

Tropikos

Theater Three

Tropikos

2016

Single-channel HD color video, 5.1 surround sound, 36 minutes

John Akomfrah

British, born 1957

Loan courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

Tropikos, titled using a Greek term for both revolution and the tropics, illustrates the quiet dawn of a major change in global history. It takes the viewer back to the 16th century to observe first encounters between British and African people on British soil. This re-creation was filmed in southwestern England and along the coasts of Guinea and Sierra Leone. Characters appear in a dreamlike state of silent observation. Occasional verses from Shakespeare and Milton are heard, but none of the shown individuals speak, conveying what it would be like to be in a boat floating down a river with no one

expressing emotions, desires, or mutual interest. Without conversation, the division between people from different continents is established. Soon, in the 17th century, England begins participating in and benefitting from the traumatic reality of the transatlantic slave trade.

Transcript for Tropikos

00:08

In these our ghostly lives, half sleeping, half awake

00:15

How if our waking life, like that of sleep, Be all a dream in that eternal life. Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Life Is a Dream (1635).

[sound of birds]

00:35

VOICE, reciting Henry V by William Shakespeare:

Oh, for a Muse of fire, that would ascend

The brightest heaven

00:47

A kingdom for a stage, princes to act

And monarchs to behold the swelling scene.

01:02

[music]

01:03

But pardon . . . the flat unraised spirits that have dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object.

01:20

Let us . . . on your imaginary forces

01:29

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;

01:35

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them

01:42

For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there . . .

01:57

Admit me Chorus to this history

02:09

Your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

02:40

a tetralogy on water and dreams

02:46

[sound of lapping water]

03:05

i the green sea of darkness

03:15

[sound of lapping water continues]

03:42

VOICE, reciting Henry V by William Shakespeare:

Oh, for a Muse of fire

A kingdom for a stage, princes to act

04:00

Admit me to this history,
Your humble patience pray,
kindly to judge, our play.

04:14

Plymouth Sound, England, 1554
[sound of lapping water]

04:50

[sound of animals in the distance]

05:25

[music, ominous sounds]

05:35 Tropikos

05:43

[deep rumbling]

06:04

[sound of animals in the distance]

07:09

VOICE, reciting Paradise Lost by John Milton:

Oh hell! What do mine eyes with grief behold?

07:27

VOICE: Oh hell!

[sound of whale calling]

08:15

[deep rumbling]

08:43

[bells ringing]

08:53

VOICE, reciting Paradise Lost by John Milton:

Ah! gentle pair, ye little think how nigh

Your change approaches, when all these delights

Will vanish, and deliver ye to woe—

More woe, the more your taste is now of joy

09:13

[sound of birds]

09:27

[music, sound of rain and thunder]

09:50

the Guinea coast, 1554

10:07

VOICE, reciting Paradise Lost by John Milton:

Oh hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold?

high advanced

Creatures of another mold

whom my thoughts pursue

With wonder, and could love

10:35

VOICE:

so lively shines

In them divine resemblance, and such grace

The hand that formed them on their shape hath

poured

10:57

VOICE:

Ah! gentle pair, ye little think how nigh

Your change approaches

11:05

[lapping water]

11:17 ii Homo Sacer

011:37

[choir singing]

12:30

[bells ringing]

14:20

[choir singing]

14:53

[bells ringing]

15:30

Plymouth, England, 1562

15:38

[sound of birds]

16:08

[sound of animals in the distance]

19:05

iii the thought of the outside

19:44

[music]

20:23

VOICE, reciting Paradise Lost by John Milton:

Oh hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold?

Into our room of bliss

Thus high advanced

Creatures of another mold

League with you I seek,

And mutual amity, so strait, so close
That I with you must dwell, or you with me,
Henceforth.

20:54

[thunder]

22:00 t

he Sierra Leone coast, 1567

022:10

[sound of rain]

23:45

[sound of birds]

24:10

[man speaking Indigenous African language]

25:08

[chanting]

26:09

[deep horn resounds]

27:11

iv the water and the soul

27:50

Fouta Jallon, Guinea, 1577

28:36

VOICE, reciting Paradise Lost by John Milton:

Oh hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold?

Into our room of bliss

Thus high advanced

Creatures of another mold

Not Spirits, yet to heavenly Spirits bright

Little inferior; whom my thoughts pursue

With wonder, and could love

29:11

[steady drum beating]

31:47

[bells ringing]

33:30

[choir singing]

36:00

In Memorium, Paul Willemen, 1944–2012

Rychard Hakluyt

The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation (1599)

William Shakespeare

The Tempest (1623)

John Milton

Paradise Lost (1667)

Gaston Bachelard

Water and Dreams (1943)