

# JOHN AKOMFRAH – MEMORY, MIGRATION, AND MUSES

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John Akomfrah's latest film, *The Nine Muses*, is a distractingly beautiful ninety-minute meditation on poetry, memory and migration that comes to Doc/Fest with an impressive festival pedigree and a raft of critical praise.

The film consists of original footage shot in Alaska and Birmingham, an extraordinary selection of BBC archival clips, a collage of readings ranging from Homer's *Odyssey* to Eliot's *The Waste Land* (by way of Shakespeare, Beckett, Matsuo Basho and Emily Dickenson) and a haunting original score. *Time Out* called it "highly engrossing", *The Times* said it was "Mind-blowing" and *Variety* found it "cerebral and sensual". But there is little pleasure to be had in reward without risk, and it is not entirely surprising that *The Hollywood Reporter* called it "impenetrable". If you think you might have an attention span fractionally longer than your average test-audience's and don't resent being asked to think a little, this ninety-minute essay-film is vastly rewarding and well-worth catching on a big screen.

Akomfrah is one of Britain's most daring and intelligent filmmakers, with a meticulous and original sense of craft. His films explore many topics (music, writing, politics) and deftly combine documentary, fiction, art, but almost all of them – like *The Nine Muses* – are concerned with identity, memory, migration, and political power.



The Nine Muses

Akomfrah came to the UK as a young child in the early sixties with his mother, a Ghanaian intellectual and political exile, who brought her sons up in London on Western canonical literature. He trained as a sociologist and quickly moved into film. In 1982 he and six colleagues formed the Black Audio Film Collective, with whom he made all his films until 1998 when he formed the Dalston-based Smoking Dogs.

Black Audio's (and Akomfrah's) first film was the 1986 *Handsworth Songs* – a combination of remixed news-archives and original footage about race riots, police brutality and the media. It offered a subtle yet unflinching critique of contemporary English culture. Made independently, it was soon picked up by Channel 4, recently launched with a tantalizing remit to "encourage pluralism, provide a favoured place for the untried, and... always encourage innovation whether in style, content, or perspective." Channel 4 allowed Akomfrah to hone his directing skills with an extraordinary degree of creative freedom. Never mind that the budgets were tiny (often just enough to cover production with nothing left for salaries) and their films aired late at night: Black Audio got to make challenging, beautiful, politically-bold films, the way they wanted to make them.



John Akomfrah

In the twenty-five years since *Handsworth Songs* Akomfrah has made dozens of inventive documentaries on subjects ranging from techno and time travel (the wonderful *Last Angel of History*) to the black power movement and Mariah Carey. His films have earned awards around the world and, in 2008, Akomfrah was made an OBE.

*The Nine Muses* is a culmination of the preoccupations found throughout Akomfrah's earlier work. These days, with "multiculturalism" on the docket, it is an important film for British audiences in particular – not because it carries any agenda, but because it reminds us of the complicated history of migration, labour and racism in this country.

Is it a "documentary"? There are no interviews, commentary, or original observational footage (except insofar as the settings – deserted Alaskan snowfields and abandoned factory buildings in Birmingham – are themselves character-like). The documentary quality comes from the mining of archive and the relevance to contemporary political struggles, but it bears little resemblance to what average viewers would expect of the genre (and will be a challenge for a TV documentary strand). If one had to categorize *The Nine Muses* it would be most appropriate to call it an essay film: a form which is itself almost a relic from another era, and makes it sound like more work than it is.

*The Nine Muses* actually emerged from two projects that weren't working on their own. Having gone to Alaska to make a doc for the BBC about the Exxon Valdez oil spill, Akomfrah and Smoking Dogs stayed on to shoot hours of exquisitely composed, almost photographic landscape footage for a film about T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The idea was to combine these images with readings of the poem. But back in the edit something wasn't working: Akomfrah felt it was too literal and set the project aside.

Around that time, Akomfrah pitched a film to the BBC which would be constructed from their Midlands archive, full of images of labour and migration. To create histories for migrants and those generally written out of England's official history, one must turn to newsreel scraps and archival traces, which offer glimpses of daily life in immigrant neighbourhoods that can be pieced together into larger stories. The images in the Midlands archive were hard going: floods, traffic jams, snowstorms, factory floors, racist speeches and graffiti. That was when the idea of combining the archive with the Alaskan "Waste Land" images emerged. The juxtaposition of spookily quiet white landscapes accented by bright primary colours against grainy black and white, chaotic urban England made a strange kind of sense. Two projects joined to form an ambitious cinematic study of poetry and memory, immigration and alienation, and the strangeness of belonging.

*The Nine Muses* is the kind of film from which every viewer comes away with different impressions. As we try to get our heads around rising xenophobia and racism and declarations of the death of multiculturalism, it is a reminder that we have been here before; and though it may at times have been achingly beautiful, it wasn't very pretty. The film challenges viewers to ask how far England has come. The answer depends, of course, on what happens next.

**The Nine Muses will be screening on:**

SAT 11 JUNE / 12:40 / SHOWROOM 2

See p7 for details.

**DON'T MISS**

**John Akomfrah  
Masterclass**

SAT 11 JUNE / 10:00 / TOWN HALL  
RECEPTION ROOMS

See p27 for full details.