

Review

Vertigo Sea by John Akomfrah

Dan Barrow



THE FILMS OF JOHN AKOMFRAH HAVE BEGUN, with their recent increase in both budgets and ambitions, to seem less like artworks than research projects. *The Nine Muses* (2012) worked through a specific body of testimony and archive footage related to the first post-war wave of Caribbean migrants to arrive in Britain. *The Stuart Hall Project* and *The Unfinished Conversation* (2013) sorted through the facts and documents of the life and ideas of a figure important to Akomfrah's project – Hall had acted in an advisory role early on in the work of the Black Audio Film Collective, of which Akomfrah was a founding member. *Peripeteia*, first shown in Akomfrah's 2012 show at Carroll/Fletcher, extrapolated from two drawings by Albrecht Dürer depicting black Africans a bleak, well-composed drama of dislocation.

He has always, since his directing debut with BAFC, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), used archival material, probing specific bodies and nodes of historical matter – in that case, the recent history of migration, poverty and police brutality that lay behind the UK's urban riots in the early 1980s. But his films since *The Nine Muses* have begun to handle their subjects with a certain detachment or disinterest – a methodology that increasingly resembles simple collation and display – at the same time as they take on increasingly lush, seductive aesthetics. The two films on show at the Arnolfini – *Tropikos* (2015), which was also on display until March at Akomfrah's parallel show at London's Lisson Gallery, and *Vertigo Sea* (2015), first shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale – exemplify this. Neither foregrounds their specific archival engagements, but still they give a

sense at once of aesthetic monumentality and imperturbable documentary facticity.

Tropikos, in the downstairs gallery at the Arnolfini, was shot in Plymouth, the Tamar Valley, Guinea and the Arctic Circle. Divided into five episodes, set in various locations in the 16th and 17th centuries, it suggests a narrative through a series of scenes whose connection is never clarified, either through the conventions of continuity editing established by classical Hollywood or the diegetic signposting of dialogue. The locations and dates are provided through intertitles; the only speech is provided by a voiceover, reciting excerpts from Elizabethan seafaring narratives, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Each scene composes itself as a tableau vivant, in which the actors, in luxurious Elizabethan costume, stand, lie or move slowly through semi-rural backdrops. Even when there is movement a curious stasis prevails; for example, in scenes set on the Guinea coast, a static camera rests on a collection of objects – gourds, masks, yams – on the prow of a boat moving down a river, rain descending in the background. This pace, leisurely verging on glacial, is combined with sudden cuts that cue a structure of flashbacks and flashforwards, in a way that recalls most closely the strange inertia of Jean-Luc Godard's films of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the velocity of montage jostles against the still, composed quality of individual shots, where the bucolic rustling of reeds and trees or a graceful track is the only moving element. A series of mirrored visual elements draws implicit analogies or connections between locations and times: a black shepherd, huddled beneath a cloak on a rainy moor stands in front of the ruins of a fort, rhyming with earlier glimpses of the slave castles of the west African coast, as black figures walked, seemingly through the 'gate of no return' to the Atlantic transports. The cuts set up a rhythm of opposition in lighting, with darkened spaces giving way to light outdoor shots or white characters to black. The quotations from *The Tempest* in particular – Prospero's acknowledgement of Caliban as 'this thing of darkness [that] I/Acknowledge mine' – draw out the logic of this rhythm: that each 'character' element of the image is in effect created by the other, just as the category and forms of white subjecthood and Western modernity were defined by the colonial encounter.¹ Migration, as Akomfrah has suggested in interviews, is a formal process, used to grasp or articulate a more general existential homelessness for subjectivity, as much as an experiential one.

But the complexity of its temporal structure, in spite of its suggestiveness, feels almost ornamental without any anchoring sense of a strongly realised diegesis and *fabula* to which this nonlinear disposition of narrative elements relates. Indeed, it begins to seem like a mirror to the lush, glossy photography and the production design, whose attention to detail and texture recalls that of Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years A Slave* (2013). As in the latter film, the style at once gestures faintly towards a certain aesthetic of historical realism and turns the past it represents into something purely attractive to present-day viewers. Simultaneously invoking the past and disavowing its historical otherness, it approaches the form of pastiche that Fredric Jameson called 'the nostalgia mode'.² The specificity of the history of (forced) migration that Akomfrah is attempting to address here is not articulated but merely accumulated, taken as a series of frozen objects piled up in a seemingly random order.

Akomfrah has spoken of his primary commitment as being to 'a philosophy of image-making' – to the technics of images as the form, content and active articulation of theory.³ He has spoken elsewhere of his work with Black Audio Film Collective as fully participating within theoretical debates of the

1980s and 90s around postcolonial identity, rather than utilising theoretical materials positioned outside their films.⁴ This was the function of form in Akomfrah's early films with BAFC: rapid montage, the use of both location and archival footage and the innovative sound design of Trevor Mathison (who also provides sound and music for *Vertigo Sea*) created the shape or frame for the nonlinear historical encounter between different materials he staged. Akomfrah has said that, for BAFC, the formal and technical questions they confronted in their treatment of images were bound up with 'an emotional, a philosophical' set of problems. The wrenching transformation of the image was a means of dealing with 'a certain kind of tyranny which overdetermined our lives' as Afro-Caribbean subjects.⁵ Editing, as an archival operation, articulates or detonates the historical burden of the image.

It is ultimately disappointing, then, that *Vertigo Sea*, despite – or, perhaps, because of – its formal virtuosity, does very little with its material. In the upstairs galleries at Arnolfini the three-channel work occupies the same width as a pre-multiplex cinema screen. As in *The Unfinished Conversation*, the multiple screens allow Akomfrah greater scope to juxtapose images not only within a single frame but between them. Drawing most of its footage from the BBC Natural History Unit archives and the National Film and Television Archive, its edits launch images from one screen to another, or spreads separate views from specific scenes across three screens. Documentary footage is cut against *tableaux vivants* that evoke what Paul Gilroy has called 'postcolonial melancholia': blasted landscapes in which figures in Victorian clothing sit among the wreckage; a black figure in an 18th-century naval uniform, looking over the sea in the attitude of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.⁶ The natural history footage, which concentrates almost exclusively on aquatic life, is undoubtedly beautiful: broken ice floes, whale pods, flocks of migrating birds and molten sunsets are some of the highlights. It lends a certain piquancy to the material Akomfrah includes evoking the histories of migration and forced transportation: footage from the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* and panoramic shots of blue ocean suggest a symbiosis between nature and civilisation, that promises the possibility of a sense of humanity fundamentally belonging on the planet. This is the nostalgia that the images of oceanic vastness bear, at their best, in *Vertigo Sea*: the promise of an original home, somewhere within and on the other side of histories of migration. This sense of memory, too, was the burden of the image in much of the formally experimental cinema that inspired John Akomfrah – for example, the work of Chris Marker, whose groundbreaking film essay *Sans Soleil* (1982) Edward Branigan described as being charged with a 'premature nostalgia'.⁷

But Akomfrah's editing here works for the most part against this insight. Natural history footage is contrasted with scenes and narratives of maritime barbarity: whaling, the mass drowning of slaves on the Atlantic voyage, atomic bomb tests. Nature is now recast as an innocent object against which a generalised human savagery directs itself. By manoeuvring these atrocities into the same frame, Akomfrah suggests less a set of connections than a sense of vague, ahistorical equivalences. Compare with the astonishingly mobile ways that the montages of *Handsworth Songs* established a fractal network of relations and differences between a set of historical specificities – between the look of a riot and the melancholy texture of the recent history of migration – and it is clear how blunt and undiscerning the method is here. As with *Tropikos*, montage seems merely to accumulate the images, rather than synthesising them or showing their incommensurability. The intense aestheticisation of the image within Akomfrah's machinery of cinematic form here denatures the images

themselves, stripping them of their historical burden. The result of his latest and most ambitious researches are, for the most part, merely vacuous and pleasant.

Birkbeck, University of London

Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. by John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 1242.
- 2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 20.
- 3 John Akomfrah and Ekow Eshun, 'Lisson Gallery weekend talk: John Akomfrah and Ekow Eshun' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rh9Rb0R_IyU> [accessed 12 April 2016].
- 4 John Akomfrah and Francine Stock, 'Sheffield Doc/Fest 2015: John Akomfrah in Conversation' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6Mr2heCoeM>> [accessed 18 April 2016].
- 5 John Akomfrah and Kodwo Eshun, 'An Absence of Ruins', in *The Ghosts Of Songs: The Film Art Of The Black Audio Film Collective 1982-1998*, ed. by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press/FACT, 2007), pp. 130-137 (p. 134).
- 6 Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 98.
- 7 Quoted in Sarah French, "If they don't see happiness in the picture at least they'll see the black": Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* and the Lyotardian Sublime', *Image & Narrative*, 11.1 (2010), 64-81 (p. 65).

Works Cited

- Akomfrah, John and Eshun, Ekow, 'Lisson Gallery weekend talk: John Akomfrah and Ekow Eshun' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rh9Rb0R_IyU> [accessed 12 April 2016]
- Akomfrah, John, and Eshun, Kodwo, 'An Absence of Ruins', in *The Ghosts Of Songs: The Film Art Of The Black Audio Film Collective 1982-1998*, ed. by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press/FACT, 2007), pp. 130-137
- Akomfrah, John, and Stock, Francine, 'Sheffield Doc/Fest 2015: John Akomfrah in Conversation' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6Mr2heCoeM>> [accessed 18 April 2016]
- Gilroy, Paul, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)
- Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991)
- Marker, Chris, 'Sans Soleil and the Lyotardian Sublime', *Image & Narrative* 11.1 (2010), pp. 64-81
- Shakespeare, William, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. by John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005)