

Epilogue

Fisheries access agreements (have been) at last recognized as the neo-colonial practices they were. Ever resourceful, though, the EU persists in signing up new fisheries agreements with countries that don't know or don't care what they are letting themselves in for.

Charles Clover: *The End of the Line: How Overfishing is Changing The World And What We Eat* (2004, 45)

'The public... abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences'

Roland Barthes: *Mythologies* (1957, 15)

Diving in 2004 is largely a leisure activity. Big Brands like Mares and Oceanic line up to sell you gear, and Cousteau's early dives have been packaged up by tour companies into glossy brochures. We all have our fridges, hoovers and washing machines. Now we have become so far removed from the meaning of food that 'healthy eating' has ironically been bundled up and sold to us¹. Fish has become the aspirational food of the western diet.

The undersea cities did not get built, but the colonial appropriation of the sea has continued unabated. Technology (increasingly sophisticated echolocation) is now so powerful that fish can be caught right up to within a metre of a reef, and much deeper. Cousteau's cornucopia is almost exhausted².

I visited the Museum of Oceanography in Monaco last year, because Cousteau was associated for many years of his life (1956-88) with it. I went there with high hopes of being inspired, but found it small, tatty, and actually rather depressing. Built long after Cousteau's association with the museum, the centrepiece of the museum is a 400 cubic metre 'lagoon', where powerful strip lighting mimics the light of day. It is populated by sharks, a turtle, big groupers and wrasse, as well as a whole host of smaller fish in small groups. Tourists pass by and have their photos taken in front of basking sharks dozing on the sand. Most of them barely look at the fish. If you do stay long enough, repeated behaviours start to manifest themselves in the tank. Almost metronome-like, the turtle bobs from the bottom of the tank to the top to take a gulp of air, then drops back down again. Two small black-tipped reef sharks patrol, always following the same route, occasionally pestered by a remora. In their very speed, they seem to be threatening attack. Though harmless, they perform a role, in so far as they conform to the *idea* of the shark – fast, dangerous & predatory. It is only when you sit and watch for an extended period of time that this constant movement starts to assume an unnatural air: it is almost autistic, or like the synchronised working of a mechanical watch.

Elsewhere there are mounted sea horses, a colony of stuffed penguins, mats, slippers, handbags made out of seal fur, and handwarmers made out of gulls (see Fig. 1). The recreated deck of the boat 'Hirondelle' is a testament to an effort of preservation and classification. Finally, there is an exhibition of Gyotaku – a Japanese technique whereby coloured inks dabbed onto a thin paper laid over a fish so that a 2-dimensional colour copy of the fish can be made (See Fig 2). This is rather like brass rubbing, but performed on a fish preserved in alcohol, and advertised as 'the best way to immortalise a catch'.



Fig 1.



Fig 2

To a diver, the lagoon is the undersea world as spectacle, and the public ‘abandons itself’ to it. And, to be fair, it is ‘even better than the real thing’³ - you don’t even have to get wet. Like Borges’ kingdom-sized map⁴, the simulation of the fish outlives the fish, and the fish itself is expendable. Thus far has come our alienation from the sea.

Conclusion

‘My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you’.

Dziga Vertov, 1923, quoted in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972, 17)

Benjamin ... is demanding of art a task far more difficult – that is to undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them'.

Susan Buck-Morss: Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered (1993, 124)

I have separated the three personae of Cousteau to fit my various themes, but clearly they co-exist in the same man. I hope that, by passing back and forth between the cultural phenomenon of diving and the surrounding world of significance, I have managed to paint Cousteau and what he produced in this time as living out the contradictions of the age – the engineer-hero who enables the future but longs for the past, the colonizer powerless to resist the lure of consumerism, the ambiguities of empire. Cousteau the Engineer connected with an emergent technological *imaginaire*. Cousteau the Coloniser expressed a truth about empire that the French were trying to efface. But Cousteau the poet expressed something far more substantial that was already present in French Culture. As France, almost overnight, became rational, urban and secular, Cousteau projected onto diving all the things this modern way of being replaced - rural idyll, catholic abyss and brotherhood. So he spoke for a generation both captivated by the promise of technology, but fearful of seeing longer-term truths disintegrate. Between 1953 and 1964 the three pillars upon which France was founded may be interpreted thus: Liberté (both the promise of technologically enabled future, and the freedom to purchase American consumer goods), Egalité (so long as you are male and white) and Fraternité (over perhaps the only post-war certainties, namely the simple pleasures of the everyday).

I suggested in my introduction that Cousteau's scientific methods had come under question. Again, I hope to have demonstrated that his early work was no more a scientific exploration than the early adventures of those associated with the railroads. Cousteau is not Barthes's Jet Man. The jet man remains impervious to us, a silent, god-like figure whose thoughts we cannot see. Cousteau opens his soul, an aquatic Jet-Man with a sense of symbolic power, who paints a romantic and existential heroism.

In my first chapter I suggested that the early experience of diving was a privileged moment in which the alienated sensorium reconnected, however momentarily, with a bigger idea about the world. In this particular medium, I also believe that a reconfigured matrix of the senses enabled a glimpse of that from which it had become alienated. In my third chapter I suggested that the Poet began to explore the expression of an alien subjectivity. From Ecott's 2002 immersion, we see that people are still trying to find the words to express this sense of connectedness.

Susan Buck-Morss, above, explores what she calls Walter Benjamin's 'reconstellation' of the terms of art, politics and aesthetics, with aesthetics interpreted not narrowly as high visual culture, but as the sensory experience of perception. I believe that Cousteau realized the revolutionary potential of film, passed through his new technology, gave voice to his art, enabled a fresh perception of the world, and spoke for a generation. The consequences of our alienation from the sea, judging by the state of the world's oceans today, are political. The terms of our re-engagement may involve us needing to get wet.

References

- Barthes, Roland, 1957. *Mythologies*: Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Berger, John, 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London, Penguin.
- Buck-Morss, Susan, 1993. *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, in *New Formations* #20, Summer 1993
- Clover, Charles, 2004. *The End of the Line: How Overfishing is Changing The World And What We Eat*: London, Random House

Notes

¹ See the plethora of dieting programmes on UK terrestrial TV in 2004, from Fat Club to 'You Are What You Eat'.

² Clover's central argument is that 75% Of the world's fishing stocks are exhausted and may never recover.

³ See Umberto Eco: Faith in Fakes, *Travels in Hyper-reality* (1986, 19).

⁴ In 'Simulacra and Simulation', Baudrillard cites Borges' tale 'On Exactitude in Science' in which a map is drawn to the same scale as the empire it represents. In Baudrillard's reading of the tale, however, the map comes to replace the empire, and the empty sign replaces the real empire that it copied.