



THE NINE MUSES

Directed by John Akomfrah
An Icarus Films Release

Theatrical Release at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)
October 6-12, 2011

"Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* wraps the viewer in literature, music and archive footage, summoning up a mood rather than a story that reflects on the immigrant experience and the violence of displacement with a majestic grace" --Jason Solomons, *The Observer*

Fascinating! Cerebral and sensual, British filmmaker John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* considers the history of the African diaspora to postwar Europe through a highly unusual prism of structuralist cinema, archival footage, spoken-word recordings and the nine muses birthed by the union of Zeus and Mnemone, the Greek goddess of memory [with] many heady references"
--Robert Koehler, *Variety*

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FILM SYNOPSIS

Twenty-five years after the end of the Trojan War, Odysseus still has not returned home. So his son, Telemachus, sets off on a journey in search of his lost father. So begins Homer's revered epic poem, *The Odyssey*, the primary narrative reference point for *The Nine Muses*, John Akomfrah's remarkable meditation about chance, fate and redemption.

Structured as an allegorical fable set between 1949 and 1970, *The Nine Muses* is comprised of nine overlapping musical chapters that mix archival material with original scenes. Together, they form a stylized, idiosyncratic retelling of the history of mass migration to post-war Britain through the suggestive lens of the Homeric epic.

In addition to its resonance with Homer's epic, *The Nine Muses* was devised and scripted from the writings of a wide range of authors including Dante Alighieri, Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, John Milton, Friedrich Nietzsche, William Shakespeare, Sophocles, Dylan Thomas, Matsuo Basho, TS Elliot, Li Po, and Rabindranth Tagore.

The Nine Muses is a journey through myth, folklore, history, and a museum of intangible things. It is a 'sorrow song' or 'song cycle' on journeys and migration, memory and elegy, knowledge and identity.

SELECTED FESTIVALS

Sundance Film Festival 2011
London Film Festival 2010
Dubai International Film Festival 2011
Jeonju Film Festival 2011
Sheffield Documentary Film Festival
Karlovy Vary Film Festival 2011
Jerusalem Film Festival 2011
Viennale, Vienna, Austria 2011
EWA Film Festival, Poland 2011
Orizzonti Finalist, Venice Film Festival 2010

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I am obsessed with archival material: those ghostly traces of lived moments, those pariah images and sounds that now occupy a unique space between history and myth. But my attachment to these phantom narratives of our shared past are the end rather than the beginning of such projects. What always comes first for me in the long, convoluted evolution of mixed genre projects are the questions. For *The Nine Muses*, the questions to myself went something like this:

How does one begin to say something new about a story everyone claims to know? How does one fulfill what historian Carlo Ginzburg once called "our obligation to the dead" without sacrificing our equally pressing debt to the living? Finally, what aesthetic and ethical considerations should govern the construction of a "historical fiction" about events and lives that have been profoundly shaped by what the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott called, "the absence of ruins"--lives without monuments, without the 'official' signature of recognition and interest?

The Nine Muses is my Proustian attempt to suggest what some of those "ruins" might look like, a desire to look into that dark mirror of one's own past in search of images, ideas, writers and music's with which to construct such a monument.

The bricks came, as usual, from a variety of sources. In music, the work of Estonian composer Arvo Part felt appropriate once again. As indeed did the work of the Gundecha Brothers, the supreme exponents of India's oldest musical form, the Dhrupad. All manner of writers from Beckett to Shakespeare, from Dante to T. S. Eliot, also were also worked into the script. Sometimes it was images the writing invoked; for instance, I've never forgotten the remarkable opening of James Joyce's "A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man," when he talked about the physical sensation of a child peeing in his bed. Sometimes it was the mood: the opening to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which I read at school, conveys a mood that has always stayed with me.

For images, I relied on my own idiosyncratic sense of the 'memorable' because it was the only way of selecting from the thousands of feet of film stored in England alone! For instance, there is a sequence from a film made in 1964 that has haunted me since I saw it almost 20 years ago: It is of a young Jamaican man who spoke movingly and eloquently about how migrating to England was for him a journey of love. That found a home in this film.

In the end, how a 'hybrid' films like *The Nine Muses* starts at all is one of those mysteries, even to me. Do you shoot original material first or first assemble the historical artifacts? I don't know. But there are always clues, hints and influences. I suppose the most important one this time is the grandfather of all epics, Homer's *Odyssey*. There is something very modern about *The Odyssey* that made it very relevant for me in the developing of my contemporary epic about migration: its fractured narrative, its multiple story lines, and its spatial and temporal disjunctions and complexities made it the perfect foil. So from very early on, that ancient epic poem suggested itself as the starting point for my stories about journeys from the margins to the centre, from the colony to the metropolis.

I am also obsessed with the formal properties of the Greek myths themselves, especially some of the more 'underdeveloped' tales and characters. Tangents and aberrations especially fascinate me: characters who appear and disappear without explanation, stories that start in the middle and seemingly go nowhere. The desire to use this approach, as well as some of the figures and stories from this vast and remarkable constellation of incomplete tales, was the guiding force behind *The Nine Muses*.

--John Akomfrah

BIOGRAPHY JOHN AKOMFRAH

Born in Accra, Ghana, in 1957, to radical political activist parents, John Akomfrah was widely recognized as one of the most influential figures of black British culture in the 1980s. An artist, lecturer, and writer as well as a filmmaker, his twenty-year body of work is among the most distinctive in the contemporary British art world, and his cultural influence continues today.

As a teen, Akomfrah was a Super 8 filmmaker and enthusiast. With several underground cine-clubs in London, he helped bring Asian and European arthouse cinema, militant cinema from Africa and Latin America, and American independent and avant-garde cinema to minority audiences.

In 1982, Akomfrah helped found the seminal, cine-cultural workshop the Black Audio Film Collective. He directed a broad range of work for the group, including fiction films, tape slides, single screen gallery pieces, experimental videos, music videos, and documentaries.

Handsworth Songs (1986), Akomfrah's film essay exploring racial disturbances in Britain in 1985, the Handsworth riots, was a hit on the international circuit. The film won seven international prizes including the prestigious 1987 John Grierson Award for Documentary.

Akomfrah's first narrative feature film, *Testament*, depicted an African politician thrust into political exile. It premiered at the 1989 Cannes International Film Festival, in the Critic's Week section, and went on to play at many international film festivals.

In *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), produced by the Black Audio Film Collective, Akomfrah collects testimonies, eyewitness accounts, and dramatic reenactments of the leading civil rights leader. The film won Best Documentary at the Image D'Ailleurs Film Festival in Paris, as well as awards at the San Francisco and Chicago Film Festivals, among others.

Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History* (1997) is a searing examination of the relationships between Pan-African culture, science fiction, intergalactic travel, and computer technology. According to *Afterimage*, "The playfulness and intellectual virtuosity of the film transcends its surface gloss, to become a kaleidoscopic celebration of the richness of Pan-African culture."

Akomfrah's work for television includes *Dr. Martin Luther King: Days of Hope* (BBC, 1997) and *The Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong* (BBC, 1999).

Since 1987, Akomfrah's work has been shown in galleries including Documenta (Germany), the De Balie (Holland), Centre George Pompidou (France), the Serpentine and Whitechapel Galleries (UK); and The Museum of Modern Art (USA). A major new retrospective of Akomfrah's gallery-based work with the Black Audio Film Collective premiered at the FACT and Arnolfini galleries (UK), and is now making a tour of galleries and museums throughout Europe.

In 2000, Akomfrah was awarded the Gold Digital Award at the Cheonju International Film Festival, South Korea, for his innovative use of digital technology. He has been an artist-in-residence at universities including, most recently, New York University, and a jury member at festivals including, most recently the BFI London Film Festival, UK, and the Tarifa International Film Festival, Spain. He has lectured at institutions including CalArts, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the London Institute. He was a member of the Arts Council Film Committee, and Governor of the British Film Institute from 2001 through 2007. John Akomfrah is currently a Governor of Film London, a visiting professor of film at the University Of Westminster (United Kingdom), and an officer of the Order of the British Empire.

FILM CREDITS

Director:	John Akomfrah
Producers:	Lina Gopaul David Lawson
Editors:	Mikka Leskinen Ben Hunt
Director of photography:	Dewald Aukema
Sound recordist:	Trevor Mathison
Archivist:	John Akomfrah
UK Film Council:	Tanya Seghatchian Lizzie Francke
Made in England:	Chris Dorley Brown Paul Gerhardt
Arts Council of England:	Paul Marshall
BBC:	Tim Burke
Exhibition formats:	DCP, HDCam, HDSR, DVD
Photographed on:	Digital video and film
Total Running Time:	94 minutes
Aspect ratio	1:85
Sound Volume:	7

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REVIEW: THE NINE MUSES ☆☆☆☆

BY CHUCK BOWEN

The Nine Muses is the kind of nonfiction film I actively hope for: a picture of intuitive, free-associational power that cuts far deeper emotionally than a dry recitation of dates and facts could ever hope to. Filmmaker John Akomfrah's conceit is unusually ambitious and, yes, even a little baffling, as he's structured his subject—the racism, dislocation, and isolation that arose from the primarily African and Irish emigration to Britain in the late 1940s through the 1960s—as a parallel to Homer's *The Odyssey*, which also, of course, concerns a long journey rife with considerable loss and ambiguity.

Akomfrah weaves archival footage of African immigrants working in factories, crossing the street, holding their children, living their everyday lives, with intertitles describing the Muses referred to in Homer's epic. Also mixed into this tapestry are scenes shot by Akomfrah of faceless figures in heavy snow coats either standing on large ships crossing large expanses of water or merely occupying vast landscapes of ice. The soundtrack, an equally dense affair, ups the existential ante with spoken-word readings of passages from various works—by Dante, Joyce, Milton, Nietzsche, Shakespeare, and Eliot, among many others—that have been gracefully mixed with a dreamy score (another collection of desperate references) that's about equal parts sorrowful, joyous and terrifying.

The Nine Muses could've been a bravura and rigorous display of erudition and editorial showmanship that's all structure and portent, but this film, which Akomfrah has said he's wanted to make for 20 years, has an obsessive power. The disparity between the images and influences adds up to more than a mixtape for eggheads, as the masterful editing allows every bit and piece to achieve a unity that honors the immigrant experience while transcending that specificity to come about as close as a movie ever has to capturing the ineffability of the free-associational process of mixing and matching that we call "memory"—an accomplishment that imbues the film with an air of mystery that honors the humans on display here. Or, to put it simply, the faces in this film aren't reduced to statistics by another unimaginative filmmaker's earnest civics lesson, because Akomfrah has managed, with his skillful assemblage, to give these images a ghostly power that allows you to see people from the past as you'd see people you personally know: as living beings entitled to their contradiction, as well as to their joy and disappointment—and ultimately their beauty. One of the most haunting and irresolvable films I've seen in years, *The Nine Muses* might be some sort of masterpiece.

VARIETY
FEBRUARY 10, 2011
REVIEW: THE NINE MUSES
BY ROBERT KOEHLER

Cerebral and sensual, British filmmaker John Akomfrah's The Nine Muses considers the history of the African diaspora to postwar Europe through a highly unusual prism of structuralist cinema, archival footage, spoken-word recordings and the nine muses birthed by the union of Zeus and Mnemone, the Greek goddess of memory. Akomfrah's steady, patient pace makes it fairly easy and ultimately fascinating to absorb his many heady references...

In the heyday of the U.K. Free Cinema movement, a film about northbound African immigrants would have documented their difficult lives with an angry, you-are-there immediacy. But *The Nine Muses* is distinctly the work of an artist considering a social phenomenon from a greater, less emotional distance. This difference sets the film apart from the country's predominantly social-realist tradition, and closer to the American experimental stream, though with a potent literary depth not common in Yank filmmaking.

Significantly, a constant motif of spectacular landscape shots framing figures in yellow, black and blue coats (usually observing the scene with their backs to the Red camera) was lensed in Alaska. The film generally alternates between these shots, extensively researched archival footage of African emigres in the U.K. in the 1950s and 1960s, and graphic inserts citing each of the nine muses (from muse of epic poetry Calliope to muse of music and dance Terpsichore), as well as literary citations ranging from e.e. cummings to Matsuo Basho.

The soundtrack is no less dense, including a vast range of selections from ECM Records artists such as David Darling and Arvo Part and an impressive array of selections of spoken-word recordings from the Naxos catalog of writers from Milton to Beckett. (One, featuring Richard Burton reading from Dylan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood," reminds that this is one of the great recordings of verse in English.)

The film's challenge is to meld all of these disparate pieces together into a coherent and effective whole, which it does with the effect of suggestive poetry or music rather than literal reference points. It's difficult when watching to account for how images of still figures in Alaskan landscapes and serene contemporary music somehow connect with the film's historical/social concerns, but by the end, the sections have been woven together into a work that conveys huge movements of history across time and space.

Akomfrah and his team have clearly devoted considerable care to the film's crystalline images (lenser Dewald Aukema) and a powerful, multilayered re-recorded soundtrack (by Ian Tapp). Though this audio richness was somewhat denied its full effect at the Sundance screening reviewed, enough of it came through to suggest its impact in a real cinema.

THE NEW STAGE
JANUARY 28, 2011
BY DAN MECCA

THE NINES MUSES, BY FAR THE BEST FILM THIS CRITIC SAW AT THE 2011 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL...DESERVES TO BE SOUGHT OUT AND WATCHED AND TALKED ABOUT

Certainly not a Sundance starlet like Elizabeth Olsen or a storied Sundance vet like Miranda July, British filmmaker John Akomfrah has been making critically-lauded films for two decades—mostly under the public radar. Finally, after years of producing documentaries for companies like the BBC, Akomfrah found himself in a position to make the film he's wanted to make since the beginning of his career, *The Nine Muses*: an emotional, abstract look at the intense period of migration to England after World War II up until the 1960s. This rush of diversity spread just as much racial prejudice, forcing those migrants to assimilate to a way of life in England they would never fully feel comfortable being a part of.

The Film Stage spoke with Akomfrah about getting the money, time and material to make this dream project come to life, and how he feels now that it's open for the whole world to see, showing at two of the biggest film festivals in the world over the last year: Venice and Sundance. As one would expect, the feeling's both rewarding and anxious. At the tail end of the interview, Akomfrah revealed he couldn't watch the film in a theater setting, with a full room of eyes. Few know what it's like watching their dreams become a reality.

TFS: How long have you wanted to make this movie?

John Akomfrah: In some ways I've been making it for the last 20 years. Because, you know, visiting the archives, different special archives in England for different projects. It was something that we had been doing anyway, except that, you know, usually what happens is that you've got a film to do about a riot or housing so I'm going to those archives specifically for something to illustrate. And I think that's the difference with this one. For the first time I said 'you know what, this deserves to be in its own right what it is.' It's about trying to build a memorial/ monument/ altar piece. And I used the religious overtones deliberately. And to that three-generational experiment that took place. And as you do anything you think 'this is kind of difficult, who's going to read this?' But, you know what, you've got to do it...there's no way around it. So, on its own I suppose, specifically, a year and a half. It was originally a single screen – 14-minute single screen- for a gallery. And half way through that I thought, 'there's no way we're going to get everything that I want to get into this.' So from then on it was like 'okay, well we'll do the single-screen piece and when we're finished we'll do something longer and when it's finished we'll see what it stands as.' I felt compelled to do it and my sense was what it was for after.

This is your first film at Sundance, after being sought after for some time. Why now?

I don't know, you know. There've been different projects over the years and whether they've not come here because Toronto wanted it or it just wasn't right because I was working on something else. There's always been a reason over the last 15 years that I couldn't get here. And there were different projects that the Sundance Institute wanted to support that they couldn't so there've been all kind of possible matchings between me and this festival that have just never happened. I thought we should because it seems to me that the New Frontier slot is what our film... basically I think New Frontier serves to highlight projects with a slightly more ambivalent identity. The question of what they are is itself up for grabs. Are they films? Art pieces? Hymns? What are they? And it seems to be that that's precisely what this slot is about. So having gone to the equivalent of that in Venice [Film Festival], a slot called New Horizons, which is the first place

[*The Nine Muses*] was shown. When they said they wanted it I said 'great! If you want the pain you can have it!'

You have a lot of interesting literary references in the film. One of the most interesting is [James] Joyce, who is this Irish writer who grew up in Dublin but then spent most of his life not in Ireland, which fits the idea of identity in your film. How big was that for you?

Big. Very big. Joyce, because of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which ends with him leaving...I mean the thing about the migration to England in particular between the 40s to the mid-60s was that it wasn't simply people from the Caribbean and Africa. They are also half a million that went from Ireland. And I thought that the best way to deal with that migration pattern was via Joyce. Or via the two Irish writers who are much concerned in their writing with this question of how you become something. [Samuel] Beckett and Joyce have talked about this more than just about anybody, so it just seemed right. So, I mean, the other reason why Joyce is so useful is because he serves as a sort of model, in a way, of what we're trying to do here. And in no way am I saying I'm James Joyce by any means. It's the attempt to find a modern resonance of a classical myth. Because, of course, *Ulysses* itself is the story of [Homer's] *The Odyssey* done...but, of course, everybody in there is a favorite of some kind, whether it's Joyce or Thomas of Milton. They're all figures that meant a lot to me. But specifically those two (Joyce and Beckett) because, look, nobody talks about this but in the 40s and 50s and 60s you would regularly see signs on houses, would say 'No Irish, No Blacks.' And there was a sense of structural humiliation. The people of Irish descent, who were also migrants, felt like [black migrants] felt. And we shared a lot together. We lived in houses together because nobody was renting to either communities and we discovered our own thing together. So the affinity of Irish literature and Irish literal ideals is not simply artistic. It's deeply felt.

This is clearly a very personal project, not unlike those of Godfrey Reggio [director of Koyaanisqatsi], who's trying to get a new project off the ground as we speak. It's so hard to get money for projects like this these days with companies like the UK Film Council falling apart every day. You want to make this passion project, how much is too much in terms of obstacles?

Well, they happen occasionally. Reggio's stuff, *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Powaqqatsi*, there was a moment where someone said 'we've got to give this guy some money' and then [Akomfrah slices the air, signifying a stoppage in funds]. And they appear occasionally, and when they do you should seize them really quickly, because I think what helped in the case of this film was that we had soft money from the [British] Art Council and the BBC. The BBC said 'look, you can have a look at our archives, see what you can make of it, we'll talk about money afterwards. The Art Council said, 'we're funding you as an artist, what do you want?' So in instances where there are no major equity stakes, no one's saying 'oh, is this going to make money?' things like that are possible. I don't know whether they will be more possible after.

But the thing is when I was talking about *Shoah* in the beginning [of the Sundance public screening], there's a moment when [director Claude] Lanzmann says to this Holocaust survivor 'you must speak, you must say this.' And I really felt this ethical imperative to just do this. Now whether we get a chance to do this again or not, I don't know. Probably not, but the fact is it's done and we've served the purposes for which it was set to serve, which is to be there as a kind of reference point. I don't know if I'm going to keep doing films like that, because I'm not sure if I made it. I feel like it kind of made me in a way. Do you know what I mean?

You're watching material and the material is saying 'I can say this, I can't say that. And if you're going to be faithful to me, you should do that.' And, in some ways, that's what you get with Godfrey Reggio's stuff – the sense that everything's forcing itself from him...I think part of what

we share and I think there are a number of other filmmakers who have that. There's a whole set of filmmakers who think that there's something there between stories and events. There's something in the crack between those two that is worth exploring. When they are explored they make incredible demands of the viewer, and the overwhelming impact is emotional rather than intellectual or visceral rather than cognitive. And everyone who sees them can't tell you what exactly they're about but they know they've experienced something which is sort of valuable for them. That's really all I wanted to do, and if it places me in that great company of fantastic filmmakers...look, I don't come here very often because I don't get much money very often [laughter]. I suspect that's something I have in common with [Reggio]. We don't work that often because we don't get money to make movies that often.

Did you shoot this film differently because of budgetary constraints? And where did you shoot the film?

I supposed there are three components in the film: there's the overwhelmingly archival material which is obviously the stuff that came from different institutions. Then there's two bits of stuff that I shot. One strand, which is the stuff in England, looks slightly grainy of a guy lying in a pipe and all of that. Those were shot 10 years ago for another project and it just felt that because we were doing an art piece my own stuff needed to be in there in some ways. The bulk of the other stuff came from Alaska, and when we first went there it was to make a film for the BBC. Sort of a straight documentary film about the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill in '89. Well the anniversary was up two years ago so I went there to do that. And I fell in love with the place. So the bulk of this stuff came from Cordova, Anchorage...

So it really is like a compilation or-

Absolutely, it's very much a compendium of scenes gathered with not necessarily this film in mind. What I wanted to do initially was a piece on T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. That's what I shot the material for. And then we were commissioned by the BBC to do this, at some point I thought, as I worked on the two things at the same time, I thought 'Hang on, it's the same project really.'

Why didn't any of Eliot's poetry make it in [to The Nine Muses]?

Eliot's poetry didn't make it in because it seemed too hermetically closed. It's a very elusive piece which refers to a whole set of other stuff. As we went on I felt that it was something that focused much more on becoming and being and interiority was more important. Whereas Eliot's is kind of more about the end of a century figure, trying to make sense that they've learned. In the end my piece is about somebody who comes to place and really doesn't know very much...so the lack of process in *The Wasteland* got in the way. And I removed it to replace it with, initially Beckett because Beckett's – what you get in Beckett is this idea of someone who's endlessly checking their own psyche. Those sorts of question seemed more of important for this piece than Eliot.

Well, I loved how you actually skipped Joyce's Ulysses...

Well, you know, the thing with *Ulysses* is, if you remember it, those of us who are fortunate to have gone through it, it's so successfully local. It's about Dublin in 1905. And the Blooms almost made it. You know, its ceaseless return to Ireland and Irish-ness got in the way. Whereas Beckett's slightly more abstract *Everyman in search of himself*. It's a very difficult thing to decide because some of it is what it feels like...It's a little bit like trying to write a piece of music or

something. You got something because you think it'll work, but actually the note's wrong. Just not quite right. So, again, having put him in I reluctantly took him out.

Was there ever a moment you thought you might lose grip of what you were making because of how general, how universal, it all was?

All the time, and to be honest I'm not even necessarily sure, to be honest, that I ever controlled it. I think the thing about it is that it's about something really complicated. It's about how three or four generations of people of color arrived at a place and tried to make themselves belong to that place. And part of it meant discarding stuff they came with and discovering new ones. Part of it was trying to create the kind of collage of themselves from multiple parts. And there were several moments where I thought 'well, we should try and drive this more. You know, center it more.' And at other points I thought 'you know, slightly more elusive.' It's in a way, weirdly, an approximation of the experience. It's a very fractured, very confusing space. And quite a lot of people spent time in that space and never really felt that they arrived and never really felt they became British. And I think that's quite a lot of people actually. People from my parents' generation. They never really, completely became British. They were stuck somewhere between the two worlds, as it were. So it felt more honest, for the project to reflect that, then what you normally get with stories: 'Oh, you know well, Demi Moore is okay, it's okay. They were alright.'

That sense of being tied up, that felt dishonest because, in a way, to do that would be, in a way, to say that I know what that narrative is about and I didn't. I'm looking to myself and saying 'what does this really mean? Did they ever really become British?' Well, no I know they didn't because I knew a lot of them and they still, to this day, curse the day they left. I mean, you can't take that completely seriously, because they couldn't of hated it that much because they stayed. But there is ambiguity and ambivalence at the heart of the migrant experience and I wanted the project to reflect that in a way. For that generation. For mine, it's a very different story.

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Icarus Films
32 Court Street, Floor 21
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 488-8900
mail@IcarusFilms.com
www.IcarusFilms.com



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