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Antwuan Sargent, "Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" Soundtracks a Film About Black Spiritual Power," *The Creators Project*, January 09, 2017

the creators project

Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" Soundtracks a Film About Black Spiritual Power

Antwaun Sargent — Jan 9 2017



Film Still Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death. 2016. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/ Rome

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Barack Obama's faces and actions flicker heroically over real images of times of sorrow—24 frames of black creativity and loss every second. Filmmaker and cinematographer Arthur Jafa's *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* presents a disorienting and disquieting history. Soundtracked to Kanye West's virtuosic "Ultralight Beam," the nearly eight-minute film, now on view at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem, uses found footage to take an unflinching look at black life, past and present. There are inventive moments, moments of such callous violence they would be thought unbelievable if there weren't caught clearly on tape and circulated on internet for the world to witness, and moments where tragedy conflates and conjures triumph. That's when frames of Nina Simone, Jimi Hendrix, LeBron James, and Beyoncé hold decades-old but suddenly contemporary resilience.

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Love is a work of video art that powerfully asks the viewer for their full consideration of the weight of black suffering and creativity. It pays homage to the old Soul Train theme song, "Love Is the Message," by Philly International's studio orchestra, MFSB, and James Tiptree's 1970s new wave short story, "Love is the Plan and the Plan is Death." The inspiration underlines Jafa's ability to artfully bring together disparate black media and find the through line, theorized in the 1970s as the "Black Aesthetic." The gesture follows the impetus found in Jafa's two-decades-long research into the movement of the black body, which resulted in more than 200 notebooks created between 1990 and 2007. (A sampling of which went on view last year at the Hammer Museum during *Made In L.A. 2016*.) The notebooks consist of careful clippings of mostly black bodies, famous and not, captured aestheticizing a singular experience in daily life and on the world's stages.



Arthur Jafa, Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death, Film Still. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/Rome.

Examined closely, the performative nature of Jafa's notebooked bodies unfold in *Love*, too. On a larger cinematic scale, they appear as "still moving images," as the gender and race theorist Tina Campt once remarked. The scale of the installation—the film is screened in a cavernous, pitch black room—suggests that *Love* is not the music video redone. (Although the artist is skilled in the form having recently directed the photography of Solange Knowles' "Cranes In the Sky," and "Don't Touch My Hair" music videos, aided in the creation of Beyoncé's "Formation" and deeply influenced her film-album *Lemonade*.)

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Jafa, however, does use a key aspect of contemporary black music: sampling. He employs the technique to make *Love*, as a contemporary musician might the structure of a beat. Essentially, he's showing on film what West does with song.



Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death*, Film Still. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/Rome.

Jafa samples freely other film, music visuals, video art, YouTube videos, and dashcam footage to continue his vision of bringing "black expressive modalities" to the big screen. *Love*, like his other cinematic experiences, is a film of black bodies bound in space and time, imbued with music, expressing a language of what they know to be of America's racial divide. It's a showing of the distinct concern with black cinema he has sought to distill over the course of his entire career. At times it can be what critic Hilton Als calls, a "film-essay." It instructs the viewer to see the art that comes from suffering. It fits the pattern of his earlier work—in the early 1990s, for instance, he shot Julie Dash's novelistic tour de force, *Daughters of the Dust*, and later, Spike Lee's *Crooklyn*. *Love* itself is most directly the result of 2013's *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, a documentary film that chronicles the state of black life since the Civil Rights Movement. Jafa used the film's b-roll as a starting point.

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Film Still (Hortense Spillers) Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death 2016 Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/ Rome

The complexity of surviving racism and of Jafa's quest to reorient film to recount black life without cliché, is seen in how he shows the horrors of white violence toward the end of *Love*. As "Ultralight Beam," reaches its zenith, a father voice booms, "That's what the police do to you." A child, no older than four years old, stands against a wall, weary, crying as the organs sound from West's song. "Put your hands against the wall," the child complies and looks back at the camera hopelessly. Kirk Franklin cuts in with a sermon detailing perseverance as the choir sings, "Faiiiith. Mooooore." The frame turns into triumphant images of a woman singing, taken by The Holy Spirit. Then a dunking LeBron James appears as an Olympian, symbolizing American power. The choir hollers once more: "Saaafe." "As we keep fighting this," says Franklin in-between the choir harmonizing, "Waaaaar," a black boy band follows with joyful choreography that gives way to a girl juking and the sun burning. The moment is one of many revelations in *Love* of the spiritual power that drives the black experience.

Love Is The Message. The Message Is Death continues through January 28th at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. For more information, [click here](#).