Capitalocene, clichés, and critical re-enchantment. What Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea* does through BBC nature

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**ABSTRACT**

In the montage of archival and original material that makes up John Akomfrah’s three-channel video work *Vertigo Sea* (2015), the frequent use of footage shot by BBCs Natural History Unit (producers of series like Planet Earth) stands out as an unusual choice. This article explores aesthetic-political implications of how this material is subtly repurposed, with focus on one of the interconnected issues dealt with in the work: nature and the Capitalocene. What does *Vertigo Sea* do to and through these BBC nature images? Which artistic strategies are involved and for which ends? Is the kind of ecological pathos already framing the original material itself critically transformed and if so in which senses? Does *Vertigo Sea* merely go for a reproduction of the natural beauty often attributed to original material, and as simply juxtaposed with terrible images, or does the repurposing also entail an alteration of the very notion of natural beauty? This article critically explores all these questions mainly through the frameworks of Situationist détournement, Deleuze’s ideas about art and clichés, and Adorno’s notions of authentic art, re-enchantment, and natural beauty—frameworks that are conversely critically discussed through *Vertigo Sea*. It aims to reveal *Vertigo Sea* as on the one hand an experiment in finding vital artistic strategies for re-enchanting (in non-idealizing ways) planetary nature in the Capitalocene, and as on the the on the other hand a thematization of the difficulties in doing so. While appearing among a contemporary art scene increasingly concerned with local and/or global relations having to do with ecology in this new era, *Vertigo Sea* presents us with a highly original case primarily through its unusual choice of main source material and its complex treatment of this material.

**KEYWORDS**

*Vertigo Sea; Akomfrah; situationism; détournement; Deleuze; Adorno; re-enchantment; natural beauty; BBC; Capitalocene; Anthropocene*

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Sea nevertheless subjects this imagery to a semi-repurposing, in which it isn’t negated or turned against itself, however, but subtly and positively—albeit critically—re-imagined.

What does Vertigo Sea thereby do to and through these BBC nature images (below this relation is referred to as VS-BBC)? How can we understand this unusual choice of archival material and the subtleties of its repurposing? Which artistic strategies are involved and for which ends? Is the kind of ecological pathos already framing the original material itself critically transformed and if so in which senses? Furthermore, what happens to the natural beauty often attributed to the BBC footage, as taken up in Vertigo Sea? Does Vertigo Sea only go for its reproduction or does the repurposing entail an alteration of the idea of natural beauty?

This article explores these questions mainly through the frameworks of Situationist détournement, Deleuze’s ideas about art and clichés, and Adorno’s notions of authentic art, re-enchantment, and natural beauty—frameworks that are conversely critically discussed through Vertigo Sea. It aims to reveal Vertigo Sea as on the one hand an experiment in finding vital subtleties of its repurposing? Which artistic strategies for re-enchanting (in non-idealizing ways) planetary nature in the Capitalocene, and as on the other hand a thematization of the difficulties in doing so. While appearing on a contemporary art scene increasingly concerned with local and/or global relations having to do with ecology in this new era, Vertigo Sea presents us with a highly original case primarily through its unusual choice of main source material and its complex treatment of this material.

Mix of materials, structures, motifs

Vertigo Sea puts the BBC footage—of mostly wildlife from across the globe, animal life, and inter-animal and plants-animal relations (more on this footage in its original BBC context in a separate section below)—into a montage with a host of other both archival and original audiovisual material. The other visual archival material includes bits from a previous Akomfrah film, unidentified photos, daguerreotypes portraying what may be slaves from the 19th century, documentaries and newsreels showing whale slaughtering, polar bear hunting, sinking migrant boats, etc. The visual material shot by Akomfrah himself, consists mainly of a large number of high-end filmic tableaus, most with human figures—many Caspar David Friedrich-like rückenfigures, a recurring motif in Akomfrah’s work—and various artifacts, carefully positioned in natural landscapes (containing or in proximity to water) in the northern hemisphere.

The artifacts are mostly antique, and placed so as to appear swept up on a landscape by a historical wave: headboards, clocks, chairs, lampshades, strollers, bikes, photo frames, books, type-writers, dolls, and navigational instruments.

Overall, graphic and thematic connections are made within each screen, in-between the three screens, and in between the screens and an audio-track with spoken bits, subtly dramatic music, and atmospheric sounds (natural and composed). There is basically no narrative information, the closest would be some aural testimony, excerpts from newsreel voice-overs, and intertitles and audio clips with quotes from various literary and philosophical sources. Art theorist T.J. Demos argues in an exhibition catalogue text that in Vertigo Sea “audiovisual matter unfolds to reveal a dizzying intersection of history, fiction and philosophy”, through (referencing statements by Akomfrah himself) “montage [that] possesses the power to elicit ‘unconscious relations between the subject and historical forces’” (2016b, 14).

While this—temporally and geographically wide-ranging—montage continues Akomfrah’s work on migration, memory, and postcolonial experience explored in light of present conditions of globalization, the scope here extends further into nature and the increasing inseparability of human and natural history. Vertigo Sea contains a host of motifs connected along such lines.

The whole is loosely and implicitly divided into sections or chapters, in which one motif plays more of a leading role than in other sections, although most come and go throughout the whole. In one section, polar bears and hunting are more of a main focus (starting about 10–15 minutes into the film), in another whales and whaling (starting about 25 minutes into the film), etc. The variety of material having to do with migration and human movement on water, are woven into even more shots of animals, birds, and landscapes: dramatic waves, zebras, seals, penguins, and innumerable sea creatures (e.g. killer wales, dolphins, sharks, jellyfish); swarms of fish and swarms of butterflies; flocks of birds (that at times intricately connect with archival images of human faces in adjoining screens); aerial shots of landscapes that form (especially in passages starting around 32 and 39 minutes in) abstract patterns (some brightly red, rhyming with the red of the insides of whales in simultaneous butchering scenes); and then there are mountains, rocks, clouds, surfers, boats, bombs, mines, oilrigs on fire, storms, avalanches, aurora borealis, volcanoes, sunrays, silent snowscapes, and still misty forests, etc.

Moreover, co-existing temporalities are expressed in juxtapositions of eras within and across images, in a recurrent motif of different clocks spread out in nature, speed- and slow-motion imagery of plants and animals, and a certain general opening of our globalized present to a geologic time scale—geologic here in the sense of entangled with biological, technological, socio-historical, political, and economic factors. In all this,
how are we to assess VS-BBC—the inclusion and function of the BBC nature material? The rest of this article explores theoretical implications of Vertigo Sea’s particular usage of this material.6

**Détournement/not Détournement**

Akomfrah has often spoken about how he started watching reflective, archival essay films at a very young age. In an artist talk during the exhibition opening for Vertigo Sea at Bildmuseet he added that he has come to find exhausted many of its formal strategies, that we need to find new strategies including widening the idea of which images can be made part of reflective films (2015b). He spoke about a need to grab those images that get all the resources, such as the BBC Natural History Unit’s, and repurpose them. Underlined by how Akomfrah also mentioned his background in the punk movement and the importance of retaining a punk attitude, and given the famous (while contested) influence of Situationism on the punk movement, it would seem most apparent to understand this repurposing as a kind of détournement.

The meaning of the word itself can be described as “deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose” (translator Ken Knabb’s note in Debord and Wolman [1956] 2006). As a Situationist political-aesthetic strategy it means the critical appropriation of existing cultural and social artifacts, mostly by making “new combinations” through “the juxtaposition of [...] independent expressions” for the sake of subverting their commodity-culture-entangled contents and ideas (Debord and Wolman [1956] 2006). Certainly, it is an established position to find this strategy having been long since recuperated by the commodity culture it wanted to subvert—a position succinctly captured in for instance Rosalind Krauss’ claim that “the ultimate master of détournement turns out to be capitalism itself, which can appropriate and reprogram anything to serve its own ends” (1999, 33). Such capitalist recuperation, however, while increasingly intensified with postmodernity (as conceptualized by Jameson and others), was identified by Debord in the 1950s as the Situationist’s own context. Previous artistic strategies with revolutionary aspects—such as Dada and Surrealism—Debord found neutered by a bourgeois commodity culture, subsumed into a society of spectacle of money (its quantitative side) and images (its qualitative side) to which he basically saw no outside. The Situationist’s took on the challenge through both negating and trying to re-radicalize earlier (mostly anti-art) artistic strategies (Debord [1967] 2005, §206).

As they self-critically swayed between skepticism and a strained utopianism regarding the critical potential of their own practices (and as they ostracized those not pure enough or anti-art enough) their strategies were continuously altered. So as to be more invincible to the forces of recuperation and as part of their efforts to realize art in the everyday (that older avant-garde dream) even artworks involving détournement were eventually to be avoided. This led to how “the Situationist group itself began to appear as a work of art—to the horror of its members”, and as Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen adds, they thereby “paradoxically came to expand art to include all human existence” and “ended up reifying life in the attempt to avoid the reification of the artwork” (2006, 13). An impasse that could only lead to the group’s official dissolution.

The situationists were thereby the first to conclude that their strategies had been exhausted. Their conclusion, however, must be understood in relation to their all-or-nothing goal: complete destruction of the capitalist symbolic order. Subsequent artists with subtler goals, or different ideas about artistic political impact, may therefore find remaining critical potentials in aspects of an ambiguous and flexible strategy like détournement.

VS-BBC is clearly in some accordance with this strategy in its recycling and rearranging of material taken from a larger society of the spectacle—or more precisely, as Akomfrah said, places that get all the resources—in order to alter their meaning. While avoiding explicitly irreverent formal manipulations there are clear re-compositions: The narration and original soundtrack is replaced and the images are recut and woven into an arrangement with other visual materials across three screens.

VS-BBC is clearly less in accordance with détournement, however, in being financed by a set of art institutions and how the BBC material is used with permission with aesthetically limiting criteria. But also in how for Debord détournement means “commitment to critique as negation”, a “style of negation” that turns (capitalist) symbolic expressions against themselves, not as simple reversals but as part of a dialectical movement (Debord [1967] 2005, §204, §207–208). While VS-BBC entails critical semi-repurposing (as examined closer below), this is not a negational rerouting of the original, neither in style nor meaning. There is furthermore nothing tongue-in-cheek or ironic (or post-ironic) about its appropriation, as is often the case with détournement. While partly explained by restrictions added by the BBC, the non-irreverent style of VS-BBC seems mostly to result from a fairly original bypassing of clichéd ways of doing critique.
How to create (critique) in societies of cliché

A look into some of Deleuze’s notions of art and clichés will help clarify what this means. If the context was conceptualized by Debord as a society of images/spectacle, Deleuze instead categorized the same post-war period—image-affirmingly—as a society of clichés. In Deleuze’s analysis, majestic notions like the capital-toppling revolution, the Proletariat as historical actor, the progress of History, etc.—held on to by the situationists—had lost their ability to convince along with a certain logic of political thought. They were no longer held together by a meaningful whole and remained only as free-floating clichés in a larger social field of other clichés in a state of intolerable, intense daily banality. How does one create politically progressive images under such circumstances—in contrast, that is, to merely cataloguing, parodying, or injecting steroids into clichés (or any of the various ways to lean into postmodern cynical resignation)? For Deleuze this chiefly means working with or towards a new logic for creative thought, for which a key initial aspect is grappling with what he calls clichés.

For Deleuze clichés are thoughts or affects determined by “economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological demands. We therefore normally perceive only clichés” ([1983] 2003, 20). Grappling with such clichés concerns form and style only as bound up with clichés of thought. It therefore does not mean freshening things up by avoiding harmless conventions or standard motifs, such as the battle against cliché in mainstream journalism or even advertising, which is generally about finding new ways to perpetuate, often unconsciously, more abstract forms of clichés. It is not enough, however, to break with such abstract clichés, rather, the grappling must make way for autonomous Ideas or Images.7 As Deleuze writes with reference to Godard: “[I]f images have become clichés, internally as well as externally, how can an Image be extracted from all these clichés, ‘just an image’, an autonomous mental image? An image must emerge from the set of clichés” (214).

Since for the artist the empty “page or canvas is already so covered with preexisting, preestablished clichés”, as Deleuze and Guattari writes in What is Philosophy?, “it is first necessary to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision” ([1991] 1994, 204). Taken at face value, this sounds like long-since recuperated modernist gestures, connoting perhaps the opposite of a breath of air. In his earlier book on Bacon, however, Deleuze qualifies such strategies in relation to a contemporary world in which quite rapidly, also “reactions against clichés are creating clichés”, which arguably adds to the meaning of these terms an ongoing struggle against clichéd ways of battling against clichés ([1981] 2004, 89). He also clarifies what this does not mean: “[I]f the painter is content to transform the cliché, to deform and mutilate it, to manipulate it in every possible way, this reaction is still too intellectual, too abstract: it allows the cliché to rise again from its ashes, it leaves the painter within the milieu of the cliché, or else gives him or her no other consolidation than parody”, and “Great painters know that it is not enough to mutilate, mau, or parody the cliché” (87, 89; see also Deleuze [1983] 2003, 210f). On the levels of form, style, or strategy, there are no “universal solutions” and one “can fight against the cliché only with much guile, perseverance, and prudence: it is a task perpetually renewed with every painting” (96). It is as an effect of such perpetual fight against cliché—rather than, say, the contractual restrictions—that we should understand the avoidance of obvious formal manipulation—e.g. mutilation, mauling, parody—in VS-BBC.

Furthermore, the critique inescapably at the center of any such grappling with cliché is not chiefly negative. While necessary as a component certainly in the broad sense of examination from a stance of conflict and challenge, negativity is not only insufficient—alongside parodying and cataloguing—for creating new images, it is also insufficient, at least when dialectical, for critically grasping multiplicities. The critique involved in VS-BBC, as gradually clarified below, does not proceed through a style of negation (and as pertaining to ecology the end goal of Vertigo Sea is even to a large extent similar to the original’s). VS-BBC primarily critiques by revealing the original as part of a larger political and historical (mostly capitalist) multiplicity.

Internal (non-contradictory) tensions in the BBC material

Global capitalism undoubtedly entails a larger scientific-technological complex, which after WWII is increasingly a scientific-technological-military-entertainment complex, involved to a large extent with exploitation and domination. This is not because modern technology has some grand essence, but because it is still generally bound up in such complexes. For Adorno, critical modern art is unavoidably part of the technical-rationalistic “disenchantment of the world”, but, in relation to nature not least, it “mobilizes technique in an opposite direction than does domination” ([1970] 2009, 70). How does the BBC Natural History Unit, which certainly does not produce modern art, fit in here? Their productions famously transmit the grandeur of nature in unprecedented detail. Each of their series normally also ends with an episode about the environmental difficulties facing the animals and regions filmed—and they have been putting out an
increasing number of additional such documentaries—and these are genuine, pathos-driven efforts to convince audiences of the need to also preserve and protect the nature to which they have been given such unprecedented access—although, as the talking head of Attenborough stresses in one such documentary: “The appeal should be to logic. The appeal should be to rational thinking” (Planet Earth: The Future, 2006). Furthermore, their productions are also boasting about their technical abilities to provide this unprecedented access. In their series and as a general attitude as exemplified by Attenborough musing in a recent interview about how they “are in paradise at the moment with the Natural History filmmaking, there is nothing on this planet, now, that we cannot see on film […] There’s nothing we can’t show” (2016). In a documentary included as extra material for the DVD of Planet Earth (2006), Attenborough’s narration adds some further components:

This Helicopter is fitted with a new high-definition camera system, the heli-gimble. Originally invented for the military, it’s only been used so far in Hollywood movies and glossy adverts. Filming for Planet Earth will be the first time that a high-tech system like this has been taken into the wild. (Planet Earth Diaries, 2006).

As rooted in public service, BBC’s Planet Earth may not be as straightforwardly embedded as something like Google Earth in a “political and economic framework, comprising a visual system delivered and constituted by the post-Cold War and largely Western-based military-state-corporate apparatus”, offering “an innocent-seeming picture that is in fact a ‘techno-scientific, militarized, ‘objective’ image.” (Demos 2017, 18). But overall their output suggests a fundamental unawareness of their own ventures’ connections to the technologies and frames of minds that have in a broad sense also been part of the causes of the environmental problems they evidently care deeply about. This unawareness restricts (not contradicts) their ability to mobilize—to refer back to the Adorno quote above—“technique in an opposite direction than […] domination” (Adorno 1970 2009, 70).

Their documentaries about ecological problems have similar limitations in both content and style. The problems are mainly depicted in accordance with what is implied with the term “Anthropocene”—that is, that the causes for our current state are universally “human”, in contrast to the notion of a Capitalocene—that is, a recognition that the cause is mainly a long history of a specific human conduct: industrial capitalism (obvious, or would be obvious, for all other thinkers or artists mentioned in this text).8 While the occasional talking-head—among discourses on sustainable development, green technology solutions, or what individuals can do in their homes etc.—can even go so far as to claim that economic development is by now itself unsustainable, there is no real analysis of more fundamental systemic causes involving the history of capitalism (which of course also includes colonial and neocolonial exploitation, the slave trade, etc.). This may partly be explained by their need to have a mainstream appeal—which here also results in mostly talking heads and digestible information.

When it comes to ecology, Vertigo Sea can be said to subject the BBC material to an immanent critique that opens it up to a larger history (that even the most pro-capitalist should be able to acknowledge). This critical opening of the BBC material is not an end in itself, but a means towards expressing the terrifying and beautiful and awe-inspiring fullness of our planetary state. In this precise sense, Vertigo Sea performs a kind of “shredding” that lets in, if not a breath of air, a less clichéd and self-righteously rational effort to re-enchant nature.

Critical re-enchantments vs. pseudo-re-enchantments of nature

Adorno (with Horkheimer) argued not only the familiar theme of how the domination of nature in modern societies means its disenchantment, but also that this had become so all-pervading that there have to be parallel re-enchantments of nature as a kind of stabilizing, inoffensive counter pressure: a mythical sphere over-there, a romantic but static image that serves to naturalize (i.e. eternalize) the order (Stone similarly describes this dynamic [2006, 237]). Manifest for instance in tourist adds or uncritical art imitating nature, such re-enchantments offer an “afterimage of magic as consolation for disenchantment”, part of an “ontology of false consciousness” (Adorno 1970 2009, 88–90, 24).

Against such, as we could call them, pseudo-re-enchantments, Adorno came to suggest that what he calls authentic or autonomous modern art engages with a more radical re-enchantment of nature—not through direct re-enchantment, but through hinting at its possibility by expressing a complex thing he calls natural beauty.9 This refers to “objective intens[ities]” in nature that are “unutterable” or “nonidentical” that withdraws from rational definition (and in extension domination), and which therefore lack positive existence in modern societies (Adorno 1970 2009, 92, 95). Such natural beauty is furthermore characterized as 1.) a fleeting dissonance in opposition to traditional notions of natural beauty as proportional, symmetrical, harmonious 2.) as containing a mythic and uncanny ambiguity that amounts to something like a post-Kantian, romantic fusion of beauty with the sublime, and that 3.) is “at its core historical” and that importantly reveals the history of suffering of nature—including the nature within us—under domination (85). The existing
order—that in contrast relies on a non-historical, idealizing notion of nature—therefore either suppresses or reifies (primarily through commodification) such expressions and experiences.

Authentic/autonomous art expresses such natural beauty, however, through its very artificality or “opposition” to nature (in contrast to promising non-mediated access to it and thereby offering a comforting illusion of a non-existing reconciliation between nature and society, i.e. pseudo-re-enchantment). We should underline that natural beauty is hereby nothing like representational information about suffering: The more autonomously artistic, Adorno argues, the more modern art has “converged with natural beauty” (Adorno [1970] 2009, 100). Its critical autonomy, furthermore, consists in following immanent formal laws that does not fully bend to the laws, values, and reifying powers of the social order it exposes. However, the artwork is still always relative to the social order, without which it would not be possible—the order is part of its conditions. This tension between the work’s critical distance and its social conditions is internalized in the form of the work itself and thereby (artistically) expressed.

This latter line of reasoning offers means to understand one of the more intricate aspects of VS-BBC: the inclusion of the BBC original as a critical inventory of some of Vertigo Sea’s own social circumstances. By autonomously incorporating this material, Vertigo Sea in one sense charts its own entanglement in a larger socio-economic and technological complex, while also creating a critical and exposing distance to this complex.

So is this all about exposing and revealing? What about expressing some kind of potential for change? In Adorno, artistic natural beauty, as defined above, contains a utopian wink of the possibility of a different relation to nature. Yet, art can only point to unrealized possibilities negatively and from the perspective of the already existing—“no existing, appearing artwork holds any positive control over the nonexisting. The nonexisting in artworks is a constellation of the existing. [I]t is possibility promised by its impossibility” (Adorno [1970] 2009, 178). The blocked possibilities are furthermore tied to the past and present. Art, he adds, “remains in all its mediations recollection [...] of the possible in opposition to the actual that suppresses it” and which “did not—and may not ever—come to pass (178). These (im)possibilities also appear quite grand, and in ways that sort of resembles the actual they are bound by: utopian ideas that the system suppresses but could hypothetically realize, such as the fact that we have the technical means to eliminate hunger, or more abstractly: “given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise” (41).

The restriction to negatively implying (im)possibilities appears to stem from an over-precaution against offering idealistic consolation—i.e. the fantasy of a future in which society and nature is reconciled, a development for which Adorno is not holding his breath. Positive expressions of progressive possibility are for Adorno unavoidably equated, therefore, with pseudo-re-enchantment. Granted, authentic artworks, as he conceived of them, appear to have a quasi-untimely aspect: “By their very existence [they] postulate the existence of what does not exist”, in the sense that their truth “no longer converges with the historical situation”, which along with the unruliness of the natural beauty may vaguely suggests a dynamic of potential (Adorno [1970] 2009, 76). However, this seem contradicted by their restriction to past and present gives: “To survive reality at its most extreme and grim”, he writes, “artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality” (50). All this makes Adorno at best a limited thinker and conceptualizer of potentiality (in art).10

This framework is however quite suitable for discussing key aspects of Vertigo Sea. On the one hand, the latter is not bound by Adorno’s white-knuckled over-precaution against naïve utopianisms and sliding into pseudo-re-enchantment: in its overflowing, heterogeneous, historically anchored natural beauty, Vertigo Sea is in some aspects—while still wholly avoiding pseudo-re-enchantment—an effort to positively or directly re-enchant nature, who’s Capitalocenic suffering, furthermore, is hardly very suppressed or even suppressible anymore (that there is no non-suffering natural sphere separate from human-cultural-nature assemblages is already quite obvious in the late Capitalocene, or to quote Latour, they are “now entangled for everyone to see” (2010, 484)). On the other hand, Vertigo Sea is partly also in more direct alignment with Adorno’s reasoning. It’s multi-channel montage is no mere representation of something deemed beautiful and/or suffering in nature, but rather an expression of (critical and historical) natural beauty through autonomous artistic-technological artifice. And as such it can also be described with Akomfrah’s own words as containing a “vocabulary of suffering” and “multiple elegies” for various humans and animals that broadly speaking meet the same destiny through the same or similar “technologies of terror” (2015b). The natural beauty expressed, in this fuller historical sense, is thereby also a kind of sublime in the (post-Kantian) sense of simultaneous terror and beauty (both Kant and Burke separated between beauty and sublime). However, especially in its ecological concerns, Vertigo Sea can simultaneously be regarded, as we will see, as both elegy and call for a needed but partly lost—or if you will blocked—sense of sublime terror/beauty.
Terror/beauty as elegy, call, and expression

The Capitalocene in its entirety—from its minute details to its systemic complexity and geologic time—is so intricate and immense that we can fully grasp it only as an abstract concept (and more practically through the help of the collected calculations of super computers)—and it is essentially for such reasons that art and ecology scholar Timothy Morton labels something like global warming a hyperobject (2013). Does this mean that the Capitalocene causes a sense of sublime dread? Arguably it is more like the reverse: its entireness being outside of our experiential and cognitive grasp appears to rather dull most people’s sense of urgency and dread (comparable to how the system of global capitalism is similarly beyond our grasp in ways that seem to dull progressive political imagination and agency, a problem Fredric Jameson famously called cognitive mapping). According to Morton, “Global warming is in the uncanny valley”, something “profoundly disturbing, especially because we created it” (2013, 132, 133). While he has a point—at least as pertaining to when global warming noticeably bends the weather in our immediate surroundings—isn’t the problem rather that it isn’t disturbing enough—or disturbing in the right way? Why aren’t we—who do not deny or repress it—more engaged? We do not so much lack knowledge—although that is a problem too—as a deep existential sense that it is really happening.

How to create images—in the Capitalocene and in societies of cliché—that can reawaken nature’s ability to make ethical demands on us? This question appears to be at the heart of Vertigo Sea—and it helps explain its many references to the Romantics (along with the fact that the romantic period ties together many of Vertigo Sea’s issues: the dusk of the transatlantic slave trade and the dawn of Western imperialism, and as coinciding with the start of industrial capitalism the “Romantic period” was, as Morton points out, “the very advent of the Anthropocene” (2013, 164)). But if significant parts of the romantic period (e.g. Hegel) also entailed a rejection of natural beauty in favor of artistic beauty, Adorno’s updating of natural beauty as an artistic concern is limited in its negativity, as described above, so that it can at best make us, as Alison Stone describes Adorno’s ideas, “feel guilt for having damaged [nature] and to seek to make amends” (2006, 243). And if recent decades have seen updated strategies for taking on ecological issues, there hasn’t been much focus on beauty in any sense—and in this way Demos regards Vertigo Sea as “a courageous act of refusing contemporary cynicism, which has given up on beauty […]”(2016b, 18).

Vertigo Sea, however, is concerned with natural beauty as a kind of (historical) sublime, only to some extent as direct expression. Demos argues, in some contrast, that it provides a direct experience of what he refers to as a sublime updated for the era of the Capitalocene, and that Vertigo Sea thereby makes us “lose our bearings—referentially, philosophically, perceptually” (2016b, 15). While Vertigo Sea is rich and challenging, however, I am not convinced it makes that many lose their bearings. Rather, this is a work that just as much thematizes our faltering abilities to lose our bearings (in relation to nature). Perhaps we find this theme most clearly in the Caspar David Friedrich-like tableaus. They do not so much purport to reintroduce or update the original’s emblematic depictions of the sublime—although they critically infuse them with more history, such as through the black rückenfigur portraying Olaudah Equiano (a former slave and explorer whose 1789 autobiography was instrumental in ending the African slave trade for the British empire), and how many include scattered human artifacts from the period and onwards. Rather, especially when the figure is subtly facing (or half facing) away from the scenery (many of the tableaus are, I should point out, variations of each other within the same landscape and setup, taken from another angle, or with or without people/artifacts) these tableaus appear more like elegies—but also calls for—a lost sense of the sublime—as an experience of nature as awe-inspiring terror/beauty—that we must somehow regain.

Although of course, the Capitalocene offers a partly different situation; it is not so much about such sentiments being spawned by encountering some depth or
immensity in wild nature that exceeds domination, as about how nature has become wild in a new sense through its domination. Or rather, again, this wildness should be more sublimely disturbing than it generally seems to be. *Vertigo Sea,* however, functions not only as elegy and call for a reawakened sense of sublime terror/beauty in this situation—to switch back to its other side—through its overall overflowing expressiveness of natural beauty—of the historical kind discussed above—it simultaneously aims to positively contribute (in non-pseudo-re-enchancing ways) to such reawakening.

How does *VS-BBC* fit into such an effort to help reawaken a sense of sublime terror/beauty? It is certainly not as simple as the BBC imagery supplying the beauty and the other archival material the terror. That would of course undercut the complex notion of natural beauty attributed to *Vertigo Sea* as defined above. But also, on a more formal level, because *Vertigo Sea* (reflexively and semi-directly) expresses a terror/beauty combination in different ways and on different levels as surplus effects of montage, rather than through simple juxtapositions of terrible images and beautiful ones. In contrast, some exhibition texts and reviews implies precisely that the BBC imagery (although also along with Akomfrah’s tableaus) supplies the beauty and the other archival material the terror. T.J. Demos’ astute exhibition text could be seen as an example to a certain extent, but it also helps us to start complexify such a division. While he on the one hand writes about how “[s]tunning images of marine life are interrupted by sailors killing whales and hunting polar bears” and how “[g]lorious footage of mountainous Arctic icescapes compete with the brutal militarization of nature, the sea as test site for nuclear bombs and field for deepwater oil drilling, leaks and, fiery explosions”, on the other hand, these juxtapositions aren’t necessarily between the BBC imagery and the other archival imagery: rather, first of all, (what is likely at least partly meant to refer to) the BBC imagery can also show “oceanic signs of climate change and global warming, in footage of melting and crashing glaciers” (2016b, 13). Furthermore, in accordance with the above discussion of internal tensions in the BBC material, Demos also mentions how its ability to penetrate deep into nature and deliver aestheticized viewing pleasure “risks slipping into the grotesque, a means of human hubris asserting its dominance over natural phenomena” (18). In these two ways he undermines the simple notion that the BBC images brings the beauty and the other archival images the terror.

Demos’ discussion, however, implicitly abides by another problematic division, which sets us up to make our final point: An equation of beauty—through whichever images—with nature, and terror with what humans and industrial technologies does to nature. While he astutely points to how *Vertigo Sea*’s showing “of the unparalleled splendor of aquatic nature […] courts the risk of being accused of naïve aestheticisation, and a hackneyed political-ecological maneuver of critically juxtaposing natural and human beauty with the terrible scenes of industrialization”, his response—although true—doesn’t take us very far from this hypothetical accusation: “Yet nature, one might rightfully resent, is intrinsically aesthetic, and beauty a part of life itself […]” (Demos 2016b, 18). And as he writes earlier in the text: “the beauty of nature becomes terrible under the sign of our capitalist present” (15, my emphasis). This is certainly true from a purely Capitaloscenic perspective, and some of *Vertigo Sea*’s juxtapositions do lend themselves to such a reading. But this work is more complex also in this respect.

Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both […]

— Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

*Vertigo Sea* is not restricted, first of all, to showing only humans and human technology subjecting animals and nature to violence (such as the killings of whales and polar bears as contrasted to their leisurely wild life). It also covers—I believe mostly through the BBC material—violence within animal life (e.g. slow-motion footage of a crocodile violently attacking a group of gnus) and within the environment itself, such as volcanic activity or thunderstorms. And while some of the latter likely show effects of altered natural cycles, as implied by Demos, volcanic activity and thunderstorms are themselves much older than most anything else shown in the film—point being: nature has always contained such aspects of terror. Some of the images, such as those of large flocks of birds, also appear—admittedly through the montage, but portrayed not as an effect of what humans do to them—as having a somewhat uncanny aspect to them, sort of in the sense that Adorno speaks of how there can be “something frightening [that] lurks in the song of birds” and how such “fright appears as well in the threat of migratory flocks, which bespeak ancient divinations” (Adorno [1970] 2009, 87). Overall, *Vertigo Sea* thereby, to some extent, reveals the terror/beauty of nature both before and after—or from both within and outside the perspective of—the Capitalocene, along with a human-culture-nature complex containing both human and non-human agencies—or non-personal agencies as talked about by Latour—in contrast to ascribing only to humans and human technologies all terror-related causal agency (2010, 481–484).

These additional aspects of *Vertigo Sea*’s effort to re-enchant by contributing to a reawakening of a sense of terror/beauty, thereby includes nature itself (dominated
and not) as containing both terror and beauty, instead of the terror only coming from the domination.\textsuperscript{12} The aim (fully intended by Akomfrah or not) clearly appears to be to reawaken nature’s ability to truly grab us, which in turn can help strengthening its ability to make ethical demands on us.

This includes the idiosyncrasy that is VS-BBC, whose aesthetic-political implications has been explored in this article. Taking neither of the trodden paths of negation, revealing contradictions, exaggerating absurdities of the spectacle, or taking things down to a smaller level, Vertigo Sea has been shown to perform a subtle critical repurposing of the BBC material in other ways. The material is woven into an audiovisual complex, a complex that this article has found to have two general aspects. First, it appears as an effort to revitalize sublime sentiments of beauty and terror in the Capitalocene and in societies of cliché; as an experiment concerning artistic means for critically re-enchanting planetary nature under these circumstances. Second, as an intricate thematization of the difficulties in doing so. The large canvas is sort of retained but broken up and reconfigured, just as the simpler, non-historical notion of natural beauty of the BBC original. This is no longer a Rational World Picture with beauty and some images of terror added to it, but a complex terror/beauty mixture on all levels—which isn’t thereby concerning some Romantic unrepresentable, however, but a (non-representational) critical multiplicity.\textsuperscript{13}

Notes

1. Vertigo Sea, 48 minutes and 30 seconds long (HD color, 7.1 sound), premiered at the 2015 Venice biennale, and was produced by Smoking Dogs Films (formed in 1997 by Akomfrah with long-time collaborators Lina Gopaul and David Lawson) with support from Bildmuseet and Baltic Art Center.
2. The term Capitalocene refers to a new geological epoch characterized by the planet’s climate, ecosystems, biodiversity etc. having been significantly altered by capitalist-industrial technologies. The more established term Anthropocene, in contrast, by referencing the “human” as cause, mystifies much of the actual causal history of this new epoch. For more on the important differences between these terms see e.g. Moore (2016); Demos (2017), 17ff.
3. While material from The Blue Planet appears perhaps most frequently, Ashitey Akomfrah at Smoking Dogs informs me over email that they “for contractual reasons” can only reveal that Vertigo Sea includes a “mix of some recycled material from BBC Natural History unit programmes and [a smaller amount] from the extra material which was shot for these programmes and not used.”
4. For comprehensive overviews of this turn to ecology/nature see for instance Demos (2016a); Davis and Turpin (2015).
5. Sources include Melville’s Moby-Dick, Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Derek Walcott’s The Sea Is History, Heathcote Williams’ Whale Nation, and Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse. Vertigo Sea also more implicitly dialogues with such sources, to which we can likely add filmic influences/references such as Doug Aitken’s Diamond Sea (1997), (the three-channel version of) Peter Hutton’s At Sea (2007) and Three Landscapes (2013), Isaac Julien’s Western Union: Small Boats (2007), Chris Marker’s Three Cheers for the Whale (2007 [Vive la Baleine 1972]), and Noël Burch and Allan Sekula’s The Forgotten Space (2010).
6. While this text is rooted in audiovisual analysis, given Vertigo Sea’s abundance of images, sounds, and motifs, and given the shortness of this text, the theoretical discussion below focuses on a condensated or even abstracted analytical appreciation of the work as a whole, from the perspective of VS-BBC. I advise the reader to experience or re-experience the work itself before, during, and/or after reading, and if not possible at least internet image and video search “Akomfrah Vertigo Sea” to get some approximations in snippet form.
7. In Deleuze, capital I in Ideas and Image indicates that these words have conceptual meanings that go also beyond their everyday meanings. While a full grasp of these conceptual meanings—which are too far outside the aim of this article to delve further into here—is not needed in order to follow the present argument, it should be noted that there is in Deleuze’s philosophy an intricate relationship between ideas, images, and thinking. For more on this see e.g. Nilsson (2014).
8. See note 2 above.
9. On why it is reasonable to talk about this as “re-enchantment” although Adorno did not explicitly use this term in these later texts, see Stone 2016, 250, note 2.
10. A pertinent comparison would be to one of the most advanced philosophers of potentiality in the 20th century: Gilles Deleuze. While conducting such a comparison is outside the frame of this article, we can briefly note that Deleuze’s philosophy is a clear example of philosophies of potential that differ from Adorno’s specifically by being non-negative while still avoiding the pitfalls Adorno wanted to avoid with his negativity. For more on Deleuze’s notion of potential see e.g. Nilsson (2014). For a more affirmative discussion of possibility in Adorno, which still refers to it as “blocked possibility” and a “negative” possibility, a possibility of which we are ‘cheated’ or ‘deprived’, see Macdonald (2017).
11. I should point out that Demos in his other writings astutely abides by such more complex notions of agencies and human-culture-nature assemblages.
12. The point made here actually works regardless if “nature itself” means ontological realism, “how it appears for us”, or some a combination of the two.
13. The “critical” of “critical multiplicity” refers to the discussion above about critique of complexes beyond negativity and revealing contradictions. Regarding key differences between various notions of the “unrepresentable” and (Deleuzian) multiplicity, see Rajchaman 2000, 8, 18–19, 125.
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