

# GLADSTONE

Linda Yablonsky, "In New York, Arthur Jafa sets record straight on Scorsese's Taxi Driver,"  
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## In New York, Arthur Jafa sets record straight on Scorsese's Taxi Driver

In two shows in New York, at 52 Walker and Gladstone, Jafa gets to the dark side of Black life

**Linda Yablonsky**

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Rewind: a still from BG, Arthur Jafa's retelling of the final scene of *Taxi Driver*  
Courtesy of Gladstone gallery

In whatever medium Arthur Jafa works (video, photography, sculpture, or painting), his primary subject—his calling, even—is Blackness. Essentially, he is an archivist of historical sound and image.

From his obsessive collecting and editing have evolved such magisterial video compilations as *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) and the Venice Biennale Golden Lion-winning *The White Album* (2018). Neither locates its specific sources, but both provide an effective counterweight to the values and aggressions of a forcibly dominant white culture that has borrowed just as freely from Black material. The difference is that Jafa doesn't claim to own those sources, only the layered compositions he makes of them.

Now comes \*\*\*\*\* at Gladstone Gallery, an appropriation of a different sort. Viewers can readily identify its source: the penultimate scene from Martin Scorsese's 1977 film, *Taxi Driver*. Beginning with the sociopathic protagonist's murder of Sport, the man who pimps out Jodie Foster's teenage prostitute, Jafa shows us Robert DeNiro's Travis Bickle, but Sport, played by Harvey Keitel in the film, is now Scar, a Black actor (Jerrel O'Neal) who speaks Sport's lines and makes the same moves. Black actors also fill the roles of the other men killed in the bloodbath; ditto the police who come into the room, guns drawn.

The scene, including its famous overhead shot and long tracking shot through the hallways and into the street, repeats and repeats, from different starting points and cut to different rhythms, throughout the nearly 75 minutes of Jafa's film. After several repetitions, some opening-night viewers left the Gladstone's 21st Street space, thinking they had seen the whole loop. They hadn't. Jafa inserted one take where Bickle kills himself, and gave Scar two hummed monologues taken from song lyrics and poems he talk-sings to, including *As*, the hit from Stevie Wonder's 1977 album, *Songs in the Key of Life*.

As a white viewer in decades-long thrall to the cinematic lyricism of *Taxi Driver*, I did not think it needed fixing. Notwithstanding its somewhat coy title *BG* arrives at a moment when schools across the US are removing significant elements of Black American history from their textbooks or banishing it altogether. *Taxi Driver* is also very much about its time, its place, and most of all its white protagonist, whose barely repressed racial hatred explodes in a hailstorm of deadly gunfire, from which he emerges as a living (white) folk hero.

That emancipating coda for an unredeemable figure was the one big problem I had with the film in 1977, while the rest of it, including the unbridled racism of other white characters, felt brutally realistic. It was as hard to take as it was supposed to be. For Jafa, who saw the film as a teenager, something else was unbelievable: that the men in the brothel were white, when that business then as the province of Black entrepreneurs.

Evidently, Paul Schrader's original screenplay called for Black actors to play those roles, but with racial tensions in American cities running high, the studio shot down the idea. Jafa waited thirty years for the technology that allowed him to set the record straight—and own it. His seamless repurposing of the scene didn't change my regard for *Taxi Driver*, which also derived from an earlier movie, John Ford's 1956 western, *The Searchers*, but I doubt that I will be able to think about it the same way ever again.

- Arthur Jafa: \*\*\*\*\* , until 4 May, Gladstone, New York