

The mountains, the ocean and the metropolis  
Notes on John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses*





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Filmmaker John Akomfrah, OBE



## Introduction

“Compared to the US black films, the black British films are strikingly British, and yet in no way can they be construed as nationalistic. They are part of a British specificity, but not of a British nationalism...”

— Paul Willemen<sup>1</sup>

“Il y a un rendez-vous mystérieux entre les générations défuntées et celle dont nous faisons partie nous-mêmes. Nous avons été attendus sur terre. Car il nous est dévolu à nous comme à chaque équipe humaine qui nous précéda, une parcelle du pouvoir messianique. Le passé la réclame, a droit sur elle. Pas moyen d’éluder sa sommation L’historien matérialiste en sait quelque chose.”

— Walter Benjamin, “Sur le concept d’histoire.”<sup>2</sup>

“Whenever I’m present for a screening of the film, I say to audiences, ‘Think of it as a kind of free-form performance.’ Because there are things that will become apparent in the course of watching it, some afterwards, and some you won’t necessarily know at all. I know that most people see that as a fault, but I don’t. Partly because the film is an act of homage to those who have gone, and I’m not trying to explain them. I’m just trying to get something across about how they might have felt in the course of being in this country for 40 or 50 years.”

— John Akomfrah<sup>3</sup>

John Akomfrah is one of the giants of British political cinema. Ironic, then, that he is properly addressed as John Akomfrah, OBE. He was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 2008, “For services to the film industry.” He began as a filmmaker in the 1980s, when he was a key member of the Black Audio Film Collective, the group that put militant, avant-garde British cinema on the international map. But in another, more interesting way, his induction into the Order of the British Empire is entirely logical. Akomfrah was born in Ghana in 1957, but he came to England when he was a kid, and he is inseparable from the place. His work, like that of Black Audio, is a key part of post-war British Cinema. Any history of the

Still from  
John Akomfrah's *Last Angel of History* (1996)





national cinema that wants to be taken at all seriously has to account for them. The Dalhousie library holds DVD copies of a some of Black Audio's films, at the end of this booklet are notes on those.

Black Audio Film Collective had a good run, lasting from 1982 to 1998. People wanting to come to grips with the full body of their work should have a look at Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar's 2007 massive book *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*, an extraordinary anthology that is full of great writing by and about these filmmakers and chock-a-block with photos and frame enlargements.<sup>4</sup> Since then, Akomfrah has had a very diverse career. He's now part of the production company Smoking Dog Films, with whom he has made TV documentaries (including pieces on Mariah Carey and British Jazz) as well as feature films and video installations. These forms have all creatively corrupted each other, and *The Nine Muses* serves as a great example of that. *The Nine Muses* then took a kind of protean form as a three-screen video installation called *Mnemosyne*, and this booklet reproduces a piece on the installation by Sukhdev Sandhu, originally written for the British film magazine *Sight and Sound*. And also offer three essays on the film itself, each written by a Halifax-area film professor. Together, we hope that all of this will give people some extra tools to understand the rich and multi-faceted creature that is *The Nine Muses*.

### Notes:

1. Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 1994): 209.
2. Ben Sachs, "The Latest Obsession: An Interview with *Nine Muses* Director John Akomfrah," *Chicago Reader*, 13 November 2012.
3. Walter Benjamin, *Écrits français* (Paris: Folio, 2003): 433.
4. Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sugar, eds., *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press / Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, 2007).

Still from  
John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2011)



## Archive and Canon as Akomfrah's Muses

By Jennifer VanderBurgh

John Akomfrah's use of textual quotation in *The Nine Muses* has an aesthetic similarity to a genre known as the found footage film, but differs in one key aspect. Rather than resurrecting discarded footage considered irrelevant by culture as in the found footage tradition, Akomfrah does the reverse: he appropriates texts in which there is already significant cultural and custodial interest. In this essay, I will read the film through Michael Zryd's seminal work "Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory," which distinguishes between found and archival footage. "Found footage," says Zryd, "is different from archival footage: the archive is an official institution that separates historical record from the outtake; much of the material used in experimental found footage films is *not* archived but from private collections, commercial stock shot agencies, junk stores, and garbage bins, or has literally been found in the street."<sup>1</sup>

Rather than finding cultural meaning in "trash" as in the found footage tradition, Akomfrah's method of textual quotation takes fragments of texts considered precious to archives or to literary and musical canons and quotes the material without attribution to the original author or work. This method effectively "trashes" (or discards) the cultural status of the original, so that the work's material properties – its language, images, sounds – become useful for his purposes.

As a form of “writing,” this method arguably has a similar end result to the found footage film, since in appropriating Homer’s or Shakespeare’s words without their authorial gravitas, Akomfrah effectively brings canonical and archival works “down to earth,” reconsidering their relevance. Texts that would normally be “discarded” from the project of narrating contemporary life, are, with this treatment, considered to contain new meaning and insight. As a cinematic intervention that is somewhat in concert with found footage projects, Akomfrah’s method of quotation demonstrates how insightful textual fragments can be to the narration of mundane, everyday experience. The difference is that whereas found footage elevates its material in order to demonstrate its relevance, Akomfrah’s method makes text relevant by masking the perceived “preciousness” or elitism of its origins. In so doing, he effectively integrates works of art (literature and music) or historical artifacts (archival footage) with the everyday. This gesture can be read as a form of textual rescue.

In *The Nine Muses*, Akomfrah quotes extensively from pre-existing archival, literary and musical texts. Fragments of twenty-four (credited) literary works appear on intertitles or in voice over. He uses excerpts of eight films and over twenty pieces of music as well as “actuality” footage, all filmed documentation of everyday life that comes from three British archives. Eight archival curators are mentioned in the credits as well, along with one archival assistant.

Akomfrah’s methods make it clear when he is appropriating. Poems, novels and plays are read by different voices (many from audio book recordings), poetry on intertitles maintains its line structure, and the content and aesthetic of vintage archival footage contrasts with his own digital footage. Although it is clear when Akomfrah is quoting others’ work, he deliberately resists attributing

the author and source of borrowed texts until the closing credits. Even then, the information that is made available leaves questions about the attribution of individual works. The experience of this results in a kind of textual mashup wherein quotations appear to “speak” or have meaning, independent of their authors. This brings to mind Roland Barthes’ seminal point from “The Death of the Author,” that “...it is language that speaks, not the author,” itself an adaptation of Martin Heidegger’s famous dictum “Die Sprache spricht.” “To write,” said Barthes, is “to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘me.’”<sup>2</sup>

But while it might initially be tempting to conclude that Akomfrah’s textual pastiche takes a poststructuralist perspective, suggesting that text/language/image speaks independently of authorial intention, this reading conflicts with the extent to which Akomfrah inscribes himself in the film. Images of Akomfrah, seated, lying, looking out over the water, over landscape, and directly addressing the camera, all foreground his authorial presence, reminding the viewer that the film is “authored.” Although the viewer does not literally see Akomfrah assembling the film, his physical presence is a reminder that these archival traces do not speak independently. Rather, they have been found and brought together purposefully to tell a story, and by one person in particular.

Akomfrah’s method of “writing” through textual borrowing refuses the viewer closure and certainty about the origin of his quotations. This draws the viewer’s attention away from the originals to what they become as a new formation. Just like the actual travellers/immigrants that are the subject of the film, textual fragments are both journeying from their original contexts and arriving somewhere new.

Still from  
John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2011)



In assembling pieces of preexisting texts to form something new, Akomfrah constructs his own film with the work of others. By using other “voices” as vehicles through which to “speak,” Akomfrah draws attention to the act of storytelling as a kind of utterance – as an intervention that uses image, text and voice in order to “say” something as a political project. Considering the film’s literal and figurative concerns with knowledge as “conceived” from the union of power and memory (according to Greek myth, it is Zeus and Mnemosyne’s union that produces the muses), it is fitting that Akomfrah uses textual quotation as a technique through which to reflect on knowledge (of history and lived experience) as an act of storytelling. In describing how he does this, I am suggesting that Akomfrah’s method of appropriating preexisting texts in the production of new work, functions as a form of metawriting that draws attention to the contribution of text to knowledge production.

I return here to Zryd, with whom I am in agreement that found footage filmmaking is “a metahistorical form commenting on the cultural discourses and narrative patterns behind history.” “[T]he found footage artist,” says Zryd, “critically investigates the history *behind* the image, discursively embedded within its history of production, circulation, and consumption.”<sup>3</sup> While I suggest that *The Nine Muses* departs from the “found footage” genre in certain respects – it is not particularly experimental, it is more lyrical than disruptive, it uses archival and canonical texts rather than discarded footage – this does not, I believe, discount its purpose and capacity as a metahistorical project.

As Odysseus, the central character of Akomfrah’s film, discovers in *The Odyssey*, home is not a stable place to arrive at, but rather, it is a site that is contested by suitors – a site of tension rather than agreement. In *The Nine Muses*, the contested “home,” a site that resists stability, appears to refer both to the U.K. as a destination

for the Black/African and east Asian diaspora and to the narration of this history through official channels, including, importantly, the archive. A passage from Matsuo Basho that appears on an intertitle, “[e]very day is a journey and the journey itself is home” refers, it seems, to the idea that instability and striving is the norm, and that knowledge is only ever an interpretive act.

Most archival footage of “actuality” in the film fits within categories of travel, arrivals, and labour. Extensive footage is used of cars, boats, trains, and airplanes to emphasize the film’s themes of journey and immigration. Often, in this footage, vehicles do not function the way one might expect, moving forward efficiently. Cars sometimes move laboriously, snow covered, stuck in traffic, or buried in flood water. In one example, a couple uses an oar to paddle a motorboat down a flooded roadway. Travel and journey become estranged through the figurative use of archival images.

Akomfrah’s figurative or poetic use of archival footage tends to challenge its status as indexical evidence. Throughout the film, Akomfrah’s editing juxtaposes archival footage and original footage to create recurring motifs of the elements. Archival shots of labourers manipulating bubbling vats of molten steel are intercut with footage that is original to the film of snow and ice. Images of heat, earth, mineral, and water/ice are juxtaposed, foregrounding the poetic intention behind the assembly. In this way, Akomfrah calls into question what Tom Gunning calls the “truth claim of photography” by using contrast to suggest the way in which archival footage is manipulated for his own purposes to create meaning.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, Akomfrah seems to be questioning what the archive remembers, and the relationship of author to text in determining which images are worth saving and salvaging.



In one particularly exploitative, self-reflexive example, Akomfrah quotes archival footage that begins with a high angle shot of a Black family with small children, seated around their kitchen table in what appears to be the early 1960s. The shot is initially filmed through an open window, presumably from a rooftop. The camera then descends through the window into the interior of the home, until the camera operator, like a cat burglar, invades the domestic scene, attracting the attention of the children, who look toward the camera.

Over this “official” archival image, Akomfrah’s choice of voice over evokes Odysseus’ arrival home: “this is your home...and here inside this house your wife.” The voice over directly reframes both the family’s initial exploitation and the camera operator’s (presumed) intention to document “othered” subjects by intruding in the home. With Akomfrah’s voice over intervention, the viewer/ intruder is now perceived to be a part *of* the family, rather than an observer of the family. “You” (the viewer from the camera operator’s perspective) becomes a participant in the scene, connected and familiar to the people in the footage.

This is an example of a move that critiques the archive’s intention as both author and custodian, and compels the viewer to question whose interests that archive serves. In quoting this and other intimate cinematic examples of documented, and thus objectified, Black subjects in archival footage, Akomfrah is making it clear how gestures of narration, documentation, and archiving are exploitative. This relates to Derrida’s point in *Archive Fever*, that the word “archive” derives from a term meaning both “commencement” and “commandment.”<sup>5</sup> That is, it both makes narration of the past possible and, in providing the mechanisms to do so, in ordering materials and in determining what to save, the

archive is also inherently prescriptive. In the allegory of Akomfrah's film, just as the muses provide inspiration for knowledge, their function as categories inherently prescribe and frame the knowledge they inspire.

Far from bringing clarity and certainty to knowledge and knowing, Akomfrah's use of archival materials functions as a kind of metawriting. Quotations that refer to the journey of the immigrant also reference anxiety (a kind of archive fever) with respect to narrating history and the impossibility of achieving knowledge or clarity in such a project. "I can see nothing before me / I wonder where lies my path," is one example of such a quotation. "Hard is the journey, / So many turnings, / And now where am I?" is another. This quotation (about Odysseus' son, Telemachus) could be read as a reference to Akomfrah, the auteur/storyteller:

Muse, speak to me now of that resourceful man who wandered far and wide.  
He came to see many people's cities where he learned their customs. While on  
the sea his spirit suffered many torments. He came to Sparta to learn about  
his father's voyage home and to gain a worthy reputation among men. So  
now, tell us his story starting anywhere you wish.

While *The Nine Muses* departs from the found footage film in certain respects, I suggest that its use of archival footage does not make its intervention less metahistorical. In estranging canonical texts by removing their authorial signature and in reading archival texts against the ways their custodians intended, the film appears to be reflecting on the production of knowledge as a form of narration. By including images of himself, Akomfrah inserts himself in the film as a self-reflexive gesture to reflect on his own intervention as a form of knowledge production.

**Notes:**

1. Michael Zryd, "Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory: Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99*," *The Moving Image* 3.2 (Fall 2003): 41.
2. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: Norton, 2001): 1467.
3. Zryd, 42.
4. Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs." *Nordicom Review* 5.1/2 (September 2004): 41.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Still from  
John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2011)



## Ghosts of the Material World

By Darrell Varga

The conventions of documentary come with an expectation that the form provides empirical evidence of the material world. The idea, following John Grierson, is that documentaries should be structured as a didactic exploration of a social problem and should offer some direction toward that problem's resolution. As a consequence, the aesthetic of the form is commonly understood as an anti-aesthetic (although Grierson did allow for poetic juxtaposition, inspired as he was by the radical reinvention of "the real" that marked the best of Soviet cinema of the 1920s). Documentary as a distinct form arose from the ruins of the depression, the chaos of emergent mass urban society, and the techniques of mass communication. It became a force for the regulating of citizenship, not to mention one that shored up the puritan strain of Anglo-culture which demands use-value from representation. We can also say that Grierson's model of documentary was the last gasp of Enlightenment progress, a teleology of ruins that extends, as Adorno and Horkheimer would say, from the slingshot to the atom bomb.

It is from these ruins that John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* takes its form: not through Grierson's empiricism but as pure metaphor and along the way transforming our understanding of documentary in relation to the real. The real is never coherent and unified; it is present in fragments, in the fleeting gesture, in memory and desire, and in the way we look back at the camera. The real is the place we occupy by birth, force or migration, and in the places we dream. This film dreams the world into being.

**“There are no stories in the riots,  
only the ghosts of other stories.”**

This triad of riot, ghost, and story comes from Akomfrah’s 1986 *Handsworth Songs*, a film that uses the racial tension and urban unrest of early 1980s urban London and Handsworth (in Birmingham) as a starting point in pulling back the cloak of British unity to reveal an ersatz tolerance in the xenophobic supremacy of empire. This tension has been echoed in more recent anti-capitalist riots in the streets of London, something that is a cogent response to the ruins of greedy 1980s Thatcherism and an expression of desire for alternatives to the desperation of everyday life under the routine machinations of transnational capitalism. *The Nine Muses*, like *Handsworth Songs*, looks back from the everyday to try to understand the violence of history and the place of Black subjectivity in England.

The form that it takes cannot, then, allow for a straightforward narrative, since that would mimic the mapping of empire. Walter Benjamin, a key influence on Akomfrah, tells us that there is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism. The place of documentary is to question the tropes of so-called civilization, to stare back at the ruins of empire. The film turns these ruins on their head in order to imagine a place for diasporic experience. The past is forever in fragments, enveloped by the story of storytelling. Akomfrah leavens the vast archive of the BBC with textual artifacts from the canon of western literature in a process that reclaims the language of empire on behalf of diaspora – remaking the nation-state as a lived place.

This story of migration begins with Homer’s *Odyssey*, not as voice of the master but as part of the mix, a plurality of expression rising

out of the chaos, along with the gaze of the Black migrant stepping off of a ship looking with trepidation first one way and then the other, out at the landscape of England. In this plurality and in the body of the migrant, the Homeric journey as affirmation of bourgeois individualism and progress is set askew. Is the journey of the diasporic a step forward or is it the sacrifice underpinning the *Odyssey*, the body as object of exchange in the cannibalism of empire?

Recalling the Robert Flaherty-directed but Grierson-completed 1933 film *Industrial Britain*, we see workers amidst pots of molten steel in a foundry. Is this the alchemy of the industrial revolution or the invention of tradition in the making of things? Is this modern England or an arrival into the cruel labour of history? Slow pans of the harbour, the body of the artist by the docks, the place where stories begin. The rumble of the train blasting through the countryside – the documentary brought into the real by sound – recalling the Griersonian mythologization of empire and modern communications that is Basil Wright and Harry Watt's *Night Mail* (1936). A Black man carries a suitcase along a street, later a policeman waves a flaming torch in order to illuminate the road through the thick London fog. The cop's torch is fire and light, but it also always recalls the violence of the mob: movement and stillness. The landscape is transformed by the human body within the camera's frame.

And so Akomfrah journeys to Alaska to record the stark and beautiful landscape with a single figure in the frame. This must be the sensation of the immigrant having arrived at a place without warmth, without community and a set of stories already embedded in the landscape. Here is the Black body on white ground. The filmmaker as poet calls forward the muses to write that story – his

body in-between camera and landscape, mediating the gaze – but that story is also written in labour, and we see shots of women at work in a laundry. Footage at a bingo hall is met with a voice that says: “He who hears the siren call never gets back.”

From Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, Joyce, Sophocles, and other great men of Akomfrah’s score, do we get the beauty of words abstracted from the everyday? It is no longer the question of who gets to speak, but of the ways that we come to listen. By calling forth these grand songs of the journey, we are invited to see the experience of diaspora as something more than the accountant’s score of patterns of settlement. It is also to say that material history is not a story of grim survival but a song of cunning and refusal. Or is it a song of defiance told in the bondage of Odysseus as he sails his desire-fueled ship on course toward the Sirens, the making of civilization along with its refusal? He is bound to the mast of the ship, knowing and unknowing the trajectory of knowledge.

Is this the meaning of these figures in the Alaskan landscape? They stand at the bequest of the filmmaker, but are also part of the song of meaning found in representation, the song in which the film is searching for meaning. The film finds that meaning in the gaps of reason. *The Nine Muses* emerges in this space in-between, affirming the documentary as resistance, but a resistance founded not on the tactics of activism but in the hesitancy of expression – seen here in the glance into and away from the camera. Hesitancy, refusal, and presence together undermines the distance required of formalism. The diasporic body has traveled enough! The play of language demonstrates the fluidity of words as if tossed at sea along the immigrant’s voyage and against the grim instruction of Reason.



This is the film's tactical magic: not affirming word and world in the convention of documentary, but undermining language as system of order, intention, and power so that the Word can no longer freely penetrate the meaning of place and community. This approach reminds us of the process of deception embedded within description and teaches the necessity of documentary as an Other to the tactics of meaning within Empire. In this foundational uncertainty formulated through, but not within language, there is a space for living. The language of progress can only ever be the language of deception – and it is here that we find the immigrant body in the shock waves of travel. Akomfrah's film recasts the meaning of place so that language can no longer be a mythologized command structure but now a system of possibilities.

Migration and immigration: economic logic against (or in spite of) the logic of desire. What happens when the dream of empire is met by the failures of capitalism? We see the logic of immigration as a teleology of progress dismantled by the very same system of desire: we see it as the capitalist promise refused. What remains is the need to make meaning in the wake of the departure of the ship of Empire. Language reserves itself as a tool of power, but the invocation of listening is another matter. It is in this radical disunity that certainty of Akomfrah's film is to be found. If documentary as a form is the ur-text of *the* world, against the narrative conjectures of an imagined world, here it is to proclaim the real as something that is made in speech and action, but also to say that documentary is the representation of possible worlds, something imagined in the wake of empire but not beholden to its logic of endings.

No stories, but the ghosts of other stories, only this time we have to deal with the weight of story as it has been lived from the first

step off the ship and onto the soil of Empire. It is not an imaginary journey of progress, but as if the ship is still sailing in waters of meaning, belonging, and nation. The purpose of historical recovery within the documentary is to elide the tactics of the nation-state, even as its very condition of rule is written on the body. This is the power of *The Nine Muses* as it stands against the wake of the Griersonian tradition of filmmaking as force for nation-building.

This interstitial space is what we see, but can never fully see, in *The Nine Muses*. It is created in the weaving together of the poets with the archival material through which there is a kind of reconnaissance of history that invites us to ask what are the voices we hear when we look at the landscape. It exists as invocation of the unheard where the poetry of civilization is turned inside out, so that the narrative of diaspora, unwritten in the legacy of the nation-state, finds meaning in the presence of these images. The film reminds us that the function of documentary is not to cover over the cracks in the façade of civilization but to explode its possibilities. Memory refuses the silence demanded by the grim winter of the north, or of that sad archival shot, seen early in the film, of the cold chill of the wind broadcasting over the frozen road.

In Alaska, or in the landscape of the imagination, figures stand in the background with the weight of weather and history, clothed in the anonymity designed to keep the flesh alive. We see a white landscape of snow written over by the body of speech. We think about naming and the need to un-name, but this is never said in the film, we are only given the traces. The filmmaker's body on screen is an exercise of presence – not as confrontation as is the case with the riots, but as a means of reimagining the teleology of the nation, not as State but as state-of-being. What we see of the archive likewise provides no facts, only the ruins of facts. There,

grim estate housing and crude graffiti that says “Keep Britain white,” and here a kid in a stroller and over there more children at play. A telephone rings and we hear narration extolling: “To be or not to be.” Is this what they mean by whiteness? A glimpse of the riots and the voice of hate disguised as reason asks: “What is living like an Englishman?” Home is far away now; it has become dream. We go deeper into the archive, but meaning is not ever to emerge fully formed. Did you ever think it was available as just another product on the shelf? There are people here, and the ghosts of other people. The past is just another story; it is how we frame it that matters.

Still from  
John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2011)



## Massifs, Oceans, and Cities

By Jerry White

One of the more remarkable aspects of *The Nine Muses* is the degree to which it both continues the concerns of the Black Audio Film Collective and re-orientates the point of view of much of that period's work. Black Audio's films are clearly part of the avant garde: they communicate mostly through visuals rather than through storyline, they assume that the viewer has a certain knowledge of politics and history and so assume an active viewer in a way that conventional cinema never does, and overall they feel seductively strange (which is another way of saying that they feel free from the constraints of commercial cinema). But Black Audio was a collective. Although their films were signed, so to speak (it's clear who directed what, which is not always the case with film collectives), they had a common project, a shared sensibility. Even the autobiographical films – such as Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) – were explicitly about community, about shared experience. That's true of *The Nine Muses* as well, but only to a point. One way of understanding the film is to think of it as a kind of diary, of an attempt to visually represent someone's internal struggles. Those internal struggles are rendered here as semi-transcendent, almost pure: they are embodied in the film by all those luminous images of mountains and of the sea. There's very little in the Black Audio corpus that feels this awestruck, this invested in the sublime qualities of the natural world. But *The Nine Muses* is not a work of philosophy or spiritual mediation. Akomfrah makes it clear that these internal struggles are the product of the external world: postwar British history, colonial migration, community-building in dizzyingly cosmopolitan metropolises like London. This, in contrast, is all quite central to the work of the Black Audio Film

Collective, no matter who was directing the films. Akomfrah is, in many ways, close to the generation of filmmakers who revisited the achievements of the first wave of political filmmaking and chose to build on that foundation rather than reject or even revise it. Chad's Mahmet-Saleh Haroun is doing something like this by modernising but still remaining faithful to the ideals of Third Cinema with films such as *Daratt* (2006) or *A Screaming Man* (2010). That's also true of Portugal's Miguel Gomez, whose 2012 film *Tabu* (currently making a big impression on the international festival circuit) continues the tradition of radical European filmmaking at the same time that it feels entirely new and, like *The Nine Muses*, feels quite comfortable with its own weirdness. Indeed, *Tabu* uses images of Mozambique's landscape (especially the made-up Mount Tabu, which gives the film its name) to evoke a kind of post-colonial malaise, a sense of melancholy about contemporary Portuguese life. *The Nine Muses* is using the landscape of Alaska in a very similar way. It's there that we find the meaning of the distinctly modern experience of calling a place home even when it feels equally beautiful and distant. This book takes its title from the three most striking visual motifs of the film: the mountains, the ocean, and the metropolis. Akomfrah renders all three in very different ways, but that's what they are coming together to produce: a portrait of modernity, but a version of modernity very specific to being Black and British in the first decades of the 21st century.

### **The Mountains**

The very first images of *The Nine Muses* are of the mountains, a series of slow pans and zooms across a wintery Alaskan landscape. It's the credit sequence of course, and one of the things that this sequence tells us is that this is produced by "BBC Regions," and that this is a "Made in England initiative." One aspect of Akomfrah's work that it is crucial to bear in mind is that it is

made in England. *The Nine Muses* shows him at his most restlessly cosmopolitan, but his entire career has been devoted to exploring a certain kind of English experience, exploring the locales and places where he has found his sense of belonging. This is most explicit in films like *Handsworth Songs*, which is, as its title suggests, an exploration of the Birmingham neighbourhood of Handsworth, the site of fierce rioting in 1985. That film was attacked by Salman Rushdie in the pages of *The Guardian*, although reading his take on today is a curious experience, since he and Akomfrah seem to share a similar sense of the culture they inhabit. Rushdie wrote then that “Look at the bright illuminations and fireworks during the Hindu festival of lights, Divali. Listen to the Muslim call to prayer, ‘Allahu Akbar,’ wafting down from the minaret of a Birmingham mosque. Visit the Ethiopian World Federation, which helps Handsworth Rastas ‘return’ to the land of Ras Tafari. These are English scenes now, English songs.”<sup>1</sup> Redefining English identity along more or less these lines has been the key project of Akomfrah’s career. These are local films, local images. To slightly revise the quote from Paul Willemen with which we opened the introduction, Akomfrah’s work is strikingly English, although quite incompatible with any project of English nationalism.

It’s no wonder, then, that *The Nine Muses* is so filled with awe-inspiring images of nature. Landscape is what gives us a sense of where we are, of how we live our lives in a place. The Alaskan landscape is utterly distinct: this omnipresent snow, these massive peaks, this inexplicable light, can only be Alaska. When, a few minutes into the film, Akomfrah gives us a montage of text about Greek mythology combined with archival images of snow blowing across English fields, across a roadside pub whose sign waves in the ferocious wind, this just as clearly can only be England. In many ways *The Nine Muses* is a meditation on the local, on the distinctive.

These images of the mountains are not only about invoking a sense of the sublime, although they do that. They are also about using cinema to evoke a place, a region, somewhere with its own history and its own sense of belonging, all quite independent of the homogenising forces of globalisation or colonialism. *The Nine Muses*, like all of Akomfrah's work, is about a place, a place as distinct and interesting and awe-inspiring as Alaska. The film is always reminding you of the sense of the local, always calling you to meditate on the experiences of figures in distinct, complex, and ultimately unknowable landscapes.

### **The Ocean**

The first "real" image of *The Nine Muses*, the first shot that's not part of the credit sequence, is of the sea. If the images of the mountains give us some sense of the subject matter of the film – it's about place, about belonging, about figures in different kinds of landscapes – the images of the sea give us some sense of the film's form. That form is all about flow.

Some of the most striking shots in *The Nine Muses* are not just of the landscape, but of the landscape rolling by, and rolling away. These images taken from ships remind us not only of the arrival experiences of so many immigrants to England but also of the sensation of being utterly inside of a landscape even though that landscape is fleeting, always slipping away. Images of water are important in *The Nine Muses* because, like those images of the mountains, they take us back to the world of *The Odyssey*, back to the inner life of the seafarer who wants to return home. When, about fifteen minutes into the film, Akomfrah gives us archival images of immigrants disembarking from a boat, presumably in England, and a voiceover that tells of Telemachus being greeted lovingly by Menaleus, it is a gateway to more images of the port,



of the canals, of industrial life of the maritime country that is England. But Akomfrah doesn't present these archival images of the city in any linear way. This is a montage of tremendous visual diversity: some of it in colour, some in grainy black and white, some of it moving, some still, most of it silent but some of excerpts from dialogue-heavy feature films, almost all of it historical but bits of it of an unmistakably modern dreadlocked guy (and that shot in black and white). In the quote from Akomfrah with which we opened the introduction, the *Chicago Reader's* interviewer Ben Sachs suggested that as he watched *The Nine Muses* he "felt somewhat adrift" and that "after a while I just decided to go with the flow." It's the maritime vocabulary that seems to come most naturally as he tries to describe the film. This is no accident. The film is not just about the sea in some literal, narrative way. The rhythms of the sea (which is never far away in England) are what give *The Nine Muses* its form; the logic of the seafarer is the logic of this film.

### **The Metropolis**

For all my talk of the mountains and the ocean, it must be admitted that Akomfrah is not a pastoralist; he's an urban guy, through and through. For if the images of mountains give us a sense of *The Nine Muses'* subject matter and the images of the ocean give us a sense of the film's formal patterns, it is images of metropolitan spaces that give us a sense of the film's politics. About two thirds of the way through Akomfrah presents us with a montage of archival footage; it is confrontations between community members (mostly white) and police officers (mostly Black) with audio footage of Enoch Powell delivering his infamous 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech (we see Powell briefly). This was, of course, delivered not in some tiny "little England" village but in Birmingham, in the city whose burned-out urban core Akomfrah is

showing us here. As the sequence continues the imagery is still that of the urban life of Black Britian (a close-up of a brooding Black man is cross-cut with documentary footage of kids near a bonfire amidst ruins), but the soundtrack changes radically. It is from Book I of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an indisputably central part of English literary history, here made modern, here made part of a troubled, cosmopolitan metropolis:

[...] what in me is dark  
 Illumin, what is low raise and support;  
 That to the highth of this great Argument  
 I may assert Eternal Providence, And justify the wayes of God to men.

Akomfrah doesn't cite the next stanza, but reading it I find it impossible not to think of Akomfrah telling the *Chicago Reader* that "the film is an act of homage to those who have gone, and I'm not trying to explain them; I'm just trying to get something across about how they might have felt in the course of being in this country for 40 or 50 years." Milton writes:

[...] say first what cause  
 Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,  
 Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off  
 From thir Creator, and transgress his Will  
 For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?  
 Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?

That recalling of those who have gone, that desire to understand what it is that led those who came in search of a new world only to find that a fall into painful revolt was their inescapable destiny: this is Milton's concern, just as surely as it is Akomfrah's. Moving from Powell to Milton via images of racially troubled Birmingham is to offer a kind of analysis of the complexity and the fluidity of Englishness in a way that is only possible from someone who is equally rooted in a specific place and aspiring towards the openness

and sophistication of a true cosmopolitan. Salman Rushdie was that kind of figure in the 1980s and 90s, and that's the ethic that has defined all of Akomfrah's work. To again cite Rushdie's denunciation of Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* and so to put it in a way that neither man would probably approve of: "It's important, I believe, to tell such stories; to say, this is England."<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusion

Complexity, fluidity, cosmopolitanism: the mountains, the ocean, the metropolis. Understanding *The Nine Muses* is, for me, about understanding the way that these three concepts interact and creatively corrupt one another. Complexity, fluidity, and cosmopolitanism are the defining factors in all of Akomfrah's work, really, and the snowblown imagery of *The Nine Muses* should not distract from the degree to which it is a continuation and, arguably, a summation of all of the work that he has done so far, both with Black Audio Film Collective and on his own. He is possessed of a singular vision, but he is never repetitive. Each film he makes is a new attempt to grapple with his own experience of modernity, and the experiences with modernity of those who form the multiple communities to which he belongs. To end with the language of Milton, the tensions that this kind of grappling creates really do form the great Argument of our day.

### Notes:

1. Originally published as "Songs doesn't know the score," *The Guardian*, 12 January 1987. Reprinted in Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91* (London: Granta, 1991): 115-117 (the quote is from p.117).

2. *Imaginary Homelands*, 117.

Still from  
John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2011)



## Family photos:

### John Akomfrah's *Mnemosyne*

Sukhdev Sandhu

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Named after the Greek goddess of memory, John Akomfrah's *Mnemosyne* is a series of tone poems and essay-drifts around the theme of migration that rekindles many dense and evocative memories of its own. Memories of *Handsworth Songs* (1985), a pivotal work by the Black Audio Film Collective, which Akomfrah co-founded in 1982, whose exploration of both real and imagined West Midlands topographies prefigures the Birmingham setting of his new feature; of an era when a generation of young black artists tackled the "inner-city question" using avant-garde aesthetics rather than the keeping-it-real banalities of films like *Adulthood* (2008); and of an era when such multi-layered and allusive films were often broadcast on national television, rather than being forced to take refuge in art galleries, as *Mnemosyne* is currently doing at The Public in West Bromwich.

Bucking the trend for multi-screen installations, *Mnemosyne* is a focused, intense and visually gorgeous single-screen work that excavates archival footage of Birmingham from 1960 to 1981, spanning a period from the initial arrival of South Asian and Caribbean settlers in the city to that when, as in so many other urban centres across the UK, it witnessed a wave of rioting, much of it the result of decades of second-generation anguish and frustration.

The images Akomfrah resuscitates are more private and elliptical than those normally used by television researchers to illustrate news headlines concerning race relations or the social condition of Britain. They're interlaced with footage not just of a flooded or frozen West Midlands, but of two men: one, his face hidden under layers of protective clothing as he yomps across polar landscapes; the second, an older black man who wanders through largely deserted Birmingham industrial sites.

This latter motif of a journey across fragmented cartographies refers back to Schubert's *Winterreise* song cycle, as well as to Eliot's "The Waste Land." It's a journey into a mood-space characterised by a ruminative melancholy, ensuring it avoids charges of Brummie boosterism and, furthermore, providing a stark contrast to that desire for historiographical clarity, racial uplift and Manichean narratives so often and so tediously found in cultural productions from the "minority sector."

What emerges is a fascinating fusion of two modes of modernism rarely brought into dialogue: the formal experimentalism and attention to ethnicity associated with elements of 1980s countercultures, and the interest in threnody, bricolage structures and the poetics of perambulation found in a writer such as W.G. Sebald.

That bricolage – extracts from Nietzsche and from Beckett rub up against passages from "The Song of Solomon," Milton and Homer – has the effect of making stories long seen purely through post-war and postcolonial lenses take on a more deeply historical and universal resonance. Here hover the 20th-century equivalents of the solo trekkers and existential vagrants to be found

in medieval writers such as William Langland or in Anglo-Saxon verse epics such as “The Wayfarer” and “The Seafarer.” Here the impulse to migrate to another land has its roots in impulses to do with curiosity, love and a hunger for otherness – impulses more elemental than economically deterministic explanations.

*Mnemosyne* is also part of a small but noticeable trend for black artists – among them Isaac Julien in *True North* (2004) and Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) in *Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctic* (2009) – to mine the creative potential of spaces seen as literally and symbolically white. It uses footage Akomfrah shot for a recent television documentary about the Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska.

The snow-caked territories through which the silent protagonist slowly moves inevitably evoke the spectre of the melting of the icecaps, and of a more diffuse and hemispheric eco-catastrophe: the film’s exploration of the fragility of memory is supplemented with a tactile awareness of the fragility of place, and an unspoken awareness that many migrants in the future will be environmental ones.

Another disappearance the film points to is that of industrial labour. Some of the most evocative archival footage shows migrants in factories and foundries, those hubs of interracial sociality that in recent times have often been disassembled, shipped to Asia and reconstructed as viable workspaces for Indian and Chinese proletarians. Images that a generation ago might have indexed working-class exploitation now have a nostalgic appeal. They recall the way in which manual graft often permitted a dignity and grace that’s hard to replicate in today’s service-sector economy.

In this respect, *Mnemosyne* should be treated as part of the growing body of cine-essay and documentary productions – others include Harun Farocki’s *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), Travis Wilkerson’s *An Injury To One* (2002) and Jia Zhangke’s *24 City* (2008) – that tackle what critic Andrew Ross describes as “the extinction of a mass industrial personality for whom labour was a livelihood in the fullest sense of the term.”

*Mnemosyne*, like all the features Akomfrah made with the Black Audio Film Collective, is as attentive to sound as it is to image. It’s a city-symphony that makes elegant use of Schubert and the drone-time of Indian classical music, as well as choice extracts from the likes of poet Zbigniew Herbert, refashioning Birmingham not so much as the heroic polis of Terence Davies’s Liverpool in *Of Time and the City* (2008), but as somewhere closer in spirit to the ghosted, hauntological London of dubstep artist Burial. In its own way it is not just a welcome return to the arthouse fray, but a very necessary haunting of the present by a singularly important British film-maker.



Still from  
John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2011)



Still from  
John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993)



## Notes on work by Black Audio Film Collective held by Dalhousie's Library

### *Handsworth Songs*

John Akromfrah, UK, 1986, 60m

Dalhousie's library doesn't actually hold this film, but at press time it was available in full at <http://goo.gl/58sSY>. It is worth including in this section because of its historical importance not only for Black Audio itself but for political filmmaking in Britain. As a few of these essays note, the film was the subject of considerable controversy when it was first shown, controversy driven in large part by Salman Rushdie's sense that it was overly cranky (the letters-pages debate about the film is reprinted in full at the same website where you can find the film). This is remarkable in no small part because of *Handsworth Songs*' form. This was not simply a didactic examination of present-day racial tensions, but a very fast, dense, montage-based essay film. Akomfrah would go on to prove himself quite capable of making conventional documentary treatments of racial politics (as with his 1997 A&E-Biography-produced *Martin Luther King jr.: The Man and the Dream*, which is held on VHS at NSCC's library). This isn't one of them. Arguments about what constitutes political cinema have long focussed as much on form as on content; that was certainly true of the debates around "Third Cinema." It was equally true of the debates about the "workshop movement," which refers to the films that were made by publically-funded workshops in the late 1970s and 80s (the successes and

failures of the workshop movement was debated very vigorously in the pages of the academic journal *Screen*: see Alan Lovell, “That was the workshop that was,” *Screen* 31.1 [1990] and Rod Stoneman, “Sins of Commission,” *Screen* 32.2 [1992]). Many of those workshops had a regional emphasis (such as Derry Film and Video, who made the widely-screened *Mother Ireland* and *Hush-A-Bye-Baby*), but this period was remarkable for the number of ethnically-focussed workshops: Black Audio Film Collective, Sankofa Film and Video (which included Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien, whose Sankofa films *The Passion of Remembrance*, *Looking For Langston* and *Home Away from Home* are in Dalhousie’s library), Ceddo Film and Video Workshop (whose director Menelik Shabazz shot riot footage that appears in *Handsworth Songs*), and the Asian-focussed workshop Retake Film and Video Collective. *Handsworth Songs* is a kind of flagship-film for explosion in British cinema, this great decade or so where the debates of Third Cinema had well and truly come to the heart of the metropolis.

### *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*

**John Akomfrah, UK, 1993, 52m**

This is a very strange and quite wonderful film. Watching it with colleagues recently, we all had a little bit of a chuckle about how dated it seemed. All the soft lighting and warm colours, the direct address to the camera, and the complicated wiry glasses seemed to shout “90s avant-garde.” That’s true, of course. The film *is* dated, but in the best possible sense of the term. In many ways, it seized on a kind of “Malcolm fever” that was a defining part of American culture of the early 90s. This was driven in no small part by the success of Spike Lee’s sprawling biopic *Malcolm X* (1992). So in that way, it’s no surprise that Spike Lee is one of the interviewees

in the film. But there's another story hiding below this early-90s tale, one that actually illuminates some important aspects of the transnational movement that groups like Black Audio were trying to build. And that tale, as is so often the case with Akomfrah, is told mostly at the level of the visuals. *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* was shot by Arthur Jafa, one of Black cinema's real renaissance men. Jafa has written essays about cultural politics, worked as a second-unit cinematographer on *Malcolm X* and as the cinematographer of Lee's next film, the much-underrated *Crooklyn* (1994), and was both producer and cinematographer of Julie Dash's 1991 Sea-Islands-set, Gullah-language masterpiece *Daughters of the Dust* (which is held at Dalhousie's library). Julie Dash is, to my mind, best understood as Black Audio's American cousin, a filmmaker whose political commitment and formal adventurousness is nothing short of wondrous. Like Akomfrah, she should be seen as a key part of her country's political and avant-garde film traditions. Seeing *Seven Songs For Malcolm X* through Arthur Jafa lets us see it as a kind of linchpin, a film that brings together the commercial and the avant-garde, the American and the British, the narrative and the documentary, the biographical and the political. This is not to say that the film is only interesting for these kinds of macro-historical reasons. In fine Akomfrah style, it mixes fascinating archival footage and artificial, poetic imagery in a dense montage that encourages a viewer to meditate on the complexity of a painful set of historical and political questions. And even though ostensibly it looks quite different from *The Nine Muses* (it's all cozy interiors instead of sublimely massive landscape shots), it is just as pleasurable to look at, just as beautiful in a let-it-all-wash-over-you kind of way. *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* is, for sure, an eccentric film, but it is no mere curiosity.

*The Last Angel of History***John Akomfrah, UK, 1995, 45m**

Other essays in this book make the point that Akomfrah is strongly influenced by that giant of 20th-century philosopher and much-beloved godfather of cultural studies, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). That influence seems strongest in this film, although it's not necessarily explicit. *The Last Angel of History* is ostensibly a documentary exploring the work of a number of important Black science fiction writers, artists, and, um, practitioners: the novelists Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler, the actress Nichelle Nichols, the musicians George Clinton and Sun Ra, and the astronaut Bernard A. Harris jr. But this is not a conventional educational documentary. The talking heads are, as in *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, intercut with highly artificial monologues and semi-fictional sequences, archival footage, and a bit of abstraction. It's very Benjaminian in that way: this is very much a bricolage, a collection of various bits and bobs. That's a form that was enormously important to Benjamin, who saw in that ethic of assemblage a blueprint for the modernity; it's also the form that defines his unfinished masterpiece, *The Arcades Project*. This is a kind of mini-arcade project for Akomfrah, a dense, allusive and slightly fragmented attempt to imagine the future through the material and literary details of the present. That quality of being between past and future is what accounts for the film's title. Akomfrah is alluding to Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History," which is also known both as "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" and "Sur le concept d'histoire" (for Benjamin, as for Akomfrah, the notion of "the original" is always a little slippery). In that piece's ninth section, he writes about a Klee painting called "Angelus Novus," a painting of a figure that Benjamin says "is how one pictures

the angel of history”. Benjamin goes on to write that “a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” This is the future that Akomfrah’s angels are seeking: a debris-cluttered vision of reality defined by their attempts to catch the tempestuous energy of the transcendent, even as they look with steely determination on the historical past that is before them.

## Contributors' Notes

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