On Terror and Beauty: John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*

T.J. Demos

'Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime' – the phrase, taken from one of *Vertigo Sea*'s nine intertitles, provides an apt descriptor for this moving triple-channel installation, produced for the 2015 Venice Biennale. Running at forty-eight minutes, it portrays the ocean as a site of both terror and beauty, creating a vast expanse of historical meanings and experiential sensations where incongruous narratives interact. Startling seascapes provide the colourful backdrop for the routes of colonial exploration and the transatlantic slave trade, indicated by seconds-long clips of shackled black figures lying on the dank bunks of a ship's hold. Stunning images of marine life are interrupted by sailors killing whales and hunting polar bears. Gorgeous footage of mountainous Arctic icescapes compete with the brutal militarisation of nature, the sea as test site for nuclear bombs and field for deepwater oil drilling, leaks and fiery explosions. And oceanic signs of climate change and global warming, in footage of melting and crashing glaciers, counterpoint shots of the sea as cemetery, from which the bodies of countless Europe-bound migrants wash up on shore.

This panoply of images is largely drawn from BBC's archive of nature films and television programmes (including David Attenborough's sumptuous sea life documentary, *The Blue Planet*, 2001), though in *Vertigo Sea* they appear delinked from their original narratives, merely glimpses of dramatised history and oceanography. In addition, the film adds footage shot by Akomfrah depicting Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–97), the freed African slave and abolitionist who travelled the seas, explored the Arctic and lived out his life in England, writing an important autobiography in which the sea also figures as place of multiple valences, of wondrous beauty, existential threat and watery captivity.[1] Joined together in triple projection, Akomfrah's montage is redoubled in the soundtrack, where breathy strings of majestic and foreboding affect combine with whale song, interrupted at times by the echoing shots of hunting rifles and the blasts of harpoon cannons.

Bringing these audiovisual elements together in conversation, Akomfrah presents a haunting meditation on this selection from the visual culture of Western modernity. Focusing attention on the intervals between projections as much as their interior images, the piece proposes a cinema of relationality, an archival work that resists providing a simple message, moral or partisan interpretation. Rather, *Vertigo Sea* reveals unanticipated connections between narratives, virtual openings that offer places where the unexpected appears and where discovery can take place.[2] More often than not, what results is a matter of visual and affective experience, not so much informational communication, even though the film cites several cultural references, joining audio clips from sources including famous literature that takes the sea as subject, such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

IN:
"JOHN AKOMFRAH"
LONDON: LISSON GALLERY, 2016

1 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* [1789], ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Norton, 2001).

2 As Akomfrah explains in an online interview accompanying a 2015 exhibition at the Bildmuseet, Umeå University, bildmuseet.umu.se/en/exhibition/john-akomfrah-vertigo-sea/20548. Turning the interval into a site of meaning creation, Vertigo Sea offers a contemporary version of the 'time-image', as according to Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

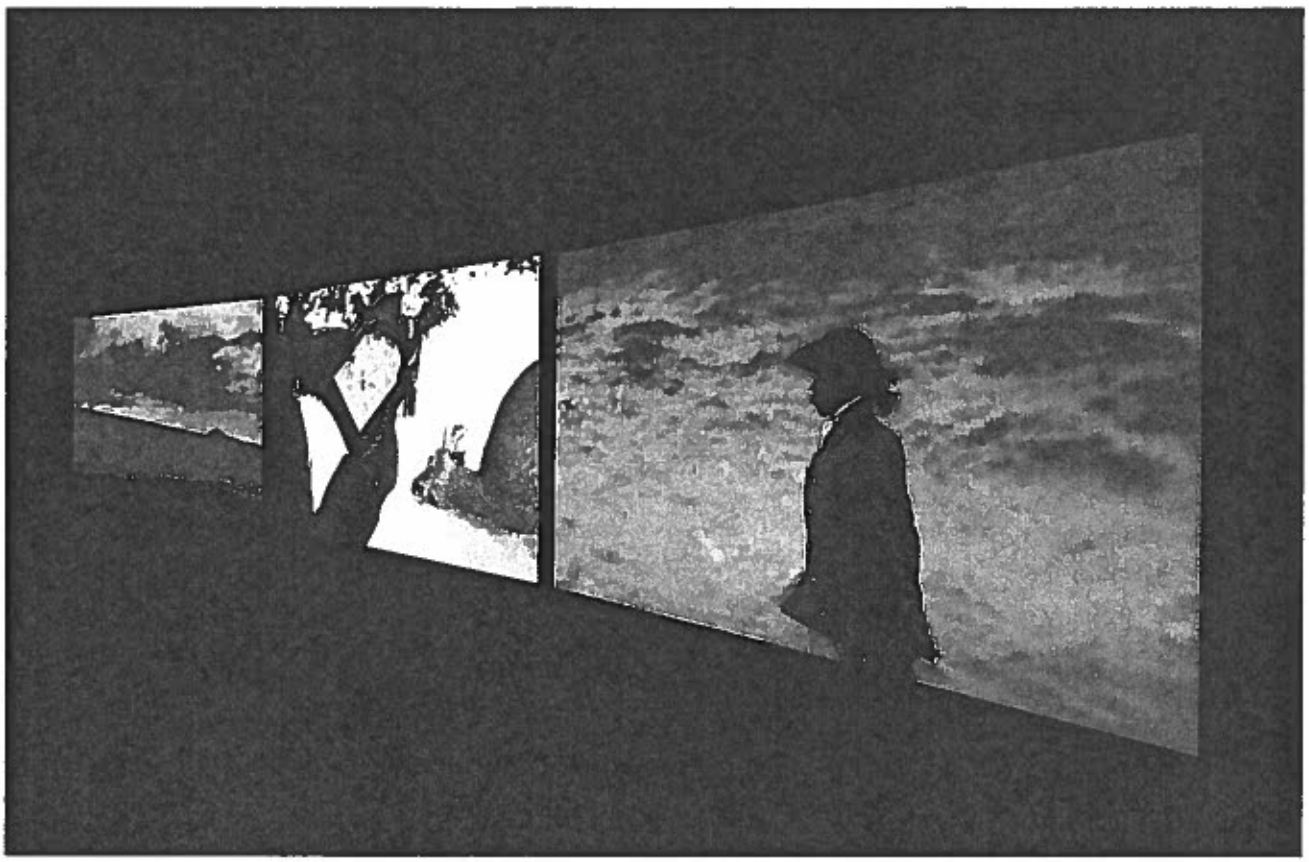
(1927); philosophical accounts of conceptual exploration, namely Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–91); and hymns dedicated to marine life, specifically Heathcote Williams's epic poem *Whale Nation* (1988). In addition, there are recent TV reports of unnamed refugee deaths at sea, which have become all too familiar in recent years. Audio elements enter into the film intermittently, without proposing a clear connection to the imagery or obeying a specific order or chronology, the piece being overall non-narrative (which develops the aesthetic strategies found in Akomfrah's earliest productions with the Black Audio Film Collective, such as *Signs of Empire*, 1982–84). In *Vertigo Sea*, audiovisual matter unfolds to reveal a dizzying intersection of history, fiction and philosophy, without clear boundaries between them.[3]

Or, as Akomfrah explained in reference to the 'unspeakable moments' developed through similar juxtapositions in *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), his work on the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall, montage possesses the power to elicit 'unconscious relations between the subject and historical forces', 'uncanny' affinities beyond the 'literalism of historical causality'.[4] *Vertigo Sea* builds on that precedent, defining an innovative cinematic methodology to endow the past, present and future with new meanings.

The film's idea of vertigo is further thematised by the footage of Equiano, who, we know from his autobiography, hailed from the Igbo people of what is now southeastern Nigeria. *Vertigo Sea* pictures him statically in stylised tableaus, standing in eighteenth-century European attire on the coast gazing out

3 *Vertigo Sea* thus approximates the condition of what Jacques Rancière terms 'documentary fiction'. See Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006).

4 As the artist explains in T.J. Demos, 'Unspeakable Moments: An Interview with John Akomfrah', *Atlántica*, No. 54 (2014), p. 59.



at the sea. He appears posed in states of contemplation against ravishing backdrops of coastal mountains, bringing to mind the romantic painting of Caspar David Friedrich, as well as providing an analogue of the viewer's own position watching the film, initiating a slew of identifications. In one scene recalling Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), he is shown amidst a range of clocks, each set to a different time; and in another shot evoking the ocean iconography of literary romanticism, namely, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), he appears on the coast surrounded by assorted domestic items – an iron bed frame, a bicycle, a buggy – picturing the scene of a shipwreck. In referencing Equiano, *Vertigo Sea* continues the revisionist cultural history of Akomfrah's recent films, such as *Peripeteia* (2012), which explores some of the earliest appearances of black people in Western painting, as found in works by the sixteenth-century artist Albrecht Dürer; in his films, these figures become centres of imagination and recovery, contesting the consignment of blackness to oblivion in the marginalia of such canvases and in the conventional art-historical narratives that continue to overlook them.[5]

In the case of *Vertigo Sea*, Equiano embodies a figure of deterritorialisation, out of time and place, confronting the vicissitudes of experiences and memories that the sea represents. That disjunctiveness has historical roots: while Equiano describes being violently ripped from his home by slavers and put in a position of abject servitude, he was able to purchase his freedom in his early twenties and relates how he subsequently lived an emancipated life of exploration, seeing the world from the Arctic to Central America's Mosquito Coast. In this regard, the radical ruptures and ambivalences in Equiano's life mirror the very incongruities of beauty and terror, fear and attraction, absolute greatness and intense dread, often associated with nature, as was conceptualised in the eighteenth century's philosophical aesthetics of the sublime – the cultural framework of Equiano's Europe – which *Vertigo Sea* takes up in turn.

Rather than repeating familiar constructions of the sublime, however, Akomfrah's film locates and thereby updates its logic within our own cultural-geological present, where modern society, no longer separate from the natural world, has become a driver of climate change over centuries of capitalist industry. The world that Equiano gazes upon – our contemporary one – has not only colonised his own homeland, but also nature itself, and this is what *Vertigo Sea* depicts. With nature and culture now inextricable, and industrialisation determining the course of the earth's natural cycles – what some call the Anthropocene, others, the Capitalocene[6] – the incongruous categories of the sublime formerly located in the non-human realm now cross over into the cultural one, each potentially corrupting the other. Indeed, Akomfrah's film shows how the beauty of nature becomes terrible under the sign of our capitalist present, even as the latter's horror is aestheticised.

One effect of entering the geological space-time of *Vertigo Sea* is that we lose our bearings – referentially, philosophically, perceptually – tipping into a nauseous loss of balance that is the very definition of vertigo. The disequilibrium occurs when we can no longer separate our own secure viewing space from that of the dizzying sight of the real that surrounds us (are we not a part of these geologies, are they not consuming us, reconfiguring our very environment?); nor do we have the distance to dissociate beauty from terror. Taking the expanded spatialisation and extended temporality of the sea – what eco-critic Timothy Morton might call a 'hyperobject', which, owing to its unbounded scale and geological time, displaces human epistemologies and representational capacities[7] – Akomfrah attempts nonetheless to subject it to a frame, according to the monumentalising terms of his triptych-based model of expanded cinema and his use of spectacular imagery, which propose a scenography of modern history, both beautiful and terrible. Doing so, I would suggest, Akomfrah shows us that this filmic construction is but one integral part of the very grotesque attempt at dominating nature.

5 Akomfrah's practice parallels the work of revisionist historians in recovering these figures from the art-historical archive, such as David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (eds.), *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). Of course Akomfrah's work with Black Audio Film Collective was also invested in reconstructing the history of black subjects, from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Malcolm X, though focused on the twentieth century.

6 On the Anthropocene, see Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015); on the Capitalocene, see Jason Moore, 'The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature & Origins of Our Ecological Crisis' (2014), jasonwmoore.com/uploads/The_Capitalocene__Part_I__June_2014.pdf.

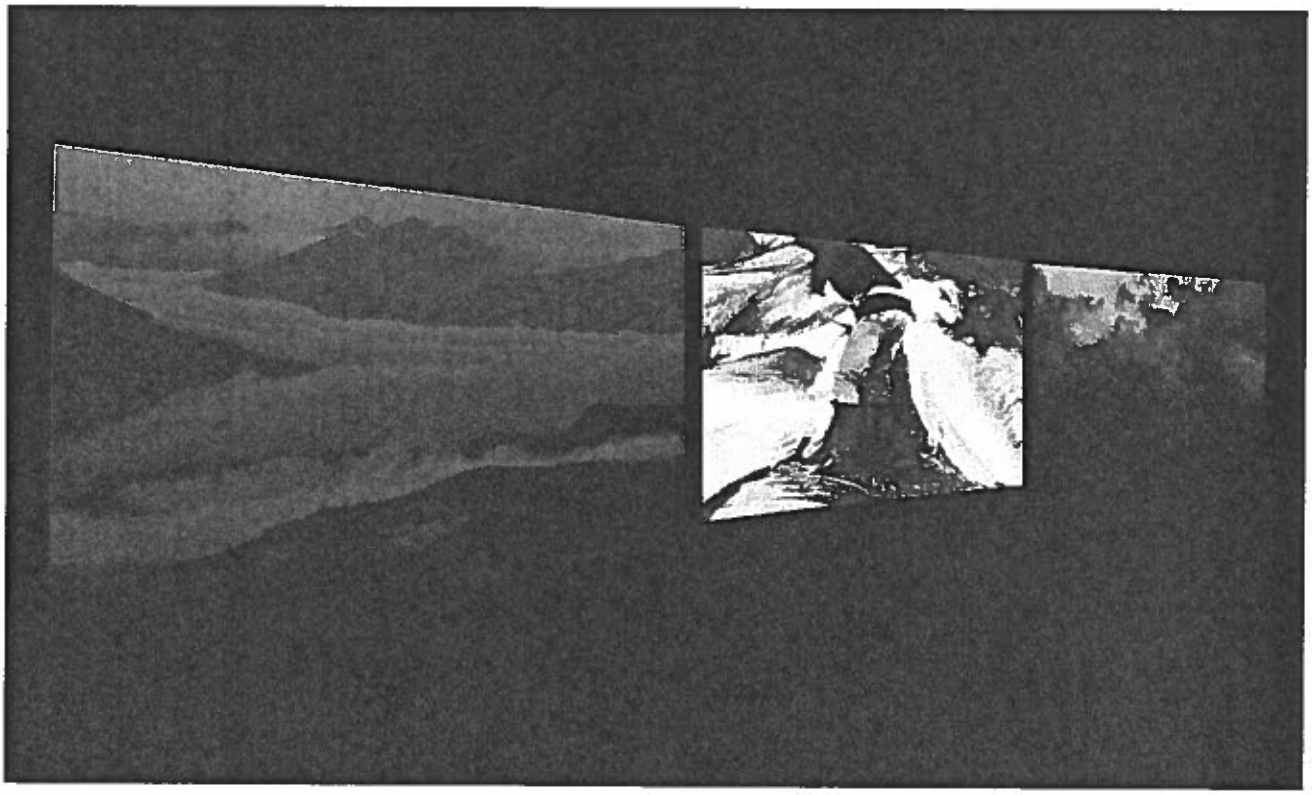
7 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

The film's recurring depictions of whale killing – a powerful and disturbing refrain at the present time of mass species extinction[8] – also figure as but one part of modernity's rampant colonisation of the world. ('The way of killing men and beast is the same', reads another intertitle, as screens mix scenes of whales dying in clouds of their own blood with those of drowned black bodies washed up on beaches.) Nature TV, which can capture every element of a whale's life and explore the most hidden spaces of the ocean, might be directly related to the industrialisation of the sea: as such, the visualisation of the aquatic sublime risks slipping into the grotesque, a means of human hubris asserting its dominance over natural phenomena. If aestheticisation here becomes a matter of the control and appropriation of nature for human pleasure, then it parallels our horror when scenes of destruction (shipwrecks, slavery's Atlantic passage, whaling and polar bear hunting, migrants drowning) themselves become spectacularised as filmic images, to be witnessed from a safe, mediated distance.

To be clear, *Vertigo Sea* doesn't shirk from showing us the unparalleled splendour of aquatic nature; this is, in fact, a courageous act of refusing contemporary cynicism, which has given up on beauty, even while it rightfully sees beauty itself as threatened, if not colonised, by consumerist spectacle. The film thereby courts the risk of being accused of naïve aestheticisation, and of a hackneyed politico-ecological manoeuvre of critically juxtaposing natural and human beauty with terrible scenes of industrial exploitation. Yet nature, one might rightfully respond, is intrinsically aesthetic, and beauty a part of life itself, which Akomfrah portrays in its fullest glory.[9] On the other hand, the film glimpses the destruction of that beauty, especially where aesthetic delectation mediates the destruction of a species, the violence of climate change and the mass death

8 See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

9 If 'all life is semiotic and all semiosis is alive', as anthropologist Eduardo Kohn argues, then it also bears an intrinsic aesthetic element. See *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 16.



of migrants. There's something key in this vertiginous sea of philosophical speculation that the film initiates about our contemporary response to violence, whether ecological or human. For when our image-saturated media invites us to enjoy scenes of violence through their movie-like aestheticisation, it is of course intolerable. The intolerability, as Jacques Rancière has noted in related contexts, identifies not only the unbearable reality that such images show, but also the numbing, anaesthetising capacity of such images, which can also be excoriating.[10] *Vertigo Sea* interrogates both aspects, showing their logic at work in scenes of slavery, ecocide and migration, provoking a reconfiguration of the visible without any simple lesson.

Insofar as *Vertigo Sea* prompts a reshuffling of times and places, it disrupts the fixation on the presentness of the contemporary, where events may be shocking because they are misrecognised as new. In this sense, the piece offers a continuation of Akomfrah's hauntological conjurings in recent films that bring past horrors and injustices into our own time, refusing to put them to rest, connecting these 'unspeakable moments' and 'unconscious relations' to present developments (the persistence of memory, indeed).[11] These interlinked histories demand recognition, and instead of allowing them to act out like unwieldy spectres in our periphery, causing havoc, *Vertigo Sea* brings them into conscious regard, insisting on conversing with them – 'feeding the ghost', as another of its intertitles reads. At the same time, *Vertigo Sea* projects what Akomfrah calls an 'afterlife of the image', according to which any image, as he explains, necessarily implies a future. This viewing-time-to-come defines a utopian dimension of image-making, if on an abstract level. Making an image, any image, is thus a protest against finitude, and as Akomfrah contends, artists, as image-makers, act as 'custodians of a possible future'.[12]

Developing the same line of thinking, can we not then say that remembering past tragedies and imaging present wrongs – on the world-historical levels of slavery and colonialism, species extinction, nuclear war and anthropogenic climate change – proposes, even tacitly, an alternate future? If so, perhaps what *Vertigo Sea* offers is the following optimism: where past injustice has failed to utterly destroy the future, we can maintain hope of a different time to come. If that time will not necessarily redeem the past, then at least it holds the potential to bring historical failings into consciousness – so that they won't be forgotten in the creation of the new.

10 Jacques Rancière, 'The Intolerable Image', *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009). Whereas once, political art directed intolerable reality against spectacularised appearance, in our current age of 'disenchantment' we face 'a single regime of universal exhibition' and the consequent loss of such strategies (p. 84).

11 'Hauntologies', referencing Derrida's coinage in his 1993 book *Specters of Marx*, was used as a title for Akomfrah's exhibition at Carroll / Fletcher in 2012. I've also investigated this haunting condition of cultural contemporaneity in T.J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

12 Bildmuseet interview, op. cit.