

Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour

Artwork transcript

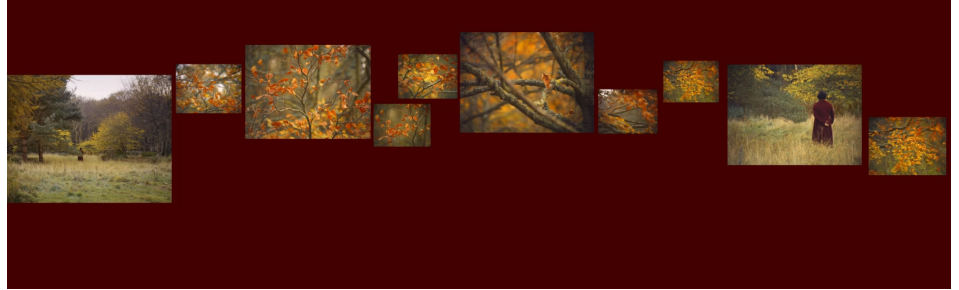
MoMA

Lessons of the Hour. 2019

Ten-channel 4K video and 35mm film transferred to high-definition video (color, sound; 28:46 min.) and 10 projection screens. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the Ford Foundation. © 2024 Isaac Julien. Commissioned by the Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester in partnership with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Images courtesy Isaac Julien Studio; audio transcribed by Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

[Birds singing, footsteps]
[Birds calling]
[Wood creaking]
[Whirling sound like a flock of birds flying in a circular pattern]



[Single low tone]

Frederick Douglass

Several old logs and stumps imposed upon me, and got themselves taken for wild beasts.

[Whip crack]

I could see their legs, eyes, and ears, or I could see something like eyes, legs, and ears, til I got close enough to them to see that the eyes were knots, washed white with rain, and the legs were broken limbs, and the ears, only ears owing to the point from which they were seen. Thus, early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance.

[Wood creaking]
[Sound of stretching and hoisting a rope]
[String instrument plays]
[Birds flying]

[Sounds of cutlery, low piano chords]
[Clock ticking]
[Violin plays Scottish song]
[Piano plays. Footsteps]
[Clock ticking]
[Sewing machine]
[Train engine]



[Rumble of train engine, sewing machine]

Frederick Douglass

Eleven days and a half gone and I have crossed three thousand miles of the perilous deep. Instead of the bright, blue sky of America, I am covered with soft, grey fog. I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man. I gaze around in vain for one who will question my equal humanity, claim me as his slave, or offer me an insult. I am seated beside white people—I reach the hotel—I enter the same door—I am shown into the same parlor—I dine at the same table—and no one is offended...

[Piano plays, sewing machine, train engine and train whistle sounds]

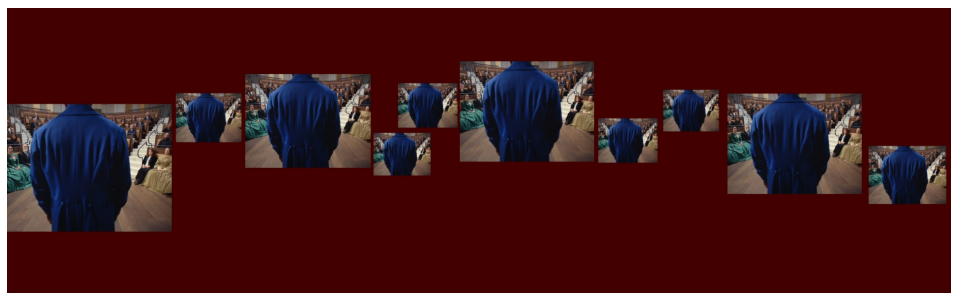


Frederick Douglass

... I am now as you will perceive by the date of this letter in Old Scotland—almost every hill, river, mountain and lake of which has been made classic by the heroic deeds of her noble sons. Scarcely a stream or a hill that is not associated with some fierce and bloody conflict between liberty and slavery.

[String instruments, high-pitched tones]

[Applause]



Frederick Douglass to audience

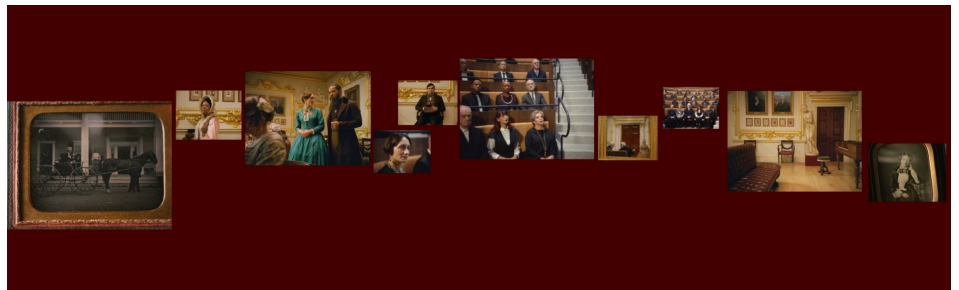
Good day everybody. You know I take it as a compliment to my enslaved race that while summoning men here from the highest seats of learning, philosophy, and statesmanship, you have also summoned one from the slave plantation. On this, the committee of management have, in one act, labeled their course both philanthropic and cosmopolitan.



[Piano plays]

Frederick Douglass to audience

Daguerre, by the simple and all-abounding sunlight, has converted the planet into a picture gallery. Daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, photographs and electrotypes, good and bad, now adorn or disfigure all our dwellings. Men of all conditions may see themselves as others see them. What was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all.



Frederick Douglass to audience

The old commercial maxim that demand regulates supply is reversed here. Supply regulates demand. The facilities for travel has sent the world abroad, and the ease and cheapness with which we get our pictures has brought us all within range of the Daguerreian apparatus.

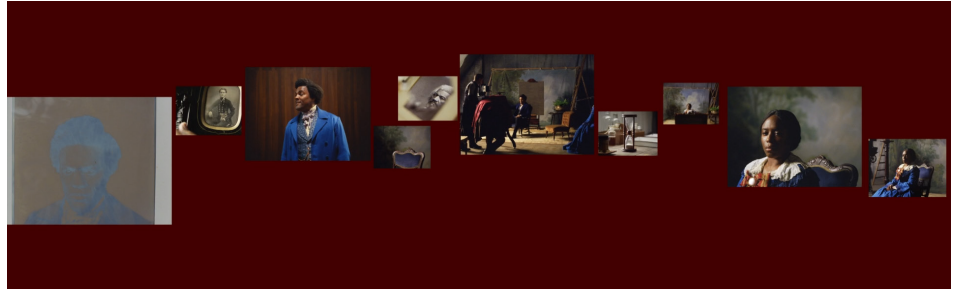
[String instruments, high notes]

Frederick Douglass to audience

As to the moral and social influence of pictures, it would hardly be extravagant to say of it, what Moore has said of ballads: give me the making of a nation's ballads and I care not who has the making of its laws. The picture and the ballad are alike, if not equally social forces—the one reaching and swaying the heart by the eye, and the other by the ear.

[String instruments, high notes]

But next to bad manuscripts, pictures can be made the greatest bores. Authors, editors, and printers suffer by the former, whilst almost everybody has suffered by the latter. They are pushed at you in every house you enter, and what is worse, you are required to give an opinion of them. Pictures, like songs, should be left to make their own way into the world. All they can reasonably ask from us is that we place them on the wall, in the best possible light, and for the rest allow them to speak for themselves.



[Rumbling low tones, high-pitched tones]

Frederick Douglass

Rightly viewed, the whole soul of man is a sort of picture gallery, a grand panorama, in which all the great facts of the universe, in tracing things of time and things of eternity, are painted.

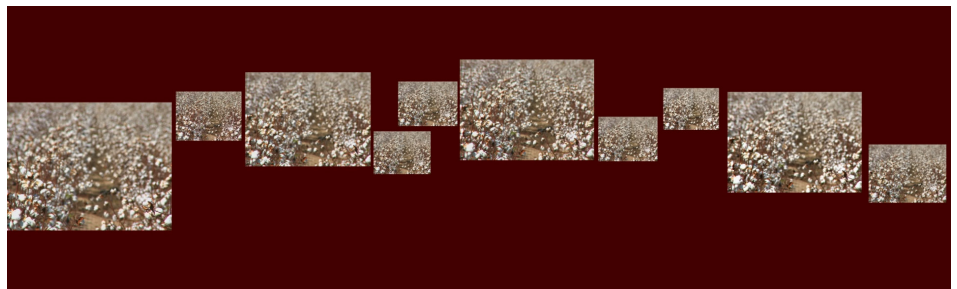
[Water]

The love of pictures stands first among our passional inclinations, and is among the last to forsake us in our pilgrimage here.

It is said that the best gifts are the most abused, this among the rest. Conscience itself is misdirected: shocked by delightful sounds, beautiful colors and graceful movements—but sleeps amid the ten thousand agonies of war and slavery.

[Low buzzing tone]

[Whip cracks × 10]



[Insect sounds]

Frederick Douglass

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and

at night.... She was with me in the night. But long before I waked she was gone. She was a field hand and a whipping was the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise.

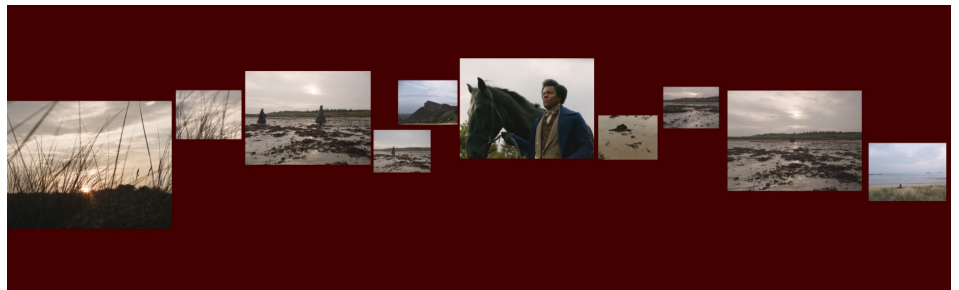
[Waves]



Scottish Woman sings “Send Back the Money”

“Send back the money! Send it back!
Tempt not the Negro’s God
To blast and wither Scotland’s Church
With his avenging rod:
There’s not a mite in all the sum
But cries to Heav’n aloud
For wrath on all who shield the men
That trade in Negro’s blood.”

[Piano plays, high notes]



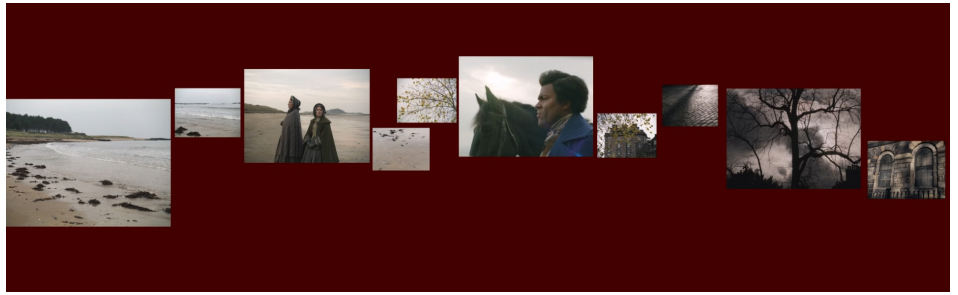
Anna Richardson

Yesterday Eliza and I rose at four and armed with string and staves and with Douglass quite laden down with all the tools we could muster, without alarming the household we set out to climb a fair way up Arthur’s seat.

[String instruments]

Eliza chose the place and wasting not one minute we began to mark out our slogan.

[String instruments]



Scottish Man and Woman sing “My Boy Tammy”

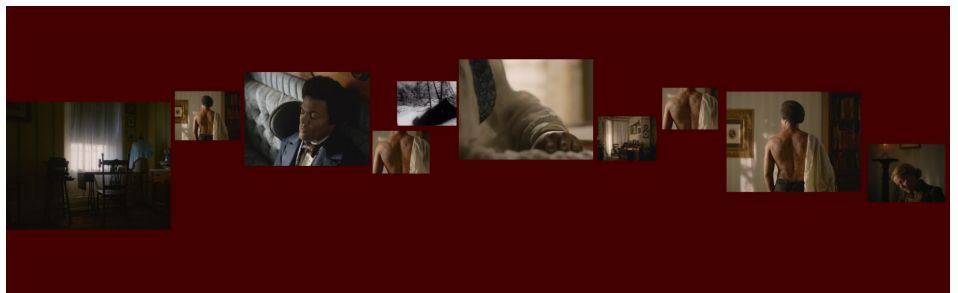
Man (as Tammy)

Waes me! Ye’re getting warm, warm,
My kind Mammy;
Ye’re foamin’ like a keg o’ barm,
My kind Mammy.
[Waves]
[Wind through leaves]

Woman (as Mother)

Shall I, as free as ocean waves,
Shake hands wi’ women’shippin’ knaves,
And build Kirks wi’ the bluid o’ slaves? –
Send back – SEND BACK THE MONEY!

[Instrumental music]
[Thunder]
[Train engine]
[Instrumental music]



Frederick Douglass

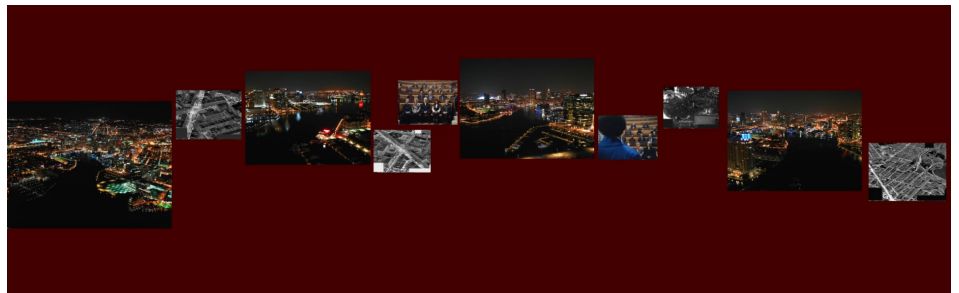
My back is scarred by the lash—that I could show you. I would if I could make visible the wounds of this system upon my soul.

[Instrumental music]
[Door creaking, footsteps]



Frederick Douglass

I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!

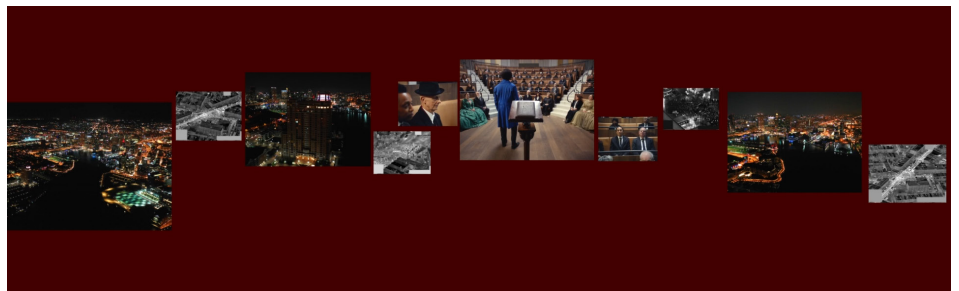


[Electronic sounds]

Frederick Douglass to audience

Ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable—and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, are by no means slight. That I am here today is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude.

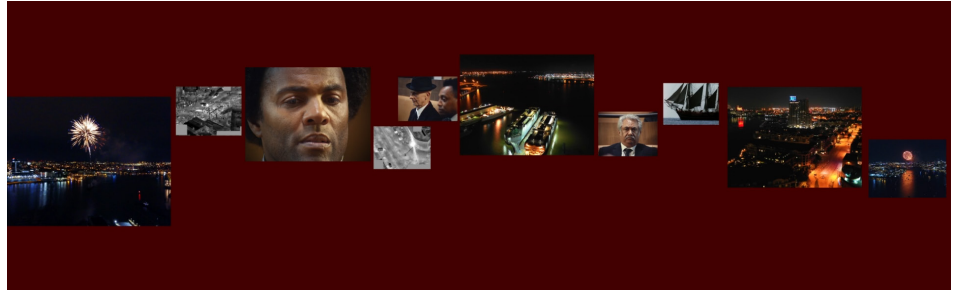
[Helicopters]



Frederick Douglass to audience

The American slave trade is a terrible reality. I was born amid such hellish sights and scenes. As a child, my soul was often pierced with a sense of its horrors. I lived on Philpot Street, Fell's Point, Baltimore, and have watched from the wharves, the slave ships in the Basin, anchored

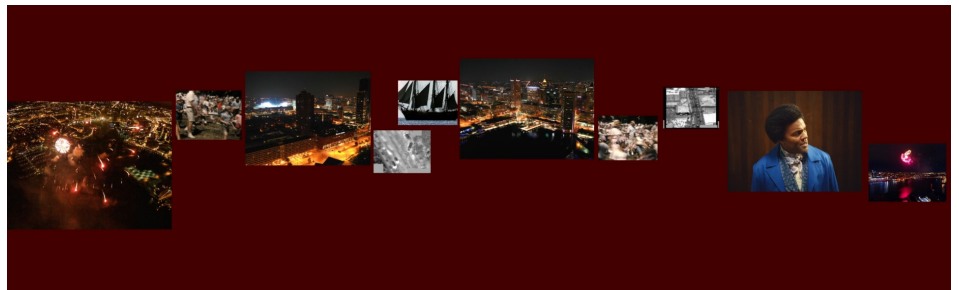
from the shore, with its cargoes full of human flesh, waiting for favorable winds to waft them down the Chesapeake. In the still darkness of midnight, I have been often aroused by the dead heavy footsteps, and the piteous cries of the chained gangs that passed our door.



[Fireworks, explosions]
[Single low rumbling tone]

Frederick Douglass to audience

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your nation's greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery;



[Fireworks, explosions]
[Single low rumbling tone]

Frederick Douglass to audience

Your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody, than are the people in these United States, in this very hour.

[Helicopters]
[Audience applauds, sound fades]



Frederick Douglass

I have now my manumission papers in my possession.... There is nothing that will sting the Americans more than the fact. I left republican America a slave; I returned from monarchical England a freeman...

[Ship whistle]

[Instrumental music]

[Thunder]

[Instrumental music]

[Horse steps]