

1 *Summer of Soul*

The Angel of History Comes to Harlem

Catherine Russell

As an archive-based film, *Summer of Soul* is in many ways a perfect illustration of the significance of Walter Benjamin's claim that "In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant [*Aktualität*] there must be no continuity between them."¹ *Summer of Soul* is subtitled "When the revolution could not be televised," a line borrowed from Gil Scott-Heron, for whom it was a critique of the banality of white TV. The irony is, of course, that the Harlem Cultural Festival was televised in 1969, although its broadcast was limited to two one-hour segments at reputedly obscure hours with little to no publicity.² *Summer of Soul* is described in the film itself as made up of footage unseen until "now." In this chapter, I want to press a little harder on this now-time to see how this powerful concert film articulates revolutionary time through archival retrieval, digitization, and editing. The way that the film crystalizes the parallels between 1969 and 2021 in terms of Black Power, Black Lives Matter, and Black soul music produces a complex temporality that is at once utopian, mystical, and grounded in affective experience. It challenges the viewer to consider their own "now" as the precipice of a future that might echo the collective Harlem Cultural Festival experience of 1969.

For Walter Benjamin, "each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability," and "the now of recognizability is the moment of awakening."³ Does this film answer to such a recognizability? Can the original 1969 concert and its re-production 50 years later be seen and felt as a messianic moment of social change and transformation, an instance of the revolution that was and wasn't televised? If yes, it does so through a discourse of affect. The footage itself expresses the urgent conjunction of Black music and civil rights activism through performance and spectatorship. The editing of that footage as a mode of memory and the timing of the release of the film during the Covid-19 pandemic arguably produce a revolutionary dialectic of historical time, a dialectic of then and now that poses the question of: what next?

The framing of the *Summer of Soul* footage as having been lost, abandoned, and buried in a basement is an important part of its narrative. Because the festival had been "forgotten" by the culture at large, the finished film is a redemptive gesture. This is not recycled footage, although many of the

contextual archival clips and photos have been retrieved and recycled from institutional archives and are therefore instances of archival media research, appropriated and reused. Director Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson and his editor Joshua L. Pearson have also included newly shot interviews with festival participants looking back at the concert footage “watching their younger selves” and remembering their experience.⁴ For Benjamin, “while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical; not temporal in nature but figural.”⁵ Through the nonlinear editing of these multiple time frames, *Summer of Soul* produces a dialectical historiography of American culture.

It is precisely because *Summer of Soul* is composed from archival images (the figural) that Benjamin’s messianic historiography is so appropriate. Moreover, the extent to which the film is constructed from sound as well as image archives makes it further exemplary of the Black futurist discourse produced by filmmaker John Akomfrah and Black studies scholar Kara Keeling, both of whom are informed by Benjamin’s historiography. My approach to the film, highlighting the commonalities between these thinkers, situates the popular documentary as a virtual incarnation of Benjamin’s Angel of History. The future that the Angel foresees cannot be imagined without technology, spiritual faith, sensory experience, and the fragmented temporality of archival re-use. This is a future that has yet to arrive, but its seeds are in the debris and the struggle of the past. Both Akomfrah and Keeling build on Benjamin’s historiography to imagine the role of music and/as technology as the crucible of thinking through the catastrophe of now-time and to clear space for a different kind of future.



Figure 1.1 Hal Tulchin’s archive of video tapes, as pictured in *Summer of Soul*.

The time of the pandemic, which allowed Questlove the time to sort through the footage, was also the historical moment when the reckless murder of George Floyd and the vivid evidence of systemic racial discrimination during the Trump era spurred on the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement.⁶ That now-time is brought together with the time of the 1969 festival, and the time of viewing *Summer of Soul*, which links five different concert days and uses many superimpositions in which the multiple angles of five video cameras are combined into one musical, rhythmic time.⁷ Walter Benjamin's admonishment to "appropriate a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" rests on the observation that "articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was'." The historian needs to fan "the spark of hope in the past" by tearing it apart.⁸ In my book, *Archiveology*, I argue that this destructive gesture is a critical tool of archival film practices through which new histories are made from the ruined image cultures of the past.⁹ As Keeling has noted, film is uniquely suited to this task, and if Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) performed such a task for the Harlem Renaissance, then *Summer of Soul* performs a similar action for Harlem of the 1960s.¹⁰ In "tearing apart" and reconstituting the footage of the Harlem Culture Festival, *Summer of Soul* opens a space for thinking about potential futures – particularly Black futures but also futures shared across culture and identity – both then (1969) and when the film was made (2021) and into the ongoing present.

Keeling's notion of Black futures, like Heron's conception of the untelvised revolution, is theorized by and for African Americans and people of color globally. Working through "Bartleby," a short story by Herman Melville, in which an accountant tells his boss that he "would prefer not to" do his job, Keeling cites Giorgio Agamben suggesting that Bartleby "keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and non-occurrence, between capacity to be and capacity not to be." To put this in other terms, Bartleby for Keeling is a figure of "futures past."¹¹ Keeling's method resembles Benjamin's in her stacking of quotations – including some from Benjamin himself – for a theory akin to Benjamin's dialectical images.

Keeling's theorization of Black futures is grounded in the material histories of Black existence, but she also notes that "the long arc of Black existence contains vital elements that might be recombined to call forth new relations for all."¹² I would further clarify this notion of Black futures as belonging to everyone who would prefer to live in an anti-racist world in which racial equality is normalized. As Keeling notes, Black existence "carries within it alternative organizations of time in which the future, if there is such a thing, has not been promised; it has had to be created by reaching through and beyond what exists."¹³ Growing up with soul music as many white women of my generation did, without understanding its roots in a violent colonial history, *Summer of Soul* is for me a mode of enlightenment and social justice through which I can remake my own memory, to imagine a different Black anti-racist future

for everyone. Indeed, one of the key accomplishments of the revisiting of the Harlem Cultural Festival of 1969 is that its memory of possibility held in suspension is made available beyond the original Harlem audience to viewers of all ages and races. The address of the original event may have been specifically to the Harlem community, but in 2021 the concert film was broadcast internationally, addressing millions of potential new allies of the Black struggle.

What Time Is It Now?

The opening sequence of *Summer of Soul* poses the question of when is “now” very specifically. Concert attendee Musa Jackson, one of many who the producers identified through social media,¹⁴ is shot in close-up with a blank face. An off-screen voice asks him if he remembers the Harlem Cultural Festival, and his face brightens with the blue light of the monitor, although his expression remains hesitant and uncertain. Cut to a festival audience in unsteady, unfocused camera movements (a note of uncertainty never to be repeated in the film). Many of the cuts in the opening sequence are marked by a flash of video “noise.” A loudspeaker announces a lost wallet – implicitly also announcing a non-violent crime-free space – before intertitles state the time and place of the concert “100 miles from Woodstock,” and then “It has never been seen. Until now.” Cut to the crowd under umbrellas. Concert promoter Tony Lawrence briefly introduces Stevie Wonder, who launches into “It’s Your Thing,” while the camera picks out individual dancers in the crowd: a young boy and a woman in pink. Wonder moves to the drum kit for “Drum Solo” while the montage moves through flash forwards to forthcoming acts, all of them dancing, synched to Wonder’s drum solo, which is shot from multiple camera angles, superimposed over one another in a frenzy of musical energy. The sound of the band is lowered, and we hear fragments of dialogue, including someone declaiming on a dark stage, “What time is it?” followed by voice-over clips describing the transformational moment of the summer of 1969. “We were creating a new world,” one man says, and another voice describes the summer as a “Black Consciousness Revolution.”

What time is “now”? It could be when Musa Jackson first sees the footage (and if that was really when and where the film says it was), or when someone wrote the intertitle “until now,” or when the director and producers first saw the footage, or when someone watches the film today, whenever that is. The opacity created around the timing of “now” foregrounds the present-tense and its transience. Precisely because now-time is rendered so fleeting, the possibility of social change is, in Benjamin’s words, “blasted out of the continuum.”¹⁵ The now-time of the Harlem Cultural Festival 1969 is, in part, a mythic time when violence and crime were temporarily banished, when the city park was a space of collective love, Black Power, and family. But *Summer of Soul* does not deny or repress the underlying tensions of violence and anti-Black racism.

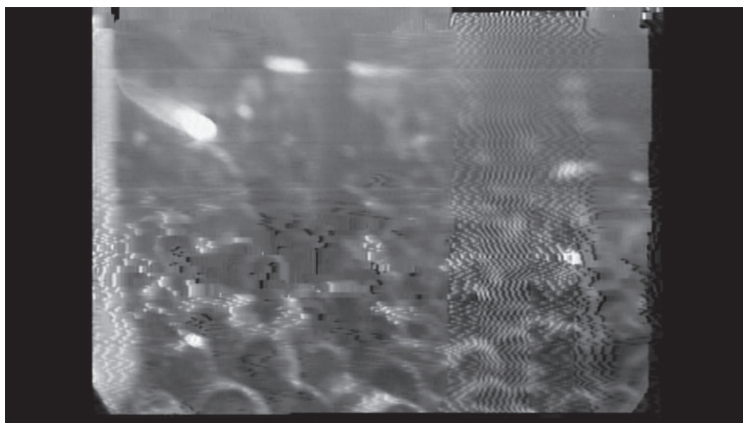


Figure 1.2 An example of the video “noise” from the film’s opening sequence.

The violence of Harlem in 1968, when Black Americans brought New York to its knees after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. is only briefly alluded to in the film. The aftermath and ongoing cultural landscape of drug use, poverty, and ruination are, however, palpable. The brightly decorated stage of the festival and the sunshine and visceral energy of the audience dancing, clapping, and pulsing cannot erase its haunting presence. Political speeches by Jesse Jackson, who channels King, and mayor John Lindsay, the “blue-eyed soul brother” who thanks and flatters the Harlem community, thinly mask the violence lying behind the celebration of Black culture. Mavis Staples and Mahalia Jackson singing “My Precious Lord,” however, most powerfully and persuasively transform the crippling pain of King’s passing into a call for collective action. Mahalia passing the mic to Mavis is an act of generational transition and renewal, felt not only by Staples herself but by the audience of the concert and the audience of the film.

Much is made in the film and about the film regarding the heterogeneity of the Black music featured in *Summer of Soul*. Blues, jazz, gospel, salsa, and soul music are brought together as one Black musical form grounded in rhythm. The pulse is apparent not only on the stage but in the audience, whose dancing bodies are picked out by Hal Tulchin’s five video cameras. In fact, this singular music is probably best described as soul, which Emily J. Lordi defines as possessing a “recuperative logic” and an “alchemy of pain.”¹⁶ Soul emerged as a popular term precisely during the 1960s as a mode of social organization and an “open-ended readiness” for a people in transition.¹⁷ The term was popularized at a time of crisis to define resiliency and “thriving,” but the promised “transition,” along with the promised revolution, has yet to happen. In 2021, *Summer of Soul* poses the critical question of the potential of

soul music to inspire real social change and a truly anti-racist public sphere. What happened to the revolution that was and wasn't televised that summer in Marcus Garvey Park (or Mount Morris Park as it was then called)?

The future that was imagined in 1969 is “now” – the present – but as Lordi puts it at the end of her book *The Meaning of Soul*, “If we are the future that past artists and activists dreamed of, how much freer were we all supposed to be?”¹⁸ Keeling's theory of Black futures builds on the Afrofuturist aesthetics that were roughly concurrent with the Harlem Cultural Festival, but in an avant-garde modality. The Afro-futurism of Sun Ra offered a futurist discourse for the sense of crisis, urgency, and community for African Americans, through the recognition of African heritage alongside the rejection of American racist institutions. Afrofuturism was a free jazz movement that embraced new technologies of the 1960s, including space travel, and the cameras and TV set-up that made *Summer of Soul* possible. Keeling is critical of the proto-colonial impulse of Sun-Ra's film *Space Is the Place* (1974), where a Black future transpires on another planet. In the Afrofuturist narrative, for Keeling, “a Black future is no future at all.”¹⁹ At the same time, because it is grounded in free jazz and poetry, Afrofuturism points to “a way to enter into relation with an autochthonous space of and for Black existence. Such a world is not premised on dispossession, ownership, property, and exploitation.”²⁰ The same can be said of the Harlem Cultural Festival and its reconstruction in 2021, where the history of inner-city poverty and violence is inverted and reframed as a love-in. Keeling's futurism recognizes the significance of “Black Swan” events, or surprising eruptions that are at once unpredictable and yet have a high impact.²¹ Is this not a good description of the Harlem Cultural Festival, especially in its belated recycled form, as an awakening after 50 years of dormancy?

The festival, as reconstructed by Questlove and his team, seems to have created a utopian space of Black experience, and yet neither the film nor the festival can be said to be free of the logic of consumer capitalism, as Keeling imagines Black futurism to be. The festival was sponsored by Maxwell House coffee, even if it also received support from the city of New York; the documentary was co-produced by Disney and released in the United States on the streaming platform Hulu, which counts Disney as its majority stakeholder. The celebrity musicians who performed at the festival are embedded in the industrial complex of popular culture and were hopefully compensated by the sponsors then and now. While Keeling's futurism leans toward the avant-garde, the soul music performed on the Harlem stage – including its multiple subcategories of jazz, blues, and gospel – is consumed by families alongside hipsters. Unlike Afrofuturism, which was addressed to specialized audiences of the avant-garde, *Summer of Soul* is eminently consumable.

While it is no surprise that Thompson and his producers chose to make a movie with broad appeal from the spectacular footage, it does raise the question of its revolutionary value. After all, Heron's poem from which the subtitle

is borrowed proposes that the revolution will take place on the street, not on the screen. And yet, in its articulation of now-time and its crystallization of present and past, a present-tense of renewed Black activism, *Summer of Soul* may in fact construct an Afrofuturism for the 21st century, appropriating the affective energy of 1969 for a renewal of the promise of soul. Heron's poem includes the line, "The revolution will put you in the driver's seat," and the film arguably does this by addressing the spectator as a participant in the "new world" created in retrospect by the 1969 Festival.

Archival Montage as Digitopia

Walter Benjamin's Angel of History predicates the impossible future on the chaos of the past: "Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet."²² Keeling, building on Benjamin's historiography and Sun Ra's declaration "It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?" belted out by June Tyson in *Space Is the Place*, defines a Black future as having "another temporality and coordinates" that are neither predictable nor coherent.²³ In the temporal dissonance of past, present, and future, no continuity or stability presages a Black future. The aesthetics of montage and the art of archiveology, remaking history from recorded sounds and images, are vital tools for this project.²⁴ For Benjamin and Keeling, it is critical that the past is rendered sensual and affective, as a mode of experience. Sun Ra and Tyson's refrain "opens a marvellous (im)possibility: 'the world' does not cohere as such."²⁵

Keeling also engages with *The Last Angel of History* (John Akomfrah, 1996), a film inspired by Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* is described as an Angel being blown into the future by the destructive storm of progress.²⁶ In this film, produced by Black Audio Film Collective, the "data thief" is an archiveologist, time-traveling to the sounds of Black music of the 1980s and 1990s, inspired by Sun-Ra's free jazz and speculative historiography. The data thief is impersonated by Blues guitarist Robert Johnson, and also by Parliament Funkadelic, while Akomfrah's collage style is pitched as a celebration of the emerging digital field. Indeed, Akomfrah has written about the digitopia of Black futures premised on the digital, which, for him, brings moving images closer to the rhythmic foundations of Black music and Black culture. While the Harlem Cultural Festival did include some free jazz according to Questlove, which the audience was surprisingly patient with, Sly and the Family Stone are the most funky and "psychedelic" of the lineup in the film.²⁷ The electronic and proto-digital instrumentation and aesthetics of Afrofuturism are clearly registered in the video glitch that marks the initial cuts of the film, inscribing the technologies at work in the art and act of resurrection.



Figure 1.3 The Staple Singers onstage at the Harlem Cultural Festival singing “It’s Been a Change.”

Both *Summer of Soul* and *The Last Angel of History* make reference to the moon landing of 1969, but the technological achievement has very different meanings in the two films. For Akomfrah, the moon landing represents a technological utopia, inspiring the interplanetary adventures of Sun Ra and Afrofuturism, while for Questlove and the Harlem Cultural Festival attendees, it is much less. In Akomfrah’s film, Black astronaut Bernard Harris and Michelle Nichols, a diversity recruiter for NASA, talk about what it means for Black people to be included in the space program. Their accomplishments are unironically tied to George Clinton’s “motherhip connection” and the data thief’s pronouncement that there is a profound connection between music, space, and the future. In *Summer of Soul*, as The Staple Singers sing “It’s Been a Change,” which includes the phrase “one of these days they’ll be a man on the moon,” Thompson intercuts interviews borrowed from TV news of the period in which the white interviewees praise the moon landing for its accomplishment for science, global harmony, and human achievement, but the Black interviewees disdain the event as a waste of money that could have been better spent helping poor Black people in America. One of the last interviewees segues the film into a sequence on the heroin epidemic in 1969 Harlem, and thus the film outright rejects any allegorical significance of outer space as an answer to the struggle for a better Black future. At the same time, by highlighting the racial divide of 1969, *Summer of Soul* foregrounds the rift between Black and White social imaginaries. An anti-racist future is one in which our goals are better aligned.

The moon-landing sequence is remarkable for the cutting back-and-forth between the singers and the sound bites. The Staples’ song is about social

change through hard work and education, addressed to the young people in the audience. The pulse of the song, a tight fusion of blues and gospel harmonies, is taken up by the editing, moving through the news footage, dancing audience members, and the three Staples sisters in medium close-up with matching dresses and afros. They are in synch with the audience, both ideologically and musically, challenging the dominant white narrative of the moon landing. The sequence includes Black anchormen wearing dashikis explaining the unpopularity of the moon landing for the Black community, a visual signature of an alternate televisual reality of the times. As one Black man-on-the-street puts it: "It's groovy for certain people but not for the Black man in America." Another says, "Black man wants to go to Africa; white man's going to the moon. I'm going to stay in Harlem with the Puerto Ricans and have me some fun."

In *The Last Angel of History*, the narrator declares that "Our thief from the future gives up the right to belong in his time in order to come to our time to find the mothership connection." Thompson is not a thief but a borrower, but his technique nevertheless invokes the mothership connection. For Emma Cocker, "borrowing" is the best term for artists' film and video works that reuse archival materials because it invokes the dialogue that takes place between present and past, a process of "meaning making," rather than a "retrieval of meaning from the past."²⁸ The recovery of the Harlem Cultural Festival is also a remaking of it, not only in the choice made to exclude some material, but in the cutting up of the show and mixing it with visual and audio evidence of the cultural history to which it was a response.

In the film, the songs are rebuilt, often through the use of dissolves, fluidly linked through clever sound edits that cover the cuts with rhythmic continuity. *Summer of Soul* is proof of Akomfrah's faith in the potential of digital tools as the answer to Black cinema grounded in the pulse of African-originated drumming.²⁹ For Akomfrah, the difference between analog and digital editing is the "fear of phantoms and loss" in analog editing when cut-out images are either gone completely or re-inserted with splice marks. He compares this to "digital editing with all its rhythmic possibilities, its banishing of the warrior mark by turning all images into ghosts, facsimiles without referent, all ghost and all machine."³⁰ Editor Joshua Pearson shares Questlove's background in VJ culture, and their approach to the archival material was that of the VJ rather than the experimental "found footage" filmmaker, which is where Akomfrah comes from. Akomfrah's embrace of the digital as the future of Black music lies in his recognition of the role of music in Black histories.³¹ By digitizing the original analog tapes, Questlove and Pearson had more "rhythmic possibilities" for their edit, and yet both modes are *technologies* that enable the cut-up and fragmentation of archiveological method. Medium specificity is less important than the mechanics of editing together fragments of the past shared by analog and digital media.

Keeling follows Akomfrah's data thief's proclamation that the Blues is a secret Black technology to suggest that "a formulation of race as technology

offers a way to conceptualize the possibilities for materialist anti-racist praxis that still inhere in the cinematic."³² For both Keeling and Akomfrah, "the digital" is inherently atemporal, untethered from the space-time continuum of referentiality. Keeling develops Akomfrah's concept of digitopia as an "unmooring of spatiotemporal logics . . . including the proposition of wrenching the index from its referent."³³ In *Archiveology*, I make a similar argument about digital images as files having an immateriality that obliterates the discontinuity between images and reality in the sense that images are themselves "things" in the real world – as exemplified by the moving images that are the remnants of the Harlem Cultural Festival.³⁴ Joshua Pearson says that the tapes that were recovered in Tulchin's basement included no isolated camera reels, only live line cuts in which the various camera angles were already assembled and cut up, so he was essentially working with the bones of a concert film, not the concert itself.³⁵

The digital distinctions between inside and outside collapse, which opens up the possibility of digitopian discourse of the African diaspora in the modality of Black music. The archival language of recycled sound and image enables new temporalities, new histories, and new futures: new "now-times." Keeling says that the data thief "structures a messianic time" through which cinematic technologies are responsible for another organization of things, "outside the tyranny of time." The digital realm as an immaterial space-time makes possible the meeting of past and future in an imaginary new memory-vision, especially when it is grounded in the affective, sensory rhythms of African American culture.

Because the Harlem Cultural Festival took place over several weekends in 1969, Tulchin's video footage includes performances and audiences from many different days, which are compounded into one long festival by Thompson and Pearson. The disjunctions between different concert days are nevertheless made evident by abrupt costume changes by recurring figures such as Tony Lawrence and Jesse Jackson, and by the variety of weather conditions, from extreme heat to pouring rain. In this sense, *Summer of Soul* echoes *Amazing Grace* (Alan Elliott, 2018), made from footage shot by Sydney Pollack, another archival reconstruction that combines two of Aretha Franklin's 1972 concerts in a Los Angeles Baptist church into one moving and spectacular movie. Aretha seems to change her outfit in the middle of songs, as the editors reconstructed her performance from multiple sound recordings and camera angles collected over two different nights. In both cases, the status of the films as digital constructions is foregrounded as disjunctive temporalities synched through rhythm and soul music. Both films push their archival status to the foreground, situating the powerful musical performances outside of linear time, creating new composite and nonlinear times that open the possibility of imagining different pasts and futures.

The dynamic technologies and the wide-ranging content of *Summer of Soul* arguably bring it close to the digitopia conceived by Akomfrah and the impossible future imagined by Keeling on several levels. First of all, the diasporic

reach of the film is grounded in the back-to-Africa ethos of the 1960s, including the brightly colored fashions, the participation of Hugh Masakela and the Dinizulu Dancers and Drummers, and is inclusive of Latin music in the form of Puerto Rican drummer and bandleader Ray Barretto. Second, a strong digital thrust of *Summer of Soul* lies in the transposition of analog video to digital code, enabling the multilayered and synched editing of images and sounds. And finally, the “messianic” historiography is felt most strongly in the shared experience of 21st-century viewers of all races in our own time, mostly in our own homes, and the thriving throng of Black bodies in 1969, dancing to the same music. By stressing the deep links between gospel and soul, the reconstructed Harlem Cultural Festival embraces the spiritual roots of Black music, implicitly inscribing the redemptive impulse of Benjamin’s historiography.

The Future Anterior

The final scenes of *Summer of Soul* drive home the urgency of the revival of the 1960s alliance of activism and soul music in 2021. Nina Simone concludes her performance with the recitation of a poem backed by a chant: “Are you ready?” She asks the audience if they are ready to kill if necessary, or to smash and burn buildings. A news clip from the period features Black protesters and white police arguing in Harlem, while the repeated phrase “are you ready?” continues. Simone’s invocation of violence jumps out of the peaceful celebration of Black community and is the film’s only hint at divisions within the Black activism of the times, between peaceful and violent protest. As Daphne Brooks has noted, Simone was deeply informed by Brechtian aesthetics in which her performance was often a mode of activism and agitation.³⁶

Simone’s set is followed by a brief blackout, before black-and-white photos show the deserted park, littered with the evidence of a vanished crowd. The jarring shift from Simone’s vibrant African print dress and stunning hairdo to the banality of urban waste is echoed by a voice remarking on the colorful beauty of the forgotten concerts. Stacks of videotapes denote the archive that Tulchin says, in voice-over, he could not sell to anyone. Shots of the crowd in black and white reinforce the aesthetic of erasure and neglect, while a woman’s voice speaks of the importance of the Festival “especially today,” when Black people need to feel “like a family.” Cut to a final performance of Sly and the Family Stone singing “Higher,” with the audience singing along and Rose Stone gyrating with her white wig and silver dress.

The reference to family is apt but undersells the film’s gift of energy and high-powered, high-level musicianship. Stevie Wonder’s extended performance toward the end of the film is a good example of how Thompson and Pearson’s editing of the archival footage expands its affect. Even though it is interrupted by a brief bio of Wonder explaining how he became a Civil Rights activist around the time of the Festival, the footage of him playing keyboards



Figure 1.4 Stevie Wonder singing in a close up, dissolving from a medium shot of him playing keys.

and singing is especially rich and dynamic. Shots of his feet rhythmically stomping and working the keyboard pedal are superimposed over shots of him singing, looking skyward, standing, and bouncing until his bandleader gently coaxes him into ending the runaway song. Digital effects are used here to layer the images into a palimpsest of explosive energy. The urgency of Wonder's spirit is as palpable as Simone's polemics, or Jesse Jackson's rhetoric, and is what makes the film turn toward a future grounded in a past experience of shared struggle.

The story of the "lost" tapes is also a story of how American cultural history has been written. The working title of "Black Woodstock" certified the Festival's status as a shadow of the other event. And yet, it is precisely because Hal Tulchin not only taped the Festival so well, providing multiple camera angles of the performances as well as extensive footage of the faces and bodies and dance steps of the audience, but safeguarded the material too, that the film was made possible. For all its digitopian promise, *Summer of Soul* remains a record, on one level, of what really happened. To say that the film is a new thing, made in a new "now" does not contradict its status as evidentiary. The relation between past and future inscribed in this film may be described as a "coil," a fold, or a discontinuous memory that originates from the future. Domietta Torlasco describes the "future anterior" as "one that remembers not only what happened but also what did not happen in our cinematic past."³⁷

Thompson's film not only rewrites American cultural history; it also enables a re-imagining of the potential of a different future. As Keeling proposes, such a future "can be conceptualized as a creative, eccentric way of sinking deeply into the space held open in music and engaging with what is

always there already.”³⁸ Benjamin’s Angel of History sees a messianic future constructed from the failures of the past – from the chaos, violence, and barbarism of the past, but also from the unfulfilled promises that failure inaugurates. Thus, the revolutionary discourse embedded in the soul manifesto becomes “legible” in 2021 during the anti-racist activism generated by police brutality made newly visible through digital means and the large-scale protests under the banner of Black Lives Matter.

The pandemic context meant that the image of Black crowds packed into a joyful time, at a moment when even street protests required social distancing, had extra impact. The crowd of mostly male bodies waiting for Sly and the Family Stone to take the stage seems to sway like an ocean, as if it were one large Black body. The “now” of the film, half a century later, includes the time when that image becomes legible as a force of power and collective energy. A loudspeaker threatens the crowd to be patient as the seething sea of bodies harbors seeds of revolt, marking roads not taken.

Summer of Soul points to a “future anterior” of a Black future grounded in past sensory experience. For Torlasco, the “future anterior” refers to “what will have been.” It “embodies the promises of temporal excess and becoming, providing feminist theory with the possibility of envisioning a future that does not resemble the past.”³⁹ In Benjamin’s theory of history, montage and ruins play significant roles, as the “refuse” of history is precisely where the future lies. Tulchin’s tapes may never have been considered “garbage” – except for those who refused to buy them or broadcast them – but their “lostness” has everything to do with their previous devaluation and their contrasting power in the present. Benjamin’s “awakening” is premised on the claim that “‘Historical understanding’ is to be grasped, in principle, as the afterlife of that which is understood.”⁴⁰

Questlove’s project challenges the audience to ask what happened to that revolutionary energy of summer 1969, and yet “the present” is forever being eclipsed by another “now-time,” and it is precisely that other “now-time” of 2021 that makes *Summer of Soul* exemplary of Benjamin’s Angel of History. He notes in *The Arcades Project* that the “historical index” of images only becomes legible at a particular time, and this “acceding to legibility constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior.”⁴¹ Can this be the movement of the people dancing at the Harlem Cultural Festival in 1969? The movement of the Pips choreography? Ray Baretta’s drums, or the 5th Dimension exposing their gospel roots? Stevie Wonder levitating? Are they signaling a more equitable anti-racist America, or is it just my imagination?

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 470.
2. According to the Wikipedia entry for the Harlem Cultural Festival, a one-hour special was broadcast by CBS on July 28, 1969, and a second one-hour was broadcast by ABC on September 16, 1969 (accessed February 16, 2023). Citation: James

- Gaunt, "Who Is Tony Lawrence?" *The Shadow Knows*, December 21, 2001. These were said to be the first shows with commercials featuring all Black performers.
3. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 463, 470.
 4. Clifford Thompson, "'When Black Was Born': *Summer of Soul*," *Commonweal* 148, no. 8 (September 2021).
 5. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 463.
 6. Questlove interviewed on *The Director's Cut*, November 1, 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/summer-of-soul-with-ahmir-questlove-thompson-and-amir/id1067471691?i=1000540450448>.
 7. Richard Sandomir, "Hal Tulchin, Who Documented a 'Black Woodstock,' Dies at 90," *New York Times*, September 14, 2017.
 8. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4 1938–40*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 390–91.
 9. Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
 10. Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures. Sexual Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 91.
 11. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 48. Keeling quotes the phrase "futures past" from a book of the same name by David Scott (Duke University Press, 2004). Scott's opening words of that book are: "My most general concern in this book is with the conceptual problem of political presents and with how reconstructed pasts and anticipated futures are though out in relation to them." (1).
 12. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 35.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. *The Director's Cut*, podcast November 1, 2021.
 15. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 475.
 16. Emily J. Lordi, *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience Since the 1960s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 8.
 17. Lordi, *The Meaning of Soul*, 10.
 18. *Ibid.*, 163.
 19. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 67.
 20. *Ibid.*, 69.
 21. *Ibid.*, 20. Keeling borrows the concept of the Black Swan from Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010).
 22. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 392.
 23. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 53.
 24. "Archiveology" is a term developed in my book *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham, NC: Durham University Press, 2018) to refer to media practices that engage with archival sounds and images through remediation and recycling. As a mode of found footage filmmaking, archiveology explicitly refers to the remaking and reconstructing of historical materials through archival retrieval.
 25. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 54.
 26. Edward George, who researched, wrote, and performed in *The Last Angel of History*, explains the integral role of Walter Benjamin in the conceptualization of the film and as inspiration for the title in "Last Angel of History: Research, Writing, Performance," *Third Text* 35 (2021): 205–26. He refers to the key essay as "Theses on the Philosophy of History," whereas I have cited the more recent translation as "On the Concept of History."
 27. Questlove interviewed on *Object of Sound*, podcast July 9, 2021, <https://object-of-sound.simplecast.com/episodes/summer-of-soul-feat-questlove>.
 28. Emma Cocker, "Ethical Possession: Borrowing from the Archives," in *Cultural Borrowings: Appropriation, Reworking, Transformation*, Scope 16 (February 2010), 102.

29. John Akomfrah, "Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora," *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (January 2014): 26.
30. Akomfrah, "Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora," 26.
31. Joshua Pearson interviewed on Gold Derby, November 18, 2021, accessed February 18, 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QviTLovSebo.
32. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 135.
33. *Ibid.*, 137.
34. Russell, *Archiveology*, 103.
35. Joshua Pearson interviewed on Gold Derby.
36. Daphne A. Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play," *Callaloo* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 176–97.
37. Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2013), vi.
38. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 69.
39. Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, vii.
40. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.
41. *Ibid.*, 462.