

THE NINE MUSES (DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 2010, SMOKING DOGS FILMS), FRAME GRAB.



The Ghosts of John Akomfrah

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The work of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) has been poetically recalled as “the ghosts of songs” in a gallery retrospective and subsequent critical anthology.¹ These titular “songs” vastly exceed their primary denotation; hence, they are also stories, forgotten histories, diaphanous traces of memories, and, especially, images and sounds quarried from the impossible archives of the black diaspora. While the collective disbanded in 1998, such ghosts continue to vex the work of pioneering director John Akomfrah, who, along with co-producers and former BAFC members David Lawson and Lina Gopaul (Smoking Dogs Films), consistently generates groundbreaking experimental cinema. In this piece, I will probe Akomfrah’s recent work at several fundamental nodes—sonic/musical, archival, and historico-temporal—all of which are grounded in iterations of the black diaspora.

Specifically, I argue that films such as *The Last Angel of History* (John Akomfrah, 1995), *Digitopia* (John Akomfrah, 2001), *The Nine Muses* (John Akomfrah, 2010), and *The Stuart Hall Project* (John Akomfrah, 2013) engage the sonic and the musical as both affective implements of memory and structural-theoretical scaffolding for cultural production. While sound and music are constitutive flows within the archive, they also leak through its seams. This seepage results from both sonic/musical representational ambiguity and the irregular attention paid to archival sonicity. Regarding the former, sound and music are representationally abstruse; they thus allow for a vigorous, recombinant logic that incites the undoing of archival codification and encourages myriad regenerations. Hence, funk, hip-hop, and techno provide inspiration for an Afrofuturist remixing of history

in *Last Angel*, and Miles Davis’ jazz operates as commemorative filament throughout *The Stuart Hall Project*.

Further, Akomfrah’s work posits radical philosophies of history and time founded on the present-absence of Africana peoples within the archive. The director’s oeuvre treats history and time as disjunctive, imbricated and nonlinear; therefore making them available for remixing, improvisation, and reconfiguration. To put it differently, the future is in the past is in the present, and all are open to, or in dire need of, re-vision. John Akomfrah undertakes nothing less than a reimagining of the aesthetics, epistemologies, and ontologies of African-descended peoples—such are the specters that haunt his art, and which he haunts in return. This essay feels the ghosts as they pass.

I understand Akomfrah’s work to take ghosts seriously, if not exactly in the way popular culture typically

understands them. Avery Gordon writes: “If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place.”² Thus, ghosts haunt us—they *do* things—affectively marking their presence and founding modern social life by pulling us “into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.”³ Ghosts, then, come in myriad forms, and this essay looks at a few that persistently flit through Akomfrah’s art.

Digitopia sets the stage, outlining a number of key concerns. Smoking Dogs’ website describes the film as a “drama about a man who lives in an analogue world but seeks to fulfill his desires in a digital world.”⁴ The

man in question is haunted, in part by his generally unfulfilled desires for a prostitute named Tanya, and in part by broader affective and conceptual states—tensions between analog and digital, the socius and the collective, humans and nature—that constitute the dense combination of history and subjectivity that Gordon characterizes as modern social life. *Digitopia* uses sound—ticking clocks; blowing wind; street noise; and especially phone conversations, which are the primary, technologically distanced mode of interaction between the man and his unrequited lover—to express the alienation and loneliness of contemporary existence. The film juxtaposes images of natural sublimity (mountains, lakes, the sky) and magnificent cityscapes with the spectral life led by a man who, despite his “connectedness” through modern technology, is estranged. Repeated shifts of *Digitopia*’s dominant chromaticism—ruddy,

aquamarine, sepia, jade, and ashen tones—do little to alter the somber and unsettled tenor. At several points during the voiceover, the man muses philosophically on the potential effects of universal contraction on personal history: “If the universe was contracting, she would be in my past.” In the end, neither the deep time of the universe and the natural sublime, nor the humanist technological “conquest” of nature, provides solace for a man who merely wants to be loved. Time haunts him, but he cannot truly mitigate its



(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
The frustrated lover
holds time in his hands

DIGITOPIA
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 2001,
SMOKING DOGS FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

ravages, even as his understanding of universal temporality interpenetrates his quotidian longings. He holds time in his hands, but fails to grasp it (Figure 1).

In these ways, this short video epitomizes a concern with time and history that is the loam of much of Akomfrah’s work, especially insofar as his films and writings unsettle linear temporality in favor of time travel and the rewriting of history. In particular, Akomfrah wants to shatter the archive for its historically racist exclusions and erasures, while also mining its images and sounds for shards with which to piece together history anew. This is sometimes an understated procedure. *Digitopia*, for example, interweaves black American blues music from the early 20th Century (by Ramblin’ Thomas, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and Charley Patton) to convey the affects of the forlorn lover and signify

a diasporic circulation from Africa to America to the United Kingdom. The film gestures at blues form in that it is haunted by sorrow and desire. Yet, *Digitopia* reaches back into the archives of the black Atlantic diaspora for historically important American blues music, using these songs to configure its filmic structure, affect, and signification. The film depicts the intense, emotionally charged unraveling of a relationship—the subject of much blues music—through multiple iterations of “call-and-response” structure, or antiphony. With strong roots in Africa, antiphony is of signal importance to most black popular musics, including blues, jazz, gospel, rock, and hip-hop. The film’s narrative is in fact anchored by a telephonic call-and-response, as the male lover pleads with Tanya and is repeatedly rejected. While causal connections can be discerned, the relationship’s trajectory is depicted

nonlinearly—calls and responses cut-up and remixed. Not coincidentally, the man’s final desperate plea is a proposal for the two of them to flee their lives in the United Kingdom for a fresh start together in America. This fraught attempt at transatlantic expatriation—a return to the birthplace of the blues—is brutally rejected. There will be no shelter, no solace. In these ways, Akomfrah locates a trace of what is to come in the past, and a trace of what has been in the future, a move that he repeats in a number of other works.

The brief haunting enacted by archival blues songs in *Digitopia* becomes a grand gesture in *Stuart Hall*. Previously, in *Nine Muses*, Akomfrah employed graphic onscreen titles marking different filmic sections, one for each of the nine Greek goddesses of inspiration. That graphic practice continues here, but marks periods of Hall’s life in

**“WHEN I WAS ABOUT NINETEEN
OR TWENTY, MILES DAVIS PUT
HIS FINGER ON MY SOUL...”**

synchronization with periods of Miles Davis’ music, which accompanies various filmic sections. For example, Miles’ *Filles De Kilimanjaro 1968* appears onscreen, announcing a segment of early BBC appearances and bits from Hall’s young career. Such titles also tell us that the film is composed “entirely from [Hall’s] film, television, radio, and photographic archives [along with] musical fragments from his lifelong listening to Miles Davis.” This musical accompaniment—the ghosts of songs, again—is a signal element of both

the film and Hall’s life. Hall poetically intones: “When I was about nineteen or twenty, Miles Davis put his finger on my soul...the various moods of Miles Davis matched the evolution of my own feelings...and some of the nostalgia for what cannot be is in the sound of Miles Davis’ trumpet.” Hence, the film is haunted by “what cannot be”—lives not lived, histories unrecorded, opportunities denied, promises broken, homes forgotten. This haunting is, in part, an affective mnemonic marked by Miles Davis’ music. Music, to be

sure, has such power; as Kodwo Eshun puts it: music maintains a “despotic drive to crumple chronology like an empty bag of crisps, to eclipse reality in its willful exorbitance, to put out the sun.”⁵

Together, the diverse elements of *Stuart Hall* form a dense orchestration of different tracks that accrete into a deceptively complex polyphony; it is, in other words, a film that demands careful and repeated close analysis. What Akomfrah and his partners have done is to raid a variety of archives in order



(LEFT) FIGURE 2:
Imbricated Layers: A photograph of young Stuart Hall is placed in front of a record player, which is spinning a Miles Davis album; both objects sit before a dreary cityscape viewed through blurry windowpanes
THE STUART HALL PROJECT
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 2013, SMOKING DOGS FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

to glean raw materials for a long-playing remix of personal biography, wide-ranging history, political and cultural theory, and race—all intercut with the affective and signifying powers of Miles Davis' music. We are thus tasked with simultaneously unraveling a number of different strands—or, if you will, of carefully attending to several competing melodic lines at the same time. The film frequently cuts together archival images, Hall's voiceover and interviews, archival sound recordings, Davis' music, and textual graphics, with no single element necessarily predominating. *Stuart Hall* makes us aware of this intricacy within the first few minutes of the film, as it juxtaposes various visual and sonic elements, each with differing affective and signifying valences. In Figure 2, for instance, personal history (Hall's photo) forms a façade in front of musical affect (Miles Davis' record), and both guard the way to

murky urban geography (the drab city outside the window); note that both the photograph and vinyl album are archival means of preserving ephemeral slivers of pastness in mediatic form.⁶ Put differently, they both try to capture ghosts.

Nine Muses is constituted by many of the same elements that found *Digitopia* and *The Stuart Hall Project*. It is haunted by the ghosts of the archive, like the latter film, but includes a great deal of new footage of fictional characters silently pondering tremendous natural scenery, like the former film. And, like most Akomfrah works, *Nine Muses* is experimental and complex, and can seem oblique at first. The film makes frequent allusions to Homer's *The Odyssey*, and is divided into sections corresponding to each of the nine muses, as mentioned above. The primary tension derives from exploration of the émigré's

experience of diaspora and interminable transoceanic voyages to and from various "homes." History is, as usual, chopped and reorganized, with African-European and African-American emigrations and diasporic archival images/sounds at the fore. Ancient Greek history and myth nestle beside this archival footage, which in turn nudges the contemporary shots of mysterious, largely obscured spectral figures, covered head-to-toe in winter-proof attire, including mirrored ski goggles.

Akomfrah's characters here are keenly observant of the movements

(RIGHT) FIGURE 3:
Vexed by Time and Distance: The mysterious émigré stands alone, contemplating diminution, during an ocean voyage
THE NINE MUSES
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 2010, SMOKING DOGS FILMS), FRAME GRAB.



“AKOMFRAH’S WORK DEALS WITH A MOURNING OR MEMORIALIZATION OF AN IMPOSSIBLE PAST...”

and circulations of capital, commerce, peoples, and natural forces. They sit, look, listen, and feel as these rhythms occur; yet we get the impression that they, like the man in *Digitopia* before them, are dwarfed in the face of such heft (Figure 3).

Alluding to the long transoceanic voyages that initiated portions of the African diaspora, the mysterious figures spend much time on or near the sea, but they never seem to speak. Their embodied voicelessness is a structuring absence in *Nine Muses*, particularly in comparison

to the loquaciousness of the other films examined here. Of course, this is not to reduce all Africana culture or subjectivity to a vestigial experience with slavery, but to call for acknowledgement of the marks and scars that many individuals and communities bear, explicitly and implicitly; it is to remind of the persistence of lost or deferred histories, from both enslavement and diasporic dispersal, and how those forces work in concert with the cultural, political, and economic legacies of slavery,

segregation, and anti-black racism. After all, Mnemosyne, who gets her own section in the film, is the personification of memory. We are called to remember—to remember unheard voices, to remember things that have yet to occur, to remember even that which we have never experienced in the first place, to remember ghosts.

These “impossible” acts—remembering the unknown, hearing the unspoken, seeing the invisible—pervade Akomfrah’s films. Accordingly, I want to suggest that

several of the elements we have been exploring—ghosts, haunting, missing or absent histories and people, interpenetrating temporalities—may be thought through the notion of the cenotaph. The etymology of the word “cenotaph” can be traced back to two ancient Greek words that together mean “empty tomb.” Constructed all over the world for the last two thousand years or more, cenotaphs take a variety of architectural and artistic forms, but share common purpose in their public commemoration of the absent or missing dead. Here, this matters because much of Akomfrah’s work deals with a mourning or memorialization of an impossible past in the midst of an uncertain future. That is, Akomfrah’s films frequently mine the archive to explore what so often remains hidden, or that which is assumed to be “lost,” namely, Afro-diasporic lives and histories put under erasure by white

hegemony. Akomfrah creates art that marks, and then thinks through, the present-absence of blackness in modernity. In this sense, his work is *cenotaphic* in that it attempts to memorialize—to call attention to—bodies that are perpetually absent in both senses: lack of physical presence and erasure from the dominant archives. I maintain that this tendency memorializes bodies that may not be found at all, if they were known to begin with; thus, Akomfrah’s work erects cenotaphs to an absent, if not lost, referent. Yet, this cenotaphic tendency is differently inflected in Akomfrah’s work than it is in global monuments. This is especially the case insofar as Akomfrah creates audiovisual works (films, videos, installations) that are by definition ephemeral and reflect the aforementioned reconceptualization of time, contra the monumental attempts at permanence and fixity found in

granite and limestone cenotaphs. Indeed, much of Akomfrah’s output explores monumental ideas through the quotidian. As Akomfrah himself writes, the films of both *Black Audio* and *Smoking Dogs* often pursue an “impossible gesture, a desire to cease and entrap the ghost... to reconcile the facsimile and the real, history and myth.”⁷ These are monuments to ghosts of the past, and to specters yet to materialize.

Finally, *The Last Angel of History* is an experimental DigiBeta video essay (and the only film in this article produced by Black Audio) with both a fictional narrative arc and copious use of creatively treated talking head interview footage, primarily of figures associated with the Afrofuturist canon (if there is such a thing) including George Clinton, DJ Spooky, Greg Tate, Octavia Butler, and so on.⁸ Following the adventures of a time-traveling hero from the future known as the

**“HE WANTED
RECOGNITION
THAT BLACK
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THE FIRST
ASTRONOMERS...”**

“Data Thief,” *Last Angel* explores the fecund theoretical implications of the music, art, literature, and criticism surrounding Afrofuturism. Much of the focus is on the music and its performance/performativity, highlighting music’s conceptual and theoretical potency, or, as Shana Redmond puts it, music is a *method*, “a complex system of mean(ing)s and ends that mediate our relationships to one another, to space, to our histories and historical moment... [and] to new political modalities.”⁹

In *Last Angel*, the Data Thief receives clues about the past: the “black secret technology” of the blues, the “Mothership Connection” of George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, and the like. Only in the past, it seems, can our future-hero find the answers he seeks, and the past he is revisiting was in fact already living in the future when he arrived back in time. Thus, many of our themes

come together: Data Thief’s quest, the film itself, and the music/figures with which the film is concerned are all foundationally archaeological; they are attempts to uncover and reconstruct a history that has either been written out, or was never written originally. The quest is met by remixing, by time travelling, by rewriting and reactivating history through experimentation, through sonic, musical, and audiovisual theory and praxis. It’s a future-past, with seeds in the present—funk uncut. Of course this is idealistic, but, as Eshun suggests in the film, so are the musics at issue here, including the Detroit techno that takes its cues from Afrofuturist pioneers Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Lee “Scratch” Perry. These are all “impossible musics” that “imagine the future” rather than reflecting the past, or, we might say, they imagine a past *which may have been*—such as Clinton and Ra’s fantastic invocation

of black people’s potentially extraterrestrial origins—while attempting to construct a future that may yet come out of the materials presently at hand (Figure 4).

The Data Thief’s archaeological expedition soon uncovers “Africa,” which he reasons is the source of “science fiction,” an originary form rooted in the African use of “drums to cover distance.” Or, we might say, *Last Angel* locates the origins of science fiction (and, of course, Afrofuturism) in the musical-communicative collapsing of time and space, or drumming as the attenuation of space-time. Akomfrah’s formal innovation yet again matches the complexity of his thematic concerns. At times, sounds and voices are heavily effected—reverb, phasing, delay—and talking head interview footage is often shown on a screen-within-the-screen, displayed on an old personal

computer placed slightly off-center, or on multiple screens scattered throughout the frame, forming an infinite regress of frames. Images and sounds flash and rapidly cut in and out—photographs, artwork, archival documents, and scientific sketches from African and Afro-diasporic history are rapidly intercut with interview footage and the sci-fi mélange of the Data Thief’s quest. The inclusion in *Last Angel* of pioneering African-American astronaut Bernard Harris gestures toward the Pan-Africanism that gained such traction in much of postcolonial Africa and in Civil Rights movements in America. Harris, an avid science fiction and Parliament fan, brought along an African “composite” flag on his first NASA space flight—a flag which included all of the flags of all the countries in Africa at the time of the voyage—as a salute to his Afro-diasporic heritage. As Harris says, he wanted recognition

that black people were the first astronomers and mathematicians in the world; hence, the “future-past-present” vortex is transposed to his NASA work. As the descendant of ancient African astronomers, he describes himself as their “son,” returning from space (and the future) to show what has been accomplished. In the film, all of this is remixed with myriad rapidly intercut images from Ghana—a ghost from the future, visiting ghosts from the past, set to a soundtrack from outer space.

Foundationally, Akomfrah is imagining possible worlds—past, present, and future—in an era that desperately needs it. He persistently returns to the demand for re-envisioning and rewriting history precisely because whiteness has spent centuries becoming invisible, normalizing itself at unfathomable cost. As Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer contend (with nods to Stuart

Hall and Gayatri Spivak) this process proceeds through “the epistemic violence that has, historically, disavowed difference in Western discourses.”¹⁰ So, these monuments to ghosts obviously work upon whiteness as well—exorcising it and drawing it out into the light, where it can be properly seen. Indeed, as blackness hovers throughout the BAFC and Akomfrah’s work, it is variously mobilized to recall, rethink, recreate; to tear down and build up again; to critique; to question; and to dream. In their oblique, even opaque (re)configurations of sounds and images, these films insist upon deliberate reflection—they demand

(RIGHT) FIGURE 4:
The Data Thief’s Remix: “Surfing across the internet of black culture, breaking in...and stealing fragments”
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.



that audiences think—but they are also visceral, presenting audiovisual material that is immediately affective. Like a chill down the spine, Akomfrah’s films move us directly while leaving behind vexing questions—thoughts lingering on the

threshold of consciousness for days after contact. They are very much like ghosts, then, persistently challenging the conventional and calling us to hear, see, and otherwise sense the potentially transformative possibilities of existence as best we can. ■

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- ¹ Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, eds., *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective 1982–1998* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).
² Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, New ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.
³ *Ibid.*, 7–8.
⁴ “Digitopia,” Smoking Dogs Films, <http://www.smokingdogsfilms.com/filmDigit.htm>.
⁵ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998), -004. Eshun’s idiosyncratic pagination in this book indicates that page -004 should be understood as the fourth page of his introduction.
⁶ Both Fred Moten and Alexander Weheliye produce innovative theorizations of blackness and “pastness in mediatic form” in their respective texts. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
⁷ John Akomfrah, “Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora,” *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (2010): 27.
⁸ Kara Keeling suggests that the film is, in fact, engaging in the process of creating an Afrofuturist canon. At this point, the film would also then be part of such a canon. Kara Keeling, “Introduction to *The Last Angel of History*” (Atlanta: BAFC Film and Speakers Series, Georgia State University, October 3, 2014).
⁹ Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.
¹⁰ Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, “De Margin and De Centre,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 456.