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“This England”: Re-Visiting Shakespearean Landscapes and Mediascapes in John Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* (2010)

Abstract: The paper will offer a reading of John Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* (2010), a 90-minute experimental feature film that has been defined as “one of the most vital and original artistic responses to the subject of immigration that British cinema has ever produced” (Mitchell). It will focus on the multifarious ways in which the film makes the “canonical” literary material that it incorporates, including Shakespeare, interact with rarely seen archival material from the BBC regarding the experience of Caribbean and South Asian immigrants in 1950s and 1960s Britain. It will argue that through this interaction the familiarity of Western “canonical” literature re-presents itself as an uncanny landscape haunted by other stories, as a language that is already in itself the “language of the other” (Derrida). In particular, it will claim that Shakespearean fragments are often used in an idiosyncratic way, and they repeatedly resonate with some of the most fundamental ethical and political issues of the film, such as the question of England as “home” and migration. The paper will also argue that the decontextualization and recontextualization of these fragments makes them re-emerge as part of an interrogation of the mediality of the medium, an interrogation that also offers insights into the circulation of Shakespeare in the contemporary mediascape.

Keywords: John Akomfrah, Migration, Archive, Media Interference, Rhizomatic Shakespeare, Postcolonial Shakespeare, Home and Hospitality, Englishness, Richard II, Hamlet.

John Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* (2010) is a 90-minute multi-layered, experimental feature film that has been shown at major film festivals (including the Sundance Film Festival, the London Film festival, and the Biennale in Venice) and in gallery spaces (such as the MoMA in New York) to much critical acclaim.¹ In a volume of the *Directory of World Cinema* dedicated to contemporary British cinema, it is defined as “one of the most vital and original

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¹ The film began as a 40-minute gallery piece called *Mnemosyne*.

artistic responses to the subject of immigration that British cinema has ever produced” (Mitchell 110). It is an idiosyncratic film that defies easy categorization; stressing its lyrical qualities, Akomfrah himself has called it a “tone poem” (qtd. in Budzinski). It is divided into nine sections of slightly unequal length, and each of the sections is dedicated to one of the Muses—the intertitles preceding these sections clarify that Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory, slept with Zeus for nine nights, thus giving birth to the Nine Muses.² This article will offer a reading of the film, and focus on the multifarious ways in which it makes the “canonical” literary material that it incorporates, including Shakespeare, interact with archival images. It will argue that through this interaction the familiarity of canonical literature re-presents itself as an uncanny landscape haunted by other stories. In particular, it will claim that Shakespearean fragments are often used in an idiosyncratic way so as to resonate with some of the most fundamental ethical and political issues of the film, such as the question of England as “home,” as well as the topic of migration. I conclude that the decontextualization and recontextualization of these fragments makes them re-emerge as part of an interrogation of the mediality of the medium, an interrogation that also offers insights into the very circulation of Shakespeare in the contemporary mediascape.

One of the most striking aspects of the film is undoubtedly the inclusion of rarely seen archival material from the BBC regarding the experience of Caribbean and South Asian immigrants in 1950s and 1960s Britain: we are mostly shown footage of movement, travel, and journeys of various kinds, with an almost obsessive reiteration of images of immigrants arriving in their “Mother Country,” and this alternates with sequences of immigrants diligently carrying out physically hard labour in factories and foundries, living in sub-standard housing, and spending their free time in pubs and music-halls. (This is often combined with “original” and contemporary footage of frozen, inhospitable landscapes, a point to which I shall return.) In this sense, *The Nine Muses* is the latest addition to Akomfrah’s tenacious excavation of the media archive, continuing the kind of work that the Ghana-born British director has been doing for a very long time, both solo and as part of the Black Audio Film Collective (1982-98), and at least since the prize-winning 1986 film *Handsworth Songs*, shot during the 1985 riots in Handsworth (Birmingham) and Tottenham (London).³

As with his previous work, however, the inclusion of archival material is not synonymous with what Akomfrah himself calls “archive euphoria,” the naïve belief that “somehow the truth resides in the archive, unsullied, unmediated”

² The sections are dedicated to Calliope (Epic Poetry), Clio (History), Erato (Love), Euterpe (Music), Melpomene (Tragedy), Polyhymnia (hymns), Terpsichore (Dance), Thalia (Comedy), and Urania (Astronomy).

³ For an excellent survey of the work of the Black Audio Film Collective, see Eshun and Sugar.

(Power 62). Put differently, in terms of genre, *The Nine Muses* is not a conventional documentary film that claims merely to reproduce the “real” and/or have a social impact.⁴ According to Akomfrah, “diasporic lives are characterized by the absence of monuments that attest to [their] existence, so in a way the archival inventory *is* that monument” (Power 62). But one needs to gloss Akomfrah’s qualifier: if the archive functions as a “monument,” bearing the traces of these “diasporic lives,” it does so in a highly contradictory manner. It can be said to *contain* the experiences of the Black and Asian subject, in the double sense of the word “contain”—it includes and so allows the narration of these experiences, but also frames them in an inherently prescriptive way, thus keeping them under control (VanderBurgh 17-18). In other words, there is no archive that does not remember *partially*, in a selective way and from a specific perspective, which is nothing but the point of view of the “dominant”: remembering goes hand in hand with forgetting.⁵ Relatedly, there is no archive without archival violence, in particular *interpretive* violence. Reconstructing the etymology of the word “archive” in *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida reminds us that “archive” derives from the Greek word *arkheion*, which designates a house, “the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded,” and who were “accorded the hermeneutic right and competence to interpret the archive” (2). Of course much has changed since the Greeks, especially in terms of media technologies of inscription, storage, and reproduction, which also inexorably affects the *location* of the archive, the non-heterogenous “gathering together [of] signs” (3) in a specific place to which the French philosopher refers. But one can hardly disagree with Derrida when he points out that “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory,” and that this is not merely “one political question among others” (4n).

As I have started to emphasize, John Akomfrah is fully aware of the theoretical, ethical, and political problematics of the media archive, especially as they concern the experience of migration. In an interview with Nina Power, from which I have already quoted, he not only repeatedly returns to the necessity of a “critical interrogation of the archive” (62), but also openly discusses the “practical” strategies he adopted to pursue this “interrogation” while working on *The Nine Muses*. One of these strategies, which is not only employed in this

⁴ On the (fraught) relationship between Akomfrah and the tradition of British documentary film, see Varga, where he argues that *The Nine Muses* affirms “the documentary as resistance, but a resistance found not in the tactics of activism but in the hesitancy of expression” (24).

⁵ Akomfrah is very much aware of Walter Benjamin’s work, especially his dictum in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (248). As Jacques Derrida argues, in more general, structural terms, the archive as “monument” inscribes within itself “forgetfulness and the archiviolic,” and “works [. . .] against itself” (*Archive Fever* 12).

film, is an apparently simple intervention but with far-reaching consequences: the removal of what Akomfrah considers one of “the key structuring devices” (Power 62) of BBC documentaries of the 1950s and the 1960s, the “original” narrative voice-over of the *archons* / “custodians” of the BBC archive that offers authoritative comments on, and thus structurally *pre*-scribes, the meaning of the images of the migrant, inexorably turning the migrant subject into a problem—the problem, even when s/he is not negatively connoted. For Akomfrah, this elimination paves the way for the “mobilization” of these images; it allows these images to begin “to say something else,” so that they can be “reinserted back into other narratives” (62).

In *The Nine Muses*, archival images “function in erasure,” namely “as what they always were, but also as something new” (Power 62).⁶ They are the same *and yet* different, not least because they are frequently inserted in a much more varied, fluid, and evocative soundscape made of music that ranges from Schubert to Paul Robeson singing “Let My People Go,” from the Gundecha Brothers performing classical Indian dhrupad to Arvö Pärt’s compositions, from Leontyne Price’s spiritual “Motherless Child” to post-industrial and “post-soul” ambient noise.⁷ But perhaps more importantly for my purposes here, this footage is also often interwoven, and forced to interact with, a wide array of readings of fragments of (mostly) Western “canonical” literature, which are fragments that appear to be just as heterogeneous to one another as the *mélange* of dissonant and non-dissonant sound in the soundtrack: these readings include excerpts from Milton, Homer, Beckett, Dante, Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, and E.E. Cummings, just to mention a few.⁸

For instance, the section of the film dedicated to Calliope (the Muse of Epic Poetry) opens with a condensed, spoken version of the beginning of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, an excerpt in which references to the “loss of Eden” (4) and the “fall” (30) from a prelapsarian “happy state” (29) cannot fail to evoke the experience of the migrant, and especially so if one considers that the lines from Milton’s poem are juxtaposed to extensive archival footage of a frozen, wintry, and inhospitable *English* landscape in which people, cars, and lorries are covered with snow, stuck in traffic, or strenuously move forward.⁹

⁶ The implicit reference to Derrida’s concept of “under erasure” (*sous rature*) here is not casual. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 19, 30 and *passim*.

⁷ On the use of sound in Akomfrah’s work, see Trilling.

⁸ Twenty-four works of literature are credited in the end titles, but this is only part of the material used. Non-Western literature is also included, for instance excerpts from Rabindranath Tagore, Chinese poet Li Po, and Japanese poet Matsuo Basho.

⁹ On the use of Milton, see White. Referring to the line “Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?,” he comments on the migrants, on “those who came in search of a new world only to find that a fall into painful revolt was their inescapable destiny” (34). In the section dedicated to Thalia (the Muse of Comedy) images from *Paradise Lost* are read over images of riots.



Figure 1. “Milton and the English Landscape”



Figure 2. “The *Odyssey* of the migrant”

This sequence is almost immediately followed by the first sample of archival footage focusing on the migrant’s arrival in the “host country,” a recurring visual motif throughout the film that is here detached “from the narrative and the chronology of which it used to be a part” (Power 59) by means of its interaction with the voice-track, a reading of excerpts from the beginning of Book I of Homer’s *Odyssey*. It is through this interaction that the archival footage begins

to signify differently: the migrant becomes a modern-day Odysseus, the “resourceful man who wandered far and wide,” and whose “spirit suffered many torments at sea”;¹⁰ his / her journey turns into an *epic* journey, a vital if excruciating quest that is not unlike Odysseus’s, not least because it similarly has to grapple with the fraught notion of “home.”

It is this uncanny conjunction of experiences across time and space—the fact that there are “no stories” without “the ghosts of other stories” (Varga 22)—that the media archive tends to forget and / or repress. It is perhaps to reiterate this multi-layered sense of temporality and spatiality that John Akomfrah repeatedly intersperses these two sequences with contemporary footage of solitary black figures wearing yellow and blue parkas (mostly Akomfrah himself and music composer Trevor Matthison), standing or walking in an inhospitable, snow-bound, literally *and* symbolically white Alaskan environment, and almost always with their back to the camera.¹¹ According to Darrell Varga, this footage hints at the “sensation of the immigrant having arrived at a place without warmth, without community and a set of stories already embedded in the landscape” (23).¹²



Figure 3. “Parka-clad figure”

¹⁰ I am citing from the audiobook used in the film.

¹¹ Akomfrah uses footage he had shot when he travelled to Alaska to make a documentary on the Exxon Valdez disaster for the BBC. The documentary was aired in 2009.

¹² Similarly, Jonathan Romney argues that these “breathtakingly desolate images [. . .] seem to embody an idea of Absolute North, or of the cold, compassless exile that Britain might resemble to immigrants from warmer places” (n.p.).

But I want to argue that these figures also function meta-cinematically, as part of the self-reflexive mode of the film. They visually make a theoretical point about the critical interrogation of the archive, a process of “counter-memory,” to adapt from Iain Chambers’s related argument, that does not simply proceed by providing a series of additions “fill[ing] in the gaps in the already established historical mosaic” (59). In other words, these “spectral” figures are themselves *and* self-reflexive emblems of a political, ethical, and aesthetical intervention that dislocates “the frame, the pattern, the construction” (59) of the archive, and in particular its (supposedly) coherent, ordered, and linear narrative logic. Moreover, and also related, it is not by chance that these figures almost always look away from the camera. Even though they can be considered as the inscription of a visual authorial signature, they refuse to “complete the picture” (Chambers 59), or to be entirely part of the narrative in which they are nonetheless inserted; they offer a challenge to the archive’s endless desire to turn the “otherness” of the migrant into a knowable, transparent, utterly legible entity. It is also through these “spectral” appearances—a leitmotif of the film—that the archival repertoire begins to “anarchive” itself, to somehow work against itself (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 12).

To return to the interaction between the media archive and literary writings, one needs to underline the process of reciprocal transformation of these components of the film. It is not just archival images—for instance, the images of the migrant’s arrival—that are affected by this interaction, but also the literary material included in the film. The weaving together of the image-track and the voice-track, that is, also makes canonical Western literature re-emerge, or emerge as if for the first time, as a literature *of* migration, endlessly inscribing this experience. This may seem obvious in the case of the *Odyssey*, and it is probably the reason why *The Nine Muses* makes extensive use of Homer’s epic poem, and especially the sections dedicated to Telemachus’s tortured search for his father, since they add displacement to displacement. It also goes some way toward explaining what presides over Akomfrah’s selection of literary material: the vast majority of the excerpts being read as well as many of the film’s intertitles concern journeys and the experience of travel, both literally and metaphorically, from Emily Dickinson’s “Our Journey Had Advanced” to T.S. Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi,” from *Gilgamesh* to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 50, from Beckett’s *Molloy* to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

In an interview with *The Wire*, Akomfrah does not shy away from making what may appear to be a bold “universalistic” claim: “There’s something about the migrant experience which is—in embryo—what everybody has to deal with in their lives” (Budzinski n.p.). The crucial significance of migrant-hood also has to do with the fact that it is the most poignant dramatization of the state of “transience,” becoming, and flux into which one is inevitably thrown. Indeed, for Akomfrah, who explicitly refers to *Paradise Lost* in another interview, “we

are born in that moment of flux and we never really move out of it” (Power 62). This is a “state” that the custodians of both the media and the “canonical” literary archive tend to forget, or actively and violently repress, perhaps because it is so uncannily and threateningly proximate to one’s sense of being-in-the-world. In a way, “canonical” Western literature already incorporates this “state,” and Akomfrah repeatedly returns to this issue: “there’s something that connects the motives of *Paradise Lost* with Beckett’s *Unnameable* because both are obsessed with this question of becoming” (Budzinski). And yet, it is mostly through its dialogue with a number of visual and sound fragments, a dialogue that can sometimes take the form of a “perverse collision” (Corless 46), that canonical literature uncannily re-presents itself in the film as the *difference* that it already *is*, as the reiterated articulation of a fluid state of identity that simultaneously inscribes threat *and* chance. In this sense, Akomfrah’s film does not write *back* against canonical Western literature; it writes *with* it, paving the way for the (re)-appearance of the “ghosts” of otherness that always-already haunt it.¹³ It repeatedly intimates, to refer to Derrida once again, that the language of this literature is always-already the “language of the other” (*Monolingualism* 23).¹⁴

That migration works at many different levels has not escaped reviewers of the film. For instance, Darrell Varga points out that the arrangement and rearrangement of literary material somehow mirrors the subject matter of the film: “Just like the actual travellers / immigrants that are the subject of the film, textual fragments are both journeying from their original contexts and arriving somewhere new” (13). Here “migration” is a structural principle of uprooting and rerouting; it is another name for processes of decontextualization and recontextualization through which fragments take on new meanings. Yet, in order to explore further the parallelism to which Varga draws attention, one also needs to delve deeper into the intricacy of “migration” as a construct. For example, one may want to underline, with Akomfrah, that migration is made of “endless journeys” (Budzinski), that it is a fraught but fluid process that never quite reaches its destination: “It’s a kind of interminable process, people are endlessly arriving, but never getting there, so to speak” (Power 62). The migrant never quite arrives; or, when s/he does, at least literally, s/he never quite settles. In an excerpt from a BBC documentary included in the film, a young black man

¹³ As Mark Fisher puts it, “instead of opposing the canonical texts to immigrant experience, *The Nine Muses* finds parallels between them. The most insistently repeated text—*The Odyssey*—is also the most foundational. Yet *The Nine Muses* reminds us that this foundation is of course a work about movement and migration” (75).

¹⁴ Derrida is here referring to language in a colonial context, and in particular to the “mad” appropriative gesture by the colonial master, a master who pretends, and wants us to believe, that he “does [. . .] possess exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language” (23).

living in a grim bedsit puts it this way, with his light Caribbean accent: "You get settled [in England], and then you, too, become part of the strangeness." One of the film's intertitles records the words of seventeenth-century Japanese writer Matsuo Basho, which are words that also insist on the uncanny intersection of the "familiar" and the "foreign": "Everyday is a journey, *and the journey itself is home*" (my emphasis, 3). Arguably, whether one refers to the reiterated images of actual travellers who disembark from large vessels with trepidation, or the textual fragments that "migrate" from one context to another, the film shows that there is no proper arrival; no "getting there" without the unsettling re-emergence of that "strangeness" which irremediably makes "home" a site of transit, indistinguishable from a "journey."¹⁵

Thus, from a structural point of view, and quite irrespective of their "content," textual fragments move from place to place, acquiring supplementary meanings as they do so, but also implicitly re-marking the new context in which they are inserted as non-saturable context, open to recontextualization: their new "home" / context is not a final destination but instead remains a site of transit. The use of fragments from Beckett's *Trilogy* (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*) is emblematic in this respect. The first excerpt included in the film is the beginning of *Molloy* ("I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind") (Beckett 7), which is obviously connected with the film's more general emphasis on various forms of movement, and in particular the uncanny feeling of finding one's self in an alien space / place ("I don't know how I got there"). With some variation, this excerpt is immediately reiterated, so as to function as some kind of spoken commentary on archival images illustrating the migrant's hard labour in factories, industrial kitchens, and foundries. (This repertoire of images makes up most of the section dedicated to Clio, the Muse of History). What is worth pointing out here is not only how the "same" fragment is brought into contact with different aspects of the image-track, but also, from a theoretical point of view, how reiteration signals the more general dynamics of iterability that governs the film; how, that is, this reiteration self-reflexively draws attention to the *modus operandi* of processes of decontextualization and recontextualization that defy closure. (The repeated appearance of archival sequences of arrival in the image-track in other sections of the film works in a similar way). It is perhaps to re-emphasize the lack of closure that the film

¹⁵ Of course, when we watch the film, these fragments are also authorless, without an origin: we might recognize some of them, or most of them, but it is only at the end that they are credited, and this does not apply to all of them by any means. For Varga, Akomfrah "trashes the cultural status of the original" (11) and makes these fragments relevant again "by masking the perceived 'preciousness' or elitism of [their] origins" (12). In a sense, they are just as "anonymous" as the "storyless" migrant with whose archival images they interact.

offers a broad selection of material from Beckett's *Trilogy* that more explicitly articulates, from both a "thematic" and "formal" point of view, a sense of transience and open-endedness, anguished as it may be.

Speaking of Beckett in an interview, Akomfrah refers to the fluidity of identity as well as the "endless questions" that appear in his work (Power 62). The end of the section dedicated to the Muse of History makes extensive use of the proliferation of questions that characterize the beginning of *The Unnameable*. The following is an example:

Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning.

I, say I. Unbelieving.

Questions, hypotheses, call them that.

Keep going, going on (call that going, call that on) [. . .].

What am I to do (what shall I do, what should I do?) in my situation? How proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered (or sooner or later)? (Generally speaking.) There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. (287)

As we hear these questions, we continue to see archival sequences of migrants engaged in the most menial tasks. Thus, through the (ironic) collision between the voice-track and the image-track, the migrants symbolically refuse to be "like figures on a flat earth, in a Paracelsian universe," playing a walk-on part in the media archive and then "just fall[ing] off into obscurity" (Budzinski). The questions that are being asked in the passage become the questions *of* the migrant, the questions in which the nameless—or perhaps unnamable—migrant is repeatedly caught: "Where now?"; "What am I to do [. . .] in my situation?"; "How proceed?". These are questions that somehow inject life into the archive and put it *in* question—its uniformity, partiality, and monodimensionality. They are open-ended questions that the migrant cannot but keep asking, because of his / her "aporetic" status as an *arrivant/e* who never quite "gets there," an *arrivant/e* who, according to Derrida, "doesn't simply cross a given threshold": his / her journey redefines "the very experience of the threshold" (*Aporias* 33), repeatedly confounding (supposedly) definite borders, such as the one between home and abroad, origin and destination, native and foreign. These are, indeed, the "other shifts" of the migrant, and they are inseparable from his / her questions.

Shakespeare is deeply involved in the open-ended process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization that characterizes the film, not only because he is the third most quoted author after Homer and Beckett, but also because fragments from his works are used in multiple ways, and are often made to resonate with some of the key political and aesthetic issues of the film. For instance, the first two lines of Sonnet 50 ("How heavy do I journey on the way / When what I seek, my weary travel's end" (1-2) appear as an intertitle in the

section dedicated to Thalia, the Muse of Comedy. They clearly respond to, and are inflected by, the film’s reiterated emphasis on a compulsory, anguished “movement forward.” Moreover, they are immediately followed by images of an unfriendly landscape, adorned with high fences and flooded with water: we see cars trapped in the flood that, like the “beast” of Shakespeare’s sonnet, cannot but “plod [. . .] dully on” (6). These images are also juxtaposed with fragments from Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech. Thus, the “journey” of the speaker of the sonnet becomes “heavy” with supplementary meanings; it turns into a “weary” movement through inhospitable physical and media environments, a movement that is shot through with the additional “grief” (14) of the ostracized “foreign other.”

Another significant inclusion of Shakespearean material takes place at the beginning of the section of the film dedicated to Terpsichore, the Muse of Dance: here the opening lines of *Twelfth Night* (i.e., the whole of Orsino’s “If music be the food of love” speech, 1-15), with classical music in the background, provide a running commentary on archival footage of Black and Asian people playing instruments, singing and dancing. Some of this footage presents the dancers calibrating their movements to what appear to be Western forms of popular music. However, the inclusion of this Shakespearean material works in a very different way from the insertion of the opening lines of Sonnet 50. The emphasis here is not so much on the anguished journey of the migrant as on a variety of joyful gestures and movements, haunted as they may be by the different sense of “movement” that emerges from the voice-track—the undulating moods and melancholic sense of transience that permeates Orsino’s speech. Moreover, not only does the image-track show examples of cross-cultural hybridization in terms of music and dance; as a whole, and at a self-reflexive level, the interaction between the image-track and the voice-track / soundtrack strongly suggests forms of potential, reciprocal cross-cultural contamination between Shakespeare and aspects of popular entertainment that are often deemed to be antithetical to the canonical status of the Bard. Indeed, one could argue that this sequence of the film allegorizes the extent to which “Shakespeare” itself functions as an *undulating* signifier, an ensemble of fragments that lends itself to an infinite variety of “migrations”—what in current critical debates is often referred to as “global Shakespeare.”¹⁶

I want to end by focusing on two samples of Shakespearean material that are used in a rather idiosyncratic way, and that are undoubtedly more crucial than others to the film’s articulation and re-definition of key aspects of its politics and aesthetics: John of Gaunt’s speech in the first scene of the second act of *Richard II*, which is employed in a largely politically-inflected way; and

¹⁶ See, for instance, Huang.

Hamlet's "To be, or not to be," which primarily resonates with aspects of media self-reflexivity that inform the film.

The central part of John of Gaunt's speech ("This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, / This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars," 2:1: 40-41) starts to be spoken as the camera pans out to reveal a lonely figure with dark glasses on, in a coloured coat, lying on the ground as if suffering from exhaustion. As the sequence progresses, Gaunt's magniloquent lines ("This other Eden, demi-paradise / This fortress built by nature for herself," 42-43) are juxtaposed with contemporary footage of a desolate urban landscape that includes images of a derelict building site surrounded by a pool of stagnant water. The jarring,



Figure 4. "This England"

ironic contrast between the image-track and the voice-track de-mythologizes Gaunt's anaphoric fabrication of space—and time—as the monumentalized, unchanging embodiment of the idea of Englishness; it forces the *unhomeliness* of the (supposedly) familiar English "home" to emerge, or re-emerge, in unexpected ways. The aesthetic and political undermining of England as a "demi-paradise" (42) is pursued further when the last lines of Gaunt's speech included in the film are made to interact with images of a monochromatic, stark and snowy Alaskan landscape that is once again haunted by solitary figures in blue and yellow coats. "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" (50): these words metaphorically turn into signifiers of places that are just as inhospitable, uninhabitable, and unceasingly distant as the harsh Alaskan landscape that is repeatedly contemplated by these lonely figures. And yet, one also needs to consider the sequence of the film that follows this poignant

dramatization of the alienating unfriendliness of the English “home,” since this sequence obliquely readdresses “home” as a question, as “a place,” to use the words of Black-British writer Caryl Phillips, “riddled with vexing questions” (6). Immediately after the end of Gaunt’s speech, we are shown footage of a multicultural, diverse, and relatively joyous ensemble of people who implicitly mark their difference from the “happy” but homogeneous “breed of men” (45) of Gaunt’s speech. In a sense, this visual supplement—this “dangerous supplement” in Derridean terms (*Of Grammatology*, 141-164)—retroactively infiltrates the speech, insinuating doubts about the mythology of uniformity that governs the configuration of “this little world” (45) and introducing critical disjunctions within it; it forces the speech to bear the memory of a different past as well as of an alternative future, the memory of hybridity *as* home that further challenges the idea of the English “home” as a prophylactic “fortress” (43) composed of rigid borders, or “a precious stone” located in a solid, unassailable, “silver sea” (46).¹⁷

In the section of the film that contains Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy, the icy and austere Alaskan landscape re-presents itself along with one of the parka-clad, enigmatic figures that regularly haunt it. This extremely Northern landscape appears to be an appropriate setting for Shakespeare’s most famous lines. And, indeed, it is tempting to see the man wearing a yellow parka, standing with his back to us, as a version of the Danish Prince silently reciting the lines from Hamlet’s soliloquy—from “To be or not to be” to “Ay, there is the rub” (3:1:58-67)—that are included in the voice-track. To pursue this interpretation, one could argue that this image fits in with the widespread, common sense notion of a solitary, individualistic, “romantic” Hamlet caught in what has become an unfamiliar environment, almost a visitor “from another planet struggling to pass in an alien and dangerous world” (Vint 12).¹⁸ One could add, from within the logic that is more specific to the film, that this is a Hamlet who embodies an existential question—“To be or not to be”—that deeply resonates with the questions *of* the migrant to which I referred earlier. (Fragments from Beckett’s *Trilogy* aptly resurface immediately after the conclusion of Hamlet’s speech, which creates unexpected connections across texts).

However, one needs to consider not only the striking physical environment in which Hamlet’s soliloquy materializes but also the latter’s

¹⁷ It is also worth pointing out that the sequence that includes Gaunt’s speech is preceded by an unusually extended footage of women working in factories or standing on a beach, interspersed with readings from *The Song of Solomon*, as if the film wanted to question in advance the male-inflected construction of “this England” in Gaunt’s speech.

¹⁸ Sherryl Vint argues this point with reference to the mysterious figures appearing in the Alaskan landscape.

idiosyncratic position within the film in terms of *media* environment. For instance, this is the only literary fragment included in the film that is spoken by *alternating* recorded voices. Moreover, these voices proceed at different speeds, which draws attention to the “medium” of the “message,” to the materiality of the body of the recorded voice—its texture—as a site of affect that exceeds meaning. This is perhaps nowhere more palpable than when the second of these voices seemingly slows down to enunciate: “Perchance to dream” (67). “Perchance to dream”: what one perceives is not just the content of the speech but the dream-like quality of the variation of speed as a media effect that *touches* the viewer. It is not by chance that this and other lines spoken at a lower speed appear to have an audience inside the film: they are juxtaposed to archival images of Black and Asian youths in an educational environment, who are often attentively listening with their headphones. This intra-diegetic audience meta-cinematically stands for the viewer, a viewer who is not simply the passive recipient of the work of ideological reproduction of a canonical English author but, rather, the addressee of an invitation “to redream (and perhaps redeem) the canonically familiar” (Fisher 75).

More specifically, Hamlet’s speech, in all its components, and given its orientation toward the materiality of the medium, is an invitation to “redream” Shakespearean fragments in the light of their endless media reproducibility, their reiterated appearance as *re*-appearance, as *déjà-vu*.¹⁹ Moreover, I want to suggest, and from a more theoretical point of view, that it is also an invitation to consider the extent to which noise and interference are an integral part of the continuous process of remediation in which “Shakespeare” is involved. To refer to recent developments in information theory, noise is not an obstacle, some kind of “rub.” It is, rather, an inscription of “unexpected information” (Clarke 164) that repeatedly activates new meanings.²⁰ And, indeed, the “To be or not to be” sequence of the film opens with noise: we hear a phone ringing, firstly in the background and then louder and louder, but it is only after the speech has started that we are able to identify the source of the noise, a phone booth standing in the midst of an icy landscape next to a telegraph pole and a road sign.²¹ Speaking of the relationship between sound / noise and images in the extras of the DVD

¹⁹ On the appearance of “Shakespeare” as fundamentally a (ghostly) re-appearance in the contemporary mediascape, see Calbi, esp. 1-20.

²⁰ Bruce Clarke observes, in a way that is relevant here, that “from the standpoint of art forms instantiated in informatic media (aural sounds, visual images, linguistic signs), the noise is the art.” He continues by suggesting that “media arts remediate information in the form of meaningful noise” (164).

²¹ “Who’s there?”: one is tempted to ask this question, using the first line of *Hamlet*. And the play has indeed been read as an extensive *mise-en-scène* of the *call* of the other / Father / Ghost to which one often fails to reply. For an exemplary reading along these lines, see Burt and Yates 17-46.

version of the film, Akomfrah underlines his interest in “cacophony in a metaphoric sense,” and contests the idea that sound and noise simply underscore images. He argues that the “physicality of noise” as flux acts as “a subversive presence [. . .] vis-à-vis the logic of images.”



Figure 5. “*Hamlet on the phone*”

With these remarks in mind, I want to stress how the noise in the “To be or not to be” sequence undermines the aura of the most famous lines in Western literature, and puts under erasure the emblematic image of a solipsistic Hamlet; how this noise diverts our attention from the spoken “original,” an “original” that is already in itself a recorded voice and thus a media effect; how it self-reflexively foregrounds our distracted reception in an increasingly crowded mediascape; but also, at one and the same time, how it redirects our theoretical attention towards supposedly peripheral elements. In other words, the ringing of the phone is a kind of wake-up call that alerts us to media interstices, to what is in-between image and sound / noise, noise and soundtrack, noise and voice-track, voice-track and voice-track (as in the case of the alternating recorded voices unfolding at different speeds). It makes us veer towards those in-between spaces / places where the meaning of “Shakespeare” flickers elusively between the “familiar” and the “foreign.”

Just before the phone starts ringing in the “To be or not to be” sequence, the camera zooms in to offer a lengthy close-up of a sturdy tree-trunk. This image can be read as an allegorization of a solid, “arborescent Shakespeare” that is clearly at odds with the multiplicity of inscriptions and ramifications of “Shakespeare” that appear immediately afterwards, or occur in other sections of

the film—what may be called, in Deleuzian terms, a “rhizomatic Shakespeare.”²² In its highly idiosyncratic, politically-inflected and media-oriented re-visiting of Shakespearean fragments, *The Nine Muses* makes the Shakespearean archive emerge, or re-emerge, as a multi-layered, asynchronous, and endlessly migrating archive, a fluctuating assemblage and re-assemblage of media, places, and languages. Not unlike the other types of archive to which the film draws attention, this archive is not so much a thing of the past as an entity with no definite beginning or predetermined end that keeps on engaging the future.

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²² On “arborescent” and “rhizomatic Shakespeare,” see Lanier.

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