O Hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold?

Ah! gentle pair, ye little think how nigh
Your change approaches, when all these delights
Will vanish, and deliver ye to woe;
More woe, the more your taste is now of joy...

— FROM PARADISE LOST, JOHN MILTON, 1667
CITED IN SECTIONS OF TROPIKOS, 2016
In these our ghostly lives...
half sleeping, half awake,
How if our waking life, like that of sleep,
Be all a dream in that eternal life

— FROM LIFE IS A DREAM,
PEDRO CALDERON DE BLANCA, 1635
CITED AT THE BEGINNING OF TROPIKOS, 2016
Oh hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold?
Into our room of bliss thus high advanced
Creatures of another mold...

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

— FROM PARADISE LOST, JOHN MILTON, 1667
CITED AT THE END OF TROPIKOS, 2016
Oh, for a Muse of fire...
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act...
Admit me to this history...
Your humble patience pray...
Kindly to judge, our play.

— FROM THE TEMPEST, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, 1623
CITED IN TROPIKOS, 2016
During the reign of Elizabeth I, the British slave trade was established, eventually leading to great wealth for many British families in the 17th–18th centuries. It was a trade that was largely out of view, as the slaves were taken in Africa and transported to the Americas.

Before the trade began, Elizabeth I believed that capturing Africans against their will "would be detestable and call down the vengeance of Heaven upon the undertakers." However, when the huge profits that were possible became clear, she lent royal ships to the slaving expeditions of a merchant adventurer, John Hawkins. A massive demand for sugar in Europe helped ignite the growth of a plantation economy that led to the largest forced migration in human history. Britain was the dominant country in the trade between 1640 and 1807. Between their ships and those of the Portuguese and Dutch, it is estimated that 12.5 million people were taken from Africa to the Americas between Elizabeth’s reign (1558–1603) and 1807.
In *Tropikos*, there is a man on a slow-moving boat sailing up the River Tamar in England. He is surrounded by potatoes, pineapples, and a sculpture like this one. Akuabas are commissioned by women who want to conceive children or ensure their children’s well-being. The broad forehead and ringed neck are ideal features to wish for. During pregnancy, the akuaba is treated carefully; after birth, it may become a woman’s most cherished possession. Here, it becomes a reminder of how far this man from Ghana has come, leaving behind his family and security.
OLAUDAH EQUIANO

1745—1797

A voice for millions of diasporan Africans emerged when The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, a 530-page, two-volume autobiography, was published in 1789. In it, Equiano describes growing up in a village in Nigeria and the horror of being taken by slave dealers at the age of eight. He narrates his personal journey as a pawn at the height of the transatlantic slave trade, being taken to Virginia, London, and the West Indies, and eventually buying his freedom in 1766. Equiano then ventured to Central and North America, the Mediterranean, and the North Pole on an expedition to collect zoological specimens and record whale and polar bear killings. He settled in London, married an English woman, and became a leading advocate for abolition. His autobiography became an international sensation, upsetting the image of Africa as a place filled with savagery, idolatry, and cannibalism. Instead, the voice of this young man describes Igbo land, Nigeria, as an idyllic home with strong leaders, varied foods, festivals, and a defined sense of order. This memory is contrasted with vivid descriptions of slave traders as cruel and barbaric; of the suffocating sweat, smells, and traumas on the ships crossing the Atlantic; and of the humiliations he endured and witnessed in the slave trade around the world. He died in 1797, known as the wealthiest and most famous person of African descent in the Atlantic, but was largely forgotten in the later 19th century.

Equiano’s efforts on behalf of abolition are portrayed in the feature film Amazing Grace (2006), when he counseled William Wilberforce in his debates about the slave trade happening before the House of Commons in London.

Video still from Vertigo Sea (detail), 2015, John Akomfrah, three channel HD colour video installation, 71 sound, 48 minutes 30 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.
From space, the planet is blue
From space, the planet is the territory
Not of humans
but of the whale.

— CLOSING VERSE OF WHALE NATION,
HEATHCOTE WILLIAMS, 1988
A being dedicated to water is a being in flux...
Water always falls, always ends in horizontal death...
For the materializing imagination,
Death associated with water is more dream-like
than death associated with earth:
the pain of water is infinite.

— WATER AND DREAMS: AN ESSAY ON THE IMAGINATION OF MATTER,
GASTON BACHELARD, 1943

Video still from Vertigo Sea (detail), 2015, John Akomfrah, three channel HD colour video installation, 78 sound.
48 minutes 30 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.
Jellyfish are monsters. Soft glass parasols as colorful as flowers, they blossom from watery depths with delicate grace. Yet woe to those tangled in their stinging tentacles. Along beaches in Australia, Florida, and the Philippines, jellies are becoming a greater threat than sharks, sending scores of swimmers to hospitals, some with fatal stings. Off the coast of Japan, 450-pound Nomura’s jellies have capsized boats that have snared loads of them in their nets. In the Black Sea, comb jellyfish eat ten times their weight in a single day, destroying fish and fisheries. As jellyfish consume the small fish fry, emptying seas of other species, the waters fill up with jellies in fantastical numbers. The richness of earlier marine assemblages is overwhelmed. The ocean turns monstrous. Filling up the sea with sloshing goo, jellyfish are nightmare creatures of a future in which only monsters can survive.

How did such monstrosity arise? Those Black Sea combs—so inspiring and so terrible—arrived in the ballast water of ships as recently as the 1980s. They took over too-warm seas emptied out by overfishing and polluted by the choking runoff of industrial farming. Under other conditions, jellies are capable of playing well with other species. If jellies are monsters, it is because of their entanglements—with us. Jellies become bullies through modern human shipping, overfishing, pollution, and global warming. In all our heedless entanglements with more-than-human life, we humans too are monsters.

— Introduction to Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, “Bodies Tumbled into Bodies,” Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, 2017
The Zong massacre was a disaster at sea. In 1781, a British syndicate loaded a ship with 470 slaves, but the ship took a wrong turn and entered a zone in the Atlantic known as the Doldrums, where there are periods of little or no wind. As slaves and crew were dying, Captain Collingwood ordered 132 slaves thrown overboard, to join the 50 who had already died, enabling him to claim extra insurance for these dead passengers. This massacre led to a trial at the highest court in Britain and became a symbol of the depravity of the slave trade, often cited in arguments by the Anti-Slavery Society founded in 1823 and leading to a Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

When asked about his conception of time in Vertigo Sea, Akomfrah responds,

“I’m against teleology, the idea that time is unfolding towards some moment of greater clarity, which is always the present... To go back to the Zong massacre, the fact that a group of Africans were thrown into the sea [as unwanted cargo]... this and other moments in the slave trade effectively changed the boundaries of humanity, and we are still living inside those boundaries, more or less...”

One of the thousands of boats loaded with Vietnamese migrants fleeing their country from 1975-95. It is estimated that 800,000 made the journey successfully; countless others did not.

TWO IMAGES FROM THE PACIFIC OCEAN IN VERTIGO SEA

The explosion of a nuclear bomb in the Bikini Atoll in 1946.
Someone else who appears to be waiting is the old man in black and white, who recurs with increasing frequency toward the end of the film. As with so many of the other images or quotes in the film, the viewer cannot necessarily be expected to know what or who is being represented, but this is Béla Bartók, as portrayed by Boris Ranevsky in Ken Russell’s 1964 Monitor episode about the composer. He looks frail, completely lost in thought, sitting uncomfortably as if expectant of an arrival or an impending cataclysm, alone in a Spartan attic room, little but a gramophone for company. Bartók fled his native Hungary, an Axis member, having been a committed antifascist. Exiled to an unfamiliar place, feeling stripped of purpose and thus of agency, he hides in his room, overwhelmed by confrontations with the outside world—an outside world that appears hostile but is not innately so. He is a political migrant, a refugee of war, not unlike those who have been forced to flee to Europe in recent years. He escaped the grim fate such as those critics of Pinochet had, thrown into the sea from helicopters in the middle of the night, or that of the similarly treated crevettes Bigeard (‘Bigeard’s shrimps’) of the Algerian War—all further ghosts of the deep whose photographs and stories haunt Akomfrah’s film. Bartók’s troubled, distant gaze is obvious, whether you know who he is or not, and the chances are you don’t. You cannot help but ask yourself—what is he haunted by? A place he has left behind? An awful deed? Or an idea he wants to leave behind but will not leave him? Bartók fought an ideology, but had no choice but to run away.

— ANDREW R. HILL, “OBlique Tales FROM THE Aquatic sublime: John Akomfrah’s Vertigo Sea,” BLASTed JOURNAL, January 17, 2018
Free from land-based pressures: /
Larger brains evolved, ten times as old as man’s /
The accumulated knowledge of the past: /
Rumours of ancestors /
Memories of loss

— WHALE NATION, HEATHCOTE WILLIAMS, 1988
JOHN AKOMFRAH’S RECOMMENDATION OF HERMAN MELVILLE’S MOBY-DICK, 1851:

It’s sold to you as a novel, and of course it is a novel. But it’s also this vast philosophical speculation about aquatic space, and the way in which that space poses questions of mortality, of becoming, of relativity, the demarcations of human and nonhuman. And, of course, the coming of multiculturalism and how they are formed. All of these are the speculative shape of Moby-Dick.

— CITED IN “THE OCEANIC ECOLOGIES OF JOHN AKOMFRAH.” ERIK MORSE, ART REVIEW ONLINE FEATURE, FEBRUARY 2016

When you think about our understanding of the “New World”—the Americas, for instance—there’s the conquistador myth and narrative, which is about people voluntarily coming over, but actually quite a lot of people in this part of the world are here because of some kind of crisis involuntarily. They could be Pilgrims, Sephardic merchants from the Iberian Peninsula, or Huguenot persecuted minorities in Northern France; there is a whole range of people who made large sections of the “New World” possible because of multiple crises. When Queen Isabella of Spain declared in 1492 that all Moors and Jews should leave, you had to go.

This is a near five-century history. What that means to me is that there is an affinity between what’s going on now and other forms, other moments, which were engineered by crises to the point where you can see that far from this being like an accident, it’s almost a norm, a feature of our modernity. There are moments when difference is not acceptable in a certain space and migration is the only possibility, either forced or voluntary. That’s really what I’m concerned about at the moment, to rescue the legitimacy of the Yazidi, Afghan, Syrian, and Palestinian migrations that have been force-fed a certain kind of “radiophonics of emergency” by the space that they’re in. There’s an announcement that says, “You die or you leave,” and that’s a fairly compelling argument for flight.

Video still from Vertigo Sea (detail), 2015. John Akomfrah, three channel HD colour video installation, 71 sound, 48 minutes 30 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.
I think there’s a way in which we have to be very modernist, in the sense that we need to know what is not possible anymore. Or rather, we need to teach ourselves to speak in a very different way about questions of subjectivity, because holding on to the notion that there is absolute demarcation between the lives and misfortunes of the humpbacked whale and the enslaved African in the 16th century is a mistake. There are overlaps and striking affinities between those lives that can only be recognized if you get rid of this idealist assumption that there is a hierarchy of subjectivity, at the apex of which sits the human.

— FROM “JOHN AKOMFRAH IN CONVERSATION,”
OCULA MAGAZINE, JULY 6, 2018
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY

CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

DATA THIEF  PLAYED BY EDWARD GEORGE, RESEARCHER FOR BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE
KODWO ESHUM  MUSIC JOURNALIST AND FILMMAKER, B. 1967
GEORGE CLINTON  MUSICIAN AND LEADER OF PARLIAMENT FUNKADELIC, B. 1941
DERRICK MAY  TECHNO PIONEER MUSICIAN, B. 1963
SUN RA  MUSICIAN AND LEADER OF THE SUN RA ARKESTRA, 1914-1993
ISHMAEL REED  NOVELIST AND POET, B. 1938
LEE SCRATCH PERRY  MUSICIAN AND PRODUCER, B. 1936
JOHN CORBETT  CRITIC AND CURATOR, B. 1963
DR. BERNARD A. HARRIS, JR.  RETIRED NASA ASTRONAUT, B. 1956
NICHELLE NICHOLS  ACTRESS WHO PLAYED LIEUTENANT UHURA ON STAR TREK AND NASA VOLUNTEER, B. 1932
JUAN ATKINS  DETROIT TECHNO MUSICIAN, B. 1962
DJ SPOOKY THAT SUBLIMINAL KID  DJ, MUSICIAN, PRODUCER, AND CRITIC, B. 1970
CARL CRAIG  TECHNO PIONEER MUSICIAN, B. 1969
GOLDIE  MUSICIAN AND ARTIST, B. 1965
GREG TATE  WRITER, MUSICIAN, AND PRODUCER
SAMUEL R. DELANEY  NOVELIST, B. 1942
OCTAVIA BUTLER  NOVELIST, 1947-2006
A GUY CALLED GERALD  DJ, MUSICIAN, AND PRODUCER, B. 1967

Video stills from The Last Angel of History. 1995, Black Audio Film Collective, John Akomfrah, single channel colour video, sound, 45 minutes 7 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.
We are considered as outsiders. We are considered as people who are not part of the American experience. As a matter of fact, African Americans were excluded from Fourth of July celebrations. So there’s always this feeling in this country that we’re aliens—that we don’t belong here. There’s always people who want us to go back where we came from. I don’t know where I would go. Maybe I’ll go to Dublin because some of my ancestors are Irish, or maybe I’ll go to Tennessee because some of my ancestors are Cherokee. Maybe I’ll go to Yorubaland because some of my ancestors are from West Africa. I wouldn’t know where to go. There’s always this mention of, “Send us back—send us back to some other place. Send us back to the planet of our origin.”
Back when Ronald Reagan has just become president, people were talking about winnable nuclear wars. And I thought, “If people are falling for this kind of thing, there must be something basically wrong with the human species.” So, I thought about it and what I wound up doing really, was putting the thing that I came up with into the mouth... of my aliens. I had them arrive right after a nuclear war so that I could make my point and I had them tell my character that human beings had two characteristics that didn’t work well together. One, they were intelligent, and that was good, no problem. And two, they were hierarchical and, unfortunately, the hierarchical tendencies were older and so sometimes the intelligence was put at the service of the hierarchical behavior.

— OCTAVIA BUTLER, INTERVIEW IN THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY, 1995
In the 18th century, slaves like Phillis Wheatley read poetry to prove that they were human, to prove that they weren’t furniture, to prove that they weren’t robots, and to prove that they weren’t animals. In that sense, a certain idea of cybernetics has already been applied to Black subjects ever since the 18th century. I think what we get at the end of the 20th century in music technology is a point where producers kind of willingly take on the role of the cyborg—willingly take on that man-machine interface—just to explore the mutations that have already happened to them and to accelerate them some more. Now the question is, like, kind of, cyborgs for what? Well, the reason is, of course, to get out of here—to get out of this time here, this space now.

— KODWO ESHUN, INTERVIEW IN THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY, 1996
Detroit is a symbolic location in American culture because it’s where the American automotive industry’s heart was. It was this sort of industrial space. But once one encounters the information in the streets, which are now in decay, so now Detroit becomes a relic. It’s a decaying structure at the crossroads. Techno coming out of Detroit represents urban youths’ view of change, saying, “No longer do we have this industrial kind of base. No longer do we have this kind of security. Everything is in flux.”

— PAUL D. MILLER AKA DJ SPOOKY, INTERVIEW IN THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY, 1996
When asked by the data thief, ‘What does the mothership connection mean to you?’, Harris replies,

Well, it means to me a reflection of one man’s vision of the future, of us as being human beings exploring space, but more importantly, a Black man exploring space—Black people exploring space. We’re doing that now, we’re going to be doing that in the future. I have always wanted to be an astronaut since I was about eight years old. I was one of those kids that was fascinated with science and science fiction. I always tout myself as one of the original Trekkies or Trekkers, or whatever they call themselves these days. So through that fantasy of imagining being in space, I started reading about it, I started researching NASA and finding out what it was all about. And when I saw the first human beings walk on the moon, I was hooked. That was it.

— Dr. Bernard A. Harris Jr., interview in The Last Angel of History, 1995
Greg Tate is the writer who argued that Black people, in America certainly, live the estrangement that science fiction writers kind of talk about. All the stories about alien abductions, all the stories about alien spaceships taking subjects from one place to another, genetically transforming them—Greg is recasting American history in light of science fiction and saying, “Well, look, all those things that you read about—alien abduction and genetic transformation—they already happened. How much more alien do you think it gets than slavery, than entire mass populations moved and genetically altered, forcibly dematerialized? It doesn’t really get much more alien than that.”

— KODWO ESHUN, INTERVIEW IN THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY, 1996
Today, according to the International Telecommunication Union, around 55.1% of the world’s population, more than 3.1 billion people, have access to the Internet. As we move further into a world that is defined by information and how it shapes and molds all aspects of modern society, the Internet and its ancillary effects have resulted in the most complex systems architecture humanity has ever made...

We worked with Internet Archive’s WayBack Machine to look over open-source material to think of “DJ-ing the Web.” The archive is a way of engaging information overload by playing with fragments.

We live in an era of the “Quantified Self”—a place where most aspects of contemporary life are informed by the invisible and deeply connected power of numeracy. But the idea of a civil society based on information even reflects some of the most powerful issues of digital governance. That’s why I translated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into binary code and had the chorus sing it. I wanted to explore the radical changes the Internet has unleashed for our time. This is just the beginning.

— PAUL D. MILLER AKA DJ SPOOKY, JANUARY 2019,
PART OF THE ARTIST STATEMENT “AN ACOUSTIC PORTRAIT
OF THE INTERNET” ON THE WORLD PREMIERE OF THE PERFORMANCE
“QUANTOPIA: THE EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNET” AT YBCA,
SAN FRANCISCO