

The Aural Impulse: Sound-Driven Approaches in Contemporary Black Audiovisual Aesthetics*

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ABSTRACT

Lungi dal funzionare come mero accompagnamento o effetto, il suono può informare profondamente la sua controparte visiva, talvolta chiedendone il ritiro. Ne deriva una tensione che assume particolare rilievo nelle scelte formali di diversi artisti e artiste afro-discendenti. Costoro, infatti, sembrano individuare nel regime dell'udibile un campo speciale di articolazione per le soggettività non bianche e, dunque, un'alternativa critica all'impasse oculocentrica della modernità occidentale. In particolare, l'analisi si concentra su alcuni lavori – *Oh Adelaide!* (2010) di Sonia Boyce, *AGHDRA* (2021) di Arthur Jafa e *Sunshine State* (2022) di Steve McQueen – che rimediano forme preesistenti di rappresentazione, testi e generi, e ne interrogano le stesse condizioni di possibilità, chiamando in causa la dimensione politica e culturale dell'ascolto.

Parole-chiave. Impulso aurale; Black culture; Sound culture

Far from functioning merely as accompaniment or effect, sound can deeply inform its visual counterpart, sometimes even calling for its withdrawal. This creates a tension that holds particular significance in the formal choices of various Afro-descendant artists. These artists seem to identify the domain of the audible as a unique field for articulating non-white subjectivities, producing a critical alternative to the ocularcentric impasse of Western modernity. Specifically, the analysis focuses on specific works – *Oh Adelaide!* (2010) by Sonia Boyce, *AGHDRA* (2021) by Arthur Jafa, and *Sunshine State* (2022) by Steve McQueen – that remediate pre-existing forms of representation, texts, and genres and interrogate their very conditions of possibility, bringing into play the political and cultural dimension of listening.

Keywords. Aural impulse; Black culture; Sound culture

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Introduction

Since the advent of the Sound Era, cinema has maintained an ambiguous relationship with Black sonorities. Symptomatic is the fact that in *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), the voice appears on screen not only as a singing voice¹ but, more significantly, as a Black voice – or, to be more accurate, as a white voice imitating a Black one. Indeed, in accordance with a parodic approach inherited from minstrel shows², the history of cinema is crossed by a dual impulse: that is to say, the desire to perform as the ‘other’ by emulating their bodily excess, alongside their persistent racial discrimination. Whereas *The Jazz Singer* paved the way for the talkies, cinema could no longer disregard the supply of rhythm and musicality provided by Black culture, bodies, and voices. Notably, their presence in the talkies began to increase significantly in comparison to the Silent Era, leading to the extensive appropriation and commercial exploitation of Black sounds by the film industry³.

This ambiguity resonates throughout the history of both American and African American cinema. In the former, it manifests as an insidious ‘attraction’ between the performativity of the Black body and the white gaze, as well as between the Black voice and the ‘white listener’; in the latter, it appears in the form of more or less explicit cultural references – consider, for instance, *Bamboozled* (*Id.*, Spike Lee, 2000), in which the blackface actors are Black Americans⁴. The film industry has thus constructed its conception of Black identity, relying on sound strategies that draw upon the improvisational and syncopated features of jazz and blues, as well as the more spiritual aspects of gospel or, additionally, upon a range of non-philological sound signatures to evoke generic Afro-like atmospheres.

Several Black artists have critically explored and delved into these aspects,

¹ Cf. M. CHION, *Un art sonore, le cinéma: histoire, esthétique, poétique*, Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris 2003.

² Cf. N. COOK, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2013, pp. 299-307; D. BOGLE, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: an Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, The Continuum, New York-London 2003, pp. 19-34.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁴ The use of this form of camouflage during the Silent Era was unexpectedly employed also by Black actors. Cf. *Ibid.*; A. RAENGO, *Critical Race Theory and Bamboozled*, Bloomsbury, New York 2016.

remediating pre-existing forms of representation, texts, and genres to debunk their racist foundations and cultural hegemony. In doing so, they have increasingly engaged with the political and cultural dimension of sound and listening, questioning and often challenging the relationship between aural and visual elements. Accordingly, this text explores how sound-driven approaches and editing strategies serve as tools for the cultural critique of ocularcentrism in Western modernity. Specifically, it examines three case studies – *Oh Adelaide!* (*Id.*, 2010) by Sonia Boyce, *AGHDRA* (*Id.*, 2021) by Arthur Jafa, and *Sunshine State* (*Id.*, 2022) by Steve McQueen – which remediate and radically deconstruct the film's narratives and visuality, questioning the conditions of possibility of art along with its deeper epistemological and cultural origins.

Part of a lineage of audiovisual experiments that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century⁵, these artists metalinguistically expand the medium's potentialities, whether performing on found footage or not. In their work, they fundamentally reconceptualise the so-called «audiovisual contract»⁶ towards a «musicalization of vision»⁷ that frequently disturbs the image legibility and clarity. Indeed, rather than functioning merely as accompaniment or effect, sound can profoundly inform its visual counterpart, prompting it to recede or assume a secondary role, as well as challenging viewers to reconsider their meanings and implications; «to produce», according to Holly Rogers, «social, political or gendered forms of discourse, [...] to encourage a critical distantiation between audience and work»⁸.

⁵ See, for instance, how a number of experimental artists subverted the idea of moving-image based art in favour of an «imageless cinema», to which the Anthology Film Archives dedicated a series of film screenings in Spring 2022, cf. *Imageless films, Part 1*, in Anthology Film Archives, <https://www.anthologyfilmarchives.org/film_screenings/series/54404> (last accessed: 11 November 2024). Nonetheless, for an extensive analysis of the interdependence between darkness, blackness and cultural discourses on race, cf. N.M. ELCOTT, *A Brief History of Artificial Darkness and Race*, in *Rethinking Darkness: Cultures, Histories, Practices*, edited by N. Dunn, T. Edensor, Routledge, London-New York 2021, pp. 61-76.

⁶ Cf. M. CHION, *L'audio-vision: son et image au cinéma*, Nathan, Paris 1990.

⁷ Cf. C. VERNALLIS, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013.

⁸ H. ROGERS, J. BARHAM, *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, p. 4.

Ob Adelaide!, Sonia Boyce, 2010

Ob Adelaide! by British artist Sonia Boyce is part of her personal archive, the *Devotional Collection* (1999–ongoing)⁹, a project that questions the representation and perception of the female Black body – specifically of the Black British female singers – which was exhibited within the UK Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022 as part of the installation *Feeling Her Way*¹⁰. It is a single-channel video created in collaboration with the sound artist, composer, and DJ Ain Bailey.

Boyce remediates the found footage of a performance by the American-born, UK-based singer and entertainer Adelaide Hall, who sings *Creole Love Call*, a jazz standard by Duke Ellington, Bubber Miley, and Rudy Jackson¹¹. As the performance unfolds, the scene appears doubly lacking and disturbed; the body of the jazz singer is enveloped by a mass of white light, resembling the effects of a damaged film. Similarly, only a few notes and vocalisations from the original song remain audible, while everything else deforms into indistinguishable noise and electromagnetic disturbances reminiscent of the rapid rewind of a tape or a malfunctioning device. Hall's dancing but vanishing body creates a sense of estrangement and dispossession, further emphasised by Bailey's immersive and haunting soundtrack.

The artist works both symbolically and materially through deduction and disturbance, visual lacunae and noise. Simultaneously, this approach aims to remove the singing body of the Black woman not only from the 'scopophilic gaze' of the white spectator but also from his equally insidious 'phonophilia' for the Black voice. This process results in a radical disembodiment of Hall's voice, which appears to reverberate from a distant spatiotemporal dimension, leaving behind only a pure, sounding body. Such a choice can be interpreted, in line with Kaja Silverman's analysis of women's avant-garde films, as a strategy to escape patriarchal control¹²; by avoiding the close connection between voice and body,

⁹ *Devotional*, in National Portrait Gallery, <<https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/exhibitions/2007/devotional/>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024).

¹⁰ A playlist of Boyce's selection can be accessed on Spotify.

¹¹ Cf. Ain Bailey, in tumblr, <<https://ainbailey.tumblr.com/movingimage>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024).

¹² Cf. K. SILVERMAN, *The Acoustic Mirror: the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1988.

it subtracts the representation from the male gaze and emphasises discontinuity, dissonance, and dislocation.

Not by chance, Boyce declares to treat the found footage as «something elastic», where «light and dazzling whiteness becomes the material presence that reveals and threatens to obliterate everything in its path, which Adelaide Hall and her accompanying pianist emerge and disappear within»¹³. In addition, the remediation serves the function of exorcising the trauma of a repressed past and emphasising the memory sedimented in the images precisely through a particular use of the song: as a means of «a cross-generational dialogue that vacillates between activating the archive and a melancholic futurism»¹⁴, that is to say, «not only as a musical object but above all as a cultural, inter/cross/transmedia object»¹⁵.

***Sunshine State*, Steve McQueen, 2022**

Like Boyce, the British artist and director Steve McQueen also draws upon visual lacunae and noise to appropriate and reuse highly symbolic preexisting materials. In 2022, during his solo exhibition at Pirelli Hangar Bicocca in Milan, McQueen presented *Sunshine State*, commissioned and produced by the IFFR – International Film Festival Rotterdam. In this two-channel video installation, he remediates the previously mentioned *The Jazz Singer*, using it as a material and symbolic palimpsest of meanings to erase and rewrite radically.

The installation engages with the historical context of *The Jazz Singer*, which is often critiqued for its use of blackface and its implications regarding race and performance in cinema while prompting critical reflections on the narratives embedded within the film. By reinterpreting this material, McQueen invites viewers to reflect on the legacy of such representations and their impact on contemporary understandings of Black identity and culture. The artist selects

¹³ Sonia Boyce. *Scat: Sound and Collaboration*, in e-flux, 1 june 2013, <<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/32587/sonia-boyce/>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024).

¹⁴ *There is no archive in which nothing gets lost* in e-flux, 28 August 2012, <<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/109242/there-is-no-archive-in-which-nothing-gets-lost/>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024).

¹⁵ *Itinerari della canzone tra i media. Immaginari narrazioni trasmissioni*, edited by M.T. Soldani, Neo-Classica, Roma 2023, p. 17 (my transl.).

and displays scenes where Al Jolson does not speak or sing, focusing on the actor's mute gestuality while significantly removing his face from the screen. His performance is mirrored on the second screen, creating a positive-negative correspondence. In this instance, the scene also proceeds in reverse, resulting in a second type of *détournement* that is temporal in nature. As the action unfolds, the image and its counter-image gradually fade, abruptly inundated by flashes of intermittent light that render them increasingly difficult to read.

Meanwhile, McQueen's voice-over narrates an episode of discrimination and racial violence his father, a Caribbean-born orange picker, endured in Florida. The account is re-enacted repeatedly in a formulaic manner until the narrative blurs, with the voice faltering into episodes of echolalia or glossolalia that distort the words and erode their clarity. Such visual and sonic deformation culminates with images of solar flares; these elements represent the symbolic and material duality of brightness and darkness, that is to say, the contrast between the harsh realities of racial harassment and the idealised, sunny, idyllic image often associated with the American South, namely with Florida – actually known as the Sunshine State.

Consequently, the more the image and words lose their intelligibility, the more McQueen's critical gesture becomes evident. Indeed, the film undergoes various forms of visual and sonic distortion, along with the overturning and fragmentation of its temporality. It is as if, in a specific instance of poetic justice, the body and voice of the white-actor-in-blackface performing negritude are removed from the visible and audible realm, allowing Afro-descendant subjectivities to gain ground, specifically the right to their own representation, both visual and aural, as well as citizenship.

***AGHDRA*, Arthur Jafa, 2021**

Unlike the works above, in *AGHDRA*, a large-scale video installation by African American artist and cinematographer¹⁶ Arthur Jafa, the archival object under

¹⁶ He began his career as a cinematographer, working on several independent productions, including the experimental film *Daughters of the Dust* (Id., Julie Dash, 1991), the Black or race film *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (Id., John Akomfrah, 1993), the auteur film *Crooklyn* (Id., Spike Lee, 1994), as well as various television spots and documentaries such as *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (Id., Ada Gay Griffin, Michelle Parkerson, 1995) and *W.E.B. Du Bois: A*

critical deconstruction holds a sonic nature rather than a visual one.

The image is, in fact, a CGI animation (12 sequences made by 120 frames per second in 4K) created by the French company BUF, which produced the special effects for *The Matrix Resurrections* (*Matrix Resurrections*, Lana Wachowski, 2021). The animation depicts what can be interpreted simultaneously as an endless sunrise or twilight set against an artificial and abstract-like black sea. The image, which clearly evokes the transatlantic slave trade, features an almost photographic fixity, appearing as if it is suspended in time: a 3D black ocean that becomes increasingly dense and resembles tar or banging lava stone fragments. Furrowed by deep wounds, this massive sea, reminiscent of Alberto Burri's black *Cretti*¹⁷, also evokes the famous photograph of the ex-slave Gordon that shows his heavily scarred back. This image, which appears in many of Jafa's works, including the well-known *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2019), expresses a personal and collective injury on an environmental and timeless scale.

In terms of sound, its prominence as a driving creative force is evident from its very title, which is a crasis of *Agharta* – the concert album recorded by Miles Davis in 1975 in Japan – *Godzilla*, and *Mothra*, the main characters from the 1992 Japanese *kaiju* film directed by Takao Okawara, which refers to the Japanese trauma caused by the devastation of the US atomic bombings¹⁸ and, more broadly, the awareness of living under the threat of impending doom. More importantly, in collaboration with bassist Melvin Gibbs, Jafa adds complexity to

Biography in Four Voices (Id., Louis J. Massiah, 1995). He also performed a series of commercial works, ranging from the feature film *Selma* (*Selma - La strada per la libertà*, Ava DuVernay, 2014) to music videos for artists such as Solange (*Cranes in the Sky*, 2016), Beyoncé (*Formation*, 2016), and Kanye West (*Wash Us in the Blood*, 2020).

¹⁷ Jafa may have seen one at UCLA, where he studied film with Haile Gerima, Ben Caldwell and Charles Burnett, independent directors from the Los Angeles Rebellion Movement. This piece is the largest ever created by Burri outside of Italy and was donated to the Department of Italian of the same University in 1977.

¹⁸ In Jafa's own words, «Japanese people are the only people who have ever had A-bombs dropped on them, and *Godzilla* was an attempt on some psycho-social level to embody the trauma of that experience. And I started to think, well, what would that look like if we tried to embody black experience in non-narrative terms, but in some other sort of way». A. D'SOUZA, *Arthur Jafa, AGHDRA, his new film, approaches Blackness through animation*, in 4Columns, 19 November 2021: <<https://www.4columns.org/d-souza-aruna/arthur-jafa2>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024).

Davis' experimental fusion of rock, jazz, and blues sonorities¹⁹ by mixing them with several soul songs performed by Black artists – such as the Isley Brothers, Roberta Flack, Rose Royce – which are altered, fragmented, multiplied, repeated, and slowed-down. As a consequence of such a mush-up, the music unfolds in an aural crescendo of interweaving voices and sonorities, becoming unrecognisable and rendering the listening experience almost unbearable. In addition, the depth of these timeless voices that blend with the sea's artificial murmur contrasts with the image's flatness and two-dimensionality, producing a kind of animistic *Vox Mundi*.

Unlike Jafa's previous works, which are characterised by music video-style editing²⁰, *AGHDRA* is a more contemplative piece in which the artist employs an almost prayerful, relentless, and slow-paced rhythm, an oversized yet ephemeral aural monument to the Black diaspora. This eighty-five-minute video installation²¹ viscerally explores the beauty and precariousness of Black life, creating a compelling and immersive sonic landscape that emphasises slowness – which could be perceived as an almost anti-black feature –, deep bass-heavy tracks, spatiotemporal extension, and sonic elongation²².

In particular, the dynamic relationship between the sense of intimacy suggested by the aforementioned features and the installation's environmental scale, as well as the vastness of the sea and the intensity of chromatic contrast – specifically between the bright yellow-orange sky and the deep black sea – enhances deep emotional involvement and evokes contrasting feelings, further punctuated and sublimated by music. This results in a sublime aesthetic

¹⁹ Such fusion alienated his more purist listeners. Moreover, the album was titled after the alleged subterranean city of *Agharta*, which emerged as the world became increasingly violent – a reference that evokes the poetics of Afrofuturism.

²⁰ Cf. *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (Id., 2016); *Apex* (Id., 2013), *Ms Hillsonga* (Id., 2017).

²¹ 4K video (black and white and colour, sound), 1 hr. 14:59 min.

²² Cf. H. ROGERS, H. BRITTON, *The Spaces Beyond: Experimenting with the Theory of Audiovisual Concrète*, in «Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies», 1 September 2022, <www.media-commons.org/intransition/spaces-beyond-experimenting-theory-audiovisual-concr%C3%A8te> (last accessed: 11 November 2024); H. ROGERS, *Sonic Elongation and Sonic Aporia: Two Modes of Disrupted Listening in Film*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Cinematic Listening*, edited by C. Cenciarelli, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, pp. 427-449.

experience that is anything but peaceful, reminiscent of the effects sought by Romantic painting, both stunning and profoundly disquieting. However, what is measureless here is not the feeling of one's smallness compared to the grandeur and power of nature but rather the weight of human rights abuses that the black sea epitomises²³.

Black Phonographies Challenging White Modernity

To comprehend the cultural and political dimensions of sound and listening in contemporary Black audiovisual aesthetics, as well as their influence on the *mise-en-image*, it is essential to return to the roots of what is termed «Black modernity» and its centrality to the formation of Western modernity. According to A.G. Weheliye, «Black modernity» (or «sonic afro-modernity») is founded on the notion of «phonography», namely on the separation between sound and image inaugurated by the sound recording, which is a typical condition of the «sonic modernity»²⁴, and assumes a peculiar significance in the expression of Black culture in the Twentieth Century²⁵. Black identity notably relies on orality, or, more precisely, on the singing voice, unlike Western culture – whose transmission is based on alphabetic writing – and in contrast to other forms of inscription, where Black culture has historically occupied a minor position or has been relegated to a latent presence²⁶. Consequently, Black phonographies challenge the role assigned by white modernity to writing and, subsequently, to moving images, both of which pertain to the visual realm.

In addition, while this contrasting tradition endorses the racial prejudice that has positioned the Black subject as inadequate for writing and the articulation of logos since the Enlightenment era – thereby dehumanising them – Black culture simultaneously established a counter-field for expression within the sonic

²³ On the black aesthetic as the «bearing of the unbearable», cf. also R. BRADLEY, *Anteaeesthetics. Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2023.

²⁴ S. HALLYDAY, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2013, p. 13.

²⁵ Cf. A.G. WEHELIYE, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 2005.

²⁶ Cf. L. BARRETT, *Blackness and Value. Seeing Double*, Cambridge University Press, London-New York 1999, pp. 55-93.

realm. Since the Age of Slavery, music and the singing voice – unique means of expressing suffering and hope for a better future – take on the role assigned to language in Western thought and, more recently, to image as the primary and most valued forms of human expression. At the same time, far from becoming entrenched in a magical and pre-technological conception of orality, Black performativity has been able to transcend such polarisation. The slave trade, in fact, marks the beginning of the existential condition that W.E.B. Du Bois termed «double consciousness»²⁷, namely the condition of being simultaneously inside and outside the rules and rights of modern society, as well as inside and outside the states to which individuals were deported. However, a similar phenomenon can also be ‘observed’ in the ‘soundscape’ of Western culture, where it manifests in forms that are often removed and maintains an ambiguous and unresolved relationship with Black sonorities, oscillating, as previously noted, between fascination and discrimination.

Advocating for a deconstructionist and anti-essentialist interpretation of Black identity – namely, for the idea that identity is a fluid process rather than a fixed occurrence²⁸ – many scholars have focused on the (per)formative importance of dislocation and contamination. A pertinent example mentioned by Paul Gilroy is precisely Miles Davis’ fusion production, which serves as an exemplary mode of this diasporic aesthetics based on the concept of the «changing same»²⁹ – i.e., something that persists despite the disruptive and destabilising effects of history. It can be argued that the diasporic condition exists within an «aesthetics of repetition and variation» wherein redundancy holds its own «communicative importance», and the same «stops time and invents a

²⁷ Cf. W.E. BURGHARDT, *Du Bois sulla linea del colore*, in «Il Mulino», 2 October 2010, <<https://www.rivistailmulino.it/a/william-edward-burghardt-du-bois-sulla-linea-del-colore>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024).

²⁸ Cf. Stuart Hall, *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by D. Morley, K.H. Chen, Routledge, London-New York 1996; *Representation: Cultural Representation and the Signifying Practices*, edited by S. Hall, SAGE-The Open University, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi 1997. Hall also affirms that what Black subjectivities and communities scattered all around the world really have in common is the feeling of belonging produced by the social condition experienced within racial western structures, rather than the other way around.

²⁹ P. GILROY, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London-New York 1993, p. 101.

possible variation, a moment before the catastrophe»³⁰. Not by chance, Gilroy moves away from nativism and the presumed transhistorical essence of Africa, asserting the intimate connection and tangle between white and Black modernity. Of course, the latter is not an alternative or marginal form of modernity; rather, it is the disturbing double, the repressed and (not-so-hidden) fold of Western modernity. In particular, he argues that within the deep time and dark background of modern technologies for sound recording and reproduction lie the rhythms and sounds of the Other, characterised by their liquid and pelagic manifestations. To further clarify this point and to relate the issue back to our case studies, Boyce, McQueen, and Jafa engage with the white techno-culture and audiovisual aesthetics, emphasising the performative power of pre-existing audiovisual materials to demonstrate how they have been used against Black people. According to Gilroy: «the major things Black art must have are these: it must have the ability to use ‘found objects’, the appearance of using ‘found things’, and it must look ‘effortless’. It must look ‘cool and easy’. If it makes you sweat, you haven’t done the work. You shouldn’t be able to see the seams and stitches»³¹.

Not coincidentally, *Oh Adelaide!*, *Sunshine State*, and *AGHDRA* tackle the tension between an (apparently) effortless grace and violence. As a matter of fact, these works draw inspiration from well-known representatives of Black culture, utilising historical footage and recordings that evoke various public and private traumas, placing Black-sounding bodies at the centre of an eerie entanglement between celebration – of their performative prowess, which allows them to succeed with grace despite oppression – and discrimination. To succeed in some fields, such as music, while simultaneously facing oppression represents two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, while the idea of divine grace refers to the ability to maintain unity and faith toward salvation from mundane suffering, from an aesthetic perspective it denotes the skill, flair, and elegant gesture of concealing the effort behind artistic feats³².

³⁰ *Remix-Remake. Pratiche di replicabilità*, edited by N. Dusi, L. Spaziant, Meltemi, Roma 2006, pp. 28-29 (my trans.).

³¹ GILROY, *The Black Atlantic*, cit., p. 78 (emphasis added).

³² Cf. B. CASTIGLIONE, *Il cortegiano* or *The Book of the Courtier*, Penguin, North Chelmsford 2003.

The Aural Impulse in Black Aesthetics

To clarify how the remediation enacted by the aforementioned Black artists is propaedeutic to their sound-based practices and critiques of white ocularcentric aesthetics, one should consider that, despite the clear differences between them, they also exemplify at least two tendencies or impulses that permeate many contemporary artistic practices, particularly in cinema: the «archive effect»³³ and the «aural impulse»³⁴. While the former has been the subject of significant scholarly discourse and critical examination³⁵, the latter has arguably received less attention. As for the archive effect, it has become particularly meaningful in the context of Black audiovisual production, as it is informed by a declared desire to rewrite History – specifically, that written, seen, and heard from a predominantly white and Western perspective. Similarly, in light of the foregoing paragraph, the aural impulse assumes particular significance when considered from the perspective of Black subjectivities. Moreover, while the emergence of the aural impulse was undoubtedly facilitated by the techno-aesthetic accelerations of global media within a post-cinematic and post-television scenario³⁶ – just as the

³³ J. BARON, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, Routledge, London-New York 2014.

³⁴ The use of the term «impulse» preceded by an adjectival form is a common trend in studies of contemporary art practices. Terms such as «archival impulse», «cinematic impulse», «documentary impulse», and «historiographic impulse» illustrate this phenomenon. As for the archive cf., for instance, H. FOSTER, *An Archival Impulse*, in «October», n. 110, pp. 3-22; R. KRAUSS, *The Im/Pulse to see*, in *Vision and Visuality. Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, edited by H. Foster, Bay Press, Seattle 1987, pp. 51-78.

³⁵ The debate on the relationship between archives, cinema, and art, as well as the reuse of found footage, is extensive and articulated; however, this is not the appropriate context for an in-depth discussion. Therefore, for illustrative purposes, cf. *Found Footage: Cinema Exposed. April 5 – June 3, 2012*, edited by M. Bloemhevel, G. Fossati, J. Guldemon, EYE Filmmuseum, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2012; M. BERTOZZI, *Recycled Cinema. Im-magini perdute, visioni ritrovate*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012; C. BLÜMLINGER, *Cinéma de seconde main. Esthétique du remploi dans l'art du film et des nouveaux médias*, Klincksieck, Paris 2013; *Cinema and Art as Archive: Form, Medium, Memory*, edited by F. Federici, C. Saba, Mimesis, Milano 2014; *Memory in Motion: Archives, Technology, and the Social*, edited by I. Blom, T. Lundemo, E. Røssaak, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2016; *Found Footage Experience. Pratiche del riuso cinematografico e forme del contemporaneo*, edited by R. Catanese, G. Ravesi, in «Imago», n. 24, 2021.

³⁶ Cf. *The State of Post-Cinema: Tracing the Moving Image in the Age of Digital Dissemination*, edited by

archival effect was – it also appears to revitalise a line of interest that has existed since the advent of sound film, which has been devoted to filming and recording musical performances.

More importantly, a common strategy in remediating found footage and archival materials often consists of drawing on musical practices and techniques such as remixing, looping, and sampling. Within the frame of Black culture, these techniques are not limited to a mere exercise in citational style but rather employ the methods of the Black musical tradition and genres: the polyrhythm and non-linearity that emphasise complex temporalities (Boyce); the hip-hop segmentation and phrasing (McQueen); the intensity of blues, the antiphonal construction of gospel, and free jazz improvisation (Jafa). Jafa, for instance, explicitly draws on the idea of what he calls «Black visual intonation»³⁷. This concept involves rendering both image and sound unstable by constructing the film's phrasing on the rhythms of African American music, particularly the cadence and vocal intonation of blues and free jazz. Specifically, the artist emphasises a form of resistance of Black sonorities against the white visual tradition, seeking «techniques, ways to get visual movement in cinema that has something of what Black vocal intonation does in Black music»³⁸.

Although Jafa is more explicit about his understanding of sound-driven Black aesthetics, music and singing voices play a leading role in all the three works described above. Indeed, they profoundly affect the image: degraded under flashes of light that partially (Boyce), completely (McQueen) occupying the screen, or reduced to an almost still image (Jafa) – tactics already employed in many experimental films and certain auteur works. According to Gilles Deleuze:

M. Hagener, V. Hediger, A. Strohmaier, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2016; M. DE ROSA, V. HEDIGER, *Post-What? Post-When? Thinking Moving Image Beyond the Post Medium/ Post-Cinema Condition*, in «Cinéma&Cie», vol. XVI, n. 26/27, Mimesis, Milano 2016.

³⁷ A. Jafa, *My Black Death*, in *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture*, edited by G. Tate, Broadway Books, New York 2003, pp. 245-257.

³⁸ C. TOMKINS, *Arthur Jafa's Radical Alienation*, in «The New Yorker», 14 December 2020: <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/12/21/arthur-jafas-radical-alienation>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024).

“The absence of image”, the black screen or the white screen, have a decisive importance in contemporary cinema. For, as Noel Burch has shown, they no longer have a simple function of punctuation, as if they marked a change, but enter into a dialectical relation between the image and its absence, and assume a properly structural value (as in Brakhage’s *Reflections on Black* in experimental cinema). [...] The screen becomes the medium for variations: the black screen and the under-exposed image, the intense blackness which lets us guess at dark volumes in process of being constituted, or the black marked by a fixed or moving luminous point, and all the combinations of black and fire; the white screen and the over-exposed image, the milky image, or the snowy image whose dancing seeds are to take shape³⁹.

Moreover, they not only appropriate pre-existing materials to perform a counter-narrative but also extend their iconoclastic gesture from the image to the medium itself, metaphorically injuring it as a means to emphasise its complicity in the visual racialisation of Black subjectivities, thereby bringing its sonic counterpart to the fore. At the same time, in a complementary and even contradictory manner, they also appear to revitalise the longstanding phonographic tradition that, by recording sounds, relegates the image to the background, allowing it to linger in a limbo without the certainty of rejoining its sonic counterpart. Notably, the radicality with which these artists approach visuals clearly alludes to the broader context of colonialism, as well as the historical and ongoing struggles faced by Black individuals and communities, emphasising the intensity of their experiences.

Simultaneously, while the presence of sunlight and solar explosions may suggest a subtle reference to the poetics of Afrofuturism, these works do not present the risk of depoliticisation, as they do not relocate the issue of race into a timeless space, which could lead to radicalisation rather than countering the otherness and alterity of Black bodies⁴⁰. Conversely, in the context of a broader

³⁹ G. DELEUZE, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2001, p. 200. Cf. N. BURCH, *Theory of Film Practice*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1981.

⁴⁰ This is not the appropriate context for an in-depth discussion on the issue, whose implications, even in the most recent interpretation of Afro-accelerationism, are broad and complex. Therefore, for illustrative purposes, cf. at least M. SYMS, *Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, 2013; M. WARK, *Black Accelerationism*, in Public Seminar, 27 January 2017: <<http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/01/black-accelerationism/>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024); A. DEAN, *Notes on Blacceleration*, in

cultural critique of ocularcentrism in Western modernity and amid a general reassessment of Blackness in both history and the present, these artists question the role that the scopic regime has played in culturally constructing race and in reifying Black bodies and sonorities. They clearly identify the auditory regime as a distinct field for the representation and affirmation of Black subjectivities and non-white cultures, viewing it as a counterpart to Western visual culture.

Conclusions

We have seen how, despite the slightly different formal solutions employed, the cases analysed in this study construct a suspended, near-abstract space that seems to demand a symbolic and material withdrawal of the moving image, pushing it toward a kind of zero degree. This strategy aims to affirm the failure of figuration – in representing and accounting for inhumanity against Black subjectivities – and the waning faith in the epistemological possibility of visibility itself. Complementarily, these works also demonstrate how sound functions as a primary and driving force that shapes and transforms visual narratives. This creates a seamless continuity between text, performance, and the medium⁴¹, while postulating the spectator not only as a viewer, but equally as a listener.

Consequently, this investigation has sought to underscore the quest for new descriptive categories capable of challenging traditional notions of the sound-image relationship, an endeavour that gains particular relevance when considered through the lens of Black discursivity. In this regard, Black aesthetics epitomise a broader shift towards sound-driven approaches in contemporary artistic practices, including those previously and reductively identified as moving-image-based, which are increasingly open to engaging with emergent subjectivities and the cultural and political dimensions of listening.

This growing emphasis on sound has been conceptualised using the term aural impulse. While the notion of aurality pertains to a semantic field that refers

«e-flux journal», n. 87, 2017, <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/169402/notes-on-black-celeration/>> (last accessed: 11 November 2024); C. ATTIMONELLI, *L'Afrofuturismo e la crisi dell'umanesimo. Prospettive recenti, visioni attuali e linguaggi futuri in Kodwo Eshun*, in *Più brillante del sole. Avventure nella fantasonica*, edited by K. Eshun, Nero, Roma 2021.

⁴¹ Cf. A. CECCHI, *La musica fra testo, performance e media. Forme e concetti dell'esperienza musicale*, Neo-Classica, Roma 2020.

to the receptive counterpart of orality – which, as discussed, is fundamental for the representation of Black subjectivities – the word impulse denotes the urge and desire to act, thus encapsulating the essence of black performativity⁴². The audiovisual text is then translated into an event, primarily an aural event, through a process of negation and/or separation, in which the image is either compromised or compelled to disappear entirely, indicating an unresolved relationship with the world and its (visual) representations.

To conclude, such an alienating effect is akin to that geared by colonialism towards the «wretched of the earth», as keenly described by Stuart Hall⁴³ and Frantz Fanon: «There is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge»⁴⁴. It embodies the profound fragility of Black life, and both personal and collective existence navigated on edge, in response to which the image either withdraws or explodes.

⁴² COOK, *Beyond the Score*, cit.

⁴³ Cf. J. AKOMFRAH, *The Stuart Hall Project*, 2013.

⁴⁴ F. FANON, *Black Skin, White Mask*, Grove Press, New York 2008, p. XII.