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Crowds played a prominent role in early cinema and cinema theory. While bourgeois commentators drew on contemporary crowd theory by Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud to articulate their worries about the affective dynamics of collective spectatorship, the political potential of such collectivity—on- and off-screen—became key to cultural theory and film aesthetics as well.[1] The on-screen presence of crowds particularly shaped the political aesthetics of both socialism and fascism.[2] After 1945, however, crowds lost this central status in Western (independent) cinema: with their promise tainted by the specter of fascist and Stalinist (mob) violence, masses became exceedingly difficult to show as political actors.[3] Deleuze famously declared that "*the people are missing*" in "modern political cinema."[4] Closer to our own media-ecologically post-cinematic moment, audiovisual representations of transnational protest movements from Tahrir Square (2010), Occupy Wall Street (2011), and Gezi Park (2013) to Black Lives Matter (BLM) (2013–) sparked a forceful comeback of political assembly in cultural theory.[5] Across theoretical and political affiliations (spanning Brian Massumi's interest in spontaneous affective attunement and Jodi Dean's Leninist *Crowds and Party*), this literature from the 2010s

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tends to celebrate the crowd as potentially liberating or revolutionary by virtue of its dynamic more than any "pre-given political content."[6] "The crowd does not have a politics," Dean claims. "It is the opportunity for politics."[7] Only Judith Butler sounded a more cautious note as early as 2015 in light of the recurrence of historical specters: a "surging multitude" of "active bodies assembled on the street" would "include lynch mobs" as well as "anti-Semitic or racist or fascist congregations," Butler warned with reference to a German anti-immigrant organization's assemblies in the name of "the people."[8]

The transnational ascent of authoritarian populisms and new fascisms has since intensified this spectral superimposition of the (virtually progressive) crowd with the (fascist) mob. When Republican politicians in the United States tried to downplay the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol by claiming equivalences with BLM rallies, liberal and leftist commentators were rightly outraged.[9] Nonetheless, dominant scholarly faith in the liberating dynamic of crowds was shaken. Didn't the Capitol rioters echo a bit too eerily Jodi Dean's description of the creatively violent crowd finding its satisfaction in the "destruction of boundaries" and the slamming of "windows and doors"?[10] Had "political content" inverted the "egalitarian possibility" prefigured in the crowd's "breach" of the given into Le Bon's violent "mob" after all?[11] (Ironically, Dean's description of the crowd's dynamic draws on Le Bon's anticrowd treatise.)[12] Given the danger of such conversion, (how) can we distinguish promising from terrifying crowd dynamic?[13] Initial attempts to answer this question turned, not least, to the topoi of aesthetic crowd analysis developed in response to twentieth-century fascism. With reference to the wording of Donald Trump's infamous Twitter call to assemble ("Be there, will be wild!"), Jack Halberstam underlined that the Capitol riot was actually "organized," not "wild" in the sense in which his *Wild Things* (2020) reclaims the notion of conceptualizing "unrestrained forms of embodiment" and "the refusal to submit to social regulation."[14] According to Siegfried Kracauer, Susan Sontag, and Walter Benjamin, fascism organized the masses around an "all-powerful, hypnotic leader figure," whereas proletarian class consciousness loosened this "compact mass," and revolutionary Soviet cinema, as Michael Tratner has it, dissolved the leader figure into "swirling energetic masses."[15]

In some respects, these old distinctions in fact seem to get at what matters most in the political context in the United States today. In this outrageous configuration at hand, in which the special counsel didn't dare to charge Trump with inciting an insurrection even before the US Supreme Court declared his partial

immunity (and he returned to office with a heightened sense of impunity), shouldn't this leader's role and (individual) accountability be at the center of it all?[16] This urgent political insistence is, however, insufficient for a fuller scholarly account, even apart from the general complication that leftist theory and aesthetics from Soviet cinema to today have not as clearly let go of leader figures as suggested in the above summary.[17] An aesthetic analysis of January 6 first needs to account for the twofold scenario of rally and subsequent storming in Trump's (however unintentional) absence. Any audiovisual comparison with twentieth-century scenarios would need to draw on footage of orchestrated riots in addition to films such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* that were at the center of Kracauer's and Sontag's analysis. A more delicate question is about how the distribution of leadership functions—along with those of image production—is in fact different in the age of social media and smartphone cameras.[18] Lauren Berlant's earlier analysis of the Trump phenomenon, which intertwined psychoanalytic and affect-theoretical approaches to foreground questions of (real and imagined) agency, might offer a way of taking the pole of "wildness" in Trump's seemingly paradoxical Twitter call more seriously. The "Trump Emotion Machine," Berlant argued, delivers a sense of affective liberation and imagined sovereignty—of "feeling ok, acting free"—in that his unabashedly hateful tweets and speeches grant his supporters "freedom from shame" and the license to counter their own late capitalist experiences of disempowerment with the insistence that "one's internal noise . . . matter[s]."[19] Beyond the legal context of failed Trump conviction, might such layered accounts of the folds of ideology and affect, leadership, and on-the-ground crowd dynamic ultimately indicate more promising political orientations for our contemporary moment as well?

Against the backdrop of these questions, my contribution to this dossier attempts a fine-tuned approach to the aesthetic politics of crowds. Can we, I started out wondering, in fact develop political distinctions from the aesthetic angle deployed in twentieth-century crowd theory? How do progressive, revolutionary, antiracist assemblies look, sound, move, and feel differently from fascist "mobs"? To answer these questions, I propose a closer look at crowd choreographies: assemblages of bodily movement and performance, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and sound. My use of the choreography concept draws on Alana Gerecke and Laura Levin, who have profiled it to encompass a spectrum of practices from individual design—or leadership—to distributive agency in networks saturated with affect and power across media and artistic-political contexts: from theater and fiction film to documentary media

accounts of street assemblies.[20] With its genealogies in the fields of performance and dance, the choreography concept facilitates an emphasis on the aesthetic dynamic of bodily movement, rhythm, affect, arrangement, and sound. Simultaneously, it poses questions of direction in the sense of both aesthetic design and political incitement as infused with layers of ideology, intertextuality, and narrative. The concept thereby invites me to interweave the divergent analytical models in play in the analyses referenced above: the contemporary work focused on the potentials of (affective) crowd dynamic—with its ironic echoes of early twentieth-century *anti*crowd phenomenology—and the twentieth-century (psychoanalytic) emphasis on leadership.[21] In other words, the choreography concept enables layered analyses that entwine interests in distributive agency with the possibility to account for individual responsibility and allows underlining the performativity of movement and form (irreducible to "pre-given political content") without concluding that "the crowd doesn't have a history."[22] Histories, I underline, are imported to any assembly through cardboard slogans, costumes, flags, and other props (think of the noose displayed at the Capitol on January 6) but also through the gendered and racialized perceptions of bodies and gestures, through poses, routes, and rhythms of speech modeled upon earlier assemblies.[23] Reading for these histories forms a crucial part of making sense of the aesthetic politics of crowd phenomena.

For archival anchoring, I organize the following investigation around Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* (2018). With its fictional and documentary layers, and rich intertextuality, the film connects variously mediated representations of the Black Power movement and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to more recent images of BLM and neofascist crowds. Although the film was already in preproduction during the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, one critic read it as a "storytelling" answer to its concluding documentary footage of the deadly violence and Donald Trump's refusal to distinguish between supremacist and protester crowds.[24] I take up this suggestion as a useful heuristic, with the qualification that "storytelling" be understood not simply in terms of plot or genre but as a complex, intertextually saturated, performative practice of audiovisual assembly.[25] As Lee himself has put it, his cinematic aesthetic is a practice of making "joints": films that do "not" pretend to being "one thing" but instead "connect stuff," or noticeably link together heterogeneous thematic, stylistic, and musical elements.[26] Along with Ron Stallworth's KKK infiltration memoir, generic elements of the cop comedy, and the heterogeneous stylistic legacies of blaxploitation, this encompasses a range of crowd

choreographies, such as the concluding Charlottesville footage, largely from a *VICE News Tonight* documentary; visual and sound records of the Black Power movement; and key crowd sequences from the film's classical Hollywood intertexts.[27] Less directly, we may also encounter historical representations of fascist crowd iconographies and a broader range of contemporary representations of BLM and white supremacist crowds.

BlacKkKlansman sparked some controversy for its cinematic navigation of liberal versus radical politics, including diverging charges that it distinguishes fascist from progressive crowds either too easily, by presenting the KKK in merely cartoonish terms, or not clearly enough, to the effect of suggesting its own equivalences.[28] While refuting these charges, my own intervention is not oriented at a full-fledged defense of the film. I grant its unevenness, arguably (as critics have suggested) coinduced by its joyful indulgence in Hollywood aesthetics,[29] or, I specify, less in Hollywood aesthetics per se than in some of Hollywood's traditional topoi for containing the radical political of crowds.[30] I draw on *BlacKkKlansman*, then, less toward an auteurist appreciation in its own right than for how its intertextual network guides me in sketching broader reflections on the aesthetic politics of crowds, touching on very different contexts from classical Hollywood via European cinema to broader contemporary media ecologies.[31] Still, I do suggest that *BlacKkKlansman* overall develops a rich and nuanced comparative account of politically diverging crowds that begins significant critical work toward such broader reflections.

Among the first round of scholarship on *BlacKkKlansman*, the most interesting to my undertaking is Amelia Saunders's contribution, which positions the film in dialogue with 1970s apparatus theory. *BlacKkKlansman*, Saunders argues, "encloses its conventional, feel-good Hollywood police procedural"—based on Stallwarth's memoir—"within modernist formal strategies."[32] Saunders convincingly describes how the film's opening explicates that cinema's "address is not neutral, but raced," anchoring the "seeing and hearing that will be offered to the spectator . . . in a history of white supremacy."[33] Opening footage from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is followed by a propaganda rehearsal of "Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard," played by Alec Baldwin, the actor known for impersonating Trump on *Saturday Night Live*, with footage from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) projected "on him, behind him, through him." At the end of this prologue, Saunders suggests, the camera "slides toward" a projector and thus "figures an entry" into "the Hollywood fiction machine" before the protagonist Ron is introduced, as he is about to enter the police force.[34] And when his story comes

to a close, the film transitions back out of this fiction machine with its shift to documentary footage of the Charlottesville rally and a tribute to Heather Heyer (not part of the *VICE News Tonight* documentary), "to reveal the nature of the game it has been playing and its limitations."[35]

While I agree that this framing is important, the way in which Saunders contrasts the body of Lee's film with its opening and closing sequences does not do justice to the intricate intertwining of documentary and fiction elements—and modernist and mainstream strategies—in the film's main plot as well. At the opening of this main plot, a title informs us "Dis joint is based upon some fo' real, fo' real sh*t." *BlacKkKlansman*'s docufictional "reframing of the 'real'" operates in mediatized folds that do not align into a clear-cut fiction versus documentary opposition, and his "joining" together of disparate audiovisual materials and generic references cuts across the associated critical binary of genre versus modernist unveiling.[36] Accordingly, I propose a layered reading also of the film's various crowd choreographies. As part of her interest in reconsidering 1970s film theory, Saunders underlines the film's focus on "the production of audiences and audience effects," more resonant with a notion of Althusserian interpellation—and the psychoanalytic interest in leadership—than with concepts of spontaneous attunement such as Massumi's collective event.[37] I agree that even at their wildest, *BlacKkKlansman*'s crowds are organized through leadership functions. However, the main plot does not dramatize this process of interpellation as "producing responses in a . . . more or less automatic fashion" on both ends of the political spectrum.[38] Rather, the following reading of Lee's crowd choreographies within the network of audiovisual records he cites and evokes will demonstrate that the film carefully configures both echoes and contrasts between different crowds in their different historical contexts, audiovisually assembling nuanced distinctions between the film's Black Power and KKK and BLM and contemporary white supremacist crowds.

For the opening footage from *Gone with the Wind*, Lee picks the famous crane shot from the sequence of the defeat of the Confederate army after the siege of Atlanta.[39] In the narrative context of the 1939 film (cut off by Lee's citational montage but likely operative in the minds of many American audience members), the scene shows the agitated Scarlett searching for the doctor to assist with Melanie's childbirth, a personal call he will decline with reference to the vastness of urgent collective need at hand. As the camera slowly moves out and pans across the field in the crane shot, it showcases Scarlett's disappearance into the ever bigger collective

of wounded soldiers on the ground, one of *Gone with the Wind*'s most dramatic audiovisual gestures of constituting the Southern collective of defeat.[40] Before the tattered Confederate flag comes into view in the foreground, the sense of movement on the ground quiets down, effecting a moment of contrast with the dominance of (fleeing or marching) movements in most of *Gone with the Wind*'s crowd sequences. The part elegiac, part dramatic score increasingly drowns out individual voices, and bodies configure into geometrical patterns in a monochromatic assembly with their nonhuman supports and the red earth they depend on in their vulnerable state. The effect of patterning echoes what Kracauer analyzes as fascist ornamentation in the European context of interwar culture.[41] In *Gone with the Wind*'s nostalgic world-making assemblage, this moment of ornamentation interweaves diverging emphases on disempowerment and overwhelming panoramic mass presence. Lee's citation further underlines disempowerment by framing the (size-reduced) 4:3 image as an archival one with prominent black margins on all four sides. Nonetheless, the shot's twofold emphasis introduces his overall treatment of white supremacy in the film: on the one hand, *BlacKkKlansman*'s satirical portrayal ridicules dimwitted drunk clan members; on the other hand, white supremacy is shown to be institutionally and phenomenologically dominant on society's screens to a degree that cannot be laughed away.

A cut then facilitates the transition to "Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard," played, as indicated, by Alec Baldwin to evoke his Saturday Night Live impersonation of Trump. Lee's mise-en-scène conjoins time periods. In black and white, we see Beauregard at his desk, in formal attire, with 1950s props—and another Confederate flag in the background. Before the footage from *The Birth of the Nation*, Lee inserts documentary images of school integration after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the immediate historical object of Beauregard's hateful diatribe. His opening words—"they say we may have lost the battle, but we didn't lose the war"—explicate the historical genealogy of twentieth- and twenty-first-century white supremacy indicated by Lee's montage. While verbalizing the recurring right-wing narrative of victimhood visualized in *Gone with the Wind*, Beauregard turns the narrative mood from nostalgia to hateful attack: a shift then visually underscored by the footage from *The Birth of a Nation* projected onto him. For this projection, Lee assembles images from different moments in the 1915 film, cueing audience memories out of narrative context: glimpses of *The Birth of a Nation*'s hatefully portrayed "black mob" looking at us, the sexual violence sequence in the forest, the KKK's ritualistic dedication of the cross with blood, and its concluding

triumphant march through the town.[42] Indicatively, Lee omits the film's preceding repeated views of the KKK horseback riders majestically moving in more or less military formations: shots resonant with how Kracauer and Sontag describe the formations of fascism, which (as Tratner words) provide "proper images of the nation, as a collection of identical white bodies."[43] Instead, Lee chooses footage from the concluding sequence in which unmasked women have joined into the now less orderly, more heterogeneous, crowd: if you will, a white "mob" dominantly moving toward us.

The overall impression left by the excerpted footage is one of extreme ghastliness and fragmentation, further underlined by the effect of several intertitle slides also projected on Beauregard's face: white supremacy is threatening more than laughable. However, this affective charge is counteracted by the fact that *BlacKkKlansman* clearly marks Baldwin's speech as a performance. Repeated interruptions and puns, at moments silly, expose his discourse as the staging of a script, once more intertwining the insistence on white supremacy's center-stage presence with (now openly satirical) diminution. For the film audience, this choreography of film projection and satirized rhetorical agitation effects a complicated address—or, in Saunders' terms, interpellation.[44] As Baldwin looks directly at us, "asking *you* to operate as" the supremacist address's "bodily support," the interruptions establishing a diegetic situation of address bracket this call.[45] Short of resolving audience discomfort into a comfortable viewing experience (resonant with one's *Saturday Night Live* memories), the sequence seems designed to effect an affectively complex, fraught response.

This complexity, I argue, carries through into several key sequences of *BlacKkKlansman*'s main plot that expand the film's choreographic investigations of audience address and alignment, now showcasing diegetic audience crowds on-screen. One of these sequences returns us to *The Birth of the Nation* in directly comparing assemblies of the KKK and the Colorado Black Student Union chapter, a collective that plays a much larger role in Lee's adaptation than in Stallworth's memoir. *BlacKkKlansman* intercuts—and aurally layers—one of their meetings, where Harry Belafonte, as the civil rights activist Jerome Turner, tells of the 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington, with a KKK induction ceremony and screening of Griffith's 1915 film. This visual comparison in particular gave rise to critical concerns about equivalence. In Saunders's words, *BlacKkKlansman* shows "the two audiences respond to two different forms of text in the exact same way."[46] The sequence does in fact end on a note of parallel: the Black student union meeting and the KKK event culminate in collective "Black" versus "white" power

chants, with arms (and fists) raised rhythmically. I am inclined to read this montage moment as an audiovisual citation of the documentary footage of the Charlottesville rally inserted at the end of the film, including a fragment that directly links—and in fact seemingly equates—"white lives" and "Black lives matter" chants.

Lee's film, I argue, develops its "storytelling" answer to this footage through its detailed choreographic genealogy of the dynamic in the two assemblies leading up to the respective chants. Instead of parallel, the bulk of this comparative investigation produces a forceful affective contrast between the two assemblies, starting with the (warm brown vs. cold bluish white) color palettes they are shot in. *BlacKkKlansman* partly relies on classical Hollywood codes for distinguishing "good crowds" from "bad ones" in this context, which the industry had developed to "control" and "channel" fears of the medium's association with potentially rebellious masses.[47] As Belafonte relates the gruesome 1916 events in a calm while emotional tone of remembrance, his large audience listens with undivided, utterly serious attention: while their faces variously express emotions of shock, distress, and mourning, the members of this "good" crowd are all "settled into being spectators of a performance of individual actions."[48] The historical photographs held by the students, at moments foregrounded in close-up, provide silent documentation of the historical economy of racist spectacle that Belafonte details, including a supremacist mob. The elderly Belafonte speaks in a seated position. As his audience tightly fills the space, including students standing behind him, the visual arrangement effects his egalitarian incorporation into the crowd. The latter effect resonates less with classical Hollywood than with the qualification—not erasure—of leadership in leftist theory from Benjamin to Hardt and Negri.[49]

At the parallel KKK event, the choreography of the formal induction ceremony held by David Duke now does echo *The Birth of the Nation*'s militarized images of the white nation, which were elided in *BlacKkKlansman*'s opening sequence, with geometrical lines and a stark emphasis on hierarchy, separating Duke's leadership persona from the anonymized KKK members in their robes. However, the small scale of the assembly and its spectral mise-en-scène bring in a vector of disempowerment here as well. The impression of order also quickly dissipates at the end of the ceremony, as the women are let into the room for a showing of *The Birth of a Nation*, which Belafonte had just referenced as a contributing factor to the historical resurgence of the KKK; a title insert further foregrounds Griffith's film as a crucial intertext. *BlacKkKlansman*'s caricature, in particular, of the obese and over-the-top loutish wife

of the most vicious local KKK member presents not only an example for his questionable cinematic gender politics but also an oblique echo of how the Hays Code recoded "concerns about the lower classes": "improper"—in Lee's iteration grotesque—"sexuality" transforms a (bad) crowd into a "lynch mob."[50] *BlacKkKlansman*'s diegetic KKK audience is quickly "swept up in a frenzy" as they rowdily throw popcorn, loudly express disgust at Black characters, and cheer for the white riders' violence.[51] At moments, the choreography of this mob visually dissolves characters into a crowd of raised arms, fragmenting—as we could word with Massumi—"*dividual*[s]" in an affective event of "fascist contagion."[52] Across sequences, this mob's transindividual "rapture" builds toward the "image of euphoric hate," as which a reviewer describes the camera's concluding investigations of the eyes of hooded KKK members during a cross burning right before (and for a moment aurally layered with) the documentary Charlottesville footage.[53]

In terms of crowd analysis, Lee's contrastive montage thus intertwines a diagnosis of interpellation—by both leader figures and audiovisual texts—with significant emphasis on the affective dynamic on the ground. The circulation of fascist affect is clearly induced and fed by speeches and screens soaked with ideology (rather than being spontaneous), but it also seems to operate as a force in its own right. Lee's satirical iteration of the KKK's "liberated" brutality echoes earlier twentieth-century (anti)crowd psychologies more than the optimism of twenty-first-century crowd theory and affords little toward a (nonclichéd) discussion of distributed agency on the ground. But the contrast between the KKK and Black Power crowds established in this sequence does provide a choreographic answer to the concluding footage from the Charlottesville *VICE News Tonight* documentary, which fails to develop an equally clear audiovisual contrast between white supremacists and the BLM protesters. This failure, as I see it, cannot simply be blamed on *VICE*'s much noted "raw" aesthetics of "close" encounter.[54] In some respects, the documentary does develop a narrative response to Trump's (cited) condemnation of the "display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides." Thus, it includes a BLM speaker's explicit verbal pushback on camera and assembles evidence for the neo-Nazis' avowed preparation for violence, as contrasted with the shock and outrage of the BLM protesters after the car drove into their crowd, killing Heyer and injuring others. But the *VICE News Tonight* documentary muddles this narrative answer by how it incorporates rhetorical gestures of parallel—including crowd footage of leftist aggression along with the before-mentioned visual comparison and verbal explication of the two crowds' "rival chants"—into

an asymmetrical overall design. The documentary focuses on the supremacists, one of whom is elevated to quasi-protagonist status, and its extended footage of the (rhetorically helpless) embedded reporter following them around creates ample on-screen space for their unabashed hate speech.[55] Meanwhile, the BLM protesters come into view more fully only after the deadly attack, largely in choreographies of chaos, panic, and anger. Arguably, the affective counterpoints provided by these choreographies are too ambiguous and can be misread as uncanny—and similarly emotionally out-of-control—echoes of the Nazi hate on full display.

BlacKkKlansman unfolds clearer choreographic distinctions between "hatred"—in Audre Lorde's words, oriented at "death and destruction"—and "anger" as an energy that can fuel activism toward "change."[56] Lee's cinematic development of these distinctions is fostered by his design's opposite asymmetrical slant: while *BlacKkKlansman*'s satirical portrayal of white supremacy is less than complex, the film choreographs the Black Power movement with much more nuance. Particularly crucial is a long earlier sequence, narratively motivated by the fact that Ron's police superior also projects equivalences between supremacist and Black Power crowds. Our protagonist's initial undercover assignment is to infiltrate not the KKK but rather the Black student union chapter at the occasion of a Kwame Ture visit, which his superior frames as a security concern since Ture is a "damn good speaker" who needs to be prevented from "getting into the minds of the good black people here in Colorado." This diegetic task of prevention will not succeed: the film's powerful choreographies of the event trace how Ture's audience does largely affectively align and invites the film audience to imaginatively coassemble in political solidarity. But Lee's cinematic refutation of left-right equivalencies works precisely by affording complexity and critical reflexivity also with regard to the politics of radical Black assembly.

BlacKkKlansman accomplishes its global affective affirmation of the student union assembly—including its tonalities of anger—in part through a flamboyant cinematographic gesture of homage to Black beauty and humanity. This gesture of homage reads as a Spike Lee iteration of a more common technique of reassembling the "missing people" in contemporary (post)cinema, which has its genealogies in early twentieth-century socialist—as opposed to fascist—crowd choreographies: an intertwining of emphasized individuality with collective alignment.[57] This technique is prominently deployed, for example, in Sabaah Folayan's Ferguson documentary *Whose Streets?*, which develops its powerfully affective call to solidarity in part through the abundant use of individual close-ups in both

activist interviews and crowd sequences.[58] In *BlacKkKlansman*, when Ture underlines Black beauty in response to internalized racism, we see not only individual reaction shots of the protagonists but also cutaway close-ups of various anonymous audience members. Lit warmly against a black background to the effect of letting "the rest of the crowd seemingly" fade "away," these shots were filmed in a different room and edited in, in flamboyant disregard for continuity, for accents of pronounced stillness and slow movement.[59] In line with Lee's overall aesthetics, affective intensity is not contingent upon hiding the artificiality of composition but instead is expressively generated from heightened physical presentation to quasi-documentary effect: unknown extras are featured as individually special in their beauty and dignity.[60]

As Ture emphasizes the importance of intertwining individuality and collectivity also verbally, Lee's montage of faces deploys individual facial mimicry to demonstrate shared rapt attention—but not straightforward (or even "automatic") assent in the absence of individual agency.[61] The close-ups present still counterpoints to the stirring, clapping, echoing, murmuring, cheering, and shouting crowd, and the faces they feature variously show traces of admiration and attunement but also concern—along with the serious, active thinking that Ture calls for in addressing his audience specifically as "college students." The affective complexity of the overall sequence includes the circumstance that Ture (played by Corey Hawkins) rhetorically performs acts of racist interpellation in a way that complicates audience response, in partial analogy with Baldwin's opening performance of hate. Unlike Baldwin, to be sure (whom we may know as Trump parodist but see in the role of evil Beauregard), Ture/Hawkins embeds the rhetoric of hate into an antiracist address that calls on a preexisting "sense of being-in-common," perhaps a Black commons in analogy to José Muñoz's conceptualization of the "brown commons."[62] This commons preexists the particular moment of interpellation by a visiting leader. The phenomenological emphasis and affirmative bent of the "commons" paradigm supplements the critical diagnosis of interpellation—here by a speaker less embedded into the crowd to egalitarian effect than Belafonte in the sequence discussed earlier. Brown and Black "commons are . . . 'provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm'": by histories of racism, slavery, and genocide.[63] However, they are about "contact," not the "continuousness" of a deindividualized mass: Muñoz underlines that "affect traverses the rhythmic spacing between those singularities that compose the plurality of the . . . commons," and the fact that "disagreement within the commons—what Jacques Rancière

would call dissensus—is of vital importance" to its "insurrectionist promise."[64]

Lee further dramatizes such dissensus through the awkward position of the protagonist in the crowd, who is aware of his white colleagues listening in from outside while Ture talks about the violence perpetrated by "white, racist cops," and claims that he would rather see a "brother" kill one of these cops than a Vietnamese in the ongoing war. Reaction shots twice show Ron's colleagues in the car, turning to look at each other, as well as Ron's concerned face in close-up as Ture's mention of "retribution" provokes (some) clapping in the crowd. By thus incorporating conflict and dissonance into its choreographies of assembly, *BlacKkKlansman* unfolds the tensions within Ture's concluding activist invocation of a radically inclusive, egalitarian collective: "All power to all the people."[65] The chanting of "We, the people," Butler cautions, "is always missing some group of people it claims to represent."[66] Importantly, recognizing these tensions does emphatically not disqualify all chanting—or align *BlacKkKlansman*'s audience with the police.[67] Despite (and by way of) all complications, Lee works with anger and determined energy as much as critical reflection in inviting the film audience to coassemble in solidarity with Ture and the diegetic crowd when, for example, they stand up, fists raised, to rhythmically take up his antiwar slogan "Hell, no, we won't go." When Ture then swerves back to the topic of domestic police violence—"they are killing us like dogs"—his speech powerfully cues BLM associations in a callout to twenty-first-century audiences. Then, Ture relaxes the atmosphere with a joke and a moment of quieter tonality in his speech—his audience sits down again—accompanied with another series of cutaway close-ups. Ture's concluding words, however, return to the mode of agitation with the "All power to all the people" slogan, once more rousing the audience, now including, albeit hesitantly, Ron.

The next day, Ron will assure the police superior not to worry, and his colleagues concur. Granted, they could be wrong: Rob's undercover double, Flip, also initially thinks that the KKK does not present a danger, doubting that it is "even capable." But the rationale is different with respect to Ture's incendiary Black student union speech: although "folks were hanging on every word," it was "just talk," Ron explains; the "vibe" was not violent. As the film audience, I believe we are invited to concur. Another crowd sequence following the student assembly—and immediately preceding the next-day discussion at police headquarters—choreographically reinforces the outlined affective nuance and political distinctions. In a bar, Ron succeeds in drawing Patrice, the president of the

student union whom he met in the beginning of the evening, into a lose crowd of dancers. He does so surprisingly quickly after she reported being "frightened" by the racist and sexist cop assault she just experienced while escorting Ture to his hotel. Once more, the overall sequence thus features stark affective incongruities, but the close framings of rhythmically moving bodies and collective singing on the dance floor evoke a vibe that is vibrantly joyful rather than threatening violence.

In conclusion, Lee's choreographies clearly distinguish Black, egalitarian crowds from fascist ones in terms of their affective assembly, even as he does not shy away from also exploring moments of parallel in the interpellation and affective dynamic of different activist crowds. This layered configuration combines a clear verdict on hateful supremacism—laughable but far from harmless—with an affirmation of Black mourning and anger while affording a cinematic dialogue about the contours of a progressive politics of collectivity. Ron, whose individualist quest within the system separates him from his Black collective, is presented as equally heroic and naive: he thinks that America would never elect a fascist into higher office. The overall film develops the dialogue between his attempt to change the system from the inside and radical Black Power politics through Ron's romantic entanglement with Patrice, which culminates in their united, armed, blaxploitation-inspired camera ride toward the haunting cross burning scene, almost immediately following their discussion of irreconcilable political differences. By extension, the political controversy thus playfully resolved—or situationally put on hold with a strategic joining of forces—may be about the balance of separatism and egalitarian universalism. Lee's editing of the concluding Charlottesville footage ends in a highly affective tribute to Heather Heyer, the white BLM protester killed that day, a tribute that is not part of the *VICE News Tonight* documentary. Following the explicit messages "rest in power" and "no place for hate," the final shot shows a reverse American flag, the color of which is slowly faded out: a narrative closure in mourning, which perhaps even evokes the design of the "Blue Lives Matter" flag, albeit without the blue stripe. Making sense of this association in the context at hand, I read the film's ending as operating in the spirit of Paul Gilroy's call to move "away from 'race' . . . toward a confrontation with the enduring power of racisms."[68] For *all* lives to matter (beyond the polemical abuse of this slogan by the political right), we must align in solidarity with all lives made asymmetrically vulnerable by the racism so deeply ingrained in the country's institutional fabric.

Inviting powerfully complicated affective audience journeys

with its tonal as well as stylistic incongruity, Lee's cinematic crowd politics—notwithstanding its limitations in the reliance on mainstream Hollywood codes—thus helps us model how to develop political distinctions between crowds. The political events of the last few years have made it abundantly clear that crowds are not leaning progressive by virtue of their inherent dynamic as such, as largely projected by cultural theory in the 2010s. But this does not in turn mean that all activist assembly is doomed because of how it is overshadowed by the figure of the mob—a hateful, violent crowd that twentieth-century scholarship dominantly analyzed in terms of fascist interpellation. A closer look at crowd choreographies—as assemblages of movement, rhythm, and sound arranged by more or less individual or collective artistic or political design—allows entwining these approaches toward fine-tuned political distinctions. The aesthetic politics of crowds may not always be easily determined via individual features, gestures, or chants (perhaps especially in the age of runaway cross-appropriation) or via singular topoi such as the distinction between wildness and organization, even as these motifs keep echoing through contemporary as well as historical representations. But precisely by engaging such echoes and complications, we can develop political distinctions that matter: for example, between automatic following, affective attunement, and reflective alignment with a leader, ideology, or cause or between hate, mourning, and anger in an assembly's complex affectscapes.

Notes

1. See Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche, 2001; originally published 1896); Sigmund Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse: Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993); and Hermann Duenschmann, "Cinematograph and Crowd Psychology: A Sociopolitical Study," trans. Eric Ames, in *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*, ed. Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 256–58.

2. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [2nd version]," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, *1935–38*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 101–42; and Michael Tratner, *Crowd Scenes: Movies and Mass Politics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

3. See Elizabeth Alsop, "'The Imaginary Crowd': Neorealism and the Uses of Coralità," *Velvet Light Trap* 74 (Fall 2014): 27–41. As detailed below, this trajectory is not as clear-cut for Hollywood, where earlier attempts to censor/control the power of crowds facilitated lasting codes for their deployment (see Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 2).

4. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 216.

5. See Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.

6. Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016), 8. Brian Massumi similarly expressed reluctance to specify circumstances, conditions, or forms that would allow us to distinguish between different crowd phenomena "stirring, in the same cauldron of bare activity, immanent to the same field of complexity." Brian Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest: Activist Philosophy in the Expanded Field* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2017), 17. He suggested that only "a trial-and-error approach" may facilitate such political distinctions. Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 94. More generally, see also Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso: 2016), and (with somewhat different emphases) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

7. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 8.

8. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory*, 1, 3, 182–83. Short of drawing Butler's cautious conceptual conclusions, Massumi also expressed concerns about "fascist contagion" (Massumi, *The Power*, 66).

9. Kiara Brantley-Jones, "False Equivalency between Black Lives Matter and Capitol Siege: Experts, Advocates. Comparisons Are Absurd, They Said," *ABC News*, January 16, 2021.

10. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 122 (in reading Elias Canetti).

11. Dean, 124, 8. Dean herself uses the (classically conservative) mob concept in wording that only political struggle could show retrospectively "whether a crowd was a mob or the people." Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 8.

12. Dean, e.g., 8–9, 104; cf. Le Bon, *The Crowd*.

13. Or can we, as Nadje Al-Ali wondered, make such distinctions on the basis of our own political orientations only? Nadje Al-Ali, "Global Uprising: Space and Time I: Crowds, Bodies, Affect," Seminar, Hagob Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, New York University, February 24, 2021, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-naYec75_0.

14. Dan Barry and Sheera Frenkel, "'Be There. Will Be Wild!': Trump All but Circled the Date," *New York Times*, January 6, 2021 (updated July 27, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/capitol-mob-trump-supporters.html; Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 3; and Jack Halberstam at the book presentation, Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities, Columbia University, February 1, 2021.

15. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 73–105 (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), drawing on Siegfried Kracauer; Benjamin: "The Work of Art," 129n24; and Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 91.

16. Charlie Savage, "News Analysis: How Jack Smith Structured the Trump Election Indictment to Reduce Risks," *New York Times*, August 4, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/04/us/politics/trump-indictment-jack-smith-charges.html.

17. Hardt and Negri emphasize the historical centrality of leadership, especially for the civil rights and Black Power movements (vs. BLM), to argue for an "inverted" concept of "leadership" in the service of the "multitude." Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 10, xv. Tratner's claim regarding the dissolution of the leader figure in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1926) is based on the fact that this figure, Vakulinchuk, is murdered early on, which, however, disregards the centrality of his martyrdom for the choreography of the subsequent assembly of the people. Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 77.

18. The *New York Times* dossier on January 6 details that there were "over a million mentions on social media of storming the Capitol." Dmitriy Khavin et al., "Day of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol," *New York Times*, June 30,2021,www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000007606996/capitol-riot-trump-supporters.html.

19. Lauren Berlant, "Trump, or Political Emotions," *New Inquiry*, August 5, 2016.

20. Alana Gerecke and Laura Levin, "Moving Together in an Era of Assembly," *Canadian Theater Review* 176 (Fall 2018), 6–7, with reference to its use in dance and theater studies along with Butler and Michael de Certeau.

21. In addition to Dean's explicit reliance on Le Bon cited above, the vocabulary of contagion in Massumi also reminds me of turn-of-the-twentieth-century crowd phenomenology (see, e.g., Massumi, *The Power*, 72). Freud emphasizes the crucial role of the leader. Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, 58.

22. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 8–9.

23. On hauntings and "dragging" earlier marches, see Gerecke and Levin, "Moving Together," 8.

24. Teo Bugbee, "It Happened Here," *Film Comment*, July–August 2019, 29.

25. This draws on African diaspora notions of storytelling as a performative, dialogic practice. See, e.g., Patrick E. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7. See also my own earlier conceptualizations of cinematic world making as a practice of multivectoral assemblage that configures heterogeneous elements interweaving affects, associations, bodies, gestures, memories, objects, perceptions, sensations, topoi, and tropes through images, sounds, and words, in the folds of genre, medium and technology, and the communicative loops of collective production and reception. Claudia Breger, *Making Worlds: Affect and Collectivity in Contemporary European Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). For grammatical ease, the following often does highlight Lee's creative agency as such, but we should understand it as unfolding in these collective processes.

26. Spike Lee interview. Nicolas Rapold, "Get Me Rewrite: With *BlacKkKlansman*, Spike Lee Forcefully Corrects the Record of American History Once Again," *Film Comment*, July–August 2018, 26.

27. Ron Stallworth, *Black Klansman: Race, Hate, and the Undercover Investigation of a Lifetime* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018); and "Charlottesville: Race and Terror," *VICE News Tonight*, HBO, YouTube, August 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIrcB1sAN8I. On the stylistic heterogeneity of blaxploitation, see Calum Waddell, *The Style of Sleaze: The American Exploitation Film, 1959–1977* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

28. For example, Turner diagnoses "a liberal understanding of white nationalist characteristics: hateful, atavistic, and individualistic." Justin Turner, "Film Review: BlacKkKlansman," *Crime, Media, Culture* 16, no. 1 (2020): 159. Amelia Saunders emphasizes the production of equivalences, as detailed below. Amelia Saunders, "Not Just Talk: The Politics of Enunciation in BlacKkKlansman," Saunders, *Black Camera* 13, no. 2 (2022): 234–54. Kelli Weston combines both charges in highlighting, on the one hand, the "perplexing juxtaposition" of Black Power and KKK crowds "that yields little in the way of complexity" and, on the other hand, that "white supremacy never feels quite potent enough": the KKK members are presented as "buffoons" with their "clownish ineptitude." Kelli Weston, "BlacKkKlansman Review: Spike Lee Fails to Get to the Heart of Racist America," *Sight and Sound*, September 2018, https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/blackkklansman-review-spike-lee-john-david-washington-adam-driver.

29. "At its heart," Turner claims, "*BlacKkKlansman* is a boiler-plate buddy-cop comedy." Turner, "Film Review," 157.

30. See Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, as detailed below.

31. This is in dialogue with Eleni Palis's call (to which I generally agree) to take Lee's postmodern authorship more seriously. Eleni Palis, "The Economics and Politics of Auteurism: Spike Lee and *Do the Right Thing*," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 1–21.

32. Saunders, "Not Just Talk," 235.

33. Saunders, 238.

34. Saunders, 239, identifies this projector with the *Birth of the Nation* projector, which is not as evident to me.

35. Saunders, 246.

36. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 141. On this interweaving as a characteristic of Lee's work in general, see Delphine Letort, "Adapting *BlacKkKlansman*: 'Based upon Some fo' real, fo' real sh*t,'" *Black Camera* 13, no. 2 (2022): 210.

37. Saunders, "Not Just Talk," 235. See also Massumi, *The Power*.

38. Saunders, "Not Just Talk," 236.

39. As Letort points out, the dolly shot with which Lee thus also opens his own film has "become a trademark of" his filmmaking. Letort, "Adapting *BlacKkKlansman*," 209.

40. *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939). My reading of the film differs from that of Tratner, who emphasizes Hollywood's channeling of "herd emotions into dreams of [individual] love," as the war drives Scarlett into Rhett's arms. Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 9. As indicated by the sequence at hand, the film also forcefully problematizes Tratner's insistence on individual desire, courtesy of conventional gender coding.

41. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75–86.

42. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; Kino Lorber, 2012), DVD.

43. Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 42.

44. Tratner (*Crowd Scenes*, 2, 17) critiques spectatorship theory based on its individualist assumptions but with some caution nonetheless adopts the terminology of interpellation.

45. Saunders, "Not Just Talk," 238.

46. Saunders, 249.

47. Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 25, 2.

48. Tratner, 25.

49. The "revolutionary leader," Benjamin claims, "constantly" incorporates "himself into the masses." Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 129. Hardt and Negri's *Assembly* resonantly aims to conceptualize "inverted" leadership (see note 17 above).

50. Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 4, 27. Palis acknowledges Lee's cinematic politics of gender and sexuality as a clear limitation of his postmodern auteurism. Palis, "The Economics," 3. On stylistic excess in Lee's oeuvre as also a critical—if not uniformly successfully—tool, see Todd McGowan, *Spike Lee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 13.

51. Tratner, *Crowd Scenes*, 25 (on Hollywood's classical codes).

52. Massumi, *The Power*, 8 (with Deleuze, highlighted in Massumi), 66.

53. Bugbee, "It Happened Here," 29.

54. Caspar Shaller, "Eine Ära geht zu Ende: Der amerikanische Medienkonzern Vice soll offenbar vor dem Aus stehen," *die tageszeitung*, May 6, 2023.

55. Bugbee reads the figure of this "young" (and, to explicate, feminine blond) reporter as part of the documentary's own adherence "to familiar patterns of generic convention." Bugbee, "It Happened Here," 29.

56. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1981): 8.

57. On these earlier socialist choreographies, see, e.g., Christoph Schaub, "Labor-Movement Modernism: Proletarian Collectives between *Kuhle Wampe* and Working-Class Performance Culture," *Modernism/Modernity* 25, no. 2 (2018): 330.

58. *Whose Streets?*, directed by Sabaah Folayan, codirected by Damon Davis (Magnolia Pictures, 2017), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seehHirY_90. Julia Alekseyeva made this point in her talk "'A Riot Is the Language of the Unheard': Affects of Collectivity in 21st Century American Media" at our joint session, Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, March 20, 2021, Zoom.

59. Mekado Murphy, "Visual Storytelling through 'Spikeisms,'" *New York Times*, August 5, 2018, AR-11.

60. Carl Plantinga makes the more general resonant point that *BlacKkKlansman* uses affect to encourage (neo-)Brechtian "reflective spectatorship." Carl Plantinga, "Brecht, Emotion, and the Reflective Spectator: The Case of BlacKkKlansman," *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019): 153.

61. Saunders, "Not Just Talk," 236.

62. José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2. Muñoz in turn references "the history of brown power" as following "black power," 3.

63. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 4, quoting Jane Bennett.

64. Muñoz, 2, 3, 4. See also Lauren Berlant's resonant reflections on the recent renaissance of the concept of the commons in *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

65. With reference specifically to Sylvia Rivera, Muñoz underlines how this version of the slogan—historically apparently also used by Bobby Seale in the 1960s—has been deployed to counteract the forgetting of many in most appeals to "the people." Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 132. See also "What's the History of the Source of the Slogan 'Power to the People'"?, *History Stack Exchange*, August 15, 2018, https://history.stackexchange.com/questions/47610/whats-the-history-of-the-source-of-the-slogan-power-to-the-people.

66. Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory*, 166.

67. See, e.g., Turner, "Film Review," for such a reading of the film more generally. I also received resonant audience pushback when discussing the film at the conference that formed the seed for this special issue/dossier.

68. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 9.