

Arthur Jafa and Tina Campt

Love Is the Message, the Plan Is Death

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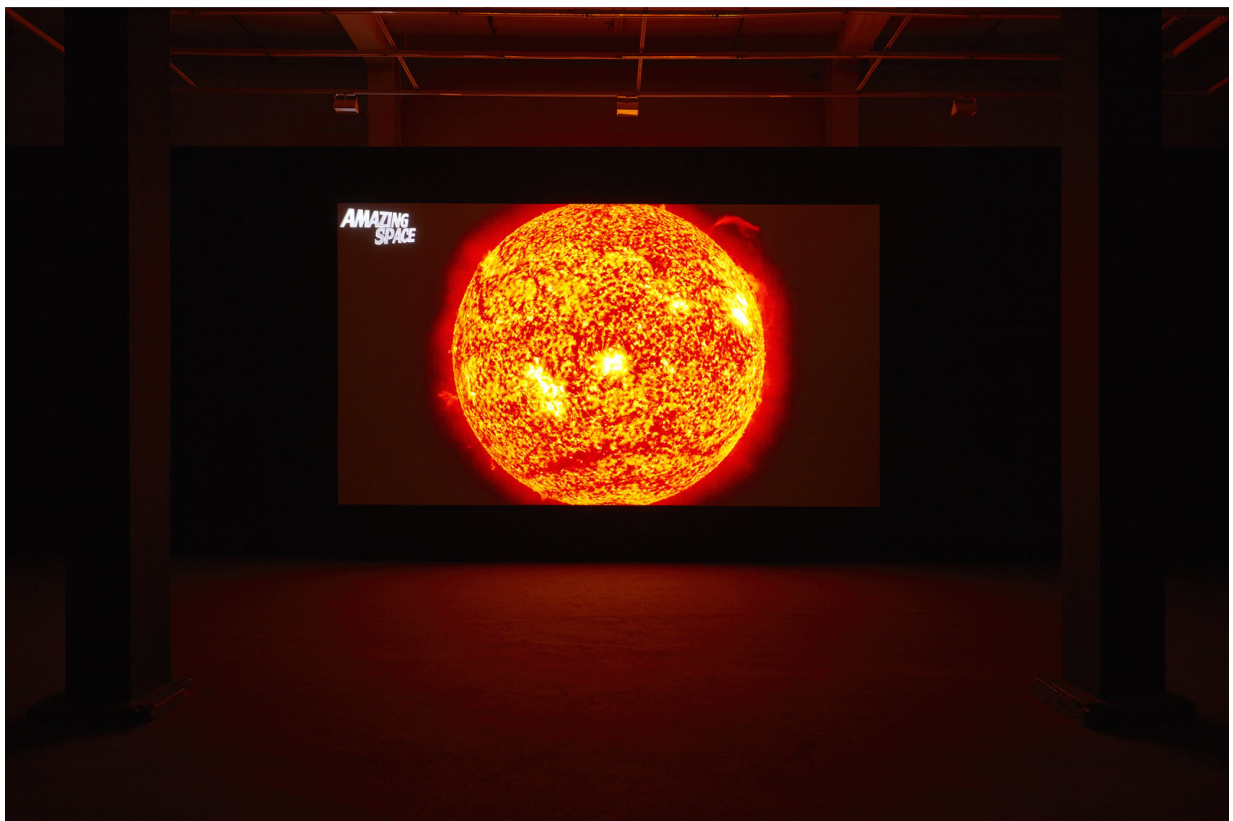
Arthur Jafa's seven-minute short film *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* cuts together footage of Charles Ramsey; *Swag Surf*, a black variation on the wave at sports games; Fred Hampton's widow the day after his assassination; Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington; *Storyboard P*, dance legend; the 2015 murder of Walter Scott in South Carolina; kids dancing in a club; *Hortense Spillers*; *Birth of a Nation*; former president Obama singing "Amazing Grace"; Earl Sweatshirt; Ferguson, Missouri; Michael Jackson; Floyd Mayweather; the Civil Rights Movement; Beyoncé; Martine Syms; Odell Beckham Jr.; Alien; Rob Peters; Bradford Young; Marshawn Lynch; Larry Davis; Thelonious Monk's hands; Chris Brown; Martin Luther King Jr.; IceJFish, atonal R&B singer; astronomical images; Drake; Mahalia Jackson; and many others, in order to explore the distance and proximity between motion and movement. The film's title refers to the Nebula Award-winning 1973 short story by James Tiptree Jr., née Alice Sheldon, *Love is the Plan the Plan is Death*, about spider-like creatures who devour their mates in the course of their lifecycle.

The following excerpts a conversation between the filmmaker and Tina Campt, Professor of Africana and Women's Studies and Director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, at a listening party for *Love Is the Message*, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem on December 10, 2016.

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Tina Campt: We were talking earlier today about the difference between movement and motion. We think of these two things as synonyms but they're not. Movement means changing the position of an object related to a fixed point in space; the focus is on that space. Motion, on the other hand, is a change in the location or position of an object with respect to time.

One of the things that your montage and sequencing technique does is provoke our relationship to images by exposing us to them at a certain velocity over time. The impact of a work like *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* keys off of how short the span of time is in which we actually have contact with a single one of these images – each of which is incredibly arresting – before it transitions to the next. This is why I talk about listening to images and why we've called this event a listening session. Listening to images is about allowing yourself to be accessible to the affects produced in all these different encounters. Which are the historical black-and-white images? Where are the bodies moving? How do you see the choreography of bodies and violence and music in relationship to each other?



Prior to this evening, I would watch *Love is the Message* over and over again on my computer and I would find myself positioning myself backwards and forwards, closer or farther away to the screen. I noticed that I was not trying to see the photos or the images more carefully or more closely. I was trying to tweak or to amplify the relationship to get the impact of the images. I needed to get that impact physically by way of the sound. I actually needed to feel the contact between the soundtrack and the way in which it actually makes bodies move.

To open yourself up to a different sensory experience of film or to a different sensory experience of images often means actually adjusting your physical proximity to them. One way that physical proximity is calibrated is through sonic penetration; the way in which music and sound connect us. At its most basic, most fundamental level, sound is the movement of particles through air. It's a vibration that is calibrated in waves. The extent to which we can hear it depends on their frequency. There are all sorts of different sounds that we as humans cannot hear. They're not audible to us because we physically can't pick them up. Except by touching them or as a vibration. Like sounds, images have a frequency, which we can adjust. We calibrate our sensibility to images in the way we let them impact and contact us.

Arthur Jafa: This goes back to something people have heard me say repeatedly over the years, which is that I have an overriding ambition to make a black cinema that has the power, beauty, and alienation of black music.

TC: Tell us what you mean by that?

AJ: Well, to go back a little bit: I'm from Mississippi and I went to Howard University to study architecture. I'd always wanted to study architecture; it's my first love to this day. My preoccupations were the same even then so I would have said I want to make a house that's like *Kind of Blue*. Or a house that's like *Electric Lady* or *Songs in the Key of Life* or any of the great records. But I got to Howard and by my third year I couldn't really see a path to victory in the things I was interested in, so to speak. I realized very early on that there was a class dimension to who got to practice and do the kinds of things they wanted to do. I became disenchanted with the possibilities of architecture. I didn't know black people owned their own homes. I didn't know many black people who were going to be able to commission me to make some experimental architecture. I remember telling my father at some point, "Dad, I think I'd rather be a failed filmmaker than a failed architect."

So I just wandered down to the film department at Howard and the first person I met there was Haile Gerima. And that was very

fortuitous. Haile had graduated three years prior from UCLA, where, for the first time, black filmmakers were consciously and collectively engaged with thinking through what it would mean to make black cinema. One of the first things Haile said to me was, "We have to make black cinema," in a way that dovetailed with this ongoing ambition I had to make the house and now the film that was like black music.

However, I realized very early on that this whole idea of black cinema was narrowly confined within a binary opposition to Hollywood. They would say, "What's black film? Black film is not Hollywood. It's against Hollywood." That's a fairly radical idea when you're first confronted with it. But very quickly my classmates and I were like, "Okay, so if that's the case, and if Hollywood has narratives, does that mean black film is necessarily non-narrative? If Hollywood films are in color does that mean black films have to be in black and white?"

It was a very narrow sort of definition. So we started to think about what black cinema could be if we didn't define it against Hollywood, but tried to define it on its own. For me it came to be about the music: How and why is the music so powerful? How does black music undermine the power of alienation? And how do we transpose this power into this other medium? I've spent a large part of the last thirty years thinking about what makes black music so powerful.

I realized that black music was powerful because the black voice was at its core. People had talked about cinema in terms of stories, narratives, thematics – but it quickly became clear that I needed to come up with different concepts. This idea of black visual intonation was intended to be the cinematic equivalent of the black voice. You would never confuse Billie Holiday with Fela or Bob Marley with Charlie Parker or Miles Davis or whomever, right? There's a certain relationship to the black voice, in particular black vocal intonation, either specifically in the voice of the performer or played out instrumentally. I was interested in how we understand this vocal intonation, how we understand these traditions or continuities or manipulate tonalities.

For example: What is the relationship between black music and Western music? African-American music is a Western music – a lot of people don't seem to realize that – and I like to say that we are illegitimate progeny of the West. In the sense that a lot of ideas were imposed on us without becoming ours, without us being seen as their legitimate heirs. Black people came to the Americas with this deep reservoir of cultural traditions of expressivity. There's a great quote by Nam June Paik who said



the culture that's going to survive in the future is the culture that you carry around in your head.

The Middle Passage is a great example of that. Despite the fact that we came with all these incredible expressive traditions, black people tend to be strong in those spaces where the cultural traditions could be carried on by the nervous system. Architecture, painting, sculpture, those kinds of things tended to erode very very quickly, in contrast to things like dance, or oral traditions of whatever kind.

TC: Speaking of dance, it seems like in your work the motion of bodies is really crucial and it has to do with what we were talking about earlier, the relationship of black people to spatial navigation. There's bodies and movement in violence and bodies in motion through dance – which is not always choreography – it's a relationship to rhythm or music and then bodies in motion through athleticism, right?

So you've got Mohammed Ali, you've got the basketball – you've actually got the fans around the basketball court [doing the Swag Surf] who are synchronizing with the people on the floor, and this connects with what you were telling me about how you understand black people's capacity to navigate space.

AJ: One of the reasons I spend so much time

thinking about music is because music is a great place to actually think through ideas that you can also share with people. Particularly black folks: we know all the music. We know everything that anybody's ever made.

We can sing all the songs – even if you don't know the words – we know the trajectory and the inflections and things like that. But increasingly I became interested in dance, African-American social dance. I was trying to think through what is happening when people actually dance. The first interview I ever read with Cornell West, in the early '80s, he was talking in that expansive encyclopedic way about black culture and somebody asked about black visual culture and his response was, "As far as I can tell it's not very apparent." It set off a little bit of a shitstorm. Howardena Pindell was like, "Cornell's ignorant. He doesn't know what black visual artists have done. He's giving ammunition to those racist forces that were wanting to keep black people out of this particular arena of the visual arts." But I remember West went on and said, "I think the reason why it's underdeveloped is because it never found support in the only institution that black people had, which was the church."

And there's reasons for this too, right? Most black churches are Baptist and Methodist

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churches, they're not Catholic churches; they're Protestant. And we know the distance between Protestant Christianity and Catholicism has a lot to do with their relationship to the visual.¹ So song and dance and these kind of things found support in the black church while visualization didn't.

Even if you go to somebody like Basquiat – one of his parents is Haitian and one is Puerto Rican. This is not a small fact because if you go to Haiti, Brazil, or other places where Catholicism is the dominant religious form that black people practice, you'll find more openness towards visual expression, particularly as it coalesced around describing saints and things like this. Whereas in the Protestant church that wasn't there.

Black American social dance functions in a space where there is no sort of external authority dictating what's good or what's not good – meaning that there is no commodification. Not that there's anything wrong with the amazing modernist dance that black folks do as well, but when you go to a social or popular dance, everyone is dancing and the dopest dance is the dopest dance. The person who is dancing who has the most charisma, who's doing the most amazing thing, is self-authorizing in a sense, right? Cornell was onto something but he mischaracterized it. It's not that there was black *visual* underdevelopment – there was what I call black *pictorial* underdevelopment.

We need to make the distinction between the visual and the pictorial because we apprehend dance visually. So I was really trying to think through what's going on when black people dance. On a phenomenological level, what's going on? I came up with the two things that black Americans are acutely sensitive to. One is rhythm. Everybody's familiar with the idea that black people have an acute sensitivity to rhythms. But there's another thing that people have a harder time putting their hands on, which is an acute sensitivity to what I term *vectors*, or spatial arrays.

One place you see this is in basketball. A person can move around and from almost anywhere on the floor can throw that ball into a trajectory where it'll arc and it will go through that hoop. You see the same thing in soccer – like with Pelé. And with capoeira. Stuff started to have an impact on how people operated in space. So there's this acute sensitivity to space.

And I started saying, "Oh, black people can predict the future" – and that sounds really crazy, but what I mean is that they have this acute sensitivity to vectors and trajectories. If a person throws a ball, they have to calculate on the fly the speed and trajectory at which that object has to be launched so that it's going to

land in a pre-designated point. A lot of times you're not talking about a fixed target. You're talking about a person who's moving in space with a person who's trying to stop them and they still have to predict what that ball is going to do.

I think when black people dance, a lot of what's happening is this play of setting up a series of vectors and then breaking them. Like a pun. The obvious example is Michael Jackson and the moonwalk. He looks like he's going in one direction but he's actually going in another direction. Something similar happens if I throw the ball to a moving target. If you can't anticipate where it's supposed to land, you can't appreciate when it does or is going to do something different. You have to perceive those two different things simultaneously. It's really about flow – flow through figures. I have been preoccupied these last three years with this whole question of flow through figures. And this dovetails with your distinction between motion and movement.

TC: Going back to Cornell – and forgetting whatever his judgment or assessment of black visual culture is, or its underdevelopment – and talking instead about it being the site of authorization: dance is visible in the church, as you say. Consider the importance the Pentecostal movement places on the visible black body possessed by Christ. The church actually becomes a site of navigating those vectors, visually enacting a specific trajectory of bodily motion.

AJ: We're here in Harlem at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Gavin has said to me a couple times, "There's so much energy here. How do we tap that energy?" And I said to Gavin, "Oh, that's an ongoing project because even the Studio Museum that's been here for thirty years is constantly trying to figure out how to tap into energy. How do we get people in here?" So we got into this whole thing. We created these posters. And the posters we chose have these lynching images. And so there was a lot of back and forth about the appropriateness of putting these things in the street. My thing was like well, first of all, there's something to be said for just making explicit what is oftentimes implicit – which is that black people just get killed like we're not human beings. How do you put something in the space so that it can cut through the noise? There's a lot of ambiguity about the appropriateness of having an image of a man getting murdered. But this footage is all over the place. It's everywhere. It's not like we're talking about digging some stuff out of the archives that nobody's seen.

It's literally everywhere so the question becomes: How do you situate it so that actually people see it as opposed to just having it pass in

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front of them? How do you actually make people see it? And also, simultaneously, how do you see beauty? There's something to be said about the ability to see beauty everywhere. I think it's something black people have developed because we are not authorized – we are not affirmed – and so we've actually learned not just how to imbue moments with joy but how to see beauty in places where beauty doesn't necessarily exist.

In the previous film I made, *Dreams are Colder Than Death*, there is a moment when Hortense Spillers utters a startling formulation about the difference between the body and flesh. She says the flesh gives empathy. That's what I feel like I'm trying to manipulate in order to get at some sort of rendering of how black people feel now. The work feels very constructed to me; I'm struggling with it. Does the constructedness of it in any way undermine the real emotions that are elicited?

TC: But that's the thing about the mechanics of empathy. Are you trying to get us to think about the constructedness of empathy? At this point in time, do we have any choice? Do we have any choice in terms of what empathy is?

AJ: I think empathy is maybe the single most important thing that's at issue now in society. We know that the process of oppressing

people requires the person who is oppressing a person to dehumanize them. I mean this is the oldest strategy. We've seen it time and time again. We see it in Nazi Germany. They put people in situations where their humanity is thrown into question because it's like, somebody said to me recently if you throw a bunch of crabs in a barrel it's gonna look as if the barrel were the natural habitat of the crabs – you know? It's going to produce and elicit certain kinds of behavior which, considered ahistorically, will appear to be innate, rather than just an adaption to the exceptional circumstances of the barrel. Same thing if you throw people into a barrel, they will make it look more natural than it is in the process of surviving the situation.

The people who are dehumanizing people are trying to maintain or hold onto the sense of their own humanity. If I step on a bug, I know maybe the American Society for the Protection of Animals might get mad, but I'm really not stressing it too deeply when I step on a roach. I'm just not. I don't think about whether the roach has a family and children or anything like that. I just step on it. But you can't do that with human beings unless in some way you convince yourself that they're bugs. So the whole issue of empathy is what's at stake around everything that's going

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on. You cannot oppress people without expending a certain type of psychic energy, unless the whole mechanism, the whole superstructure is supporting that understanding of the oppressed as being less human, less feeling than you are. I think you learn empathy. I think empathy is taught.

I was a cinematographer on this film *Daughters of the Dust* thirty years ago. *Daughters*, for those who don't know, is about a black family at the turn of the century in South Carolina – they're trying to decide if they should stay off-land, you know off the mainland, on the island. Of if they should go to the mainland and become a part of society at large. It's very much a film about Africans, African-Americans, becoming black.

The most memorable experience I've had talking about the film was at the New School. We showed the film and then afterwards we were talking, and I'll never forget this older white woman stood up and said, "This is an amazing film. When I see this film I don't see color. I see my grandmother. I don't see color when I see this film." And she was a very nice lady but I remember asking her, "Why can't you see color and see your grandmother?" Like why is that a split, you know? Why do you have to erase her blackness in order to see your grandmother in this woman? I think that's what's at stake. It comes to empathy.

The classic way in which cinema works is that you identify with the people on screen. You go to see a movie and you identify with somebody being projected. Generally, you identify with the good guy. And there's a whole battery of things, lighting, costumes, and everything that filmmakers use to get clear about who's going to be the good guy and who we are supposed to identify with. And one of the things that was radical about *Daughters*, if something was radical about it, was when you went to see that film the only subject positions you could occupy were those of black women. There's no other subject position. You can't even find white guys as bad guys. It's just black women, right? *Daughters* is what it does. It's not going to change people's attitudes but it does make it harder to pretend as if black women are less human because now you have to pick one to identify with. It erodes one of the psychic mechanisms in place that lets you pretend that that person has less feelings, less whatever, less humanity than you do, right?

So I'm very preoccupied with how the work that I do is trying to expand narrow notions of who we are. Who is "we"? You know, who identifies with what? This whole idea of empathy being learned. We know that women have better empathy muscles than men. Because they get to

go to films where they don't see themselves and they project themselves anyway. They get to exercise that muscle.

People of color have better empathy in cinema because they go to cinema all the time where they don't see figures that look anything like them and they have to have the capacity to project themselves into that space and empathetically take that experience. We need more cinema because we need more spaces for more types of people to be able to exercise their empathy muscles.

So it's one of the reasons I'm not interested in making films with white folks. I'm really interested in making work that is always foregrounding black people's humanity even when they are bad guys or good guys. I like *Alien* because I'm a big fan of the alien. I'm a big fan of Hannibal Lector, who I think is black and passing, basically. I just want to see black people who are complex. And competent at what they do, even if they're mad geniuses or whatever.

TC: I think that we should try and wrap up.

AJ: Well, hold up, I have to show something else. When I do these talks and then I show these things everybody's like, "Oh, it's just so heavy." It's so this, it's so that, but you know I like love, too. So I wanted to show something that's sweet and that's got a high love quotient. A more overtly high love quotient.

I just I hate people to go away thinking like, "Golly, man, it must be hard being AJ."

Last thing.

[music]

AJ: Can you get the light?

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Installation views of *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016) are courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome.

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Arthur Jafa is a visual artist, filmmaker, cinematographer, and TNEG (motion picture studio) cofounder born in Tupelo, Mississippi and currently residing in Los Angeles. Renowned for his cinematography on Julie Dash's pioneering film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Jafa, also the film's coproducer, put into practice techniques he had long been theorizing. 'Black Visual Intonation' is but one of his radical notions about re-conceptualizing film. He is the director of *Slowly This* (1995), *Tree* (1999), and *Deshotten 1.0* (2009). Jafa was the director of photography on Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994), Isaac Julien's *Darker Shade of Black* (1994), *A Litany for Survival* (1995), Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson's biographical film on the late Audre Lorde, John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), Manthia Diawara's *Rough in Reverse* (2000), Nefertite Nguvu's *In the Morning* (2014) and shot second unit on Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014). *Dreams are Colder Than Death*, a documentary directed and shot by Jafa to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech, garnered acclaim at the LA Film Festival, NY Film Festival and Black Star Film Festival where it won Best Documentary. His writing on black cultural politics has appeared in various publications such as *Black Popular Culture* and *Everything But the Burden*, among others. Jafa's notable solo, group, gallery and museum exhibitions include Artists Space, New York, NY (1999); Okwui Enwezor's traveling exhibition *Mirror's Edge* BildMuseet – University of Umea in Sweden / Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada / Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy / Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland (1999); 2000 Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Black Box, CCAC Institute, Oakland, CA (2000); Media City Seoul, Korea (2000); *Bitstreams*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2001); Social Formal, Westaelischer Kunstvein, Münster, Germany (2002); *My Black Death*, ARTPACE, San Antonio, (2002); The Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA (2016); The Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA (2016); Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, NY (2016). Jafa will hold forthcoming solo exhibitions of his work at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, MI; and The Serpentine Gallery, London, UK later in 2017; his work is on view at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

Tina Campt is Claire Tow and Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Africana and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, and Chair of the Africana Studies Department at Barnard College. Campt joined the Barnard faculty in 2010, prior to which she held faculty positions at Duke University, the University of California at Santa Cruz and the Technical University of Berlin. Professor Campt's published work explores gender, racial, and diasporic formation in black communities in Germany, and Europe more broadly. She is the author of two books: *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (2004), an oral history that explores the experiences of Black Germans during the Third Reich, and *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (2012), which theorizes the affects of family photography of in early twentieth century Black German and Black British communities. Campt has edited special issues of *Feminist Review*, *Callaloo*, and *small axe*, and together with Paul Gilroy, co-edited *Der Black Atlantik* (2004), the first German language collection of key texts on the Black Atlantic. Her third book, *Listening to Images* (forthcoming in 2017 from Duke University Press) theorizes the everyday practices of refusal and fugitivity enacted in a frequently overlooked genre of black vernacular photographs she calls "quiet photography." Professor

Campt is the recipient of research grants and fellowships from the Leverhulme Trust, the American Association of University Women, The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Social Science Research Council, and the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities.

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Early radical Protestants
smashed stained glass windows,
preached outdoors in local
languages, and in general
opposed the immediate and the
vernacular to the figurative and
the representational. — *Eds.*

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