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Seeing Dialectically: Systemic Crisis and Prognostic Intelligence in John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*

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"In an age of pressured time, and at the moment of film's obsolescence, the inner, temporal, communal architecture of film spectatorship is reinvented in the art of [public] projection" (Giuliana Bruno 2019, 126).

ABSTRACT: This article explores the potential of multi-channel installations to tackle the aesthetic and epistemological challenges posed to contemporary visual cultures by the scope and complexity of the current systemic crisis. Focusing on John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015), the author conceives of the three-channel installation as an audiovisual dispositive geared towards the articulation of dialectical modes of perception and cognition. The first part of the article reconstructs *Vertigo Sea*'s counter-narrative of globalization, highlighting the installation's interest for the mechanisms of social exclusion and erasure that sustain the planetary unification initiated by the advent of European colonialism in the early modern era. In the second part of the article, the author concentrates on the workings of Akomfrah's dialectical montage and on the visualization of the present in the guise of an expansive field of non-simultaneity. Suggesting that Akomfrah's dialectical approach to filmmaking and moving-image exhibition fosters a spectatorial engagement based on forms of prognostic intelligence, the article elucidates the political stakes of *Vertigo Sea*'s response to a crisis that is simultaneously unfolding across social, environmental, and epistemological domains.

KEYWORDS: multi-channel installations; John Akomfrah; Anthropocene; dialectical montage; blackness; globalization; primitive accumulation.

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It was in response to a deepening sense of crisis and ineluctability that, in the late 2000s, Dipesh Chakrabarty popularized within the humanities the geological notion of the Anthropocene. With "The Climate of History," Chakrabarty called attention to the inextricable entanglement of human chronologies and the deep time of the physical world.[1] At this most basic level, the term Anthropocene can be taken as the master signifier of the current systemic entanglement of crises, the crisis of contemporary political and economic arrangements, with its direct repercussions on the global web of social relations, the ecological crisis threatening life-sustaining systems and the viability of habitats, and the crisis of epistemological certainties propelled by the delegation of intellectual work to machines. In a situation where the environmental conditions of human dwelling are established at the intersection of ecological, social, and technical systems, visual cultures are confronted with the unprecedented aesthetic and epistemological challenges that the extension, scope, and complexity of the contemporary systemic crisis pose to perception, cognition, and the imagination. John Akomfrah's trilogy of multichannel installations focusing on the Anthropocene, and which comprises *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *Purple* (2017), and *Four Nocturnes* (2019), provides an exemplary response to such challenges.

Recognized today as one of the leading voices within the panorama of the British visual arts, Akomfrah built his international reputation on a considerable *corpus* of highly influential audiovisual works made for theatrical release and broadcast distribution between the second half of 1980s and the beginning of the 2010s. Already enjoying a worldwide fame, at the turn of the 2010s Akomfrah impressed an abrupt inversion to the trajectory of his career, returning to the *locus* of inception of his creative activity in 1983, the gallery space.[2] Freed from the material and formal limitations of television and film exhibition, Akomfrah

1. See Chakrabarty 2009.
2. Honored with a knighthood in the 2023 UK Honours list, in 2024 John Akomfrah represented Great Britain at the sixtieth edition of the Venice *Biennale* with a solo exhibition entitled "Listening All Night to the Rain." He made his public debut in 1983, as a member of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), with the first of a two-part gallery installation, *Expeditions 1–Signs of Empire*. The second part, *Expeditions 2–Images of Nationality*, was completed the following year. Akomfrah returned to the gallery space in 2010 with the single-channel video installation *Mnemosyne*. His most recent works for television (*Martin Luther King and the March on Washington*) and the silver screen (*The Stuart Hall Project*) were released in 2013. Since then, and up to this day, Akomfrah has exclusively produced audiovisual works designed for gallery exhibition. Detailed information on Akomfrah's works is available at the website of *Smoking Dogs Films*, the artist studio Akomfrah co-founded in 1997 with other two former members

began experimenting with the design of single- and multi-channel audiovisual dispositives, in a hybrid environment that combines elements of both the gallery's white cube and the movie theater's black box.[3] While his single-channel installations focus on relatively circumscribed topics and develop a more intimate relationship with the viewer, the larger multi-screen format enabled Akomfrah to expand the historical and conceptual scope of his most ambitious projects. Multi-channel exhibition gave Akomfrah the possibility to exponentially increase the complexity and depth of his essayistic practice, allowing him to dispense from an exclusive focus on individual agents and exceptional historical events and to bring into visibility environments, processes, and social and ecological entanglements.[4]

With the trilogy of installations dedicated to the Anthropocene, Akomfrah repositioned his continued interest in the aftermath of European colonialism from a national to a planetary context, while expanding the political focus of his previous works to encompass human interactions with the physical world. In these installations, the question of blackness, which chiefly animates Akomfrah's previous essay films, is explored in relation to the asymmetrical impact of the climate crisis and

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of BAFC, Lina Gopaul and Devid Lawson. See, https://www.smokingdogsfilms.com/projects/

3. Throughout the article, I define Akomfrah's installations as audiovisual dispositives. The notion of dispositive was originally introduced by Jean-Louis Baudry in 1970, with the intention of redirecting the focus of film theory from the textual fixation of semiotics and the ontological questions based on the assumed properties of cinematic images to an understanding of the cinematic experience, the effects produced by the cinematic medium on viewers, and the perceptual and cognitive operations that the medium enables viewers to perform through their interaction with technically mediated images. In the broadest sense, an audiovisual dispositive links together three elements: a technical apparatus for the production, processing, and exhibition of moving images (the camera, the projector, the screen, etc.); the content and formal features of the images; and the sensorial conditions determined by the material circumstances of the viewers' emplacement vis-à-vis the images. I use the locution dispositive instead of device, to signal the distinction between the dispositive and a mere technical apparatus. Also, I follow Maria Tortajada and François Albera's suggestion to translate Baudry's French "*dispositif*" with the corresponding word in English, to avoid confusing Baudry's concept with the notion of *dispositif* elaborated by Michel Foucault, which is commonly left untranslated in English editions of his work. See Baudry 1975. For a convincing argument in favor of the use of the term dispositive in English, see Albera and Tortajada 2015, 21–44. For a broader overview of the historical vicissitudes and the theoretical value and limitations of the concept of the dispositive for a theory of audiovisual media, see the essays collected in Albera and Tortajada 2015.

4. On the essayistic tradition within documentary cinema see the pioneering contributions of Rascaroli 2009 and Corrigan 2011. For a contextualization of Akomfrah's work within the essayistic tradition, see Alter 2018, 272–87.

the intensifying effects of prolonged and compounded social and environmental violence. In a 2017 interview for *The Guardian*, Akomfrah introduced *Purple*, a six-channel video installation dedicated to the cumulative effects of climate change, alluding to the consequences of the racialized logic sustaining the differential degrees of exposure and vulnerability to environmental violence:

> In a way, this is a person of colour's response to the Anthropocene and climate change, which is not just a white, European fixation, though it is often presented that way. When I stand on a street in Accra, I can feel that it is a city that is literally at boiling point. It is way hotter than it was in the 1960s or even the 1980s. We need to start looking at climate change in radically different ways, not just as part of a western-based development narrative. It's a pan-African concern of great urgency, but how long it will take people to see it as such is a whole other problem. (O'Hagan 2017, np)

With *Purple*, the aesthetic and conceptual complexity of Akomfrah's multi-channel installations probably reaches its highest point. Through the imposing material architecture of the six-channel audiovisual dispositive and the incorporation of heterogeneous footage shot in ten different countries and across four continents, *Purple* conveys with intense sensory immediacy the colossal proportions of the global environmental crisis. Ian Bourland defines it as "arguably the most persuasive work ever produced on the violent course of the Anthropocene" (Bourland 2017, np). He emphasizes the novelty represented by the installation's expanded, systemic historical perspective within Akomfrah's *corpus*: "While Akomfrah's earlier work tended towards the entanglements and antagonisms of human culture, *Purple*, scored in soaring and elegiac tones, bores into the collective psychosis of modernity writ large" (Ibid.). Calling attention to the novelty of the work, Bourland does not fail to notice, however, *Purple*'s indebtedness to the first installment in the trilogy, *Vertigo Sea*. In a 2017 interview with Gareth Harris, Akomfrah himself declared that "without the concerns that infused and informed *Vertigo Sea*," he would not have been able to make *Purple* (Harris 2017, np). He further explains: "I think *Vertigo* gave me a sense of the way different themes can be brought into a conversation. […] Trying to find a way of getting them all to speak in relative harmony is the thing that *Vertigo* has licensed me for" (Ibid.). By focusing on *Vertigo Sea*, in this essay I will elucidate the role of the installation in laying out the thematic and aesthetic foundations for the inquiry into the contemporary crisis pursued across the whole trilogy. As Bourland notes with reference to *Purple*, through these installations, Akomfrah is "trying to find

layers that were, as he says, 'always already there,' but of which we are only partially aware" (Bourland 2017, np).

In the first part of this essay, I will concentrate on *Vertigo Sea*'s mapping and genealogical reconstruction of the contemporary crisis, which the installation traces back to the predatory system that spread out of Europe at the inception of the modern age. In doing so, I will show that the emphasis put on oceans and seafaring allows Akomfrah to articulate a coherent, systemic perspective on the integrated global infrastructure of domination organized around the accumulation of capital. The installation's counter-history of globalization envisions the terrestrial unification of the planet as the manufacture of a paradoxical world, whose unity must be perpetually reconstituted by disposing of parts of the whole. In *Vertigo Sea*, race and blackness mark the exclusion from a world that is no longer conceived as the home of the human species in its entirety. My reading will draw attention to the fact that, while its genealogical reconstruction positions the production of blackness at the heart of the global system of capital accumulation, in *Vertigo Sea*'s mapping of the contemporary crisis, the fact of blackness—in Frantz Fanon's famous formulation—stretches out into new social domains, as the installation creates multiple connections across heterogeneous contexts of dispossession, expulsion, and de-realization.[5] In the second half of the essay, I will examine the installation's engagement with aquatic ontologies, in order to show how *Vertigo Sea* can mobilize an alternative set of aesthetic and epistemological principles to tackle the key contradictions of our age, by resorting to a paradigm of flux, interdependence, and non-linearity. As a machine capable of bringing into visibility the latency of the past and of future possibilities, *Vertigo Sea* maps the present in the guise of a systemic field of non-simultaneous temporalities, multiscalar entanglements, and virtual connections. Rejecting the apocalyptic tone of most audiovisual works dealing with the contemporary social and environmental crisis, the audiovisual dispositive of *Vertigo Sea* is designed to foster a prognostic intelligence, which urges the viewers to envision an alternative future to the accelerating catastrophe of our times. Ultimately, I contend that the crucial significance of *Vertigo Sea*—and of Akomfrah's trilogy more in general—lies in its vigorous invitation to imagine, against all odds, the possibility of a world and a future that everyone can share.

5. See Fanon 2008, 109–140.

The Ticking Clock of Globalization

Initially exhibited at the 2015 "All the World's Futures," the fifty-sixth edition of the Venice *Biennale* curated by the late Okwui Enwezor, *Vertigo Sea* offers a complex examination of the contemporary global landscape of crisis. The installation is an ingenious audiovisual dispositive, which comprises three large rectangular screens of equal size, aligned horizontally at a short distance from one another inside a darkened room. Through the angular positioning of the two lateral screens, a slightly concave semicircle is created in front of the seating area destined to the viewers, with the 7.1 surround audio system intensifying the immersive quality of the image display. Akomfrah pairs the epic proportions of the three-channel HD color video installation with a patent anti-monumental approach to the history of Western modernity and globalization. Yet, while close attention is frequently given to the specificity of minute detail, the installation strenuously pursues, by means of editing and the juxtapositions of sounds and images, an incessant reconstruction of systemic interconnections. As images alternate and juxtapose on the three screens in rapid succession, the soundscape explicates a dual function, by serving as a connective tissue and by providing points of anchorage. During the engagement with the densely layered and incessantly transfroming audiovisual fabric of the installation, viewers experience a perceptual and cognitive vertigo that fulfills the promise encapsulated in the title of the work.

As it juxtaposes a rich variety of audiovisual materials, *Vertigo Sea* constructs historical links and conceptual resonances, to develop an inquiry into the roots of the twenty-first-century deadlock. The material is organized into eight main sections, followed by the closing credits, while the beginning of each section is marked by the appearance of an intertitle on the central screen. On the visual level, the installation incorporates archival still and moving images, original materials mostly consisting of meticulously staged *tableaux vivants*, and a copious amount of footage produced by the Natural History Unit of the British Broadcasting Corporation. An equally composite and layered soundscape matches the heterogeneity of the images. The soundtrack combines sparse musical accompaniment and sound effects, direct sound associated to the BBC footage of marine life, and several voice-over inserts. These include, most recognizably, excerpts from BBC news broadcasts and the audiobooks of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Heathcote Williams' *Whale Nation* (1988), Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke*

Zarathustra (1883–1892), and John Newton's *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (1788). Each section of the installation explores a specific perspective on the historical role of the sea in shaping global social arrangements since the early modern era. When joined together, the eight sections form an overarching constellation, which is both a conceptual mapping and a genealogical reconstruction of the total crisis of our age.

Vertigo Sea opens by positioning the viewers in a state of anxious anticipation. A subtle use of sound allows Akomfrah to convey with dramatic immediacy an undefined sense of urgency. Before the appearance of the images, with the three screens displaying a dark blue background, the sound of a ticking clock fades in. As it intensifies and continues unfolding with mechanical indifference, the title "Vertigo Sea" appears on the central screen, replaced at a short interval of time by the intertitle announcing the beginning of the installation's first section, "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime." The whistling noise of an electronic device is slowly overlayed onto the rhythmical punctuation of the clock's ticking. The increasing volume and the high pitch of the distorted artificial sound amplify the disquieting feeling produced by the unceasing march of the clock. Provocatively, *Vertigo Sea* begins with the reminder that we are running out of time. The expectation of an undefined, imminent threat thus infuses a visceral sense of urgency into what will unfold on the screens in the subsequent forty-eight minutes.

With a gong chime accompanying and accentuating the startling effect of their appearance, the first set of images effectively illustrates the tension between acceleration and stasis, weightlessness and gravity, that lies at the heart of the conceptual and affective economy of *Vertigo Sea*. Displayed onto the central screen, a sepia-toned still image with the close-up of a black man's hand holding a pocket watch seemingly anchors the ticking sound that opened the installation. Although it allows to locate the sound source and dispel the eerie effect of disembodied acoustic phenomena, the matching of image and sound creates a pronounced tension between the stillness of the picture and the emotionally charged soundscape. By running counter to the kinesthetic effects of the sonic experience, the arresting quality of the image amplifies the emotional impact of the ticking sound. At the same time, the juxtaposition of sound and image produces an uncanny feeling, as we listen to the mechanism of a clock whose hands we can see are deadly still. Sensorial and affective collisions of this kind reappear throughout the work, for

Vertigo Sea repeatedly juxtaposes the urgency conveyed by a bewildering sensorial stimulation and the suspended temporalities of abandonment encapsulated in some of its most captivating images.

While the viewers are invited to indulge on the picture displayed at the center of the installation, the images on the lateral screens subtly announce *Vertigo Sea*'s systemic vantage point on the contemporary crisis. Both lateral images are aerial views of the ocean, and in both shots the camera gradually pulls out to a longer shot scale. In spite of their formal commonalities, these views seem to suggest two contrasting interpretations of the human relationship to the sea. On the right-hand screen, the ocean is presented in its primeval aspect. We see what appears to be an aerial or a satellite image of the sea, with scattered clouds disrupting a clear view of the water. This shot brings together the sea and the sky, the domains from which land-dwelling humans have traditionally been excluded. Largely withdrawn from human experience, until recently these spaces marked the boundaries of a non-human beyond. In his analysis of the ocean through the lens of elemental media philosophy, John Durham Peters suggests that it was precisely because of its close association with the sky that, until the inception of the Early Modern era, the sea was granted a sublime status. As he recalls the ancient belief about dolphins transporting the souls of the dead, Peters notes that "[m]uch of the sublimity of whales and dolphins comes from their inhabiting a zone parallel to the stars: like angels, dolphins haunt us as beings that dwell in sublime ethereal or maritime climes, in contrast to sublunary humans" (Peters 2015, 71).

Formally speaking, the shot on the left resembles the image appearing on the right-hand screen, but in this case a boat is visible at the center of the frame. This aerial view thus repositions the mythical qualities of a conventional aquatic imaginary within the material context of global infrastructural networks of navigation. The vessel inscribes the ocean in the domain of history. Metonymically, the boat points at seafaring and the taming of oceans through navigation. In his influential study of cultural techniques such as eating, drafting, or the production of the sign-signal distinction, Bernhard Siegert affirms that the ship is not a simple tool but a second-order cultural technique, as "it transforms the sea, hitherto devoid of any sense of place and history, into something inscribed by both" (Siegert 2015, 70).[6] Since time immemorial, nautical

6. Thomas Macho distinguishes between first-order techniques, such as cooking or tilling the land, and second-order techniques, which entail symbolic work, as is the case with

techniques significantly contributed to shape the self-understanding of humans as cultural beings, that is, beings which transform the environments they inhabit through their technical imagination. Due to its capacity to produce space out of emptiness, Siegert notes, seafaring precedes all other techniques including writing as the "original cultural technique of hominization" (Ibid.). Whereas the image projected on the left screen of *Vertigo Sea* may, for the moment, only recall this premodern, broad anthropological understanding of navigation, subsequent references to the nautical world will gradually center the thematic focus of the installation around European colonialism, taken as a decisive turning point in the long history of seafaring. Linked to archival and fictional evocations of European conquest and predation, throughout the installation nautical references will progressively define the ship as a key logistical medium of colonization and capture.[7]

Although the colonial context remains implicit if we pay attention to the lateral shots exclusively in terms of their subject matter, the formal features of the pictures provide an immediate hint at the temporal extension of the installation's genealogy, by pointing towards the breaking point of modernity. The aerial views of the ocean recall the tradition of pictures composed from a bird's eye perspective, which began appearing in late-fifteenth-century maps, such as those contained in Hartmann Schedel's 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle*. The noticeable placement of views taken from a disembodied perspective at the outset of the installation foreshadows *Vertigo Sea*'s self-reflexive interest in the role of images and visual technologies within the epochal, planetary reconfiguration of the human experience initiated during the early modern era.

Peter Sloterdijk connects the early-sixteenth-century craze for transcendental points of view to the epistemological revolution sanctioned by the first circumnavigation of the planet, completed in 1522. While the most direct material consequences of the *Victoria*'s return to Spain were the progressive extension of international markets and the rise of the European colonial system, on a symbolic level, the circumnavigation

writing and painting. See Macho 2013. In the introduction to *Cultural Techniques*, Siegert challenges the sharp distinction proposed by Macho and calls for the development of a processual rather than an ontological definition of the two terms, "[i]n order to situate cultural techniques before the grand epistemic distinction between culture and technology" (Siegert 2015, 13).

7. In the context of the studies on the infrastructural aspects of media, Liam Cole Young defines the ship, along with the document, as the paradigmatic medium of European colonization, for it allowed modern Europeans to reconfigure the sea in the guise of land, making it measurable and mappable, and thus available for exploitation and conquest. See Young 2021.

came to signify the overcoming of humanity's ancestral earth-bound condition. The "*mappamundo*" is, according to Sloterdijk, the emblem of this metamorphosis. With the manufacture of terrestrial globes finding a new life as an effect of the Earth's circumnavigation, these miniaturized replicas of the planet would introduce modern Europeans to the idea of watching the world from a point of view external to the planet itself: "The map absorbs the land, and for imagining spatial thought, the image of the globe gradually makes the real extensions disappear" (Sloterdijk 2017, 28). At the same time, modern Europeans would learn to identify themselves with abstract points localized inside the mathematized space of a technical projection. This is why the *mappamundo* should not be treated as a simple object, but rather as an optical device that produces aesthetic operations having concrete epistemological effects. By enabling the virtualization of the world and the self, the *mappamundo* provided the psychological and epistemological foundation for the processes of de-realization that would sustain the constitution of a unified world where "[a]ll that is solid melts into air."[8]

Vertigo Sea's pairing of the bird's eye perspective with the image of a vessel can be thus read as an oblique allusion to the entanglement of optics, political economy, and colonial conquest underlying the long history of Western modernity. In his most recent book, *Projecting Spirits* (2022), the media archaeologist Pasi Väliaho emphasizes the centrality of optical projection to the epistemological revolution of the early modern era. Visual devices such as the camera obscura and the magic lantern eloquently spoke to a new sensibility for the contingent, the accidental, and the unforeseen. With the affirmation of financial capitalism in the late seventeenth century and the "virtualization of things and beings into the anticipated realities of future markets," Valiäho shows how projection supplanted divine providence as the hegemonic governmental paradigm of Western modernity (Valiäho 2022, 28). The cognitive task of projection was that of virtualizing the real, of endowing solid things with plasticity and a propensity for metamorphosis. By substituting the actual for the possible, projection ultimately aimed to subject contingency to the speculative designs of capitalist rationality. Valiäho observes that, in England, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, "optical media became cognitive relays allowing the subsumption of material relations under abstract and invisible, noetic, and even imaginary

8. The reference is, of course, to Chapter One of Marx's and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848): https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm

designs, facilitating thus the development of a new economic concept of the world as *tabula rasa* for man-made projections" (Valiäho 2022, xiv). Highlighting the operational quality of aerial images, *Vertigo Sea* hints at the role played by optical media and technologies of vision in the long history of globalization.

The web of meanings and conceptual associations emerging from the analysis of the few aural and visual images that inaugurate *Vertigo Sea* gives a concrete sense of the complexity of the work. By looking at these images, we can also get a better sense of the functioning of Akomfrah's three-channel audiovisual dispositive more broadly. Whereas the static close-up displayed on the central screen constitutes a point of anchorage, the views of the sea appearing on the lateral screens mobilize this gravitational center, by expanding its contextual implications. Pulling out to a longer shot scale, camerawork in the images appearing on the lateral screens highlights, perceptually and kinesthetically, the movement of abstraction that the installation performs on the image of the man holding the clock, by positioning it in relation to the oceans, seafaring, and the operations of optical media. By means of the perpetually shifting associations produced by the matching of images and sounds, the installation constructs successive points of attention and continuously repositions them across a range of interconnected contexts. Within the expanding framework suggested by the lateral views of the ocean, the intense sense of urgency associated with the mysterious picture displayed on the central screen reverberates across the broader historical and conceptual constellation of *Vertigo Sea*.

While the first section of the installation resolutely positions the viewers in the context of a precarious present, *Vertigo Sea*'s second section—"Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes: Arran | 1832"—begins by outlining the historical background of the contemporary crisis. As it develops the analysis of the present in a genealogical direction, *Vertigo Sea* constructs a counternarrative of the long history of globalization. The installation invites us to consider globalization as the constitution, for the first time in human memory, of a unified social world extending across the whole planet. The emergence of a planetary consciousness represents the leading motif of "Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes," which opens with early-twentieth-century archival footage of departing transatlantic vessels. Displayed on the central screen, we first see a series of two consecutive shots, taken from land, of a ship leaving an overcrowded dock. These are followed by a companion shot picturing a departure, although this time the camera is positioned on board the ship

itself. Marking the beginning of the installation's genealogical descent, this shrewd visual transition prompts viewers to embark on a journey across space and time.

The genealogical reconstruction pursued in the second section of *Vertigo Sea* is marked from the outset by a pronounced ambivalence. On the one hand, the inclusion in this section of the lush BBC footage picturing dolphins and seagulls freely roaming waters and skies seemingly points towards the liberating aspects connected to the overcoming of an earth-bound condition.[9] From this perspective, transatlantic ships can be seen as enablers of unrestrained journeys and multipliers of possible horizons. The archival footage presents these departures as privileged symbolic moments: a standing crowd, waving hands, salutes the vessels launched towards the ever-repeating enactment of a distance-breaking ritual. On the other hand, as it extracts these images from their intended context, *Vertigo Sea* pairs them with lateral *tableau* shots of desolated landscapes and the sound of strong, whirling winds, distorted artificial noises, and, significantly, the return of the ticking clock heard at the beginning of the installation. Disentangled from the celebratory framework promoting the marvels of technology and empire, the images of departing vessels are here mobilized in the context of a symbolic universe tainted by mourning and loss.

The vast historical picture traced throughout *Vertigo Sea* primarily revolves around the ruination left behind by Western modernity. Images of wreckage multiply in the second section and will reappear across the whole installation. Several *tableaux vivants* with Victorian-age settings show a variety of objects connoting Western modernity—clocks, domestic furniture, compasses, lamps, strollers—scattered around desolated coastlines. Among these *tableaux*, one stands out as particularly emblematic, for it shows a multitude of broken clocks that seem to suggest the fraudulent nature of modern time and Western progress. By shifting attention from the point of departure to the destination, these *tableau* shots invert the perspective on transoceanic navigation encoded in the archival images of departing vessels. Seen from the shores of the colonies, the march of Western modernity appears as a progressive process of devastation. The perspective of the colonized subject is that of

9. An association that is reinforced, at the conclusion of "Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes," through the inclusion of an excerpt from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which Friedrich Nietzsche develops a reflection on wandering in terms of an interior journey.

Walter Benjamin's angel of history: in the chain of events that colonialists call progress, they can only discern "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin 2006, 392).

The awareness of the duplicitous lines along which the unification of the world has been pursued by Western modernity is most clearly crystallized, within the installation's second section, in the images of an early home movie, probably dating to the second quarter of the twentieth century. Within a static medium shot, we see three white children playing with an assortment of toys in a middle-class home interior. Among the toys on display, a rag doll of a black man catches the viewer's eye. While it signals the emergence of the consciousness of a unified planetary existence, as a condensed, crude image of reification and commodification, this doll also reveals the racial divisions and hierarchies on which the European colonial powers built their vision of a planetary unification. The installation reminds us that, whereas the globalized world is for some a world without frontiers, for the vast majority of the planet's population globalization has historically meant a condition of unwarranted exposure.

Taking a polemical stand against the historical amnesia of popular and academic discourses on the topic, in *In the World Interior of Capital* (2005) Sloterdijk defines globalization as a project of planetary unification pursued under the logic of capital accumulation. He situates the unfolding and accomplishment of this project between two temporal extremes, the spread of European oceanic expeditions in the second half of the fifteenth century and the conclusion of the Second World War. According to Sloterdijk, we can only make sense of the political *impasse* of our times, by looking at it through the lens of the founding aspirations that propelled the process of globalization. He crucially remarks that, an ever-growing production of vulnerabilities is the unavoidable correlative to the global unification achieved under the logic of capital. "Even though the scattered peoples of the world have, until recently, existed in their endospheres," Sloterdijk writes, "they are forced by the distance-destroying 'revolution' of modernity to admit that from now on, because they are reachable by mobile others, they live on one and the same planet: the planet of the unconcealed" (Sloterdijk 2017, 140). Throughout *Vertigo Sea*, Akomfrah emphasizes the link between the unification of the world and the intensifying production of social and ecological vulnerability.

A World That Is Not One

If we now return to the installation's opening section and the image of the man holding the pocket watch, we may be in a better position to appreciate its significance and function. While the pictures initially displayed on the lateral screens prefigure the spatial and temporal extension of the installation's genealogical excavation, the captivating image appearing on the central screen functions as a point of convergence between synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The view of the man running out of time subtly positions the question of race as *Vertigo Sea*'s key vantage point on the aftermath of the colonial adventure that prompted the creation the globalized world of our times. Undertaking the two-fold challenge of mapping the systemic crisis of the present and illuminating its historical and political roots, *Vertigo Sea* reconstructs the contours of a paradoxical world, of an internally fractured social whole and a totalizing system of incorporation founded on the production of disposable human surpluses. A world where blackness is the epitome of human disposability.

To map the historical present, *Vertigo Sea* adopts a symptomatic approach. In "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime," the installation looks at contemporary migrations as a paradigmatic social product of the operations of power prevailing across the interconnected world of capital. The soundscape of this sequence is thematically organized around two sets of vocal inserts concerning contemporary trans-Mediterranean crossings. In the first half of "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime," we hear the testimonial account of an African migrant, while in the second part we listen to a set of radio news reports on migratory flows. A series of four *tableau* shots picturing motionless black men punctuate the critical moments of the events recalled in the radio broadcast. In the first excerpt, the speaker connects migration to a leap into the unknown: "There were twenty-seven of them on board. None have been to sea before. They came from all across the [African] continent, travelling northwards towards the cost." The tone of the chronicle shifts from the biographical to the statistical, with the second vocal insert: "Numbers reported dead or missing here this year are the highest ever, nearly five hundred. Last month, on one day, fourteen dead bodies were found floating in the sea." Just before the appearance of a captivating *tableau* with the image of a black man staring motionlessly at a TV screen covered in static, we hear the beginning of the last excerpt: "The migrants' boat started taking on water…" The speaker continues: "The people's traffickers told them that the crossing would take less than an hour. The pilot swam back to shore, they headed on."

With the progression of the journalistic chronicle, the focus of the nature film footage sampled by Akomfrah gradually shifts from animal life—with images of turtles, shoals of fish, and water birds predominating in the first half of "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime"—to the majestic proportions and the overwhelming force of oceanic currents and waves. Then, in conjunction with the beginning of the last excerpt from the news broadcast, the prevalent point of view on the ocean changes, as shots taken from underwater begin to significantly outnumber the views taken from above the surface of the sea. Through sensorial, kinesthetic, and affective means, *Vertigo Sea*'s first section progressively articulates a viewing position capable of conveying the radical precariousness of the migrants' lives as an embodied experience. Immersed into a deluge of sound and images, the viewer experiences the installation as someone who must learn to navigate the perilous territories of the unknown.

Emphasizing the growth of global migratory flows and the expanding production of human superfluity, "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime" positions the migrant at a point of convergence between the ontological derealization of blackness and the ongoing expansion of the condition of vulnerability that Sloterdijk associates to the dwelling on "the planet of the unconcealed." To be made superfluous is to be stripped of the right to have rights, a condition whose historical embodiment is the slave. The focus on contemporary migrations from Africa highlights the perniciously resilient global afterlives of trans-Atlantic slavery. As it superimposes the experience of contemporary migrants and snapshot of black lives, the installation not only connotes blackness as the cardinal marker of human disposability, but it also hints at the historicity of blackness itself. As Bryan Wagner incisively puts it, "Africa and its diaspora are much older than blackness. Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black at a particular stage in history" (Wagner 2009, 1).

While blackness does not predate the Atlantic Slave Trade, it survived the abolition of slavery.[10] *Vertigo Sea* tracks this survival, by calling attention to the racial lines determining the degree of exposure to contemporary forms of social and environmental violence. As a continu-

10. Whereas there is an overwhelming consensus concerning the emergence of blackness in conjunction to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Frank B. Wilderson III points out that the racialization of slavery was first introduced as a consequence of the Arab invasion of the African continent in the seventh century. See Wilderson 2017, 19–21.

ation of slavery's ontological derealization by other means, racism perpetuates the fundamental violence that expropriates beings of their humanity, in order to reconstitute them as Black.[11] Achille Mbembe describes black existence in terms of a "vacant life," a life vacated of being: "the Black Man is the one (or the thing) that one sees when one sees nothing, when one understands nothing, and, above all, when one wishes to understand nothing." (Mbembe 2017, 2). Mbembe traces the invention of Blackness to the advent of international capitalism: "The term 'Black' was the product of a social and technological machine tightly linked to the emergence and globalization of capitalism. It was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred." (Ibid., 6). Put in conversation with the visual and aural recollections of slavery that appear throughout the installation, the journey of the destitute African migrants recalled in the opening section of *Vertigo Sea* trace a direct continuity between enslavement and subsequent forms of racialized subjugation. Contemporary migrations are a powerful reminder that the production of blackness remains a key objective for the operations of capital in our world.

As it emphasizes the significance of race in the historical constitution of Western modernity's project of terrestrial unification, *Vertigo Sea* directly connects the ruthlessness of the violence perpetrated against humans with that inflicted on the physical world. Beginning with this installation, the environmental crisis would acquire a preeminent relevance in Akomfrah's work, allowing him to reposition the key interests of his previous films within an expanded planetary context. Bourland situates this new direction in Akofrah's work within the wider framework of contemporary black British art. If today black artists have emerged among the guiding voices within the panorama of the British visual arts, this is at least in part due to the fact that, Bourland explains, "the themes and methods elaborated in their work provide crucial modes of reconciling terrestrial problems that go beyond questions of nation and to the core of human survival in the twenty-first century" (Bourland 2019, 130). By recontextualizing the vantage point of blackness from the local dimension of the nation to the planetary scope of globalization, *Vertigo Sea* reinscribes the social question of blackness in

11. For instance, Achille Mbembe observes that, in the late nineteenth century, French statesmen could argue against applying The Declaration of the Rights of Man to African people in the colonies, on the basis of the enduring assumption that they were not human. See Mbembe 2017, 76.

larger reflection concerning the systemic entanglement of human and nonhuman processes and temporalities. The installation connects social and environmental violence within the framework of a globalized world built around a unified system of predation.

Blackness first emerged through the equation of racially marked bodies with matter and the inorganic. From the point of view of capital, humans, animals, and the physical world are all equal; they are nothing but resources. The whale and the slave are the twin figures of extermination in the necropolitical landscape reconstructed in *Vertigo Sea*. In her review of the installation's exhibition in Toronto, Jill Glessing perceptively observes that the two main organizing axes of *Vertigo Sea*'s counter-history of globalization, the whaling industry and the slave trade, are paradigmatic instances of extractive capitalism (Glessing 2017, 38). Extractivism is openly thematized at the beginning of *Vertigo Sea*'s seventh section. A series of shots picturing an open-pit mine in an arid mountainous setting are interspersed with images of forests covered in snow and howling wolves. By introducing images of Andean miners carrying baskets of sulfide ores, *Vertigo Sea* alludes to the racialized constitution of the extractive logic of European colonialism. The geographer Kathryn Yusoff argues that mining played a decisive role in the violent dispossession and ruthless objectification of black and indigenous people; a dispossession that she identifies as the repressed origin of Western modernity (Yusoff 2018).

Not only mining created the immediate, concrete demand for stocks of forced labor, but it also contributed to the establishment of an imaginary equation between racially marked bodies and natural resources. Extractive practices therefore became a primary imaginary enabler of the ontological derealization enforced by the White-Master onto the Black Slave, for extraction required, Yusoff argues, "both slavery (first for mining) and its continuance as a mode of labor and psychic extraction of pleasure and sadism, which in turn codified Blackness in proximity to the qualities and properties of the inhuman" (ibid., 57). Racism, conversely, enabled the government of black bodies in the guise of natural resources. As Mbembe explains, "[t]he plantation regime and, later, the colonial regime presented a problem by making race a principle of the exercise of power, a rule of sociability, and a mechanism for training people in behaviors aimed at the growth of economic profitability" (Mbembe 2017, 81). The Andean miners featured in *Vertigo Sea* effectively visualize the radical derealization of human beings transformed into mere sources of locomotive and mechanical power. The installation

reveals that, while for the inhabitants of the Global North the threat of becoming a receptacle of abstract labor power—a human battery of sorts—is mostly confined to the hypothetical sci-fi scenario of films such as *The Matrix* (1999), this is the actual material condition in which millions of people survive, from day to day, in the Global South.[12]

If, on the one hand, *Vertigo Sea* consistently emphasizes the violence inflicted on human beings, on the other, it places a prominent stress on hunting and the slaughter of animals. Images of whaling, in particular, are pervasive throughout the installation. Archival footage of the harpooning, disembowelment, and dismemberment of cetaceans covey with intense immediacy the violence that Western modernity unleashed over the physical world more broadly. While environmental violence takes multiple shapes in the installation—from images of oil spills and atomic explosions to views of melting icebergs—the killing of animals, ranging from polar bears, to seals, deer, and elephants, serves to define the logic underlying the systemic domination of the non-human world in predatory terms. In this context, the primary focus on whaling allows Akomfrah to highlight the industrial scale and systemic design of the extermination. Producing the first estimate of the enormous number of whales killed by industrial fishing globally during the twentieth century, the marine scientists Robert Rocha, Phillip Clapham, and Yulia Ivashchenko laconically concluded that the "total is close to three million animals, making it (at least in terms of sheer biomass) perhaps the largest hunt in human history" (Rocha et al. 2015, 47). At the same time, through the erasure performed by the whaling industry, *Vertigo Sea* also alludes to the broader mass extinction event that we are currently living through.[13]

By superimposing racial and environmental violence, *Vertigo Sea* draws attention to the continuity between the social apocalypse endured by the colonized and their heighten exposure to the direst consequences of the current ecological catastrophe. Éric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato emphasize that, for the Amerindian populations, the end of the world begun in 1492: "genocide precedes and leads to the ecocide *to*

12. While mining is overtly thematized in this section, by envisioning whaling and slavery as extractive practices, *Vertigo Sea* invites us to adopt an expanded understanding of extraction. In *Politics of Operations*, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson identify extractivism as the overarching logic of neoliberal capitalism. They show that extractive operations today reach considerably beyond the traditional practices of mining, land grabs, and resource dispossession, to include an array of disparate phenomena, ranging from datamining and gold farming to processes of financialization and the capture of labor in the form of biocapital. See Neilson and Mezzadra 2019, 133–67.

13. On the current mass extinction event, see Kolbert 2014.

come" (Alliez and Lazzarato 2018, 348). Similarly, Laura Pulido notes that, for the indigenous communities of the former colonies, "global warming is a continuation of a centuries-long apocalypse" (Pulido 2018, 120). The climate crisis, however, not only represents a continuation of colonial violence, but it also marks a threshold of intensified acceleration. In his book on the "environmentalism of the poor," Rob Nixon famously defined environmental violence as slow, and therefore invisible: "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 2). Invisible, and yet incremental, "its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Ibid.). According to Nixon, the compounded effects of social and environmental violence manifest themselves in the emergence of a novel and more acute form of alienation. To inhabit a dying land, Nixon argues, constitutes the most radical form of displacement, "one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (Ibid., 16). The polar bears swimming amidst melting ice sheets and the destitute migrants daring the high waters that appear throughout *Vertigo Sea* are signifiers of such an epochal loss of grounding.

Pushing against the commonplace idea that the world is shrinking due the impact of communication and transportation technologies, Bruno Latour advances the suggestion that what is shrinking is not so much the human world as rather the life-sustaining environments of the planet. By claiming that it is the Earth which is shrinking, rather than the world, Latour calls attention to the progressive diminution of inhabitable land and cultivable soil, as a result of ecological depletion, the increasing amount of carbon dioxide emissions, the growing acidification of the oceans, the rising amount of radioactive fallout, the expanding desertification of the planet, and the unprecedented number and scale of climatic calamities (Latour 2018). The realization that the Earth is shrinking revokes the promise of modernity, as it becomes apparent that the planet is incapable of containing the ideal of an unlimited development: "We must face up to what is literally a problem of dimension, scale, and lodging: the planet is much too narrow and limited for the globe of globalization" (ibid., 16). The environmental catastrophe thus more acutely reveals the incompossibility of unfettered private ap-

propriation and the sharing of a "common world" (Ibid., 1). Latour interprets Donald Trump's announcement, in 2017, that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord as the symptom of an unprecedented historical situation: "it is as though a significant segment of the ruling classes (known today rather too loosely as 'the elites') had concluded that the earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else" (Ibid.). "Consequently," Latour continues, "they decided that it was pointless to act as though history were going to continue to move toward a common horizon, toward a world in which all humans could prosper equally" (Ibid.).

Vertigo Sea suggests that the shrinking of the Earth not only has intensified the production of blackness, but it has also created the conditions for its larger social proliferation. The fact of blackness in *Vertigo Sea* extends into new, heterogeneous contexts. The transition from the fourth to the fifth section of the installation builds an unequivocal analogy between the racial violence of the *Zong* massacre of slaves and the political violence of the "death flights" in post-WWII Latin America. The closest we get, chronologically, to the present, the more the installation configures blackness as a mobile signifier. While *Vertigo Sea*'s genealogical reconstruction of globalization reveals that the unified world of global capitalism is built on the production of superfluous people, the proliferation of precarious lives documented in the installation's opening section shows that, with the shrinking of the planet, human superfluity is destined to expand. *Vertigo Sea* thus visualizes, in no ambiguous terms, what Mbembe refers to as the "becoming Black" of the contemporary world.

In the introduction to *Critique of Black Reas*on, Mbembe highlights the parallel between the advance of neoliberal capitalism and the ongoing transformation of legions of exploited workers into disposable people. His words take us back again to the dispossessed migrants of *Vertigo Sea*'s opening section: "There are no more workers as such. There are only laboring nomads. If yesterday's drama of the subject was exploitation by capital, the tragedy of the multitude today is that they are unable to be exploited at all" (Mbembe 2017, 3). While in early capitalism the term Black only referred to people of African origins, "neither Blackness nor race has ever been fixed. They have, on the contrary, always belonged to a chain of open-ended signifiers" (Ibid., 6). Today, for the first time in human history, the term black has been generalized "and the systematic risks experienced specifically by Black slaves during early capitalism have now become the norm for, or at least the lot

of, subaltern humanity." (Ibid., 4)[14] Focusing on the historical significance of blackness and its progressive social extension, *Vertigo Sea* alerts us to the lines of division along which the unification of the planet was achieved and is currently sustained. The installation calls attention to the difficulty, but also to the vital necessity of thinking the world as one, inviting us to reclaim the capacity to imagine a common future on a shared planet.

Machines of Dialectical Vision

By the turn of the 2010s, the increased analytic and thematic complexity of Akomfrah's projects had gradually outgrown the potential of the single-channel format of exhibition of movie theaters and the television. The gallery allowed Akomfrah, as several other filmmakers working in the tradition of the essay film, to experiment with more flexible conditions and technologies of exhibition. This flexibility put filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Harun Farocki, Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, and Isaac Julien in the condition to design innovative audiovisual dispositives and spectatorial experiences. Like Akomfrah, many of these filmmakers were attracted by the non-linear, oblique, and dynamic associative logic enabled by multi-screen display. Writing in praise of the expanded possibilities that gallery installations offer to the tradition of the essay film, Ross Gibson analyzes the potentiality of multi-channel exhibition by comparing the single- and multi-screen versions of Alexander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices*. With a screen time exceeding the five-hour mark, the single-channel version of *Spiritual Voices* documents the life of Russian soldiers stationed on the Tajik-Afghani border in the mid-1990s.[15] The film is a pensive meditation on waiting and the expectation of incumbent threat. Rare confrontations with unidentified tribal forces punctuate a monotony riddled with anxiety, in a hallucinatory atmosphere recalling the existential condition described, at the outset of the Second World War, by the Italian novelist Dino Buzzati in *The Tartar*

14. The idea of blackness as a mobile signifier is vehemently contested by the scholars converging around the conceptual framework of Afro-pessimism, such as Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Jared Sexton. Wilderson argues that, while blackness is a historical construct, such a historical experience has sedimented into a specific ontological condition, which cannot be transferred onto different social groups without losing its specific relevance (Wilderson 2017). For an overview of the Afro-pessimist conceptual perspective, see Wilderson et al. 2017.

15. To collect the footage included in the film, Sokurov spent a total of three months, within a period of a year and a half, living among the servicemen of the 11th Frontier Post of the Russian Army's Moscow Border Detachment.

Steppe. While the film was initially released within the film festival circuit and on television in 1995, in the early 2000s Sokurov turned *Spiritual Voices* into a five-channel installation, by displaying the five consecutive parts of the original work simultaneously.

Gibson notes that, in the multi-screen version of *Spiritual Voices*, thematic lines emerge that are significantly divergent from the main topics of the original film. Most importantly, the understanding of the audiovisual material develops according to a radically different logic, if the five parts are viewed simultaneously: "With its polyphony and its interlacing panoply of imagery, the five-screen array generates a pulsive and sometimes convulsive representation of war as a non-linear phenomenon" (Gibson 2020, 112). As Gibson observes: "One of the most striking peculiarities is the way the installation presents an experience that feels like a memory charged daydream that floats adrift from mundane sequential experience. This contrasts with the long-form version, which carries the viewer in a more focussed line of selective causation and step-by-step disquisition" (Ibid., 113). In Gibson's reading, the multi-screen display of *Spiritual Voices* deepens the perceptual field of the unfolding present, innerving present perception with the retrospective power of memory and prospective anticipatory energies. Through this complex sensorial and intellectual experience, the gallery exhibition of *Spiritual Voices* "activates a mode of cognition that is not linear and disquisitional so much as it is spatial, associative, and endlessly hypothetical" (Ibid., 114).

Musical metaphors abound in the descriptions of multi-screen installations. Like Gibson, Patricia Zimmermann also resorts to the notion of polyphony to define the unity of heterogeneous elements pursued by *Vertigo Sea*'s multi-channel format of exhibition (Zimmermann 2020). Conceived in these terms, the audiovisual dispositive of *Vertigo Sea* performs the "layering of different melodies and voices to create new resonances, a combinatory art depending on both vertical and horizontal vocal movements" (Ibid., 63). Akomfrah's disposition towards a polyphonic organization of audiovisual materials predates, however, his turn to multi-channel gallery installations. As Stoffel Debuysere perspicaciously notes in his analysis of Akomfrah's early feature films from the 1980s, "[t]he force of Akomfrah's films lies in their singular ability to construct twilight worlds between multiple temporalities and realms of experience, situated in the wrinkles that join and disjoin future pasts and present futures" (Debuysere 2015, 75). Yet, while the early essay

films already combined heterogeneous elements and perspectives to organize "twilight worlds between multiple temporalities and realms of experience," the multi-channel format of exhibition allowed Akomfrah's polyphonic interests to develop to their fullest extent.

As *Spiritual Voices* demonstrates, one of the key possibilities that multi-screen display offers filmmakers is that of thickening the perception of the present, both on the sensorial and affective level, as well as on the semiotic and cognitive level. While the focus on the aquatic allows *Vertigo Sea* to move across different temporal and spatial extensions and to combine a multiplicity of vantage points within a unified perspective on the history of globalization, oceans in *Vertigo Sea* are more than historical and geopolitical markers. Aquatic ontologies provide the installation with a perceptive epistemological and aesthetic model attuned to the polychronic fabric of the historical present. Through the lens of the oceans, conceived as a medium of converging temporalities, *Vertigo Sea* invites viewers to imagine the present in the guise of what Peters calls a "field of nonsimultaneity." In a passage of *The Marvelous Clouds*, he analyzes the forms of long-range communication and the "auditory multitasking" that whales and dolphins developed by living in marine environments (Peters 2015, 93). Peters speculates that, "[p]erhaps cetaceans live in what medieval mystics called the time of the now—a plural now in which many different times cross" (Ibid., 95).

Whereas the "time of the elongated now" is present in several locations within the human and the physical world, the sky and the sea are privileged examples of such "storehouses of the fullness of time": "The nocturnal stars are a field of nonsimultaneity, appearing together to our eyes though they mingle huge differences in temporal origin" (Ibid.).[16] In the transition from the fifth to the sixth section, *Vertigo Sea* contrasts the vision of the oceans as reservoirs for resource extraction—a meaning embedded, for instance, in the footage documenting the whaling industry—with an understanding of seas as memory banks and reservoirs of time. At the beginning of the sixth section, while majestic views of the ocean are displayed on the lateral screens, the picture of two whales swimming at the surface of the water is shown on the central screen. As we hear the sound made by the cetaceans pushing air through their blow holes, a vocal insert introduces us to their world: "Deep down, in another country—moving at different tempo." What happens deep down we have

16. Other examples of "storehouses of the fullness of time" referenced by Peters are the DNA and the lithosphere, as well as libraries and museums.

already learned from the vocal insert that concludes the installation's previous section: "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."

By envisioning the present as a field of nonsimultaneity, *Vertigo Sea* responds to one of the crucial challenges that, according to Joseph Masco, the Anthropocene poses to contemporary visual cultures: "how to see what has already happened, but cannot be seen as already-happened yet?" (Masco 2018, 90) Through images of polar bears struggling among melting ice sheets, elephants killed in trophy hunts, oceans depopulated by the fishing industry, as well as through its vast and heterogeneous panorama of human precariousness, *Vertigo Sea* indexes current processes of extinction and exhaustion in their very becoming. Yet, by taking the sea as a reservoir of time, the installation also configures the present as the intersection of multiple temporal trajectories. Not only *Vertigo Sea* brings forth the awareness of forthcoming loss, but it also makes a strong claim on the undetected potential that the past might be keeping in store for the present.

Peters' reflection on the time of the now builds on the concept of *Jetztzeit* that Walter Benjamin developed in his theory of revolutionary action contained in the theses of "On the Concept of History" (Benjamin 2006, 395). The "now-time" is a field of emerging possibilities, a messianic time in which past potentialities can be suddenly actualized. The actualization of past potentialities occurs within what Benjamin calls, in a fragment of the *Arcades Project* (N3,1), a "dialectical image" (Benjamin 2002, 462–63). The fragment begins by differentiating images from the essences of Husserlian phenomenology. Benjamin explains that images are characterized by a "historical index" that not only connotes them as belonging to a specific time, but which also implies that "they attain legibility only at a particular time" (Ibid., 462). "Each 'now,'" Benjamin writes, "is the now of a particular recognizability" (Ibid., 463). Crucially, the dialectical image joins past and present in a tensive relation, rather than neutralizing their specificity through a simple equation: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectic at a standstill" (Ibid.). To illustrate the goal informing the construction of dialectical images, Max Pensky quotes another fragment of the *Arcades Project* (N7a): "The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present

into a critical state" (Pensky 2004, 181).[17] He comments that, for Benjamin, "[t]he task was to cultivate a particular capacity for *recognizing* such moments" (Ibid.). From this perspective, the dialectical image is primarily aimed at fostering the capacity to foresee critical ruptures.

As Giorgio Agamben observes in a compelling essay dedicated to the lives of pictures, Benjamin's dialectical image is a vibrant, pulsating field of intelligibility and action. The standstill of the dialectical image, "does not indicate simply arrest but a threshold between immobility and movement" (Agamben 2011, 68). As the model of a tense, dialectical field of nonsimultaneity, the aquatic allows *Vertigo Sea* to construct constellations of then- and now-times within a unified, dynamic framework. Agamben shows that, in the constellation of past and present, "the objects lose their identity and transform into the two poles of a single dialectical tension" (Ibid., 70). This is how past potentialities are actualized within the present. In "On the Concept of History," Benjamin writes that "to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history." The founders of the French Republic did not see their creation, however, as the mere copy of a Roman institution. Rather, Benjamin emphasizes, "[t]he French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate" (Benjamin 2006, 395). Taken as an epistemological model for the production of historical intelligibility, the dialectical image most fundamentally is, according to Agamben, "an unresolved oscillation between estrangement and a new event of meaning" (Agamben 2011, 69). In other words, through dialectical images, a multiplicity of apparently uncorrelated elements is grasped in a sudden unity. Dialectical images allow us to see the now-time in a previously unimaginable light.[18]

If by sensory and affective means the fibrillating opening segment of *Vertigo Sea* immerses viewers into an experience of utmost vulnerability, the dynamic juxtaposition of images and sounds positions them in an equally tense semiotic field of emerging events of meaning. The installation's audiovisual dispositive enables Akomfrah to simultaneously conjoin sensory, bodily immersion and a cognitive engagement with the contemporary crisis from the perspective of a dialectical unity. Generating dialectical forms of seeing, thinking, and sensing, the audiovisual dispositive of *Vertigo Sea* crystallizes the stakes and the meaning of the

17. For the fragment N7a, see Benjamin 2002, 471.

18. Agamben specifies that "[t]he *Dialektik im Stillstand* of which Benjamin speaks implies a dialectic whose mechanism is not logical (as in Hegel) but analogical and paradigmatic (as in Plato)" (Agamben 2011, 69).

contemporary crisis in the unresolved tension between the timeless abyss of blackness and the "great acceleration" of global capitalism and its anthropogenic impact on the planet's life-sustaining systems.[19] With the intention of elucidating and intensifying tensions and contradictions, Akomfrah revivifies the practice of dialectical montage initially developed by Sergei Eisenstein and the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, while the multi-channel format of exhibition allows him to expand the boundaries and potentiality of the montage aesthetic to an unforeseeable degree.

The text in which Eisenstein most overtly and systematically addresses the intersection of cinema and dialectics is the 1929 essay "The Dramaturgy of Film Form." Here, Eisenstein praises the potential of the dialectical method for enabling cinematic editing to produce "filmic reasoning" (Eisenstein 2010, 161–80). While conventional films only direct emotions, Eisenstein observes that, through the use of dialectical montage, the opportunity arises for filmmakers to "direct the whole thought process" (Ibid., 180). At its most basic level, his editing style is informed by a few fundamental principles widely shared by the most influential Soviet filmmakers of the era. The key idea behind the Soviet theory of montage is that the shot should not be considered as the minimal unit upon which cinematic signification is built. For them, meaning in the cinema is rather created by means of the matching of shots. Through this fundamental re-orientation, the Soviet filmmakers pursued a cinema of ideas, in opposition to the commercially driven and crowd-pleasing cinema of the action developed in Hollywood. Their aim was to visualize abstract ideas, rather than illustrating dramatic actions and clarifying the psychological motivations of the characters. Jacques Aumont argues that, with Eisenstein's intellectual montage, "cinema is no longer a machine for looking at the world, nor even for interpreting it [like in Dziga Vertov's cinema], but a machine for thinking" (Aumont 2020, 42–43).

Aumont links Eisenstein's dialectical approach to editing to Benjamin's understanding of "montage as an epistemology which revealed new regions of consciousness" (Ibid., 44). The consciousness Eisenstein

19. The notion of "great acceleration" was developed by the environmental historian John Robert McNeill in a book by the same title that he co-wrote with Peter Engelke in 2015. They argue that the ongoing climate crisis has been undergoing a stage of exponential acceleration since approximately 1945. As the title of the book suggests, the notion is developed in conversation with Karl Polanyi's analysis of the "great transformation" that brought to the establishment of a capitalist mode of production in the eighteenth century. See McNeill and Engelke 2015 and Polanyi 2001.

is interested in is, of course, the collective historical consciousness of the working classes. As pointed out by Antonio Somaini in his introduction to the English-language edition of Eisenstein's writings on the history of cinema, film itself, "with its capacity for manipulating time by arresting, inverting, accelerating, slowing down, fragmenting, and recomposing the continuity of the temporal flow [,] could be considered as a powerful epistemic tool for the construction of history" (Somaini 2016, 37). The model of historical intelligibility constructed through the dialectical principles of Eisenstein's montage relies on the identification of immanent contradictions. Building on Yuri Tsivian's observation that, in Eisenstein's thinking, "the smallest indivisible unit always consists of two things, not one," Luka Arsenjuk pushes against the conventional idea that Eisenstein's method is directed towards a grand synthetic resolution of dialectical oppositions (Arsenjuk 2018, 8). Arsenjuk instead suggests approaching Eisenstein's dialectics through a "logic of division" that continuously assembles and disassembles a unity through "immanent traversal." Eisenstein's dialectical approach to film form, Arsenjuk argues, always assumes that "unity is constitutively self-divided" (Ibid., 10). This is because, for Eisenstein, film form must construct an aesthetic response to the immanent antagonism that structures human societies. Arsenjuk concludes that, to understand Eisenstein's concept of montage, one should focus on the "'unity of opposites,' a gesture of synthesis that inheres not in the act of gathering a multiplicity of moments […] but in the concreteness of a contradiction" (Ibid., 23).

Eisenstein's dialectical understanding of montage and his pursuit of immanent contradictions and emancipatory openings permeate Akomfrah's whole body of work. His first feature, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), a collaborative project produced by the Black Audio Film Collective, overtly combines dialectical montage and avant-garde aesthetics with the revolutionary impulse of black oppositional politics. Throughout his decades-long career, Akomfrah continued developing the dialectical logic of division and the immanent traversal of Eisenstenian montage. In this perspective, multi-channel audiovisual display provided him with an incomparable potential. The multi-screen format allowed Akomfrah to multiplicate the dialectical potential of montage by applying it not only to the vertical, temporal level of subsequent images, but also to the simultaneous, horizontal matching of images across the different screens. At the same time, his installations work at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes of montage, expanding the asso-

ciative potential of film editing. As a machine for the production of dialectical images, *Vertigo Sea* responds to the problem of bringing into visibility what cannot be directly seen. By making visible the long shadow of slavery and blackness that follows the African migrants encountered at the beginning of the installation, or the extinction to come indexed by the images of whaling and starving polar bears, *Vertigo Sea* brings into visibility latent phenomena, which are "withdrawn from perceptuality and representability" (Horn 2020, 102). Through its dynamic associative work, the installation keeps drawing out what remains unapparent within the present, the lingering contours of the past, but also the seeds of future possibilities.

As a machine producing dialectical forms of looking and thinking, *Vertigo Sea* effectively tackles the three main challenges that, according to Eva Horn, confront the visual cultures of the Anthropocene epoch: the latency of phenomena, the entanglement of heterogenous processes, and the question of scale and multiscalar relations (Horn 2020). The goal of Akomfrah's audiovisual dispositive, however, reaches beyond the mapping of a complex totality. By putting a major emphasis on the contradictions of the present, the installation aims at propelling the dialectical awakening of unforeseen potentialities, arising from the sudden coming-together of past and present. According to Bertell Ollman, the vital importance of the dialectical method for the present age consists precisely in its capacity to reveal the potential, by which he means "the form in which the future exists inside the present, but until now it has been a form without a particular content, just because it was open to every conceivable content" (Ollman 2008, 22). While the present and its genealogical reconstruction emerge as the main concerns of *Vertigo Sea*, the installation's orientation is unmistakably towards the future. Image makers should ultimately consider themselves, Akomfrah believes, as "custodians of the future": "All the images that we make are a plea for a future, a plea for what I am calling 'an utopian moment,' a plea for an afterlife."[20]

A Future in Common?

It was precisely by means of the dialectical method, Ollmann argues, that "Marx sought to steal the secret of the future from its hiding place in the present" (Ollman 2008, 16). In his influential reconstruction of

20. Akomfrah expressed these thoughts during an interview made on the occasion of *Vertigo Sea*'s exhibition at the Bildmuseet of Umeå University. The recording of the interview is available on the museum's website: https://www.bildmuseet.umu.se/en/exhibitions/2015/john-akomfrah--vertigo-sea/

the methodology subtending Marx's dialectical materialism, Ollman describes dialectics as a dance articulated in four consecutive movements (Ollman 2008).[21] With the first step, Marx develops a systemic view of the present, observing the crucial interactions within the historical present from a multiplicity of vantage points. The second step involves the research of the historical roots of the present crisis. Here, the present provides Marx with the necessary orientation in his analysis of the past, as it allows him to select relevant processes and to set the temporal extension of his genealogical inquiry. The detour through the past aims at identifying, with the third step, the central contradictions innerving the present. The specific importance of this step consists in the fact that, within these contradictions, "the present comes to contain both its real past and likely future" (Ibid., 18). The temporal opening towards a possible future then propels the fourth step, in which Marx adopts the lens of communism as a vantage point from the future, in order to identify, within the present, the future's potential—its virtual existence within the present. Ollman concludes by stressing that "the future proves to be as important in understanding the present and the past as they are in understanding the future" (Ibid., 22). Such an unconditional orientation towards the future is at the heart of *Vertigo Sea*, as the sound of the ticking clock, which reappears at critical moments in the installation's reconstruction of the contemporary crisis, keeps reminding viewers.

Vertigo Sea's sumptuous choreography of images and sound is organized around the first three steps in Ollman's dance of the dialectics, as it transports us from the urgency of the present, through a genealogical reconstruction of the roots of the contemporary crisis, and back to the present, this time with a new awareness of its central contradictions. And while *Vertigo Sea* does not look back at the present through the lens of an alternative future, it emphatically celebrates the very possibility of futurity. Against the prevailing fatalism of contemporary audiovisual depictions of the social and environmental crisis, *Vertigo Sea* articulates a strong belief in the openness of the future. In my previous discussion of "Oblique tale on the aquatic sublime," I have purposefully omitted a crucial element. The radio broadcast chronicling the journey of the twenty-seven African migrants concludes on a hopeful note. After creating a sense of suspense by leaving us with the migrants on an unmanned boat—"The people's traffickers told them that the crossing would take

21. Ollman 2008. Ollman articulates this idea in greater detail across the essays collected in the volume published under the very title of *Dance of the Dialectic*. See Ollman 2003.

less than an hour. The pilot swam back to shore, they headed on…"—the speaker concludes, with an abrupt turn in the tone of his delivery: "on what was to become one of the most dramatic survival stories from this year's crossings." These words imbue the conclusion of *Vertigo Sea*'s opening section with a sense of marvel and hope, setting in motion the installation's search for the possibility of a viable future.

While *Vertigo Sea* documents a series of apocalypses—the ontological derealization of blackness, the extinction of animal species, or the environmental consequences of nuclear testing—at the same time, the installation strenuously rejects catastrophism. Ultimately, the installation is an ode to survival and hope. This orientation finds a direct embodiment in the series of *tableau* shots featuring a fictional Olaudah Equiano, the freed slave, nautical explorer, and renowned abolitionist, whose memoir, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), represents one of the earliest literary articulations of a black voice and subjectivity. *Vertigo Sea* thus refuses what Sloterdijk calls, in a recent essay, the "prophetic reason" of Anthropocene narratives. The apocalyptic logic of these discourses, Sloterdijk suggests, confronts us with a pressing task. What we most urgently need today, he claims, is "to explain the Being-towards-the-end of modernity," in order to address the question of "why modernity, for immanent reasons, has been laid out in anticipation of a total ending" (Sloterdijk 2015, 333-334 and 331). In his reconstruction of the apocalyptic logic of the Anthropocene, Sloterdijk credits Wilhelm Ostwald's *The Energetic Imperative* (1912)—where mentioned is made, for the first time, of the inherent limits of the planet's resources—as the "beginning of an analytics of finitude that Heidegger would translate from the scientific to the existential sphere" (Ibid., 334). In a time in which the being-towards-the-end of modernity is undergoing an unprecedented acceleration, a radical reorientation is required: "what we need is a prognostic intelligence which asserts itself precisely in the gap between 'late' and 'too late'" (Ibid., 337). This is the gap in which *Vertigo Sea* situates the viewers.

Whereas the installation does not envision an alternative future, its prognostic work is based on a precise historical and political diagnosis. Through the interplay of detail and context, and by continuously moving across heterogeneous temporal and spatial extensions and vantage points, the installation consistently practices the type of diagnostic observation that Michel Foucault recommended to the historian: "Effective history studies what is closest, but in an abrupt dispossession, so as to seize it at a distance (an approach similar to that of a doctor who

looks closely, who plunges to make a diagnosis and to state its difference)" (Foucault 1977, 156). Based on such a diagnostic vision, the installation offers an unequivocal prognosis of the lethal consequences of the current processes of extraction, dispossession, and expulsion. This kind of prognostic intelligence is based, according to Sloterdijk, on a more sensible reconfiguration of the relationship between being and knowing in a time of catastrophic acceleration: "Whereas for a large part of human education to date people have had to 'learn from their mistakes,' the prognostic intelligence must become prudent before misfortune occurs" (Sloterdijk 2015, 337). To perform a meaningful prognosis, Sloterdjik suggests that we need to learn from past apocalypses. Following Jean-Pierre Dupuy, he claims that "only experienced apocalyptics can perform future policy-making because only they are courageous enough to consider the worst a real possibility" (Ibid.). *Vertigo Sea*'s invitation to look at the contemporary crisis through the vantage point of blackness, the most radical apocalyptic event of modernity, provides the foundation for a judicious form of prognostic intelligence. The life of the black migrants encountered at the beginning of *Vertigo Sea* is a post-apocalyptic form of existence, a life suspended in a temporal limbo following the end of the world.

If we are to learn from blackness, the lesson can only be a radical one. At stake there is nothing less than the future and the possibility of enacting a meaningful change. As Mbembe notes, the condition of blackness initially imposed on the people of Africa, at its most fundamental level consisted in the "dispossession of the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible" (Mbembe 2017, 6). Nixon identifies an analogous erasure of futural horizons at work in contemporary forms of environmental violence. The displacement that defines the condition of those who dwell on dying lands is essentially a form of temporal dislocation: "When refugees are severed from environments that have provided ancestral sustenance they find themselves stranded not just in place but in time as well" (Nixon 2011, 162). The biopolitical rationale of territorial displacement is here supplanted by procedures of necropolitical expulsion from the universal chronology of globalization. "The problem is not that such people have been reduced to statistics but that they've been reduced to nonstatistics, a whole different level of dehumanization—indeed, one definition of surplus people" (Ibid.). This radical displacement in time is the temporal matrix of the historical experience of blackness and of its contemporary proliferations.

In the past forty years, the uninhibited experimentation of neoliberal economics has produced a new, generalized form of consciousness based on a radical sense of ephemerality. In *Out of the Dark Night*, Mbembe connects the incapacity to achieve a sufficient degree of subjective consistency and coherence to a specific form of temporal experience, which he calls "temporariness." "In Africa in particular," he writes, "temporariness can […] be described as the encounter—a very regular occurrence—with what we cannot yet determine because it has not yet come to be or will never be definite. It is an encounter with indeterminacy, provisionality, the fugitive, and the contingent" (Mbembe 2021, 29). "Today," he continues, "the tragedy is less in being exploited than in being utterly deprived of the basic means to move, to partake in the general distribution of things and resources necessary to produce a semblance of life. The tragedy is to not be able to escape the traps of temporariness and immediacy" (Ibid., 30). That is, the tragedy today is to be condemned to the temporal and existential abyss of blackness.

To reclaim the future, one should abolish temporariness, but the abolishment of temporariness, in turn, implies the obliteration of the condition of blackness. However, if blackness is the quintessential social product of what Marx famously referred to as *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*, to eradicate blackness necessarily entails obliterating the practices of primary accumulation hidden at the heart of global capitalism.[22] In the chapter dedicated to the formation of industrial capitalism included in the concluding section of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx identifies practices of colonial dispossession as "the chief moments of [primary] accumulation" (Marx 1990, 915). In the material processes unfolding in the colonies with little to no restraint—"the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of the [American] continent, the beginning of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins"—Marx identifies the trigger of "the commercial war of the European nations that [had] the globe as its battlefield" (Ibid.). This war is what structured and organized the planetary unification described by Sloterdijk and the formation of an integrated world market, necessary to the establishment of industrial capitalism.

22. I suggest translating *ursprüngliche* as primary, rather than primitive, to emphasize the constitutive role these practices play not only in the genesis, but also in the continuous reproduction of capitalist social relations. My proposal is indebted to the terminological analysis of Werner Bonefeld and Massimiliano Tomba. See Tomba 2009, 55-56, and Bonefeld 2011, 385-386.

To abolish primary accumulation would eventually entail nothing less than the dismantling of capitalist social relations altogether. Rather than a singular historical event, primary accumulation is a continuous, ongoing process that supports and complements capitalist exploitation. Numerous scholars have contested the once prevailing understanding of Marx's primary accumulation in terms of a prehistoric stage in the development of capitalism. Challenging the theory of underdevelopment and the historicist paradigm of discrete developmental stages, in the 1970s Samir Amin called attention to the pervasiveness of processes of primary accumulation in the Global South and to their role in sustaining structural asymmetries between centers and peripheries (Amin 1974). Three decades later, at the outset of the twenty-first century, David Harvey similarly highlighted the continuing role of primary accumulation in preserving the asymmetrical relationship between the Global North and the Global South (Harvey 2003). He showed that the distinctive operative principle of contemporary forms of imperialism is what he calls "accumulation by dispossession," which is nothing but another name for Marx's primary accumulation.

The aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse and the growing awareness of the dramatic repercussions of the climate crisis gave the omnipresence of primary accumulation a wider visibility, and scholars such as Massimiliano Tomba (2009), Werner Bonefeld (2011), Saskia Sassen (2014), William Clare Roberts (2017), and Alliez and Lazzarato (2018) highlighted the urgency of reconceiving the role of primary accumulation within global capitalism. Bonefeld argues that primary accumulation perpetually accompanies the economic exploitation of wage laborers as a shadowy reminder of the foundational principle on which capitalist social relations are built: the divorce of labor from the means of sustenance and production. The perpetual replication of this foundational process of separation is, Bonefeld claims, "the innate necessity of capitalist social relations" (Bonefeld 2011, 388). As Alliez and Lazzarato incisively put it, "capitalism is not a 'mode of production' without being at the same time a mode of destruction" (Alliez and Lazzarato 2018, 353). Destruction must continue incessantly because, "[s]ince non-capitalist or non-market social relations are always reconstituting themselves, [primary] accumulation must be conceived as the ever-renewed work of dismantling these non-capitalist relations" (Roberts 2017, 4).[23] While

23. Roberts articulates these ideas in conversation with the work of Massimo De Angelis. See Roberts 2017, 3-5.

contractually sanctioned forms of labor attenuate and seek to dissimulate the primary and essential social violence of capitalism, true human emancipation can only arise from the overcoming of the logic of separation.

Not only is primary accumulation a permanent feature of the capitalist mode of production, but, as Tomba shows, its current intensification is an unavoidable consequence of the acceleration in the pace of technological innovation. In order to maintain a stable rate of extraction of relative-surplus value, a dramatic increase in the extraction of absolute-surplus value produced through forms of primary accumulation becomes necessary: "Capital needs to create geographical areas or productive sectors where it can produce an enormous quantity of absolute surplus-value. The primary violence of the accumulation must be repeated ever anew" (Tomba 2009, 60). Alf Hornborg convenes that an enhanced rate of technological innovation necessarily increases, rather than diminishing, global inequality: "the affluence of high-tech modernity cannot be universalised, because it is predicated on a global division of labour that is geared precisely to huge price and wage differences between populations. What we have understood as technological innovation is an index of unequal exchange" (Hornborg 2015, 60). Whereas there has never been a contradiction between the contemporaneous deployment of slave labor in the colonies and the capitalist exploitation of wage labor in the metropolitan areas, their transversal global complementarity has never been as visible as today. With the shrinking of the planet and the becoming black of the world, absolute surplus value is, as Tomba suggests, "the form of extortion of surplus-value most adequate to our times" (Tomba 2009, 62).

Both Tomba (2009) and Roberts (2017) call attention to the emphasis that Marx puts on the role of the state in the processes of primary accumulation and the significance of the modern state's implication in the operations of capital. The historical role of the state, Tomba argues, consists in the integration and synchronization of the practices of extra-economic violence necessary to create the conditions for capital accumulation. For this reason, he argues that, in order "[t]o understand the permanence of [primary] accumulation now, we need a kind of 'historiography of the present' that would allow us to understand the current combination of different temporalities in the attempt to synchronise them through the intervention of extra-economic violence" (Tomba 2009, 56). While the work of synchronization and integration performed by the state is necessary to capitalism, Roberts emphasizes the state's

symmetrical dependency on capital accumulation. Such a lack of autonomy carries the direst consequences for the struggles over emancipation: "Policies of [primary] accumulation are attempts by the state to secure the conditions of economic growth. This dependency of the state upon capital makes the state into an enemy of all attempts to refuse, evade or escape capitalism" (Roberts, 2017, 2).

If the production of blackness is contingent upon the existence of the extra-economic violence performed by the modern state, emancipation cannot be pursued through a reformist agenda. Bonefeld argues that, to build what Johannes Agnoli calls "a society of the free and equal," it is not enough to seize bourgeoise institutions. They must be subverted and replaced with social institutions based on the rejection of capitalism's foundational violence (Bonefeld 2011, 396-397). Roberts suggests that such a future cannot be pursued through communitarian isolation, but only through universal solidarity: "if Marx was right about [primary] accumulation, it is not the desire to secure a form of life outside of capitalism that contains the germ of a post-capitalist world, but the need for large-scale, even global, cooperation" (Roberts 2017, 16). And he continues by noting that: "Capitalism poses not a moral or ethical problem, but a practical and political one. Surmounting this problem does not require a new or common ethical sensibility, or a change of heart, but a novel set of institutions" (Ibid.).

Crisis and Critical Capacities

Confronted with the becoming black of the world and the shrinking of the planet, political palliatives such as green technologies or the carbon quotas are a blatantly insufficient response. Only a radical solution can be appropriate to the task. While *Vertigo Sea* does not envision an alternative future, the installation takes the viewers to the thresholds of the fourth step in the dance of the dialectics, at the critical threshold separating us from the radically new. As it intensifies the tension between the deepening abyss of blackness and the unrelenting acceleration of global capitalism, *Vertigo Sea* produces an experience of crisis for the viewers by means of sensory, kinesthetic, affective, and cognitive overstimulation. Taking the ocean as an aesthetic and epistemological model for the understanding of the present crisis in the guise of a dynamic, pulsating field of dialectical tensions, the installation aims to perturb the ahistorical and acritical fixity that characterizes the depictions of the aquatic within Western visual cultures. In a time of ocean acidification, melting ice sheets, and severe disturbances to marine currents,

Nicholas Mirzoeff marvels at the survival of the marriage of convenience, sanctioned in the early modern era, between the biopolitical capture of the sea and an aesthetic propensity to depict oceans as primigenial environments unaffected by human industriousness (Mirzoeff 2012).[24] Mirzoeff highlights the ironic contradiction between the frenetic activity of enclosure and dispossession taking place at sea and the catatonic unresponsiveness of visual cultures to the progressive territorialization of the oceans. He goes on to show that, on the backdrop of the current historical acceleration, contemporary depictions of the aquatic mostly remain unaffected, and the ocean continue to be endowed with atemporal connotations.

Stability itself is at stake in the naturalization of the physical world: "There is a remarkable investment (in all senses, whether economic, psychoanalytic, or emotional) in the imaging of the marine as elemental, primordial and unchanging, a dialectical corollary to the biopolitical struggles over land" (Ibid., 135). Inscribing the spectacle of wilderness manufactured by the BBC Natural History Unit within a historical counter-narrative of globalization, *Vertigo Sea* shakes the comfortable torpor of Western visual cultures. Endorsing the principle of nonsimultaneity defining aquatic ontologies, the installation grafts alternative modes of intelligibility on its reconstruction of the present as a thickened, dynamic field of tensions and contradictions. An uncompromising attack on the induced inertia and unresponsiveness characteristic of Western visual cultures, *Vertigo Sea*'s whirling panoply of sounds and images aims at restoring the generative potential of the experience of crisis, the experience of critical thinking and decision making, in order to gain access to the opportunities offered by the unforeseen and the incalculable.

At the same time, the recuperation of the experience of crisis in *Vertigo Sea* does not occur within the framework of the culture of fear prevailing within the contemporary media landscape. To the contrary, as a dispositive instigating dialectical ways of seeing and thinking, *Vertigo Sea* demands from the viewers a sensorial, affective, and intellectual engagement, which defies the disempowering effects of the culturally pervasive rhetoric of fear. While the strategies of naturalization de-

24. Mirzoeff shows how, in the seventeenth century, sovereign claims began being made over what was previously considered *res nullius*, the property of no one. Aquatic enclosures were thus created, duplicating the practices of appropriation deployed on land in the same period. See Mirzoeff 2012, 135–36.

scribed by Mirzoeff work towards the dissimulation of the present cataclysm, the current popularity of the idiom of crisis can paradoxically have an even stronger disabling impact on the potential of critical experience. According to Masco, if the concept of crisis is itself in crisis today, this is primarily due to its very cultural pervasiveness (Masco 2017). Such a discursive saturation, he suggests, diminishes the concept's capacity to act as "an affect-generating idiom, one that seeks to mobilize radical endangerment to foment collective attention and action" (Ibid., 65). Masco argues that, in the twenty-first century, we have moved from the "crisis-utopia circuit" of the mid-twentieth-century modernist culture to a "crisis-paralysis circuit, a maker of a greatly reduced political horizon" (Ibid., 66).[25] "What happened," Masco wonders, "to the once vibrant social debate about alternative futures and the commitment to making long-term investments in improving the terms of collective life?" (Ibid., 75) He concludes that, "[t]he crisis in crisis today is the inability to both witness the accumulating damage of [the global capitalist] system and imagine another politics" (Ibid.). Against the paralysis provoked by the culture of fear, *Vertigo Sea* seeks to mobilize the perceptual, intellectual, and imaginative capacities required for the emergence of the radically new.

An even more radical threat, however, looms over the potential inherent to the experience of crisis. Bernard Stiegler draws attention to the disabling effect that processes of automation have on this form of experience (Stiegler 2019). He outlines the potentially catastrophic repercussions of such processes on theoretical thinking itself. "*Krisis,* which has a long history—in Hippocrates, it refers to a decisive turning point in the course of an illness—is also the origin of all critique, of all decision exercised by *to krinon* as the power to judge on the basis of criteria" (Ibid., 33). In our automatic society, the work of theory is "delegated to algorithms and executed through sensors and actuators but outside of any intuition in the Kantian sense, that is, outside any experience" (Ibid., 32). Critical thinking reaches a point of impossibility: no unforeseen decisions are taken, and we always fail to arrive at a radical turning point. Distinguishing between future and becoming, Stigler suggests that today our task is to reclaim the conditions of possibility for a

25. Masco explains that, through the continuous invocation of precariousness and resilience, "the twin logics of a neoliberal order that abandons populations in pursuit of profit," contemporary discourses on crisis constrain thinking and action "by evoking the need for an emergency response to the potential loss of a status quo, emphasizing urgency and restauration over a review of first principles" (Masco 2017, 73).

critical vision of the future—or, from the future—that might break the spell of the recursive inhuman becoming of automated societies (Ibid. 43–45). When Akomfrah presents image makers as the "custodians of the future," he is articulating a belief in the potential of images to serve as portals onto futural possibilities. Images can therefore produce an anticipation of the new capable of undermining the logic of repetition and preventing the retreat into fatalistic abandonment. According to Gilbert Simondon, invention can only occur through images and the imagination (Simondon 2023).[26] He describes images, either mental or material, as intermediary realities between subject and object, abstraction and concreteness, and past and future, which can "bring their reserve of implicit power and implicit knowledge to moments when problems must be solved" (Ibid., 9). He adds that "the image is the basis of anticipation, allowing the prefiguration of near or distant futures" (Ibid., 16).

Endowed with the capacity to actualize and reconfigure the past, in order to invent the new, the image represents, for Simondon and Akomfrah, a reservoir of possibilities that can be mobilized against the governmental paradigms of biopolitical and necropolitical projection. Discussing the "planning of collective life" in the mid-1960, Simondon highlights the extension of the process of virtualization described by Väliaho (2022) and Sloterdijk (2017) from the spatial domain to the temporal realm: "[t]he necessities of long-term forecasts [*prévision*] for action have introduced rationalization into the dimension of the future" (Simondon 2023, 17). Simondon stresses the epochal transformation that the virtualization of time imposes on our experience of the future: "time begins to be organized like space; the future is annexed to knowledge and no longer the privileged field of the optative, of desire, or of volition" (Ibid). According to Simondon, it is only through images and the imagination that we can preserve the capacity to resist the "prospective rationalizations" of contemporary automated society: "the image recovers its density and force which carries it towards the anticipation of the collective future, beside and beyond the prospective rationalizations, which are not true inventions, but extrapolations" (Ibid.).

As *Vertigo Sea* concludes, the sense of urgency attached to the sound of the ticking clock heard at the outset of the installation continues to resound in the minds of the viewers. Just before the closing credits, and with the lateral screens already displaying a homogeneous dark blue

26. "Imagination," Simondon emphasizes, "is not just an activity of image production or evocation, but equally the mode of receiving images concretized as objects, the discovery of their sense, of the perspective of a new existence for them" (Simondon 2023, 14).

background, on the central screen an image lingers on. We see a protracted shot of a large flock of birds freely crossing a sky lit in the warm light of what appears to be a new dawn. Contrary to the migrants that we encountered in the installation's opening section, these birds' movement proceeds unobstructed. Positioned at the conclusion of a sensorial and semiotic roller-coaster, this image succinctly encapsulates the idea of a shared world, as the necessary premise to the conceptualization of a future in common. While the closing credits begin to unfold, punctuated by photographic portraits of slaves and Latin-American *desaparecidos*, viewers are prompted to imaginatively and conceptually enact the fourth step in the dance of the dialectics. And, if "[t]o foresee *[prévoir]* is not just a matter of seeing, but of inventing and living," as Simondon argues, then "true forecasting *[prévision]* is to a certain extent a *praxis,* a tendency to development of an action already begun" (Ibid.). On the backdrop of the prognostic vision articulated across the installation, viewers are thus compelled to imagine and pursue a future that everyone can share, a future where, finally, "[t]he expropriators are expropriated" (Marx 1990, 929).

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this essay to the memory of a dear friend, Robert Cargni, who introduced me to the work of John Akomfrah, and whose passionate and dedicated curatorship has provided an incommensurable source of inspiration to generations of film enthusiasts in Philadelphia and beyond.

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