

# **Vertigo Sea**

## **Theater One**

Vertigo Sea

2015

Three-channel HD color video installation, 7.1 sound,  
48 minutes

**John Akomfrah**

British, born 1957

Loan courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson  
Gallery, London

Vertigo Sea offers simultaneous views of oceans and how humans have interacted with them. Exquisite glimpses of aquatic life are abundant, interlaced with what the artist calls a eulogy for lives lost at sea. Akomfrah adopts footage from the BBC Natural History Unit, archival film clips, and staged depictions of specific people, such as Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797). Equiano was an Igbo man who was enslaved in his youth. In 1766, he bought his freedom and became an explorer in the Arctic and a bestselling author. Voiceovers accent the visual montage with words from authors, including Herman Melville, Virginia

Woolf, Heathcote Williams, and Derek Walcott.  
One reviewer, Nicholas Logsdail, suggests that the video is “not only emotionally and visually powerful, but sums up the strange feeling of our time, as we are confronted by our inability to comprehend the damage we do to nature and ourselves.”

WARNING: Vertigo Sea contains occasional scenes of violence, including humans in distress at sea, humans held captive, and the hunting of whales, bears, and deer.

## Transcript for Vertigo Sea

00:07 Vertigo Sea

[music]

00:13

### **Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime**

00:34

NIGERIAN BOAT MAN: Inside the net... there was big, big fish.

I can't really explain.

If anyone fall inside, they would eat that person, because those fish were very big.

The waves, it can even move a house. The waves.

01:43

MALE BBC REPORTER: There were 27 of them on board. None had been to sea before. They come from all across the continent, travelling northwards to the coast.

02:13

NIGERIAN BOAT MAN: I shout, "Jesus, save me. Jesus save me."

02:28

MALE BBC REPORTER: Numbers reported dead or missing here this year are the highest ever.

Last month, on one day, 14 dead bodies were found floating in the sea.

02:55

NIGERIAN BOAT MAN: Jesus, save me. Jesus, save me.

03:07

MALE BBC REPORTER: They clambered onto one of these. A tuna cage. Exhausted, unable to swim. Stranded.

The migrants' boat started taking on water.

The people traffickers told them that the crossing would take less than an hour.

The pilot swam back to shore. They headed off

on what was to become one of the most dramatic survival stories from this year's crossings.

03:45

**Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes: Arran, 1832**

[sound of ship's bell and wind]

04:50

[opera music; sound of waves crashing and dolphins calling]

07:19

WANDERER: I am a wanderer and mountain climber. Whatever may still overtake me as fate and experience, a wandering will be therein. It returns only, it comes home to me at last.

In the end one experiences only oneself.

07:45

**Then came men with eyes heavy as anchors:  
Spitsbergen, 1781**

07:54

[VOICE, singing British naval song, Spanish Ladies:  
“Farewell and adieu to you Spanish ladies. Farewell  
and adieu to you ladies of Spain.”]

08:51

[Indigenous song]

09:17

EUROPEAN MAN: Sometimes I think there's nought  
beyond, but is enough. He tasks me.  
He - he moves me. What I've dared, I've willed, and  
what I've willed I'll do.

09:41

[sound of gun shots; squealing polar bears and seals]

11:10

[sound of ice breaking into the sea]

11:32

[sound of gun shots]

12:32

EUROPEAN WOMAN: Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning she had given him.

He has landed.

It is finished.

She had been right.

They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything.

13:15

[sound of a single gun shot]

13:32

### **The sea is History: the Caribbean, 1781**

[sound of waves crashing, man singing in Indigenous language]

15:05



JOHN NEWTON: I know. . .the mate of a ship who purchased a young woman with a fine child about a year old.

In the night the child cried much and disturbed his sleep. He rose up in great anger, tore the child from the mother, and threw it into the sea.

Why do I speak of one child when we have heard of over a hundred men cast into the sea?

[instrumental music, waves crashing]

16:47

[Man continues to sing in Indigenous language]

17:23

[sound of gunshots, wind blowing]

17:44

ISHMAEL (from Moby-Dick): My soul mounts up.

I leave a white and turbid wake

Pale waters, paler cheeks.

Younger, the warm waves blush like wine.

The gold brow plumbs the plume.

[sound of animals crying]

Is then the crown too heavy that I wear? This iron crown? 'Tis iron, that I know, not gold.

19:38

EUROPEAN MAN: Many other families have waited and wondered for years as to the exact fate of their loved ones. And it's a form of prolongation of the torture that was applied to the original victims, and to members of their families.

19:58

FEMALE BBC REPORTER: Amongst the women who would disappear, those who were pregnant were brought to this hospital. As soon as their babies were born, the military took them away.

[clock ticking]

20:19

**Memory does not stamp his own coin: Argentina, 1974**

20:27

FEMALE BBC REPORTER: What exactly happened to the mothers of the missing babies after isn't clear. One known method of disposing of them was with what's become known as the death flights.

20:48

MALE EYE WITNESS: Every Wednesday, on average between twenty and thirty people were designated to die. They were taken to the planes. During the flight they were undressed. Once the captain of the flight said we were in the right area, they were thrown out into the waters of the South Atlantic.

22:03

[sound of underwater swells and rumbling, opera music]

23:20

SCIENTIST: Free from land-based pressures larger brains evolved.

Ten times as old as man's  
The accumulated knowledge of the past  
Rumors of ancestors.  
Memories of loss.  
Memories of ideal love.

23:55

**Feeding the ghost: Newfoundland, 1575**

[instrumental music, cello]

24:08

MAN: Deep down, in another country – moving at  
different tempo.

[sounds of whale pushing air out of its blow hole;  
whale calls; waves crashing]

26:39

[whale calls, sound of harpoon gun, waves crashing]

30:30

MAN: Bruno Bigeard came up with the idea.

30:35

**The way of killing men and beasts is the same:  
Algiers, 1956**

30:46

MAN: Pick them up from the Kasbah. Question them. After that, tie heavy objects around their feet. Then fly them out to sea.

32:07

MALE BBC REPORTER: They are desperate people who found a desperate remedy. Only 40 per cent of the people who set out from Vietnam by boat to reach Hong Kong ever made it. Given the 50,000 or so who have reached Hong Kong, that means a much bigger number drowned on the way.

32:53

## **With her South China Sea eyes, 1978**

44:38      END CREDITS

Smoking Dogs Films

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Arts Council of England

British Film Institute

Baltic Arts Center, Sweden

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Naxos Audio Books

Moby Dick

Herman Melville

Whale Nation

Heathcote Williams

Thus Spake

Zarathustra

Frederick Nietzsche

To The Lighthouse

Virginia Woolf

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Museum for Central Africa, Belgium

## **Archive Sources**

BBC Natural History Unit

BBC Worldwide

British Film Institute

British Library World and Traditional Music

Wild Image Films

Smoking Dogs Films

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