

**JOHN AKOMFRAH. THE EARTH IS FLAT**  
**Neus Miró**

*Maybe this is, at the end of the day, the price of living in a foreign land. It is not only that you live a life different from the one you left behind. It is that living in a foreign land makes you foreign.*

Theodor Kallifatides

**And who are you?**

The work of John Akomfrah (1957) has developed, in part, on the basis of his identity as a son of immigrants in the UK; proceeding from former British colonies - specifically, Ghana - belonging to a minority black population, and part of the diaspora. His father was killed during the coup which deposed the government of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, and, together with his mother - who had also belonged to the political party that brought independence to Ghana in 1957 - he emigrated to England at the end of the 60s. He is one of the sons of what became known as "The Windrush Generation"<sup>1</sup>.

His work explores aspects of migration, the diaspora, and the construction and representation of post-colonial identity, all of which are derived from his personal and biographical trail. Nevertheless, his works transcend these theoretical and academic topics, in order to embrace, in their formulation and presentation, global and shared issues, in an emphatic and humanist manner.

The context which John Akomfrah's first works, produced as part of the Black Audio Film Collective, are inscribed in and respond to, is that of the United Kingdom in the 80s, with high unemployment rates, engulfed in a recession, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. The Black Audio Film collective, as well as Ceddo, and Sankofa - other groups also dedicated to audiovisual production and formed by members of racial minorities - constituted what came to be known as the British Black Art Movement. What they had in common was their youth, second-generation migrants from the former British colonies in the Caribbean, India, and Africa. They felt marginalised, discriminated, and with no possibility of being considered British with the same opportunities as their fellow white citizens.

Starting in the mid-70s, and up until the mid-80s, demonstrations, revolts, and riots spread all over the United Kingdom, with these migrant minorities as protagonists. The first riots took place in 1976 in Notting Hill, during the Carnival, and they spread throughout all English cities (Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham...) starting in 1981. The high point of violence took place in 1985 in response to the death of Cynthia Jarrett in Tottenham (a neighbourhood in North London), who died due to heart failure during a police search at her home.

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<sup>1</sup> The Windrush Generation is the name given to the migrants originating in the British colonies who arrived aboard the HMT Empire Windrush during the 50s and 60s, following a call by the British Government, in order to rebuild the country after World War Two.

The way the situation was handled by politicians only added fuel to the minorities' discontent. No doubt, things weren't helped by declarations such as Sir Ronald Bell's in a BBC programme about the riots in Brixton in 1981, when he spoke in the following terms: "If you look at their faces... I think they don't know who they are or what they are. And really, what you're asking me is how the hell one gives them the kind of belonging young Englishmen have?"<sup>2</sup>.

### Black Audio Film Collective

In 1982, John Akomfrah, together with Lina Gopaul, Reece Auguiste, Avril Johnson, Trevor Mathison, Edward George, David Lawson and Claire Joseph founded the Black Audio Film Collective. The collective split up in 1998, and Akomfrah, together with Lina Gopaul and David Lawson, established Smoking Dog Films, an independent audiovisual production company through which Akomfrah has produced all his work since the end of the 90s.

The Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), as well as other groups, collectives, and initiatives, were established in response to a clearly hostile context, and as platforms from which to formulate new cultural strategies and to construct new post-colonial subjectivities alternative to the stereotype-based ones imposed on them.

Of all members of the BAFC, Akomfrah was the one most interested in film, and had in fact been involved in film clubs since his teens. He was used to recognising the different cinematographic languages, their histories and genealogies, whereas, for example, the field of experience of Edward George was that of text-based works; Lina Gopaul and Reece Auguiste, that of photography, and Trevor Mathison, as well as Akomfrah, was also interested in *musique concrète*, an aspect which will translate into the undeniable importance of sound in Akomfrah's films.

At the beginning of the 80s, all members of the BAFC were students at the Portsmouth Polytechnic. They came from different family backgrounds, and were studying different degrees (Humanities, Sociology, Fine Arts), but they shared the same mission: it was necessary and urgent to build new narratives around their identities and these narratives in turn would build new identities. Nothing, and no-one, was representing them correctly, so they had to formulate new representations. Their goal was to build this political, aesthetic, and above all legitimating identity.

All members of the BAFC had had access to, and were familiar with experimental narrative and documentary film, but in Portsmouth, with the help of some of their professors and tutors, they were exposed to experimental avant-garde film, to the work of Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Hollis Frampton, and that experience opened up new possibilities in how to approach and produce a film: "But watching the aesthetic avant-garde, for want for a better phrase, was an eye opener because you thought,

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<sup>2</sup> Stoffel Debuysere, "Signs of Struggle. Songs of Sorrow: Notes on the Politics of Uncertainty in the Films of John Akomfrah" in *Black Camera*, Vol. 6, N. 2 (Spring 2015), p. 66.

wow, this is really possible, and suddenly all kinds of secret ambitions came to the fore. (...) As Trevor was being schooled in the 'artisanal', i.e. the hands-on making of things, what the rest of us were watching was the way the aesthetic avant-garde foregrounded the act of making. Because Jonas Mekas' films were essentially diaries, you saw that these were films not made via the industrial route, and that you stay where you are, in your bedroom with Super 8 camera, and begin to make films"<sup>3</sup>.

Audiovisual productions became the principal media for this group of individuals who formed a group. They became a collective specifically to develop their work on the basis of discussion, and to step away from the voice of the solitary artist, in order to combine in their work the diverse bodies of knowledge and experience of its members, and in order to also generate workshops and possibilities of production for other like-minded creators.

Finally, the collective was founded with the following questions as a take-off point: "What, after all, does 'black independent film-making' mean when present film culture is a largely White affair? And does this posture of independence presuppose a radical difference of film orientation? If this is the case how does one work with difference?"

In 1983, the Black Audio Film collective published<sup>4</sup> its manifesto, where they present their goals, and they are all premised on the principal question of '*figuration of identity*' in cinema, the representation of their identity.

The goals they present in the manifesto are the following:

"Firstly, to attempt to look critically at how racist ideas and images of black people are structured and presented as self-evident truths in the cinema. What we are interested in here is how these 'self-evident truths' become the conventional pattern through which the black presence in cinema is secured.

Secondly, to develop a 'forum' for disseminating available film techniques within the independent tradition and to assess their pertinence for black cinema. In this respect our interests did not only in devising how to best to make 'political films', but also in taking the politics of representation seriously. (...)

Thirdly, the strategy was to encourage means of extending the boundaries of black film culture. This would mean attempting to de-mystify in our film practice the process of film production; it would also involve collapsing the distinction between 'audience' and 'producer'. In this ethereal world filmmaker equals active agent and audience equals passive consumers of a predetermined product. We have decided to reject such a view in our practice."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Becoming Black Audio: An Interview with John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison" in *Black Camera*, Vol. 6, N. 2 (Spring 2015), p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> John Akomfrah, "Black Independent Filmmaking: A Statement by the Black Audio Film Collective" in *Black Camera*, Vol. 6, N. 2 (Spring 2015), pp. 58-60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The closest reference point we think of when we think about artist collectives and manifestos is the historical avant-garde. Nevertheless, there are some notable and significant differences between those groups and the present one, as well as many others that appeared during the 80s, such as ACT UP, Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, or Colectivo Cine Ojo. The main difference, as pointed out by Okwui Enwezor, is “the kind of work produced by collectives began to take critical stock of the long-standing problems between representation and social repression.”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the collectives that appeared during the historical avant-garde, the 80s collectives stand against the idea of a single, monolithic Modernity. Their mission is to reveal the multiplicity of historical modernities derived from post-colonialism.

### **Another form of documentary film is possible, or how to say something differently**

#### ***Handsworth Songs (1986)***

“Once you have accepted that there is a regime of truth that you were, in some ways trying to get beyond, there was then the question of what you did, and that was an emotional, a philosophical and technical problem. (...) In other words, the recourse to form, to the formal, and the recourse to trying to find a way in which one could get the form, to, if you like, obey certain other questions, seemed almost a precondition to becoming, for my generation.” John Akomfrah<sup>7</sup>

Was it possible to build a new identity, a new form of representation, as the members of BAFC pretended to do, by using the available and received language and formats? The answer was no.

The challenge for the young members of the BAFC was to construct a new language which had to be different from everything that came before it, a language that had to “divest itself of the old rhetoric of lament and recrimination, too easily pacified by a few concessions, and invent a poetics of affect, beyond the scope of documentary media, that could penetrate beneath surface symptoms to the deeply buried psychic economy and belonging.”<sup>8</sup>

In *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Akomfrah, together with the rest of the collective, manages to present an alternative narrative of how the BBC and other media outlets had covered the riots that took place in 1985 in Handsworth, a neighbourhood situated in the outskirts of Birmingham, with a migrant population majority.

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<sup>6</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Coalition Building: Black Audio Film Collective and Transnational Post-colonialism” in *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (ed. Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar), Liverpool, Liverpool University Press and FACT, 2007, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> John Akomfrah in conversation with Kodwo Eshun, “An Absence of Ruins” in *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (ed. Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar), Liverpool, Liverpool University Press and FACT, 2007, p. 135

<sup>8</sup> Jean Fisher, “In living memory... archive testimony in the films of the Black Audio Film Collective” in *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (ed. Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar), Liverpool, Liverpool University Press and FACT, 2007, p. 18.

In cinematographic terms, the context was populated by reference points that championed and mythologised the British Empire. *Gandhi* (1982), or *A Passage to India* (1984) are clear examples of this practice. On the other hand, John Grierson, Robert Flaherty and Humphrey Jennings were the referents in the realm of British documentary film, with *Handsworth Songs* situating itself as the polar opposite of their grammar and formats.

The film was produced, and later broadcast by Channel 4, which started to operate as a TV channel in 1982. In this channel, and in a specific programme called *Eleventh Hour*, is where Akomfrah<sup>9</sup> and many others had been able to see the films of Santiago Álvarez, Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman or Alexander Kluge.

*Handsworth Songs* is a film essay which not only tells the story of the 1985 Handsworth riots from an insider's point of view, the way a conventional documentary would have done, but it situates these events in the context of the present (contemporary) and historical time. Through montage, the film incorporates scenes shot *in situ*, footage from BBC newsreels, photographs, archival material, witness accounts, and voice-overs reciting poetry fragments. The spectator perceives the soundtrack as a cacophony, which doesn't run in parallel to the visual story, doesn't explain it, and, above all, is not narrative. The result is a film that is poetic and political, without becoming didactic.

In the opening scene of the film, one can see fragments of archival footage that show the arrival of coloured families from the Caribbean or Jamaica (former British colonies) aboard the "H.M.T. Empire Windrush". These images are gradually interpolated with others that show the faces of black children going to school, dancing, and later add images of the depressed neighbourhoods they live in, images of factories, and faces bereft of hope and illusion, accompanied by fragments of populist slogans and racist comments, in order to culminate with the film showing scenes of riots, and the comments by some of the neighbours from the area.

At a certain point in *Handsworth Songs*, we hear the following words: "there are no stories, only the ghosts of other stories". It is these other stories, from the past, that the archive material "conjures", presents, and that call on the other images in the film that situates them in juxtaposition, as well as on the spectator themselves. In this sense, Kobena Mercer has observed that the BAFC was the first group of British artists that, based on film, engaged the uncertainty of the archive's colonial origin as a starting point for a critical film on inter-cultural dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Through a disruptive and fragmented montage, and a dialectical structure - for which Akomfrah takes up as reference filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein, Chris Marker or what has come to be

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<sup>9</sup> John Akomfrah in conversation with con Gary Carrion-Murayari in *John Akomfrah. Signs of Empire*, New York, New Museum, 2018, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Post-colonial Trauerspiel" in *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (ed. Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar), Liverpool, Liverpool University Press and FACT, 2007, p. 46.

known as Third Cinema<sup>11</sup> - the film emphasises the jump from one image to another and their subject discontinuity. This is a method through which family photographs or films that document the diaspora are placed side-by-side with images sourced from official archives that show the monuments of colonisers or scenes of migrants in factories. The archival images are not only important as a means to access a past, but, also, as he himself comments, “the nowness of history contained in the sheer material fact of the document”<sup>12</sup>. The archive allows us to contextualise the situation in the present.

*Handsworth Songs* didn't belong to militant cinema, to social documentary; the language and the ethical and political stance that Akomfrah had adopted for its production didn't fit into the expectations of the Post-Structuralist and Marxist sectors represented by *Screen* magazine, and it wasn't a conventional documentary with a progressive, clear, didactic, and militant narrative, either. Therefore, its critical reception was ambivalent. One of the negative criticisms the film received was penned by Salman Rushdie in *The Guardian*, where he disapproved of its cinematographic grammar, which he qualified as cryptic, and claimed that the film should have explained the life circumstances of the Handsworth residents in a narrative manner instead. This criticism was counterbalanced by another one, published three days later in the same newspaper, signed by Stuart Hall, who praised the attempt to find a new language, so different from the tired style of reportage/protest riot documentary.

### ***Mnemosyne, 2010***

The title of this piece refers to the mother of the Nine Muses, the personification of memory in Greek Mythology. The film is divided into nine sections, each named after one of Mnemosyne's daughters, and the realm she protects: Calliope, the Muse of Tragedy; Clio, the Muse of History; Euterpe, the Muse of Music; Polyhymnia, the Muse of Sacred Hymns; Urania, the Muse of Astronomy; Thalia, the Muse of Comedy; Erato, the Muse of Love; and Terpsichore, the Muse of Dance.

*Mnemosyne* was prompted by an invitation Akomfrah received from the Arts Council and the BBC to produce a piece based on the BBC archives. As he himself explained in one of the presentations of the piece,<sup>13</sup> the premise of *Mnemosyne* engages a paradox related to migrant subjectivity and which he explained in the following terms: On the one hand, there are normally no monuments to migrants, and, therefore, whether they return or pass away, there will be no trace of their presence and life in a given place, or of their contribution to that culture. On the other hand, there is nevertheless a lot of information about the life of these migrants, usually related to what they mean

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<sup>11</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Coalition Building: Black Audio Film Collective and Transnational Post-colonialism” in *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (ed. Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar), Liverpool, Liverpool University Press and FACT, 2007, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Kodwo Eshun, “Drawing the Forms of the Unknown” in *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (ed. Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar), Liverpool, Liverpool University Press and FACT, 2007, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEfCX4KVcFE>

to the receiving culture, normally in economic terms, such as their status of workers, or relative to housing and other problems. One of the aims when producing *Mnemosyne* was to present a counter-cartography, where archival material (the official memory) could tell something about black subjectivity, Asian identity, etc. To, somehow, give these migrants the legitimacy of operating as subjects, with desires and longings, beyond being considered mere economic subjects.

The archival material incorporated is focused on the UK area of the West Midlands, around the city of Birmingham. The images sourced from archival footage present a city immersed in winds, storms, factory interiors and furnaces, amid other, everyday life scenes. These images are mixed with others, shot by Akomfrah, of a snowy landscape, often with a masculine character walking and only seen from their back, and others which show a black man, but in this case, he is in the streets of Birmingham, surrounded by abandoned factory buildings.

Akomfrah advocates the “contamination” between the different fragments he juxtaposes in his works, and the possible dialogues established, or their non-harmonic coexistence. The soundtrack operates in a similar manner: during the first minutes, we can hear the opening verses of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and this initial text is then joined by fragments of other texts by Beckett, Nietzsche, Shakespeare, and Sophocles.

For Akomfrah, the use of the archive is inseparable from questions of memory and mortality. He himself has mentioned, on different occasions, that the adults registered and shown in these moving images incorporated into his work have most likely passed away. Any recording is based on a tacit agreement to preserve this present inscription for the future.

## **The Earth Is Flat**

### ***Peripeteia*, 2012**

*Peripeteia* is an exercise in fiction about two characters that have been passed on to us through drawings. The starting premise of the film are two drawings of two persons, a black man and a black woman by Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer: *Head of a Negro Man* (1508), and *Portrait of the Moorish Woman Katharina* (1520).

Akomfrah has sometimes commented that when he was young, he wanted to study History of Art, and that finding these drawings is to a large extent thanks to that relationship with art history from a very young age. The two drawings are extremely meticulous and detailed, from which we can deduce that they were portraits of real people, prompted by a real encounter. The name of the woman - Katharina - has been passed on to us, but not the name of the man, and this is all we know about them. While this can be said of many portraits, in this case, it is twice as significant, since these are two individual portraits, of two people that used to, and still represent, “the other” in Europe. They are probably two of the first portraits of black people made in

Europe. The drawings become evidence, they are witnesses of the existence of these two persons, although we know nothing more about them, neither their age, nor how they arrived, nor where and how they lived.

For Akomfrah, “these two artifacts, which attest to an existence at some point, also suggest that we don’t live on a round planet but a flat one. Because everything about them looks like it went to the edge of the world and it fell off into oblivion. And I think that there are powerless and marginal figures like troubadours, religious groups, migrant communities, whose histories suggest that we live on a flat earth because their narratives and stories have just disappeared. So when you come across vestiges of that presence, one or two things that at the very least you try to achieve is an act of rescue.”<sup>14</sup>

Each of the two characters wanders alone through a landscape we can situate in the Centre or North of England. Their garments and some of the objects they carry take us to a different time period. This is a resource, the introduction of *tableaux vivants*, that Akomfrah uses here for the first time, but that he will incorporate into his film language in later works. This resource allows him to act out a historical event, to recreate it through fiction, and to immediately transport us to it.

Throughout the film, images of either one of the two characters wandering are interpolated with black and white photographs of other black people, and with fragments from the painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1500) by Hieronymus Bosch, which emphasise different scenes in which black and white people coexist. The inclusion of these fragments in the film obeys the same principle that prompted the origin of *Peripeteia* in the first place: “...for me this painting has always depicted a utopia, because it suggests that the Adamic space of our emergence was multicultural! (...) It might be an allegory of lust, a morality tale, but actually the materiality of the work suggests otherwise, and this is the fascinating thing about making images and paintings: they have a life that is independent of what they were supposed to say. It now exists as a record of a certain European encounter with the other.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the relationship between the characters in the film and the black and white photographs leads us to raise conjectures about a possible past for Katharina and for the male protagonist.

*Peripeteia* is a Greek word, which we can translate as “vicissitude”, and which, in its original sense, refers to an event which involves a twist in a narrative plot, a change in fate for the characters.

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<sup>14</sup> Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, *John Akomfrah. Hauntologies*. London, Carroll/Fletcher, 2012, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.



## The sea as the last archive

### ***Vertigo Sea. Oblique Tale on the Aquatic Sublime (2015)***

In *Vertigo Sea*, Akomfrah continues his research into issues pertaining to memory and migration, and presents the sea as an inseparable element of the diaspora. Specifically, Akomfrah comments that “you can't overestimate the significance the sea has had in the formation of the African diaspora and black identity.”

*Vertigo Sea* was produced for the Central Pavilion of the 56th Venice Biennale, which was curated by Okwui Enwezor. The piece develops simultaneously on three large screens which create a panoramic effect, which amplifies the presence and the dimensions of the ocean, and which, despite what it tells us about human and other species' migrations over the sea, manages to produce a sense of admiration and awe in us.

In common with previous works, the montage mixes archival images with those shot by Akomfrah, this time in Norway, the Faroe Islands, and the Isle of Skye. The archival footage is sourced from newsreels, from the British Film Institute, from the archives of the Natural History Unit of the BBC, and from documentaries produced by the latter, such as *Blue Planet*.

The piece draws on texts by Herman Melville and Heathcote Williams, *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Whale Nation* (1988), respectively, and includes quotes which are also accompanied by quotes by Virginia Woolf or Friedrich Nietzsche. The quotes appear in white on black, accentuating the evolution of the piece. The soundtrack also includes quotes sourced from the news, such as the one we hear in the opening scene, which speaks of the increase in the number of ships sailing towards Europe, as well as the increase in the number of casualties in these crossings. On the other hand, one has to also point out Akomfrah's relationship with contemporary authors such as Paul Gilroy, who, in his book *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, establishes a parallel between the violence exerted on black subjects, specifically African slaves, and the devastation of indigenous communities and natural resources by Western Capitalism.<sup>16</sup>

One of the scenes recreates the Zong massacre from 1781, when 133 slaves were jettisoned into the sea during a slave trade route between Africa and Jamaica with the intention of claiming insurance. This scandal prompted the beginning of the Abolitionist movement. In another moment of the film, we see a large barge about to keel over, crowded with people with Asian features, as a remembrance of the thousands of Vietnamese refugees who perished at sea while trying to reach Hong Kong in the 70s. There are also various scenes dedicated to the capture and killing of both polar bears and whales.

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<sup>16</sup> Anuradha Vikram, “Underneath the Black Atlantic: Race and Capital in John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea*” in *X-Tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly*, Spring 2019, Vol. 21, N.3, p.23.

Occasionally, *Vertigo Sea* incorporates *tableaux vivants* in which the protagonists, dressed in 19th-century garb, seem to be in-between places and times, in waiting. One of these characters represents Olaudah Equiano, a black man identified by his garments as an African in the Western world. Equiano was a slave and a free man, and had an important role in the explorations of the Arctic and of Central America, by opposing forced labour in these latitudes. Aside from being a key figure in raising awareness about the Zong massacre from 1781, together with other comrades, he managed to outlaw Trans-Atlantic slave trade in the British Empire in 1807.

*Vertigo Sea*, which develops throughout three screens, is one of the first multiple-screen works by Akomfrah. As he himself has sometimes mentioned, multiple screens allow him to explore “the multiplicity of voices in a simultaneous manner”. This technical device multiplies and amplifies what was already achieved in the *collage*-like montage, where disparate images and scenes are situated in a continuity, the methodology used by Akomfrah since *Handsworth Songs*. The multiple screens allow the simultaneity of these narratives, while adding a spatial dimension to this kind of montage. Even if the *collage*-like montage allows the “coexistence” of the disparate on a linear, and therefore temporal scale, the multiple screens add the spatial dimension by reinforcing this element of disparity and diversity of voices among the different elements that coexist from the narrative point of view.

*Vertigo Sea* shows an encyclopaedic ambition in the diversity of themes it engages: migration, slavery, ecology, violence, etc., and it presents the sea, the ocean, as a kind of deposit, as the last archive of memories and lives, both human and of other species.

### ***Auto da Fé, 2016***

In *Auto da Fé*, Akomfrah explores a specific kind of migration - the one that takes place for religious reasons. The piece, formed by two simultaneous and juxtaposed projections, traces out a history throughout 400 years of migrations caused by religion. The first reference that appears is situated historically in 1654, when the Sephardi Jews had to migrate from a Catholic Brazil to Barbados. The different case studies are presented chronologically, and separated by titles that indicate a chapter-based structure. In the first one, we read “We left because they were burning jews. Bahia 1680, and the last episode refers to a very recent case “Devil worshippers must convert or die. Mosul 2015”.

An auto da fé is a public event in which a person would declare their allegiance to a confession different from the one they had been following hitherto. In Spain, they were organised by the Inquisition, and the first one in the Modern age took place in Seville in 1481.

The piece always follows a similar structure: for each case study engaged, and therefore for each episode of the eight that make up *Auto da Fé*, at the beginning we can see the protagonists wearing period clothes. This staging, these *tableaux vivants*, are interpolated with images of black and white photographs floating in the sea,

objects, and occasionally, re-appropriated archival footage. At the beginning, the characters appear at home, surrounded by their belongings, with suitcases or bags, about to leave and leave it all behind. Nevertheless, as the film advances, the protagonists of the different episodes are seen gradually surrounded by ruins.

The protagonists of the different chapters rarely interact with one another, and often look at the sea. In these moments, time stops, the characters float, they become passive agents of their lives, they find themselves adrift, and at the mercy of strangers. But there's the possibility that others will arrive, to pick up their traces and remember their lives.