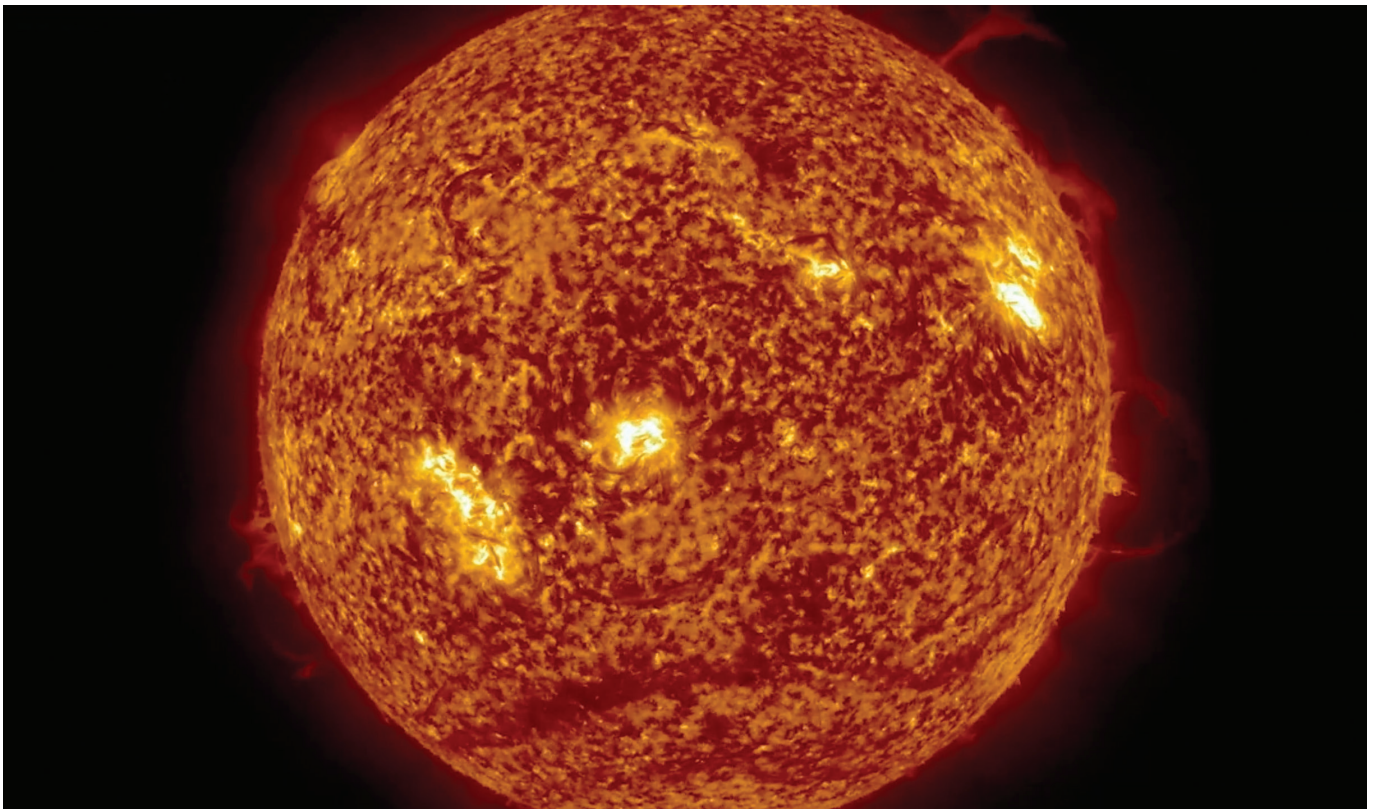




ARTHUR JAJA:
LOVE IS
THE MESSAGE,
THE MESSAGE
IS DEATH

April 2–June 12, 2017
The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA





Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (stills), 2016, single-channel video (color, sound), 7:30 minutes

History is time travel: 398 years ago, in 1619, the first African slaves landed on Virginia's shores. In 1776, 157 years after the slaves' forced arrival, the United States of America proclaimed its independence from England. With this declaration came a bounty of words that sought to enact, with a speech act of the highest order, the freedom of its citizens: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." We all know this most inspirational of sentences did not apply to the African slaves whose numbers had risen to nearly half a million between the years 1619 and 1776, establishing a four to one ratio of new liberated colonists to slaves. Life and liberty moved at different tempos; and, by the dawn of the Civil War in 1860, America's slave population had grown to roughly 3.9 million.¹ It feels like ancient history; but, as you can see, the numbers in this sour little potted history grew exponentially, and things in the rearview mirror may be closer than they appear. In 1864, the United States of America passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery, with the exception that this peculiar institution could still be used as punishment for a crime (See Ava DuVernay's 2016 documentary *13th* for the lowdown on what that exception to the rule means). Free at last? In a staggering one-sentence paragraph, *Wikipedia* blankly states: "Official emancipation did not substantially alter the economic situation of most blacks who remained in the south."²

The period between the end of the Reconstruction and the birth of the civil rights movement gave us a legacy of lynching and beatings combined with the denial of human rights typically referred to as Jim Crow (the name is thought to derive from a white performer who made his living performing in blackface). Suffice it to say that democracy, American style, limped its way to putative universal suffrage, with women gaining the right to vote in 1921, against a backdrop of laws and societal conventions that actively sought to prevent black men and women from exercising their rights to vote. Until at last we arrive in our moment, the 1960s—the age of post-modernity, the space-time continuum of the contemporary, and the decade of Arthur Jafa's (and my own) birth. This decade gave us the Voting Rights Act in 1965, a government decree to ensure that laws designed to give

people the right to vote would be enforced. One way of looking at this entire American situation is to conclude that our democracy is 53 years old.³

Arthur Jafa's seven-minute video essay *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (2016) is another way of condensing the 400 years of history summarized above. The film begins solidly in the present with footage of an unnamed everyman, or protagonist of old, taken from the seemingly endless cycle of horrible news about what human beings are consistently capable of doing to one another. This almost-benign beginning accelerates immediately into a rush of collaged images that rifle like an expertly shuffled deck of cards. There are images of fans in a basketball arena swaying in unison; young protesters marching with a decided groove thang; a clip from *Dance or Go Home*; an orderly civil rights march; a black man being murdered by a police officer who shot him in the back; a snippet of a video directed by Kahlil Joseph; some outrageously sexual dancing; poet and theorist Hortense Spillers walking in slow motion (lifted from Jafa's exceptional documentary *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, 2014); President Obama breaking into "Amazing Grace" at the eulogy for the eight Charleston parishioners killed by a white supremacist; some old-time black-and-white films I don't know the title of (my ignorance completely) in which white preachers lay their ominous hands on the shoulder of a black child; and an image of a young black boy jumping off the curb and nearly sailing through the air toward the front door of a house. All this, and more, happens in the first 60 seconds. The rapid-fire tempo of these images is held in contraposto to the swelling, sensual, gospel-inspired "Ultralight Beam" by Kanye West, whose lyrics—"this is a God dream, this is a God dream, this is everything"—envelop Jafa's ruthless and rigorous editing with an otherworldly lyricism. Where does all of this pain and joy come from? How is it that the everyday sublime flourishes amid the abjection that is the stain on our national conscience?

Jafa's masterpiece in miniature achieves its intensity through intensity itself. Once his hooks are in our affective apparatus, he does not let go. All of the movements and gestures he has chosen are expressions of bodily compression and release. Jafa has often stated that his main aim is to "replicate the power, beauty, and alienation of black music" in the space of the visual. To enact

this translation, Jafa has introduced the sophistication and profound experimentation that is the history of African American music into the realm of cinema. The rhythm and pacing of *Love Is The Message* are a riff on the syncopated temporalities of black American music. His images create an affective field similar to the blue note—a note played in the minor key over a major chord, such that dissonance is created in an otherwise unified composition. Similarly, the heterogeneity of images in *Love Is The Message* is analogous to the layered complexity of African American music—a music with African roots that was imported by slaves, introduced to the United States by those not even considered persons, and subsequently married to western instruments to form the utterly unique genres of jazz, soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop, which cumulatively engendered the spine of American popular culture.

Jafa does this in *Love Is The Message* by immediately establishing his visual mode of rapid-fire editing a montage of images that depict excruciating acts of violence (e.g., the police beating of a teenage girl at a pool party, water hoses turned on protesting children, a father giving his son “the talk”) and soaring heights of creativity (e.g., Michael Jackson dancing seated in the back of a car, Mahalia Jackson embracing Louis Armstrong after her legendary performance of “Lord Don’t Move the Mountain” at the 1970 Newport Jazz Festival, Serena Williams dancing on the court, Stephen Curry redefining the no-look pass). Within this volley are repeating visual and verbal puns. Jokes both hilarious (e.g., Drake dancing to music by his nemesis Kanye West) and macabre (e.g., Mahalia Jackson’s upraised arms followed by a mother being forced to walk backwards by the police with her hands up) pepper the film. In a cathartic expulsion of energy from the body, you’ve either got to laugh to keep from crying, or you just cry, because sometimes laughing is too hard. Jafa’s importation of strategies from black music into the space of black cinema means that the affective register of the work is consummately nuanced; it registers a *mélange* of joy and rage, sensuousness and horror, and, and, and...

In *Love Is The Message*, Jafa establishes a cinematic space where coordinates are marked by an unrelenting black excellence and the relentless violence of the state against a faction of its citizens. There is no narrative

lull, no space of sentimentality, no sleep for the weary, no respite from the intensity of this dialectic. Indeed, the only move off this dialectical mark is when Jafa includes scenes from Hollywood films that feature aliens and images of the sun. I read the aliens in Jafa’s work as signifying the dominant culture’s apprehension of the distinctly African American contributions to American life. Hailing from another place, the alien is feared and desired. It stands in for a fear of futurity, imagined as a zone of terror, and, more importantly, retribution. The alien, as offered to us by Hollywood, is the unconscious working through of the constant othering that is the dominant paradigm of whiteness as a construct. And, what about the sun? Images of the sun appear six times in *Love Is The Message*, and only once as we experience it—a flat yellow circle in the sky. The other five times, the sun is an incomprehensively huge orange, yellow, and red fireball of bubbling hot, spitting-mad plasma. Here, the sun, in addition to being the source of life on earth, is angry, dangerous, and epic. If Jafa offers us the alien as emblematic of humanity’s constant need to “other” somebody, then he gives us the sun as part of an existential mandate: He shows us that the thing we still willfully describe as rising and setting (when in fact we know it does neither), is also the thing that gives us life (even though we cannot properly see it).

Helen Molesworth
Chief Curator

1 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Slavery, by the Numbers,” *The Root*, accessed January 18, 2017, <http://www.theroot.com/slavery-by-the-numbers-1790874492>.

2 s.v. “Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution,” accessed January 18, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirteenth_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution.

3 This formulation was reached in a conversation with the always-interesting Thomas J. Lax, December 21, 2016.

Arthur Jafa (b. 1960, Tupelo, Mississippi; lives in Los Angeles, California)

Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death, 2016
Single-channel video (color, sound)
7:30 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome

Public Programs:

Members' Opening:

Arthur Jafa: *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death*
Saturday, April 1, 7pm
The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA
Info: 213/621-1794 or
membership@moca.org
FREE for MOCA members;
no reservations necessary

Arthur Jafa and Helen Molesworth in Conversation

Sunday, April 2, 1pm
Tateuchi Democracy Forum at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy (NCPD)
111 North Central Avenue,
Los Angeles, CA 90012
Info: 213/621-1794 or
membership@moca.org
FREE; priority entry for MOCA members

Los Angeles Filmforum at MOCA Presents: Arthur Jafa's *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*

Thursday, May 11, 7pm
Geffen Theater
The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA
Info: 213/621-1745 or
education@moca.org
FREE for MOCA and Los Angeles Filmforum members
\$15 general admission, \$8 students with valid ID

Please check moca.org for updates on related programs.

Arthur Jafa: Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death is organized by Helen Molesworth, Chief Curator, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

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Cover image: Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (still), 2016, single-channel video (color, sound), 7:30 minutes

All images courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise.

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