs from another sphere. The concept of modeling was formulated by Tartu–Moscow Semiotic School in the nineteen sixties, and developed in works by Yuri Lotman. Such concept was proposed to meet demands which were very close to those manifested by Jafa: the need to seek correlations among cultural creations, enabling the intelligibly in the diversity of productions in different spaces and periods of time. This diversity does not concern only signs; it also includes productions of different cultural traditions in their codifications of meanings. This provides these cultural systems – which are not structurally constituted like the language system of verbal signs – with the condition of language. Systems of mythology, arts, sciences and religions are constructed by cultural codes. They elaborate languages and constitute cultural texts, but they do not have structure. Consequently, what is understood by language in systems that lack structure is a modeling system,[13] which is

[13] It is worth noting that only in the initial texts, the distinction between primary modeling system and secondary modeling system was maintained, according to V. V. Ivanov et al (1978; 1998). In later studies,

maintained because it is developed from the competence of verbal system (Lotman, 1977, pp. 95-98; 1978, pp. 25-71; Ivanov *et al*, 1977). Accordingly, intelligibility allows the reading, in the visual movement of an audiovisual sequence, of the resonance of the vocal intonation of a song or the rhythm.

When Jafa interferes in the montage of scenes so that the movement resonates as in vocal intonation, the melodic signs of voice intonations start to direct the very rhythm of the sequential movement, manifested in the intensity of the scenes.

Despite the role of technical operation, the concept of black visual intonation cannot be limited to code. It is necessary to consider the cultural legacy that modeled vocal intonation, based on different traditions that contribute to filmic aesthetics in black culture. We should remember the importance assigned to cultural legacy or retention, carried by memory and body, in order to sustain the polyvalence that led the artist to look for possibilities of the medium and, therefore, explore its plasticity. Ultimately, the experiment demonstrates that black art, modeled by black culture, creates a space of transgression in which black people can utter the pleasure of talking about themselves, act culturally and manifest their desires, through creative procedures, put in the historical perspective of their cultural traditions. This is part of a history that started in slave plantations, with their sorrow and worship songs.

2 Cultural Heritages in the Corporeality of Black Voices

Jafa's declared commitment to the organicity between aesthetic and political forms, both connected to US black culture and its struggles, led his experiment to distant itself from the fictional narrative proposed by Clark. The experimental tendency and the inquiring spirit of his aesthetics propelled him to adopt the video-essay – already exercised in *Dreams* – in *Love Is the Message*.

Much has been discussed on the impact caused by this seven-minute video-essay, especially because of the violent scenes that give rise to protests and manifestations for black people's civil rights. However, Jafa's work goes beyond representation and

Lotman abandoned such distinction, in order to understand the semiosis of the cultural semiosphere and the unpredictable, to which cultures are subject in the course of explosive historical processes (Lotman, 2009; 2022).

complaint. Great manifestations enter his creative process as a code that forms a critical repertoire for aesthetic composition, in what is developed in a unique manner: the sensory sensitivity of black culture, planted in US soil. Besides the aesthetic impulse, such energy drives the ethical thinking connected to cultural traditions of other civilizations, from which diasporic peoples were separated, but which nonetheless remained, with hard battles, even when many of their manifestations have still been subject to violence perpetrated by white supremacy, protected by the State.

Nevertheless, the chain of audiovisual files of daily situations, which were included in *Love Is the Message*, has been read as a found-footage video (Campt; Jafa, 2017, p. 1), an overview of violence in protest marches, scenes of entertainment, rituals, sports and leisure. Moreover, the essay elaboration has procedures that aim at an aesthetic-cultural discursive horizon, which led Jafa to cultural singularities, fundamental to define the black cinema he very much pursued.

The video is focused on the montage of flashes of urban scenes with different dramatic intensities. With visible segmentation in abrupt cuts, such scenes are imprinted in the montage and the dynamics potentialize different energetic forces of the situations joined by tension points, which activate emotional charges in growing movement. In the scale of tonalities of the dramatic gradient, the emphasis is on the moving bodies and on the voices propelled in them. There is a pulsing energy going through the bodies of those who scream in violent scenes and also in celebrations taking place in sports courts, dance halls and churches. This energy of black people's bodies is typical of the culture produced in the Americas by different ethnics of Afro-Atlantic diaspora, with distinct manifestations in the countries of the continent. In Brazil, the energy is expressed in the intensity of the bodies in trance during candomblé rituals.

It is a perception that contributed to mature Jafa's idea that black cinema should be defined by something related to forms of energy produced in historical traditions, in which aesthetic manifestations are mediated by the body. In such traditions, singing, dancing and music play a fundamental role, as they evoke body energies. Unlike harmonic melodies of sonic elaboration resulting from norms produced in Western civilization, the rhythmic expression of singing and of black music is constructed from sensory intonations of ritual songs and of sorrows originated in the bodies of enslaved black people. Therefore, there is a vocality connected to the whole collective body

gesture. As a member of such culture, Jafa focused on the singularity of rhythmic forms which, in body and in voice, model memories and experiences that span generations. In this context, he elaborated the question: would it be possible to transpose this gesture potency into another medium, i.e., into the audiovisual nature of cinema? Not simply reproducing situations, but would it be possible to operate with dramatic experiences translated into sensory forms and into aesthetic expression? *Love Is the Message* was also the place to exercise such possibility to translate into audiovisual language the gesture power of the voice in its different visual tonalities of black intonation(s).

When he was elaborating the experiment, Jafa considered the hypothesis that black music is so powerful because black voice is situated in its heart – black voice is the production of an individual and collective body; it is current and historical, with relations to traditions of oral culture, according to Hampaté Bâ (2010, pp. 167-212).[14]

The context of African diaspora culture, which historically flourished in slave plantations, is mainly about the orality that emerged in collective intonations of work songs – the collective body that carried different narratives. Separated from their homes and families, languages and traditions, traded as slave labor, black people exercised the sowing wisdom to produce plentiful and healthy harvests, which was not limited to cotton. Work also brought people together in sowing affections cultivated in the collective memory, translated into singing by voice. Directly or indirectly, Jafa sought sounds in work songs as a privileged form of black culture, which arose in US plantations. This is the fundamental hypothesis to understand the artist's creative process in the historical context of his culture.

Although the intonation of such songs is an acoustic accomplishment, it has elements of inner music, "in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men," as felt and defined by former slave W.E.B. du Bois (2021, p. 16),[15] in his memoirs on "Sorrow Songs," vestige of the time of slavery. For Du Bois, such songs were generated by the sensitive experience of those workers who vocalized "[...] some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past." Therefore, it is a manifestation very properly named "soul music" – music of the soul. By

[14] HAMPATÉ BÂ, A. The Living Tradition. *In*: KI-ZERBO, Joseph (ed.) *Methodology of African Prehistory*. Berlekey: UNESCO, 1981 and 1990. pp. 166-205.
[15] DU BOIS, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 2021 [1996]. Available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm

evoking the soul of his memory, Du Bois (2019, p. 16, n. 5) quotes one of these songs whose initial verses of the first registered version go as follows: "Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen, / Nobody knows but Jesus, / Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. / Glory Hallelujah! [...]."[16]

Sorrow and worship are related, and mark the measures and cadences of the song, sowing seeds that bore fruit in the US black music, tempering the intonation of the voices that modulate rhythms, which are manifested *in* and *as* body.

Music, singing and body movements, practiced mainly in the US plantations,[17] produced and acclimatized an aesthesis repertoire of cultural forms which are not separated from the condition of enslaved lives. Such forms go beyond the limits of servitude as expressions of memories of traditions only supposedly erased. The sorrow songs are live documents of this memory, which articulates what the body expresses in the form of singing, screaming, music and dancing. In a study on black aesthetics, Oyeniyi Okunoye (1999/2000/2001, p. 125) examines how much the aesthetic experiences of African culture are linked to the condition of slavery imposed by the African diasporas. From this bond arise manifestations such as the Spirituals[18] whose songs, dances and claps define American diasporic lives.

They are bodily gestures, cultivated by different generations of peoples constituted from Afro-Atlantic diasporas. Screams arising from the body reverberate in different rhythmic movement of voice and gestures, and, therefore, are also part of a "memory archive," whose function is to bring to the present the spiritual heritages and let them emerge in black bodies, as critical-creative repertoire. Mamadu Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo (2013, p. 2) state that "[…] Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World

[16] In note 22 of the Brazilian translation, at p. 30, translator Alexandre Boide explains the reference, in Du Bois's text, to "soul" (black music) and "soul" (spiritual part of humans). The term only started to be used in US popular music in the 1940s, with jazz. The use of "soul music" appeared in 1969, in reference to secular versions of gospel music (Du Bois, 2021, p. 20, n. 8).

[17] The work at the plantations to enrich the foreign market supported the economic system started in slavery, and became one of the pillars of modernity. In slave labor, human exploitation and the resulting consolidation of an unequal society, fed by the rich/poor dialectics, made enslaved black people see and understand themselves as "the other." This propelled the need to reverse things in order to create another kind of relation.

[18] According to Alexandre Boide, Brazilian's translator Du Bois states that spirituals are types of songs that enslaved people created when they were prevented from dancing and using African percussion instruments. As an alternative, they incorporated thematic elements from white and Islamic cultures (Du Bois, p. 16, n.5). For reference, see footnote 37.

collectively argue that music and dance are living indices of a constant (re)composition and (re)mixing of local sounds, gestures, epistemologies, and memories."

The theoretical bases cited are immersed in the history of the black cultures in which Jafa was raised. He pursued their distinctive features. Hence, it is a meaningful historical precedent that helps us comprehend the compositional architecture of *Love Is the Message*, translated and updated by Jafa, when he understood, in the performance intonation of ritual songs of protestant churches, forms to equate musical arrangements and articulated dances to all body movements that flow on occasions of great emotional feelings.

Accordingly, we infer that the artist's creative process operates directly with the unique power of cultural languages of African diasporic peoples in the US, in the diversity of their languages and cultural systems, when he incorporates the intonation of singing and dancing of those peoples. If the nature of such cultural power stems from body gestures that produce songs, dances and sounds like clapping and noise, which, more often than not, play the role of instruments, it is not difficult to accomplish what Diouf and Nwankwo define as the "polymorphic" feature of music, as stated below.

> […] the most visible contributions of African-descended communities to the making of the Atlantic world, music and dance have been identified, along with orality, not only as the main modes of occurrence and dissemination in the world of black culture but also as linked channels of black expressivity and presence in the world scene. African music is "always music for dance," and African dances are "polymorphic music, with the upper and the lower parts of the body appearing to move to two different, related clocks." Not only are they "pleasurable and erotic," but they are also powerful spiritual grammars and rituals of socialization, languages of interventions in nature and society, contributing to the expression of African religious and cultural beliefs and manifestations of and engagements with historical (dis)continuities (Diouf; Nwankwo, 2010, pp. 1-2).

Jafa, however, allows us to broaden the understanding of such polymorphism, when he transposes elements of these "spiritual grammars and rituals," which black bodies carry in filmic procedures, into the plasticity of black intonation of constructed audiovisual languages, which by nature favors the transit among cultural forms.

By operating from the perspective of oral culture, Jafa draws all his attention to the body that works, does sports, sings, dances, protests, worships and expresses sorrow

with the most performance resources, and, hence, it becomes the basis for his concept of black visual intonation produced in the soul and modeled in music, singing and dancing. The same body that was, for colonizers, merely an object of exchange and slave labor, excluded from the category of human, without ontological existence, occupies the center of his black aesthetics and of what he aims to organize as an ontology of blackness, shaped as aesthesis potential. It is a human body which is integrated to the vital force manifested in different forms of life. For example, the drum is, in oral culture, an extension of plant and animal life, or better stated, of the Umwelt, which assures its existence as part of a very complex ecosystem. Thus, the drum speaks when it is touched and the percussion sounds resemble human voice. The same can be said about wind instruments, very typical in jazz. They are also performed as voices. Larry Clark was certain about that when he transferred music intonation to the montage of chromatic tones in *Passing Through.*

Transposing voice into the drum or into wind instruments becomes reference for exercising other possibilities, for instance, the experience to translate intonation into gestures, or visual cinematics to voice and vice versa, creating a unique sensory experience of audiovisual images (Campt; Jafa, 2017, p. 3). At the same time, the polyvalence of different aesthetic processes is explored. Considering that voice concentrates potency, Jafa believes that different connections are realized in the cinema through sonic level. At its most basic level, sound is the movement of particles through air by means of vibrations calibrated in waves. The extent to which we can hear depends on the frequency of waves, as not all of them can be heard by human ear. This does not mean that they cannot be aesthetically explored as waves. Like sounds, visual images have frequencies that can be adjusted and calibrated to our sensitivity (Campt; Jafa, 2017, p. 3). As resonant waves, sound and visuality share the same nature.

In audiovisuality, through frequency, filmmaking enables the interchange between the visual and sound processes. Therefore, the transposition takes another direction, by demonstrating another type of montage – no longer of filmic fragments, but of frequencies and tones. It is an operation that occurs at the level of codes, and it opens up the possibility to operate cultural codes of different traditions. This is what Jafa observed in the dancing body, in the frequency and intensity of movements that go towards another direction. In other words, the activity of the body going beyond is also manifested in the transformation of the audiovisual image. The codes of the luminous

phenomenon of electric nature move, propelled by the passage to another dimension and, therefore, create the coherence among different cultural codes. Not only does the potency of voice and dance compose the scene, but it also provides elements of rhythmic cadence of montage of plans and sequences, which must reverberate in the audiovisual expression as black visual intonation.

3 Plasticity of Jazz Cadence in Sorrow and Worship Songs of Black Visual Intonation

> ... I have an overriding ambition to make a black cinema that has the power, beauty, and alienation of black music...
>
> *Arthur Jafa*[19]

As presented earlier in this paper, intonation is an enunciative concept that distinguishes significations from the viewpoint of structural and semantic accents of discursive constructions in speech. In intonation, the sensory and emotional charge of discourse takes shape of language in the vocal gestures in interactive milieus. In dialogism studies, intonation is the key concept of the whole interactive process in the discursive "arena," where ideas determine ideological positionings in action. According to Vološinov (1973, p. 103), "intonation is determined by the immediate situation," which is not comparable to any other. A scream in the sports court materializes the euphoria in the game. Therefore, the intonation with which it is uttered differs from a scream of terror, of pain and of intense feelings in religious rituals. This is the function of ideologeme (Machado, 2021, pp. 129-152). Bakhtin (1984, pp. 78-114; pp. 181-269)[20] states that discourses are interrupted by ideologists who create counter discourses. In Dostoevsky's novels, dialogues are not always uttered; internal discourses are veiled, manifested in inner consciousnesses. In *Love Is the Message*, many silent visual images fulfill the role of manifesting intonation that comes from internal discourse, which may or may not flow to the exterior. Such is the case of Kanye West's song, which is played during the film with different acoustic intensities.

[19] Campt; Jafa, 2017, p. 3
[20] See footnote 10.

As oral performances directly towards the ears, all intonations carry discourse with expressive emphases to single out perceptions, ideas, interpretations, feelings, in dialogical contexts, in which ideological statements and counter positions do not demand conclusive maxims, but arguments to the extent of their possibilities. In other words, intonation gravitates around a semiotic universe of meaning, materialized in the interaction of alterity, with people from different ethnic groups, different cultures and from another continent – transatlantic.

Thus, we can infer that Jafa wanted to transpose, into audiovisual discourse, the possibility of such translation, by transferring, to images of sonic and visual movement, the distinctive quality of black culture, centered on dialogical-discursive voices, potentialized as intonation. Besides shaping the body in scene, the emphasis on black visual intonation relates to culture, which seemed fundamental to him, as we notice in his inquiry: "How do we make Blake music or Black images vibrate in accordance with certain frequential values that exist in Black music?" (Jafa, 1998, p. 267). If it does not provide an answer, at least the experiment *Love Is the Message* materializes a creative process in which the power of vibrations with distinct intensities was collected in situations of great movement of people, who inscribe, in the montage, the cadence of Kanye West's music. Sung as a combination of rap or hip hop and gospel, the song continues and the scenes, many of which have counter-rhythmic sonic events, express the power of black music.

Jafa, in his own way, accomplishes what had fascinated him in Larry Clark's experiment *Passing Through*: the filmic composition based on jazz cadence. However, it is different from Clark in the transposition of cadence into a montage of flashes of events, fragmented into intense moments: the athlete's jump, the dance contortions, the aggressive shoves by the police, the ecstasy of religious celebration. The flash captures tensions and constructs the cadence of filmic intonation, an audiovisual expression which is aesthetic and political.

This is what we deem to be the differentiated quality in Jafa's film about jazz, in the making of *Love Is the Message*, whose scenes we examine below.

Love Is the Message, the Message is Death was released in 2016 as video installation, which projected the film in different museums of the world, during 48

hours.[21] With rapper Kanye West's pleading song, the intonation with a chorus of voices, a counter-rhythm of other rappers' solos, invades the room with a pop song played as rap-gospel of a hymn of sorrow and worship.

Soft female chords and vocalizations introduce the initial scenes, in which a man in a crowd speaks about violence against black people. Below there is a scene of a sports events in a court. Groups of people move when West's voice begins performing with the chorus of the theme song: "We on an ultralight beam / We on an ultralight beam /This is a God dream /This is a God dream / This is everything / This is everything / Everything." The sequence is arranged with many flashes of episodes, ranging from a young man's hip-hop dance to protests, pursuits and a possible murder in public space. After a funk dance, essayist Saidiya Hartman appears, walking in slow motion (scene already presented in *Dreams*). West's song is still heard in pleading verses, when the president of the time Barack Obama appears on screen and delivers his eulogy to the death of Reverend Clementa Pinckney, in Charleston (2015). He sings the first verse of the hymn *Amazing Grace*: "Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)." When they hear his baritone voice, people get up and join, singing together the sublime hymn of gratitude.

The breakdown of some flashes of the 46-second sequence shapes the character of the composition in which intonation provides the rhythmic sheet music of the montage, which articulates episodes of movements with some *staccatos*, like the scene in which a black child yells at her mother or when other rappers' vocal performances and ordinary people's testimonials are introduced.

As a video-essay, the chorus of West's song accompanies the flash of Martin Luther King in a convertible, followed by the voice of a young man who sings a cappella the verse "I'm a dreamer / I'm a dreamer," in which the second verse is in duet with the first. Both fragments, with the incandescent, shining image of a big vibrant sun, counterpointing the chorus sung by West, introduce a pause in the violence, in order to situate – at 2'51," halfway through the film – the sun and the possibility of a warm dream, with the softness of an "ultralight beam."

[21] On the initiative of Smithsonian American Art Museum and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, eleven museums of different countries got together to organize a simultaneous and continuous exhibition of the movie, for 48 hours. They started at 2:00 PM on June 26th, 2020 at the site of the institutions, where copies of the film were deposited (Germano, 2020).

The dream is soon interrupted by a night scene in which some policemen make a woman get off a car. She moves with her arms above her head, and is followed by her son. The *staccato* breaks the song, and the silence is filled by the woman's questions, who calls her children, but is handcuffed. The scene begins the change in the movement of the chorus intonation, with high notes. There are flashes of violence: a young man is assaulted by a police officer, who grabs him while he is running; a girl in underwear is dragged by policemen in a park.

The scene is accompanied by the high intonation of the *vibrato* soprano voice, carrying the dramaticity with dense verses, while opposing forces collide, which can be observed in the following: "So why send depression not blessings? / Why, oh why'd you do me wrong? (More) / You persecute the weak / Because it makes you feel so strong / Don't have much strength to fight / So I look to the light / To make these wrongs turn right […]."

Soon the movement is accelerated and the revolt tone is accentuated towards the final sequence. Then a flash of Jimi Hendrix appears, and the duet of voices makes higher and more intense intonations, accompanied by fast cuts of sport jumps, passionate gestures of musical presentations and closeup photographs of the hips of young women with tiny funk clothes, followed by the image of the incandescent sun, which occupies the screen while the singing reaches the frenzy of its outcry. West resumes the song that goes "I'm tryna keep my faith / (Yes, Jesus) / But I'm looking for more / Somewhere I can feel safe / And end my holy war." He continues singing a cappella in an impetuous, almost screamed, *crescendo*: "Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels they're not good enough. This prayer's for everybody that feels like they're too messed up. For everyone that feels they've said "I'm sorry" too many times. You can never go too far when you can't come back home again. That's why I need...." The chorus of voices returns and the video ends in a trance – in the last scene, a singer is devoted to his music until he falls on the floor.

At the end there is a chorus of voices emphasizing discourses of desperate and disturbing outcries, in high tones, interspersed with prayers that plead to divine benevolence, which composes a performance that integrates melodies of tribal rhythms and the Spirituals, leading the orality of black culture to paroxysm. Tones and timbres collide, creating remarkable contrasts with the lightness of the title of the song –

Ultralight Beam – and with the timbre of West's voice, accompanying the montage of visual episodes that develop in intense movements, syntonized with the loop frequency of the enraged chorus of strident voices.

As it has been observed in the few verses analyzed, the long song is played during the seven minutes and twenty-three seconds, weaving polyphonies that organize the photographic sequence and film archives, progressing, like a kaleidoscope, in explosive movements. The alternation between high and low timbres and strong and weak rhythmic movements join to the thematic counterpoints of black people's social struggles, whereas the sonic arrangement of a startling and piercing intonation evokes the question related to being black, many times sung by Louis Armstrong in the song that defines the spirit of jazz: *What did I do to be so black and blue.*[22] The theme of being black was also sung by Billy Holiday in *Strange Fruits.* Du Bois also reflects on the feeling of "black being," manifested by the double-consciousness of the black person, who is "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 2021, p. 21).

Thus, the expressive force that singing – ritual or festive – of black culture is present and becomes the privileged source of visual and sonic plastic expression, manifested in the body through songs, dances, protest screams and in a simple cry of joy in sports disputes. Therefore, audiovisual cinematics results, at an elementary level, from the construction of the physical impact of images with the sound, which leads the bodies to throw themselves in space in different displacements.

Hence, the celebration-song *Ultralight beam* introduces, in *Love Is the Message*, different degrees of tensions, related both to time and to space. As already mentioned, the filmic fragments included in the video edition were collected from different episodes of violence, from music and sports events, from the daily life of collective manifestations. However, the camera does not register the sonic events of all situations depicted. The acoustic space is for West's rap-gospel hymn. The rap-gospel, in dialogue with scenes and ideas, demonstrates distinct temporalities that coexist in the performance of the song and the development of the image sequences, creating a polyphonic and counter-rhythmic dialogue – that certainly organizes the montage, which becomes equally vectorized.

[22] Musical composition of 1929 by Fats Waller, lyrics by Harry Brooks and Andy Razal, performed and made famous in Louis Armstrong's voice.

Besides reorganizing the dialogical dynamics among the singing and each episode, the song outlines the rhythm of outcry intonations, prayers, supplications, pleadings, revolts, protests and outrage at the impossibility of resignation. In the resonant space, the acoustics reverberate messages of love and death, synthetized in people's struggle for emancipation.

Final Considerations

Jafa deposits the power of black culture in intonation of cadences of sonic resonance, manifested in voice as energy of black bodies in their daily life. By doing so, he situates the singularity of black cinema in time and space of culture. This culture, displaced because of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora and subsequent slavery, is acclimatized and performs a different form of social relations, of production and of cultural realization, which happened by default, due to all contrary forces.

The notion of visual intonation as a semiotic niche, from which different cultural manifestations emerged, becomes a textual code of dance, of music, of visual arts, whose features are responsible for sensitive experiences. Such experiences are connected with remote civilizations and ancestries, which constitutes organization and organicity of visual intonation. Hence, a hymn of praise and sorrow, born from the enslaved black person's soul in the plantations, becomes the basis for the aesthetic composition of a rap-gospel, which resonates an energy present in the performances of body, voice and gesture in different contexts. This is perceived only by black people who feel it and carry it in their flesh. It is another form of the historical-cultural relation born in the transatlantic diaspora, from Europe to America, generated by African peoples.

Poet Aimé Césaire (1983, p. 24) had such perception and put it in verse, depicting the suffering of black people. Having come before a unique, unheard-of situation, he named, for the first time, what he saw. He called *négritude* (blackness) the horror of black history, as shown in his verses.

> [...] And my non-fence island, its brave audacity standing at the stern of this polynesia, before it, Guadeloupe, split in two down its dorsal line and equal in poverty to us, Haiti where negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity and the funny tail of Florida where the strangulation of a nigger is being completed, and Africa

> gigantically caterpillaring up to the Hispanic foot of Europe, its nakedness where death scythes widely.[23]

The verses do not merely show proud Haitians, who did not think twice before stimulating riots, as the first country who started fighting for its independence – conquered in 1804 – as early as the 18th century. They raised their voice in the name of human dignity that had been taken from them. Such insurgent voice echoed and deviated the threat vector, resonating in the continent with independence wars, led by the USA, freed in 1776. Lígia Ferreira (2006, p. 6) affirms that the emergence of the word *négritude* in Césaire's verses initiated a new poetic form, with new linguistic signs in transit. For the audiovisual works examined herein, the emergence of *négritude* / *blackness* / *pretitude* demonstrates how black cultures acted, through emancipation struggles, supported by a new state of critical consciousness, willing to demand compensation for an unpayable debt (Silva, 2019).

Jafa's experiment has contributed a lot to seek singularity in black cinema from culture. Furthermore, it contributed to value the role of black bodies and of embodied memories, potentialized by black culture as a state of consciousness to revisit historical meanings. This also drew Jafa's attention when he investigated what happens when the black body dances and moves the vital forces that surround it, which emerged states of the soul and eroticity, and confronted western values and customs. It is a theme whose importance in black culture has prompted another essay.

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The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

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