

Johnn Akomfrah: Arcadia

KS2-3 Art and Design Resource

The Box



The Box is a social space for people, art, ideas and experiences. We preserve the city's cultural collections and share extraordinary stories to explore the pressing issues of our age. From our home in Plymouth, we nurture and support individuals to be creative and curious about the world around them, exploring the past to imagine new futures.

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About this resource

This resource introduces the artist Sir John Akomfrah CBE and explores the themes in his 2023 film *Arcadia*.

***Arcadia* was commissioned by The Box; co-commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation and Hartwig Art Foundation, Amsterdam; and generously supported by Polygreen Culture and Art Initiative (PCAI), Piraeus, Greece, and Arts Council England.**

Part of The Box's season of exhibitions and events based around the theme of 'Revisiting History', *Arcadia* will be on show until Sunday 2 June 2024.



Who is John Akomfrah?

British artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah was born in Accra, Ghana in 1957. He lives and works in London.

Akomfrah's parents, who were involved in anti-colonial activism in Ghana, emigrated to Britain after the 1966 coup. Akomfrah has lived in Britain since the age of four.

Alongside artists David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, he was a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective in 1982. Following a period of civil unrest in Brixton, London the group were inspired to create films focused on race, identity and immigration.

The films featured multi-layered archive footage, photographs, newly filmed material, and newsreel, in a style that became a recognisable motif of Akomfrah's practice. Later notable works including 'Peripeteia' (2012), 'The Unfinished Conversation' (2016), Purple (2017) and Five Murmurations' (2021) have explored varied themes such as British black history, memory, postcolonialism and the lived experiences of migrants and their descendants.

Akomfrah's works have been featured in international film festivals and exhibited at major museums and institutions such as Tate Modern, London, Centre Pompidou, Paris and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In 2017 Akomfrah was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for services to art and film making. He was awarded a Knighthood for services to the Arts in The King's New Year Honours, 2023.

John Akomfrah will represent Great Britain at the prestigious 2024 Venice Biennale, Italy (20 April-24 November 2024).

**John Akomfrah: *Arcadia*,
2023 © Smoking Dogs
Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs
Films and Lisson Gallery.**



What is Arcadia?

John Akomfrah was originally commissioned by The Box in 2019 to create an artwork exploring themes connected to the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower voyage. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic filming was halted, and John reimagined the film to reflect on the effects of migration and historical pandemics on the 'New World'.

“...a week after we'd finalised the filming locations the UK went into a lockdown. The three years that followed gave me the time and space for a rethink and the significance of the pandemic became clear.” John Akomfrah

Arcadia reflects on the 'Columbian Exchange', named after Christopher Columbus' 1492 voyage, that began the widespread exchange of plants, animals, precious metals, populations, technology and ideas between the Americas, Afro-Eurasia and Europe. The voyage was seen to join the 'New World' and the 'Old World' from the 1400s onwards. **Arcadia** explores the multifaceted lasting impacts of these exchanges, including the spread of disease such as smallpox and the enslavement of Africans.

“I wanted to go back to a time before the guns came out – to explore what other weapons, intended or otherwise, were in play. There are always powerful forces at work that are beyond our control. Humans are never the only actors on the stage.”

John Akomfrah

The film is presented across five screens in the shape of a cross, featuring scenery of seas, mountains and forests. This scenery is 'interrupted' by images of cargo, symbols of trade, ageing boat hulks, microbes, cells and sufferers of smallpox.

The soundtrack features Giacomo Meyerbeer's 1865 opera *L'Africaine*, with excerpts from John Milton's 1667 *Paradise Lost* and ancient Greek writer Artemidorus's 2nd century AD *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The word **Arcadia** is defined as an idyllic vision of unspoiled wilderness. Europeans saw the 'New World' as a place where they could be free to seek opportunity and new beginnings. Akomfrah's film explores this fantasy of migration, journeys and colonial encounters, bringing to mind Sir Francis Drake's renowned Voyage of Discovery that looked to explore and exploit the 'New World'.

“I've been asked quite a few times what Arcadia refers to and what it means...in this fantasy of a new beginning, lies an idea that's been with us since the Greeks, which is that there is always a place...where we can be free. The problem is that Arcadia can often have a downside: somebody's free world is always somebody else's hell.”

John Akomfrah

John Akomfrah: Arcadia,
2023 © Smoking Dogs
Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs
Films and Lisson Gallery.



Ideas for activities

Global exchanges

Research on the Columbian Exchange draws on nearly 300 years of the positive and negative effects of globalisation. The widespread transfer of animals, plants, precious metals and populations at the time left a legacy that is just as relevant today.

For this activity, create small research groups of three or four students. Choosing one country from the 'Old World' such as Britain or France, students must research and identify a connection to a 'New World' country, compiling the benefits and disadvantages the countries brought to one another.

Ask your students to visualise their findings in a diagram, presentation or map.

What was the best commodity, idea or technology the countries brought to one another? Which was the worst? How were each countries' cultures changed? Are these exchanges still taking place today?

Symbolism

Symbolism is the art of using symbols to represent abstract ideas or concepts. John Akomfrah's films experiment with objects, characters, colours, sounds and settings to represent new ways of thinking about historical stories and ideas.

Inspired by Arcadia's themes, ask your students to choose three symbols that represent a contemporary theme. For example, a boat can represent adventure, escape or refuge. Historical characters can represent wisdom or transitions in time. Scenes such as seascapes or twilight can express emotions such as fear or joy much more effectively than dialogue.

Students can present these symbols to the group to measure success on expressing their chosen theme and to spark feedback and further discussion.

Visual storytelling

The digital revolution has had a major effect on how we engage with modern storytelling. Smart phones and video platforms allow us to share ideas and stories from our perspective.

Inspired by the British Film Institute online resources below, ask your students to create a short film on a subject that is important to them or their community.

Encourage your students to explore important issues such as climate change, the cost of living crisis or social justice. The resulting films can be shared online, in the class or even in a school film festival.

[BFI Film Academy: opportunities for young creatives](#) | BFI

[BFI Film Academy: shorts by young filmmakers](#) - YouTube

Key words and themes

Arcadia

To designate a place of rustic innocence and simple, quiet pleasure. 'Arcadian' can mean 'idyllically pastoral' or 'idyllically innocent, simple or untroubled'.

Migration

People or persons who move away from their place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons.

Old World

The historical term 'Old World' was used to describe the eastern hemisphere continents of Africa, Asia and Europe. The term originated from the 1500s after Europeans became aware of the existence of lands in the western hemisphere.

New World

The historical term 'New World' was used to describe the majority of lands of the Earth's western hemisphere, particularly the Americas.

The Columbian Exchange

The Columbian Exchange, sometimes called the Grand Exchange, was the exchange of animals, plants, peoples and diseases between Europe, Asia and Africa and the Americas. Originating in 1492 when Christopher Columbus arrived in the West Indies, the exploration is said to have continued over 300 years.

Colonialism

Colonialism is defined as 'control by one power over a dependent area or people'. It occurs when one nation subjugates another, conquering its population, displacing and/or exploiting it, often while forcing its own language and cultural values upon its people.

Postcolonialism

The post experience of colonialism, studying its cultural, political and economic legacy. In particular, the impact of human control and exploitation of colonised people and their lands, past and present.

Globalisation

Globalisation is the movement and exchange of peoples, goods, technologies and cultural practices across the planet. The legacy of historical globalisation sometimes known as archaic globalisation continues today with growth in international trade, communication technology and the integration of ideas, beliefs and culture.

John Akomfrah: Further Resources

[John Akomfrah | Artists |
Lisson Gallery](#)

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[John Akomfrah: in the
process of \[doing something\] |
The Box Plymouth](#)

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[Barbican Meets: John Akomfrah
\(youtube.com\)](#)

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[John Akomfrah – Why History
Matters | TateShots \(youtube.com\)](#)

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Book an Artist Workshop

Enrich your visit to John Akomfrah's *Arcadia* with our inspiring **Artist Workshops**. Your students will work with a practising artist to explore visual thinking strategies, learn artistic techniques and develop their own creative responses.

These workshops include enquiry-based learning (*Philosophy 4 Children*) and creative 21st century skills and activities to take back to the classroom.

If you would like to book an artist workshop or a self-directed visit please fill out our [booking enquiry form](#) on the School Visits section of our website.

Whenever possible we encourage students to bring along sketchbooks and pencils to our workshops. Wet or dusty materials are not permitted in the galleries. If you have any questions regarding materials or any other enquiries, please contact us via TheBoxLearning@plymouth.gov.uk



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John Akomfrah: Arcadia, 2023 © The
Box: Dom Moore Photography.

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