

18. My Black Death

BY ARTHUR Jafa

THERE WERE TWO MAJOR INSTANCES in which black aesthetics radically redirected Western art practice in the twentieth century. The first is the advent of African "art" in Europe. Europeans were confronted with artifacts that were essentially alien, i.e., they were the products of radically different assumptions about how one apprehends and responds to the world. There was little understanding of the cultural context that generated these artifacts, how their forms were arrived at or how their structures of meaning operated, what they might mean to their makers.

The second instance occurred with the emergence of jazz, yet another alien artifact but one decidedly more familiar (due to its domestic origins). In the first instance—the arrival of African sculptural artifacts in Europe—you get the artifact without its creators in tow. But with the arrival of jazz, the impact isn't solely the result of the music, the artifact in this instance, but it also results from the manifest being of its creators, the way they spoke and behaved, the way they dressed, their idiomatic manner of occupying (and penetrating) space, their individual styles and philosophies, and the consensual articulations of the aesthetic and generative processes of the music. The repercussions of these two instances of cultural insurgency are near unquantifiable in magnitude, but a few things seem clear.

Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (and hence modernism) is the direct result of his confrontation with African artifacts. His invention of Cubism was provoked by his inquiry into the spacial implications of these artifacts. This is a commonly accepted line. To be more precise, Cubism is the direct transposition of these spacial implications onto the practice of Western painting. At the time Western painting (despite Cézanne's violent cage rat-

ting) had become trapped by the limitations (and distortions) of Western Renaissance perspective (single "fixed" vantage/vanishing point), itself a conflation of the logic of Western egocentricism (the sun revolves around the Earth) into a system of ordering space and time. African artifacts provided an alternative system with which to order space and time.

Cubism's utilization of multiple "fixed" vantages, rather than the single "fixed" vantage of Western Renaissance perspective, betrays a limited comprehension of the logic of multiple "dynamic" vantages apparent in the forms of African artifacts, a logic shared by post-Einsteinian views of space/time. Robert Farris Thompson has described in *African Art in Motion* how many of the artifacts in the possession of European artists like Picasso were never intended to be (i.e., were not designed to be) seen on a pedestal, in a fixed position. These sculptural artifacts moved around the viewer, as much as, if not more than, the viewer moved around the artifact. This is a radical alternative to the Western paradigm in which the subject has agency while the object has none.

Picasso, as quoted by André Malraux, said:

"People are always talking about the influence the Negroes had on me. What about it? We all loved the fetishes. Van Gogh said his generation had Japanese art—we have the Negroes. Their forms have no more influence on me than on Matisse, or on Derain. But for Matisse and Derain, the masks were sculpture—no more than that. When Matisse showed me his first Negro head, he talked about Egyptian art. But when I went to the Musée de l'Homme, the masks were not just sculpture. They were magical objects. . . . I understand what their sculptures did for the Negroes. . . . They were weapons—to keep people from being ruled by spirits, to help them free themselves. Tools. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have come that day, not because of the forms, but because it was my first canvas of exorcism!"

Another crucial aspect of Picasso's confrontation with black aesthetics has only recently come to light. Ostensibly an investigation of Picasso's

utilization of photography, one can only smile in wonder at the publication of *Picasso and Photography: The Dark Mirror* (Baldasari, 1998). The book reveals that Picasso possessed some forty photographs taken by Edmond Fortier, a Dakar-based photographer who was the most prolific publisher of postcards from French West Africa beginning in 1900–01. The photographs, supposedly “studies,” are of African women, generally bare-breasted and often with arms raised over the head or folded behind the back. (I suspect the appearance of these clearly suppressed materials is a result of the Picasso Museum’s desperate need to feed its publishing wing.)

This book reveals, in rather explicit comparative detail, how Picasso used these photographs as the basis for the development of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The standard argument is that *Femmes* represented “the invention of colored forms that no longer intended to imitate the external world but only to signify it. The canvas ceased to be a mirror—however deforming—of the visible, in order to become a plastic language (*écriture*).” In fact, as these materials make evident, Picasso’s work imitates not only the African artifacts to which he had access, but the very bodies, by way of Fortier’s “objective” representations, from which these embodiments of black being were derived. Picasso’s combined access to African artifacts and Fortier’s photographs made explicit the presence of the highly conceptual formal system employed by these artifacts. The implications of this would seem to demand some major reconsiderations of the conceptual origins and parameters of modernism: how black bodies activate space, or the volumetric intensity of black bodies, of cities; and the attraction of the entropic; modernism as a strand of black aesthetics; the black body as the premier anti-entropic figure of the twentieth century. The trauma provoked by the introduction of the black body into white space is profound).

Our notion of the “abstract” arises from a simple refusal of, or resistance to, the ontological fact of black being (and its material dimension, the black body), what I’ve described as “the inconceivability of the black body to the white imagination.” Simply put, representations of the black body, as rendered by traditional African artifacts, were rejected (by whites) as instances of verisimilitude and instead received as “highly stylized” or “abstract.” Eu-

ropeans preferred to understand these artifacts as creative distortions rather than accept the existence of human beings that looked so radically different in appearance from them. This radical difference of appearance functions, in the Western mind-set, as the sign of a radically different (alien) ontology, which of course threatened the Eurocentric belief in itself as the defining model of humanity. This, in turn, has provoked the ongoing struggle against the acceptance of the “other,” and its full humanity.

Duchamp was initially as content as Picasso, and others, to explore the space/time implications of African artifacts. But inevitably, Duchamp, smarter than anyone else around, became deeply interested in how African artifacts *behaved* rather than simply how they looked (their gaze). Duchamp peeped that these artifacts were, in fact, not art but instruments whose functionality had been arrested, and that much of their power was derived from their radically alienated, and de facto transgressive, relationship to the context in which they found themselves. Consequently, Duchamp’s urinal was engendered by his desire to model a work after the contextual dissonance provoked by the placement of these (black) artifacts in (white) museums. And it’s no accident that Duchamp chose the urinal, a white artifact which contains and channels dark matter, or shit, the stuff of black being. Surrealism can be understood as an investigation of the psychic frisson produced by the juxtaposition of incongruent objects (a cow and an ironing board), the paradigmatic example being “the black body in white space.”

In similar fashion, Jackson Pollock (’s practice) couldn’t have been without jazz. It’s indisputable that Pollock was very good at what he did, but the problem arose, inevitably, because he didn’t know what he was doing. His genius, and I think it was genius, resided in his ability to transpose jazz’s improvisational flow and trajectory, an essentially alien aesthetic methodology, onto the practice of painting. Western painting, which up until the twentieth century had been primarily mimetic, i.e., primarily preoccupied with capturing the appearance of the physical universe, realized with Pollock a radically new, and fully implemented, paradigm. This new paradigm privileged the performance of processional formations, and constituent significations, at the expense of the mimetic impulse.

Pollock's method, often spoken of in terms of gesture and choreography, consists largely of improvised dance as a means of getting paint down onto the canvas. Lee Krasner has related that Pollock would listen to jazz continually, and obsessively, while he painted. This is particularly significant given the absence of a mimetic subject in Pollock's work. (The works to which I am referring, clearly those on which his reputation lies, are those which dispense with even the vestiges of, generally psychoanalytically read, iconographies.) Were Pollock painting a mountain or an apple, the music to which he painted would be of questionable relevance or significance, but because Pollock's paintings are pictures of his process of getting the paint onto the canvas, of the physically located rhythmic perturbations of the paint's application, the music which animated his movements while simultaneously providing the aesthetic model for his action becomes extremely significant.

Why black music? It's clear that one of the defining factors which contributed to the development and power of black American music, and other musics of the *Diafra* (the black Diaspora), was a sort of contextual displacement equivalent to HIV's leap of the species barrier. By this I'm suggesting that with the Middle Passage, African music, like HIV (which hypothetically existed for some time in a species of monkey found in Central Africa), found itself freed from its natal ecology—with its attendant checks and balances, its natural predation—and thus freed, expanded exponentially, in the process mutating from African music(s) into black music(s).

(In the 1930s the USDA, in an effort to combat soil erosion, introduced kudzu, a Japanese vine, to Mississippi. By 1955, having escaped its original planting, kudzu had become "the vine that ate the South." Today, it infests over 250,000 acres of land in Mississippi, costing over \$20 million a year to combat. Similarly, "Plague of Europeans" David Killingray '73)

It's somewhat paradoxical that in a context which radically circumscribed the mobility of the black body, black musical expressivity found itself both formally unbound and pressed into service in a manner which, classically, it would not have had to serve. Black musical expressivity not only survived the Middle Passage but, free of the class strictures of its natal

context (which had limited its avenues of articulation and calcified its content) and unconstrained by a need to speak the experiences of a ruling class, evolved new forms with which to embody new experiences. A black music evolved equal to the unprecedented existential drama and complexity of the circumstance in which black people (Africans) found themselves.

Is it an accident that Mondrian was the first major European artist to recognize Pollock's work as some new shit?

(Vinyl recordings became black in sublimated response to the separation of the black voice from the black body, a separation which solved the conundrum of how to bring black music into white spaces minus the black bodies, i.e., black beings, which, by their very nature as musically productive entities, were assertive and thus troubling to whites.)

Pollock's crisis was precipitated by his inability to access the signification inherent in the methodology (jazz improvisational flow and trajectory) he had so powerfully appropriated and implemented in his work. Classically, jazz improvisation is first and foremost signified self-determination. This actually precedes its function as musical gesture. For the black artist to stand before an audience, often white, and to publicly demonstrate her decision-making capacity, her agency, rather than the replication of another's agency, i.e., the composers, was a profoundly radical and dissonant gesture (akin in contemporary terms to the catalytic effect of hip-hop sampling and/or Sherrie Levine's practice in their respective discourses). This signification of one's "self-determination" is in turn premised on one's "self-possession." There is no "self-determination" without "self-possession." And, "self-possession" is *the* existential issue for black Americans.

For Pollock—a white man and as such assumed to be self-determined and self-possessed—the demonstration of such reads as little more than ubiquitous white masculinist privilege (jacking off, the primary critique of the following generations of abstract expressists). Pollock, unable to access his work's signification, its structures of meaning, found himself vulnerable to critiques that the work was essentially without meaning. It's significant that Pollock's last productive period, and certainly his healthiest, ends, so the story goes, with the first viewing of Hans Namuth's famous film of

Pollock painting, projected in the kitchen for Pollock and his friends. Apparently Pollock got up when the film ended, walked over to the liquor cabinet, and proceeded to drink himself into a violent stupor, thus ending over two years of sobriety, a sobriety which he never recovered.

"When I am painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing." Pollock saw himself dancing around, a white being behaving, embarrassingly, like a black being (like a nigger), thus destroying the fragile state of grace, of disembodied (white) being, under which he'd created his most powerful works.

(The classic cartoons showing monkeys making abstract paintings spoke to the sublimated realization that Pollock's practice was in large measure black.)

Pollock, feeling like a charlatan, reintroduces figuration in his late works. This pathetic attempt to inject the work with meaning, a meaning which he himself could access, signals a total aesthetic collapse. So tragically, having failed at legitimately investing the work with meaning, Pollock kills himself.

Was Jackson Pollock white trash? Pollock's particular genius was possible precisely because of his alienation. In that his alienation allowed him an atypical relationship to the culture of black America. This is similar to the relationship which Elvis had to black American music, and which Picasso, in a much more covert fashion, had to African art. (Elvis's black saturation and white trash status is mirrored by Picasso's status as a Spaniard, un/moored, in Paris.) In each of these instances, and despite the seemingly inevitable denial that occurred once influence became an issue, the breakthrough nature of the work achieved was made possible by an initially humble, and thus by definition nonsupremacist, relationship to the catalytic artifact at hand. Just as Beethoven was humble in the face of the body of work that had preceded him, these artists were each students of the work under whose influence they had fallen, students in a fashion which white supremacy would typically make unlikely.

(John Cage spent his entire career avoiding the term "improvisation," saturated as it was with black meaning.)

This is a story I've told a number of times. I worked on Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* as second unit director of photography for approximately a year and a half. We'd occasionally receive calls from Stanley while we were shooting. Lisa, the second unit director, would relay his instructions and add, typically, that Stanley said to "keep up the good work." A couple of times Lisa tried to hand me the phone so that Stanley could speak to me. Each time I waved her away, saying I'd speak to him later, ostensibly because I was too involved in shooting.

A little before the film was set for release, I'm hanging out in Germany and I get a call from Lisa. She asks if I'm available to shoot in New York the following week. We agree on a date and I make arrangements to return to New York. A few days later, I'm boarding a plane for New York, I look over and see the cover of *USA Today*: "Filmmaker Stanley Kubrick dead at 70." I'd spoken to Lisa not five hours earlier. I figure it to be a hoax, but I get to New York and it's confirmed: Stanley had passed suddenly and the shoot was canceled.

Over the next several days, I got extremely depressed. I'd never spoken to Kubrick. I wondered why, in over a year of working on the film, I'd never been available to speak to him. I realized that there'd been too much that I'd wanted to say. I'd, unconsciously, been waiting for the film's completion in the hope that I'd be able to have a real conversation with him. I'd wanted to tell him that he'd changed my life, and that I'd surely been, as a black, preadolescent inhabitant of the Mississippi Delta, the farthest thing imagined when he'd envisioned who the audience for *2001: A Space Odyssey* might be.

Two years after its initial release in '68, the film finally reached my hometown, Clarksdale, Mississippi. It played a drive-in theater on the outskirts of town, three nights only, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I barely slept that week. My father had promised to take me but by Sunday something had come up. So, a year later, I'm ten, the film finally plays at a movie

theater proper. Recently opened, the West End Cinema is located in a part of town that's exclusively white. Clarksdale was essentially segregated at this point.

That Saturday my parents dropped me off at the twelve-thirty matinee. There's clearly no big demand, over two years after its release, for *2001: A Space Odyssey* in Clarksdale, Mississippi. The theater's empty except for me and two couples, both white. The lights go down, the movie begins, and it's like being buried alive. I'd never experienced anything like it before. It quite literally blew my mind. And to say that I couldn't make heads or tails of the movie is an understatement. (And even now, I'm still searching for an art experience capable of matching the effect this film had on me, its ability to simultaneously alienate and ravish. And in this fashion, the film had provided me with a model for how powerful art could be.)

There's no dialogue for the first twenty-five minutes of the film. There's little exposition. When people finally speak, they speak in hypnotic, sedated tones. And dramatically speaking, very little seems to happen during the first two thirds of the movie. The disembodied computer, HAL, displays decidedly more emotion than any of the flesh-and-blood characters. The few dispassionate exchanges between characters are punctuated by extended sequences containing little or no additional dialogue.

By the time the film reaches its intermission, I'm alone in the theater, the other moviegoers having abandoned it at some earlier point.

After the intermission, the film becomes, relatively speaking, more narratively compelling, in that things happen, yet the characters display the same narcotized, somnambulistic tone, now completely at odds with the dire circumstances in which they find themselves. (Anyone familiar with psychoanalysis will recognize the mute, vaguely conspiratorial affect of the analyst.) By the time the spaceship reaches its destination, Jupiter, only a single crew member has survived. He proceeds to launch himself down to the planet's surface in pursuit of the origin of the enigmatic black monolith uncovered on the moon's surface earlier. From this point onward, the film ceases to be narrative in any conventional Hollywood sense. Whereas the preceding parts of the film are characterized by various lacks—lack of color,

lack of action, lack of apparent emotional consequence (save HAL's mournful end)—and whereas before we were stuck in a universe of arrested causality, an addict's nod, the film's finale, the descent and its aftermath, seems to dispense with causality altogether, except in the most primal sense, cinema's persistence of vision. The descent is a headlong rush composed of an extended, and unprecedented, barrage of chromatically oversaturated, spacially distorted, and elliptically sequenced imagery, all interspersed with shots of the astronaut's increasingly hysterical and emotionally overwrought grimaces (a bad trip, the result of some nightmarishly potent, and unexpected, combination of LSD and speed). This is all abruptly terminated by a shift to a very European, very white hotel room in which Bowman, still in spacesuit, observes himself aging progressively 'til the point of death (attended only by the black monolith), and his rebirth as the luminously white starchild, at which point the film ends.

There's of course an inescapably troubling, particularly for a young black kid in the early seventies, racial dimension of the film. First, there is the absolute whiteness of the context (both figuratively and literally). All of the characters are Caucasian and they are, in their demeanor, both archetypically and atavistically white. This is a whiteness that's sterile, creepy, and ultimately seductive (I'd guess Kubrick's background, a Bronx Jew, is relevant here). The interiors they occupy seem devoid of any artifacts that might be read as anything other than the products of an extremely Eurocentric worldview. And second, there is the absence of both black people and/or any apparent sign of blackness. This absence is misleading. Ultimately, I came to recognize the film's highly repressed and anxiety-ridden preoccupation with blackness. And given the times, how could it have been otherwise?

2001's obsession with/suppression of blackness is atypical of the genre only with respect to the elegance of its construction. And who could possibly fully disentangle the clusterfuck of racism (and sexism) that's typical of classic science fiction and its retarded offspring, science fiction films? *2001* is about fear of genetic annihilation, fear of blackness. (Black rage, Black Power, Black Panthers, black planet, black dick, etc.) White phallic objects

(starships) move through all-encompassing blackness (space) from one white point (stars) to another. This fear of space, this horror vacui, is a fear of contamination, a contamination of white being by black being which, by the very nature of the self-imposed fragile ontological construction of white being, equals the annihilation of white being.

2001 begins in Africa. The black monolith functions as a catalytic artifact in that it provokes man's evolutionary leap forward from its earlier, primitive (apelike) state. (The initial design of the monolith was in the form of a black pyramid, a clear sign of black civilization.) There's the implication that the monolith generates man's increased capacity rather than simply stimulates some latent ability. This evolutionary leap sets in motion developments which culminate with man's discovery of a second black monolith on the moon's surface. *2001*'s astronauts travel through space in pursuit of (in fact at the directive of) a signal which issues forth from this advanced and clearly more evolved black sentient entity.

(Have you noticed that *2001*'s monolith, Darth Vader's uniform/flesh, and H. R. Giger's alien are all composed of the same black substance?)

2001's white/star child is engendered by a black sentient body, subliminally, and desperately, positing the possibility of pure white being issuing forth from all-encompassing dark matter. A manifestation of white fear of genetic annihilation by the (black) other. This anxiety is played out over and over in numerous science fiction films. For example, in *Alien* all the characters (excepting the white-blooded science officer), male and female alike, are sexually assaulted by the alien and impregnated with black beings. The alien is in fact a six-foot-eight Sudanese, "Bolaji" (never, to my knowledge, given a last name), wearing H. R. Giger's Esu-Elegba-derived jet-black monster suit with penis-tipped head. Yaphet Kotto (ur-Negro signifier if there ever were one) plays the only black member of the doomed crew. And during the initial confrontation, coming face-to-face with the alien, he recognizes it as the bad nigger it clearly is. His pragmatism suggests that he stands the best chance of surviving this encounter, but predictably, he meets his end attempting to prevent the alien from ravaging the helpless white woman. Coming to her rescue, he tells her to move away, but she's

frozen (by the alien's magnificence), so, his pragmatism (one could say his sanity) having abandoned him, he moves to get between them. The alien swats him away with his big black tail, grabs him (bringing him face-to-face), and pokes a hole in his head with his chops (teeth). Casting him aside, the alien shifts its attention back to his victim of choice. She stands, breathing heavily, transfixed as the alien slides its tail between her legs. We cut away (but continue to hear her suspiciously ecstatic moans).

In *Star Wars*, Darth Vader/Dark Invader (black body/black voice, in fact the voice of Jack Johnson, James Earl Jones, clearly a blood despite subsequent revisions) is transformed by the Force's "Darkside" (black body engenders a white child, a skywalker no less). And the film's finale, a rush down the Death Star's corridors, to destroy the engendering black womb, Vader's crib, is a diminished and more overtly nihilistic replay of Bowman's Jupiter fall down the corridors of light, a rush to Death. Star. Child.

Why had I been so attracted to *2001*? Apollo generation, the first moon landing had just gone down a few years prior, and I was fairly obsessed with spaceships. I'd followed the progress of the film in magazines like *Popular Mechanics*. *2001* was the first novel I'd ever bought, though I confess not to having read it until after seeing the film. That got me in the theater.

The film's slow, glacial pageantry impressed the altarboy in me, exposing me to what I'd identify now as a minimalist sensibility, a sensibility to which, I believe, I was predisposed by the flatness and austerity of the Delta, by the landscape's beauty and trance dimensions. This exposure dovetailed with a number of other things.

There was my then nascent melancholy and the beginning recognition of a certain sort of categorical constraint, dictated by my blackness, and yet completely at odds with (1) the boundless possibility conveyed to those of my generation by television, and (2) the emancipatory fallout of the Black Power movement. My family's move from the moderately progressive Tupelo to the essentially segregated Clarksdale, situated at the Delta's epicenter, had a cathartic impact, as did a continual and enmeshing confrontation with the extreme deprivations of the region and its abject pleasures. An exposure to the transfixing, and for me unprecedented, blackness of its

inhabitants, their arresting beauty and dense corporeal being, the inescapable duality of absence and presence, the inevitable embrace, as a nascent black man, of a certain temperamental cool (a flattened affect), simply put, the dark matter of black being. These all begged certain questions, at the time inarticulate and unformed, to which years later my introduction to Miles Davis provided an answer. Where do I/we enter into these discourses on beauty and being (the answer of course being wherever and however we choose to).

The film ends, I get up in a daze and walk out into the lobby. And even now, thirty years later, I remember exactly, in crystalline detail, what the lobby looked like, the angle the sun shafted through the space, the lint hovering overhead, the drag of the carpet. I looked over and saw the manager, white and older, quietly reading his paper in the otherwise empty lobby. And the thing is, at this point in my life I didn't have unchaperoned interactions with white people, young or old. He was sitting in the ticket booth with the door open so I walked over to him and said, "Excuse me, sir, I've just come out of the movie, could you tell me what it was about?" He looked down at me over his paper, paused a moment, and said, "Son, I've been looking at it all week and haven't got a clue." And that's the last thing I remember. I don't remember how I got home, what other conversations I might have had, nothing. But that brief interaction I've never forgotten. The film had completely leveled our differences, race, class, age. So that for that moment, in the presence of this monumental work, we were equal.

a black hagakure.

a dream of death and the continual dissipation of dense black being (power and consciousness) osiris dismembered (diafra) and a part can't come together (can't remember) though the parts no longer fit, and this not fitting, this growth after dismemberment, keeps us (men and women) harder coming strong (anti entropic beasts) falling together even as we fall apart

would limit the number of blacks that can gather, a boon for Christ, one a bitch two a threat three an insurrection, no getting together coming together no drums rising up so churches, funerals, simple gatherings and places become reunions become remembrance be luciferian (fire, light) be revolution.

to the central conundrum of black being (the double bind of our ontological existence) lie in the fact that common misery both defines and limits who we are. such that our efforts to eliminate those forces which constrain also functions to dissipate much of which gives us our specificity, our uniqueness, our flavor and that by destroying the binds that define we will cease to be, but this is the good death (cachoeira) and to be embraced.