Montage Epic in John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*: The Politics and Aesthetics of Multiscreen Narrative

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Abstract
The article discusses the multiscreen visual narrative of black British artist John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015). In order to appreciate contemporary multiscreen aesthetics it first discusses the criticism on the relationship between narrative – intended as a universal structure – and transmedial narrative. It then offers a brief overview of multiscreen video art to contextualise Akomfrah's work, and finally an analysis of Akomfrah's film, focusing on the special use of montage and literature in it. *Vertigo Sea* envisages aspects of the violence of modernity in its dramatic imbrication with the sea (the slave trade, Mediterranean migration, whale hunting and more). As it combines archival material, fragments of films and original shots of sublime seascapes dovetailed with quotations from classics of literature and philosophy, the article reflects on the extent to which the assemblage enables an original reformulation of narrative and narrator in the digital medium, and envisages it as a special form of epic, a multiscreen montage epic.
Key-words: multiscreen montage epic, black British art, John Akomfrah.

1. Narrative across media

What is narrative? One definition identifies

narrative as a mental construct that involves metaphorical thinking in the process of meaning formation. (Giannoukakis 2016: 262)

Another definition, more concerned with the interaction between narrative and the human condition, addresses the relation between "belonging as an existential condition of human being" and "narrative as the quintessential mediator and enabler of that condition" (Bieger 2015: 17). The crucial ability 'to tell stories' is recognised across the disciplines as a key faculty of the human

and it was even acknowledged by Apple designer and CEO Steve Jobs, reported to have talked about "the importance of stories, of marrying technology and storytelling skills" (Auletta 1999).

Alongside the transdisciplinary acknowledgement of narrative (from linguistics to anthropology, to social theory and beyond), the "transmediality of narratives", by which it is intended that narrative presents elements "that remain invariant during […] its actualisation […] in different media" (Giannoukakis 2016: 261), has also been admitted. Transmediality as a feature of narratives is by no means a recent 'discovery', although it is especially insisted upon in critical discourse on the digital environment. It was already argued for in 1964 by French semiologist Claude Bremond:

That which is narrated [*raconté*] has its own proper significant elements, its storyelements [*racontants*]: these are neither words, nor images, nor gestures, but the events, situations, and behaviors signified by the words, images, and gestures. (qtd. in Chatman 1978: 20)[1]

As narratologists have started to reflect on the need to theoretically consider transmediality, Marie-Laure Ryan, who has extensively written on the topic, has invoked a "transmedial narratology"[2], insisting that the formal study of narrative be consciously medium-specific (Ryan 2005; Ryan and Thon 2014; Thon 2016)[3]. In the digital age attention is paid to the relation between the specificity of each medium and the transmediality of narrative – how, for example, do the interactivity and non-linearity afforded by the digital combine with the more universal features of narrative? (Ryan 2002)[4].

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[1] Bremond's "Le message narratif" (1964), from which the excerpt is taken, is an often quoted text in narratological criticism.

[2] One of Ryan's general statements on narrative is: "Narrative is not limited to written or oral storytelling. It is a mental representation that can be evoked by many media and many types of signs" (Ryan 2002: 583).

[3] In a related way, Jan Alber and Per Krogh Hansen (2014: 2) write of the "influence of the immediate discourse environment on the process of storytelling".

[4] Of course, before the advent of the digital age, narrative paths could be non-linear in literature too, at least since Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) and up to (and beyond) the experimental "book in a box" format of B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), to mention only two examples. The more recent engagement with the computational processes in electronic literature, allowing other modes of poetic practice and including nonhuman interaction, has contributed to break and/

Another important point of discussion, however, may be the presence of, or debt to, literature and literary genres in transmedial narratives. The literary has always been a contested space. In recent times, viewing "narrative as a universal structure that transcends media", Ryan has stated that "digital narrative should emancipate itself from literary models" (2002: 581); together with Jan-Noël Thon she has adopted the term "*storyworld*", intending by it a transmedial concept, in order to once more transcend the literary domain traditionally associated with "narrative" (Ryan and Thon 2014). This is, of course, an enthusing suggestion worth pursuing. At the same time, it is equally worth noticing that, in some cases, transcending the literary domain may not be the question. This, I think, is the case when we look to black British artist John Akomfrah's works.

If the medium specific characteristics constitute the 'language' of a medium and have bearings on the story that is being told in that language or environment, when it comes to narrative it is almost inevitable that the first frame of reference be the literary space, if only because the 'narrator', which many theorise as a medium-free constitutive component of narrative, is originally linked with verbal (written or oral) language, as the etymon of the word testifies[5]. Besides, digital works often borrow from or refer to literature in terms of text, chosen subject or themes, so that the literary presence is often conspicuous in those other forms of narrative. This is the case in at least three works by Akomfrah, namely *The Nine Muses* (2010), *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and *Tropikos* (2016), which all quote from or allude to literary texts of the world canon. Here I am going to

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or rearrange in alternative forms the unidirectional progress of narrative. See, by way of example, the rich variety of texts collected in the three online, open access anthologies: *Electronic Literature Collection 1* (2006), *E.L.O. 2* (2011) and *E.L.O. 3* (2016), last accessed September 3, 2017. For one more example of digital storytelling see the project *Culture Shock!*, http://www.cultureshock.org.uk, last accessed August 30, 2017. Ryan (2014) observes that *semiotics*, *technology*, and *culture* are the three spaces at the crossroads of which *media* are posited and which a *medium-conscious* narratology should always take into account.

[5] This recognition has led some critics to reflect on transmedial narratology by looking at the extent to which literary concepts and vocabulary migrate to and circulate among different media and arts (Wolf 2005). The debate is ongoing, and the migration of vocabulary from other media to literature (e.g. "scene" from cinema) is equally acknowledged.

discuss the reinvention of the narrative form and the use of literature in the multiscreen digital film *Vertigo Sea*.

2.   Multiscreen narrative of the 21st century: The political agenda

Akomfrah is one among many contemporary artists working with multiple screens. What are the implications of multiple frames video art? The form spread in the late nineties of the last century to become an increasingly popular art practice in our century. Gretchen Bender's *Total Recall*, an installation dating back to 1987 and made of three projection screens and twenty-four colour monitors, possibly triggered the present wave of experimental art (Pinnington 2014). Eija-Liisa Ahtila (*Where Is Where?*, 2009), Candice Breitz (*Mother+Father*, 2005), Yang Fudong (*The Revival of the Snake*, 2005; *No Snow on the Broken Bridge*, 2006), Isaac Julien (*Long Road to Mazatlán*, 1999; *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007; *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010), Amar Kanwar (*The Lightening Testimonies*, 2007), Richard Mosse (*The Enclave*, 2013), Shirin Neshat (*Turbulent*, 1998; *Fervor*, 2000; *Tooba*, 2002) are only some of the artists who today work with multiframe images[6]. Those and other artists use the syntax of the multiple screen installation to address different issues. Many employ the form in political ways: in *Mother+Father* Breitz appropriates iconic images of parenthood by singling out fragments of parts played by famous actors in famous films, six 'mothers' and six 'fathers', including Meryl Streep in *Kramer vs Kramer* (Benton 1979), and Steve Martin in *Father of the Bride* (Shyer 1991), which are then combined in two multiscreen videos comprising six screens each, one for each actor/actress; the artist questions and anatomises the stereotypes that media, especially TV and Hollywood films, impose on the spectators. Multiple screens are also employed to disrupt linear vision and to foreground plurality (of elements, viewpoints, narratives) in what is perceived as having been traditionally envisaged, at least up to

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[6] Nam June Paik (1932-2006), member of the Fluxus movement in the USA, should also be mentioned here, as he is commonly credited for having started video art (see his immersive, seminal multiscreen *TV Garden*, 1974-2000). Multiscreen cinema, of which multiscreen video art is in a sense a digital evolution, is instead much older, as it may be said to have started with Abel Gance's experiments with polyvision for his film *Napoleon* (1927).

a certain moment, from a single, often partial, biased and obsolete perspective. Examples of this are some of Neshat's works, in which two screens, at times placed one opposite to the other, are used to foreground the difference of the female and the male space in Islamic culture (as in *Turbulent*). Another example is Julien's *Long Road to Mazatlán*, a three-screen installation for which the same scenes have been shot and are shown from three different perspectives at once, to explore and question social constructions and stereotypical images of masculinity. In all three installations the political stance emerges from the way the many screens are employed: disempowering cultural constructions of mother and father roles by exposing their 'nature' of 'acting bits' in Breitz; equally dismantling stereotyped roles by exposing the cultural and religious construction of gender difference in Neshat; exploding and pluralising the monolithic vision of masculinity in Julien.

The different, more active form of spectatorship required by the multiscreen film, which also involves a different fruition of space, contributes to the political agenda that questions fixed views; as Atom Egoyan (2001) has written about Neshat's *Turbulent*:

No vantage point in the installation allows the audience the privileged position of omniscience provided in a conventional cinema or single-monitor viewing. […] [The form] situates the viewer as the effective editor of their own experience of the work. […] Depending on which way one observes the piece, there are an infinite number of ways that […] [the work] may be constructed.

By choosing which screen to look at at which moment, each viewer 'emplots' an original and personal narrative out of the visual material. In these and other multiscreen installations, medium-specific aesthetics and politically charged poetics align, to propose a counter-history of the present and the past, to disclose the failures of hegemonic and consolidated narratives to account for the experiences of minorities, to denounce the silence on which master narratives have relied for their emancipatory tales.

3. John Akomfrah: Narrating through the visual archive of black British history

The artform is especially apt for critical (re)envisionings, of ideas

as well as modes of expression. In Akomfrah's case, the focus is on visual representations of blackness. John Akomfrah is a Ghanaian-born, London-based artist. The visual archive is central to his art. His works testify to a lifelong interest in exploring the possibilities of rewriting history through a recuperation of footage material. Already in the 1980s and 1990s he and his fellow artists of the Black Audio Film Collective – which he, Lina Gopaul and others established in 1982 – assembled visual fragments, alternatively taken from the archives of the BBC, the BFI, National Audio-Visual Libraries around the world, and even art films, to make works such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986), a docu-film about the 1985 riots in London and the Handsworth area in Birmingham. Akomfrah has continued to explore the possibilities of visual assemblage even as a solo artist (*Vertigo Sea*; *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012); *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013)). In his works critical attention is turned to the representations of black history, the African past and African diaspora, and black subjects in the media of Western societies. His is a response to the need to retell a story which, in the footpath of Stuart Hall's important lesson, is perceived as having been distorted in representations or silences biased by white power and ruling ideologies in the West – without forgetting that the "exclusion, imposition and expropriation" exerted by white power, and the ensuing representation of black identity, have always relied on a certain internalisation of that power and viewpoint (Hall 1990: 233). Akomfrah interestingly speaks of a process of *amnesia* that allows for questionable representations of human beings; in an interview, part of the *TateShots* series, his example is that of migrants being sometimes called 'cockroaches', a term in which he detects not only an excess of fiction (therefore he speaks of his "aversion to fiction"), but also and especially a dangerous *forgetting* that, as he states, has led to the definition (Akomfrah 2015). Hence his interest in the archive:

So that is generally my interest in the archive. It's about looking, using it to look at spaces or contexts, using it to look at ways in which one might reinsert a black subject into a narrative in which he or she is assumed to be absent from. And those come with ethical implications. […] And those ethical questions are as important for me as the aesthetic ones. (qtd. in Kudumu 2016)

For Akomfrah, "history matters". And the archive is the place where history is stored and may be retrieved from, if one looks at its 'traces' there with different eyes[7]. History matters to the extent that it is non-fiction and therefore acts as "a kind of powerful counterpast" (Akomfrah 2015), for example against the fiction of 'cockroaches'; it matters because it provokes a kind of "turbulence" in the constant sea of amnesia and forgetting (the metaphors are Akomfrah's)[8].

The artist's view of history determines his aesthetics and poetics. Archival material is the physical embodiment of the 'counterpast' Akomfrah invokes; however, archival material is also nothing but representations, which as such are likely to be biased by the intrusion of excessive fictions, fictions with ethical imports (the 'cockroaches' again). The re-use of footage must therefore be such as to reveal the ideological 'forgetting' some representations originate in, and thus unveil history or the counterpast. Akomfrah uses fragments of the visual archive so as to devoid them of any ideological bias they may have had at the time the films were made, or in such a way as to expose that ideology as a vested interest. How does he achieve that?

4. *Vertigo Sea*: Multiscreen montage epic

Vertigo Sea, a forty-eight-minute sequence of stunning moving-images running on three screens, was first shown at the 56th Venice Biennale *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwenzor in 2015. In the Lisson Gallery Catalogue dedicated to Akomfrah, T.J. Demos (2016: 13) introduces the work:

[I]t 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.

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[7] Maurizio Calbi (2017) has offered an in-depth reading of Akomfrah's engagement with the archive in *The Nine Muses*. As well as artists, cultural studies and postcolonial studies have looked to the archive, especially but not exclusively in its spectacular form, the museum, to unveil its ideological biases, denounce its silences, retell from a different viewpoint the stories stored in archival material (see, among the others, Hamilton *et al.* 2002; Chambers *et al.* 2014).

[8] Amnesia is "a constant sea, and we swim in it all the time" (Akomfrah 2015).

Akomfrah's poetic gaze brings together what appear to be "incongruous narratives"; the original assemblage produces unexpected connections and new senses. Three screens horizontally aligned on a wall and placed close to each other show fragments of films, either archival material or original shots, which alternate with equally original *tableaux vivants* that look very much like stills from films. The original scenes were shot on the Isle of Skye, the Faroe Islands and the Northern regions of Norway. They are assembled with footage of the black diaspora, film excerpts on the Middle Passage, the violence of twentieth-century dictatorships, and more violent events from the history of humankind. An enthralling new form of narrative emerges from the combination of the visual fragments. The ethical stance, which the spectator is invited to share as her/his gaze becomes an active agent in the narrative, is one with the aesthetic.

Vertigo Sea reworks classic forms to offer its counter-history; it thus produces difference-in-continuity with respect to them, and I would like to define the film as medium specific, *multiscreen montage epic*. The visual narrative is epic in tone. For Aristotle ([c. 330 B.C] 1902: XXIV.4), to whom we may turn for a first definition of the genre:

Epic poetry has [...] a great – a special – capacity for enlarging its dimensions, and we can see the reason. [...] [I]n Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented [...].

In the multiscreen form *Vertigo Sea* enhances the capacity of epic narrative to present "many events simultaneously".

The film also looks to the revolutionary art of modern cinema, and in the digital multiscreen medium it enhances the effects of montage. To the modern art of moving images it owes its subversive engagement with time:

As industrialisation utilised time of the clock to standardise our conception of time and organise our diurnal activities, so throughout cinema's history film-makers have challenged the clock's authority, consequently engendering an imaginative playfulness in the art of storytelling. (Powell 2012: 143)

The Bergsonian explorations of time and memory deeply influenced the literature and cinema of the early twentieth-century, and Deleuze also relied on them for his investigation on the art in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* ([1985] 1989). That movement, time and memory are closely connected in ways that disrupt mechanistic time – measurable with the clock, as opposed to duration time – is what cinema acknowledges and *Vertigo Sea* endorses. The film proposes its critique of linear time as the time of trauma: a clock is the intruding presence in many original shots and *tableaux vivants*, a marker of violent time and deeds. The multiscreen epic defies linear time in form while also elliptically associating it to violence in its storyworld.

The refinement of montage allowed by the complex three-screen surface enables a powerful story(re)telling in which images, words and sounds come together. *Vertigo Sea* places itself at the crossroads of cinema, documentary, and digital visual art installation; it also uses literature as well as music. By mixing different 'languages' it opens up a new discursive space and produces its poetic vision of history. Akomfrah's works are often referred to as hybrid film essays. The hybridity is already a legacy of cinema: the definition "essay film" (word order inverted) was introduced in 1958 by André Bazin (2003), who referred it to Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia*. For Bazin *Letter…* was "an essay documented by film", in which for the first time the literary form entered cinema in a powerful way: "The important word is 'essay', understood in the same sense that it has in literature — an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well" (Bazin [1958] 2003). Literature has political imports and it lies at the heart of experimental filmmaking, including *Vertigo Sea*.

Akomfrah, who is an admirer of early cinema, adopts montage in the form first experimented with in early Soviet cinema. As he states: "I'm a born bricoleur. I love the way that things that are otherwise discrete and self-contained start to suggest things once they are forced into a dialogue with something else"[9]. The articulation of differences, mainly posited as oppositions put into a dramaturgical form, is precisely what Sergei Eisenstein theorised in 1923 with

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[9] See http://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/john-akomfrah, last accessed September 10, 2017.

his "montage of attractions" (1988). Akomfrah fully embraces the "philosophy of montage", by which he means "the commitment to bricolage, the commitment to having discrete elements, fragments, come together" (Akomfrah 2015). He feels a closeness to the directors of the early twentieth century:

Everyone who helped popularise the philosophy of montage was interested in one thing: the third meaning. Somehow when things collide, two opposites collide […], some sort of synthesis is engineered or brought about and in that a new form, a new meaning or new way emerges, which you can chase *ad infinitum*. (Akomfrah 2015)

The films used in *Vertigo Sea* are footage about whale-hunting in the twentieth century, fragments of films and documentaries about slavery and deportation and about migrants shipwrecked on sea coasts in more recent times. But there are also visual citations of more violent or traumatic events, including Vietnamese boat-people struggling for survival or Argentinian death flights[10]. Seascapes are in almost all scenes. They are the terrible whirling seas sailed in the colonial enterprise and transatlantic slave trade, the silent, colourful and vast underwater world, home to shoals of fish, or the immense, calm seascapes hovered over and plunged into by flocks of birds; or, they show what Demos has called "the brutal militarisation of nature, the sea as test site for nuclear bombs and field for deepwater oil drilling, leaks and fiery explosions" (2016: 13). Climate change and global warming also get into the picture, in "footage of melting and crashing glaciers" (p. 13) alongside bear hunting, arctic landscapes, and the recurrent, sad image of a deer tied head-down, in evocation of "after the hunt" nineteenth-century paintings. The montage of different shots running across three screens produces a special visual epic of human history and the sea.

   Like all digital media, the multi-screen narrative requires a different fruition, one in which the gaze of the spectator is an agent

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[10] "Vietnamese boat people" are the refugees who fled the country after the Vietnam war (1955-75), especially during the years 1978-79 and until the early 1990s. The death flights (*vuelos de la muerte*) referred to in *Vertigo Sea* are those practised by military forces in Argentina during the dictatorship, in the period 1976-1983, when political opponents were dropped from aircrafts over the Atlantic Ocean.

in the construction of the story[11]. The active role of the gaze is also classically activated by montage (Eisenstein [1923] 1988). In *Vertigo Sea* the three screens are used in a way that avoids any overlapping of images; there is nothing like cinematic superimposition or dissolve here, but each fragment or shot comes up on the same screen or migrates from one screen to the other as in a cut transition in a PowerPoint document. When a shot moves from one frame to the next, one may spectate the work in different ways: at the Venice Biennale, the seats were placed at such a distance from the screens that all three would always be included in the field of vision of any spectator, regardless of where they sat; they could watch the installation by trying not to focus on any frame in particular (of course, this is never really the case, but there could be an illusion of all-inclusive gaze in the perception of the work). And yet, that is only one form of spectating the film: when a visual fragment migrates from one screen to the other, the viewer can choose how to relate to the images: s/he can carry on focusing on the same screen while the different reels alternate; or, s/he can follow the same shot in its peregrinations from one screen to the other. Most likely, vision is a combination of the two modes, which produces a new way of co-creating the story. The emphasis of the multiscreen narrative changes for each viewer, depending on the personal perception of the work and on the time the gaze lingers on any visual fragment.

Digital tools also play a part in the spectator's experience of the installation. One specific feature of the digital visual image is its more fluid and therefore realistic character. Ryan (2002: 595) writes of "the realism and fluidity of digital images". Akomfrah enhances the fluidity by slowing down the pace and making the most of the high resolution digital videos. At the same time, the use of the cut transition and the splitting of the cinema screen into three big frames produces a narrative out of rupture, a narrative by 'incongruous' fragments; in other words an 'interrupted' narrative, which aptly renders the violent and equally 'interrupting' nature of the stories (re)told (disrupting the natural flow of life, of relations, affects, of

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[11] Akomfrah is used to working in different environments: gallery, cinema, TV. He acknowledges that "each of these 'zones' has its demands: ethical, political, cultural, aesthetic. So at the inception of an idea or a way of doing something what matters is to be clear about the pathway" (Akomfrah 2015).

nature at large in the mineral, vegetal and animal realms). Fluidity and rupture: in the cut transitions a *narrative* emerges, not only out of the unthought of, at times discordant associations between the film fragments (as for example when the beautiful seascapes are aligned with images of slave deportation or whale hunting), but also out of the articulation of the two series of movements: of the film fragments on the one hand and of the gaze of the spectator on the other. In scope *Vertigo Sea* is epic, but in a special way: it is a *fractal montage epic* which reinvents the genre of narrative in the multiscreen film. The figure of the *fractal* is used by Wai Chee Dimock as a metaphor for the kinds of interconnections between literary genres[12]. Dimock (2006: 90) also stresses that genres are alive and metamorphosing: "We don't know where any particular genre might spiral out, what offshoots might spin off from it". *Vertigo Sea* is epic in the form of multiscreen narrative.

Akomfrah's montage epic returns to the literary space as well as the visual archive: in *Vertigo Sea* there is a bricolage of textual fragments related to the sea that range from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) to Heathcote William's poem *Whale Nation* (1988), but also include excerpts from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891). These are 'floating' literary pieces recited in voice-over, but the film contains written texts, too, in the form of nine intertitles that combine the allusive mode to historical reference: "Oblique tales of the aquatic sublime"; "The sea is history. The Caribbean 1731" (Derek Walcott's poem and essay by the title *The Sea Is History* are cited here); "Memory does not stamp his own way. Argentina 1974"; "The way of killing men and animals is the same"; and others. The narrative becomes meta-narrative and the narrator enters the frame: a figure by the sea, a black man in eighteenth-century Western clothes, recurs in different original shots; he is Olaudah Equiano, the African who constructed the personal epic of himself as of a slave who freed himself and travelled the seas, then published it as his autobiography in 1789: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, a key text in the canon of slave narratives. In *Vertigo Sea* the figure is the observer of

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[12] "[T]he twists and turns that run from one genre to another, a family whose tensile strength lies in just this sinuousness" (Dimock 2006: 87).

the sea, the witness whose silent gaze may be envisaged as acting the 'narrator' in this visual epic of violence and tragedies[13].

Vertigo Sea alters *epic* to the extent that the digital tools allow narration by dis-membering and involving the gaze of the spectator as active agent of the disruptive movement that makes the narration. Like the fractal, this epic "loops around […], breaks off […], is jagged" (Dimock 2006: 88). The fluidity of the sea is exposed in a visual narrative on three screens, made up of repetitions and cut transitions; of incongruous pieces singled out from their original contexts and assembled together; of the fictional and the historical in montage. This is experimental, visual epic narrative for the 21st century; it shows its homage to montage across media, arts and technologies (literature and cinema, the aural and the visual, digital technology).

In *Poetics* Aristotle insisted on the overflowing character of the epic, to use a marine metaphor here. Dimock reads the Aristotelian definition of epic as of a somewhat 'weighty' genre, one that proceeds in a slow motion that "opens it up, makes it porous to its surroundings" (2006: 93). *Vertigo Sea* reaches back to classic epic and refigures it in the new medium. The outcome is an epic narrative (fluent, fluid, slow in motion) created by abrupt transitions of incongruous fragments across multiple screens. The film relies on the rhetoricity of the literary text:

The classical elements function both metaphorically and metonymically in Akomfrah's films. Water, and especially the sea, is a case in point. As a metonym the sea stands prosaically as a vast zone of human movement, a crossroads of migrations between territories and continents. As a metaphor it operates as a reservoir of memory, a place where stories of the past, present and future are suspended and preserved. Yet, access to these narratives can only be obtained indirectly. (Alter 2016: 6)

By proving cross-fertilisations between the literary and other spaces as positive in the way they "mobilise classical tropes to construct

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[13] The self-narrative of Olaudah Equiano has been reassessed since Vincent Carretta (1999) published his biographical findings on the identity of the writer, suggesting that the author of the *Interesting Narrative…* could in fact be a native of South Carolina who assumed the slave identity for rhetorical ends. This makes even more apt the presence of Equiano as epic 'narrator' or 'seer' in Akomfrah's work.

narratives" (Alter 2016: 5), *Vertigo Sea* creates a mode of 'story-telling' specific to its environment: multiscreen montage epic.

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