

**Aller Voir (Go and See):  
Jacques Cousteau and the French  
Cultural Imagination 1953-1964**

**Grant Venner**

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## Introduction: Into The Blue

*"Rocks covered with green, brown and silver forests of algae and fishes unknown to me, swimming in crystalline water. Sometimes we are lucky enough to know that our lives have been changed, to discard the old, embrace the new, and run headlong down an immutable course. It happened to me on that summer's day, when my eyes were opened on the sea."*

Jacques Cousteau: *The Silent World* (1953, 19)

*"When you swim, you feel your body for what it mostly is - water – and it begins to move with the water around it.... Swimming is a rite of passage, a crossing of boundaries: the line of the shore, the bank of the river, the edge of the pool, the surface itself. When you enter the water, something like metamorphosis happens. Leaving behind the land, you go through the looking-glass surface and enter a new world'.*

Roger Deakin: *Waterlog* (2000, 3)

Jacques Cousteau burst into the public imagination with the documentary film 'Le Monde du Silence', co-authored with Louis Malle. According to the review in *Le Monde* on 17 Feb 1956, it was released in the cinema in 1956 to amazed audiences, won an Oscar in 1957, and was an event of historic significance. As I write, in 2004, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9-11* has just won the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes: Cousteau and Malle's first feature was the last documentary to receive this honour. Just as Moore is endeavouring to bring about a popular revolution (with the purpose of unseating the present US neo-conservative regime) the effect of *Le Monde du Silence* can be thought of as 'revolutionary' to the audiences of the day.

When I grew up in the 1970's, France for me was synonymous with Jacques Cousteau. The France he stood for, the *idea* of France, got to me before the country itself did. The magical journeys he narrated through this strange aquatic world were as fantastic as the world of Marvel Comics or Ray Harryhausen's Sunday matinees. As interest in Cousteau waned and other programming replaced him, so I grew up and forgot about him, but became both a swimmer and a student of French.

'We must go and see for ourselves' ('Il faut aller voir'), Cousteau used to say. These words were repeated, almost verbatim, as the final line of the Luc Besson's 1988 film 'Le Grand Bleu' – a fictionalised account of the Free-Diving rivalry between Jacques Mayol and Enzo Majorca. Go and see' – says Rosanna Arquette to Jacques as she loses him to the sea forever. It was a special film at the time, one of France's greatest ever box-office successes. But it seemed particularly special to me as a swimmer, experiencing it in France, and in French.

Via a first degree in French literature, I came to diving as a leisure pursuit, and most of my experiences of it have been happy ones. Quite the most vivid of these was diving the wreck of the World War II transporter ship *Thistlegorm* in the Red Sea. The wreck lies at 30-40m below, and is not visible from the surface. Out in open sea, mooring is difficult, and entering the water is not without its hazards. Once you are underwater you descend into the murk until, suddenly, the wreck emerges from the gloom below you. The deck has literally peeled back on itself where it was hit by a torpedo (see Fig. 1). What makes this wreck almost unique is its cargo. The cargo hold contains motorbikes, vehicles, weapons. (See Fig. 2) Upright on the sand next to the wreck lies a steam locomotive. Many wrecks are stripped as soon as they are found: this one has been saved as a tourist spectacle. The wreck is full of objects that are naturalised within our consciousness in their normal roles (ships on the surface of the water, motorbikes on roads etc)

and therefore seeing them in this context is profoundly unsettling. The intensity of the dive is a combination of the excitement and the danger of entry, the size and scale of the wreck, the sheer damage caused, the shock of seeing modernity's mighty instruments reclaimed by the sea, and the fact that everything is overgrown with coral and therefore these man-made metal objects seem to have been sculpted by some infernal god of the sea.

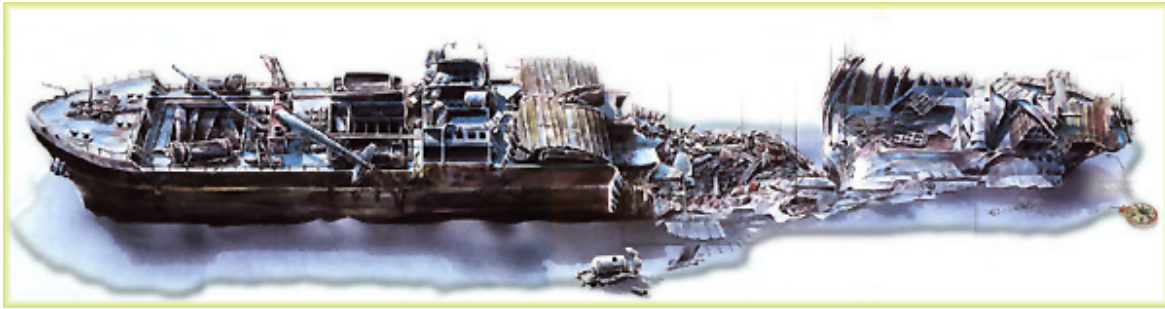


Fig 1



Fig 2

In the 1956 film 'Le Monde du Silence', Cousteau visits the same wreck and, alive to its dramatic potential, rings the (barnacle-encrusted) captain's bell as if summoning the spirits of the dead from their watery grave. It is a powerful moment in the film, and of great personal significance to me given the intensity of the experiences recorded at the same site. It is as if a ghostly bell is being rung at me not only from the past, but from another world.

As I started to dig into early Cousteau material, it became evident that there was an opportunity for a unique, and oblique, piece of cultural history. It is both the early experiences and representation of diving which this dissertation seeks to explore.

## Methodology: Refractions

*'Schivelbusch...writes to recover the subjective experience of the railway journey at the very moment of its newness'...*

Alan Trachtenberg, Foreword to Wolfgang Schivelbusch: *The Railway Journey* (1986, xiv)

*'It... should be possible for the historian to discover the social dimension of thought and to tease meaning from documents by relating them to the surrounding world of significance, passing from text to context and back again until he has cleared a way through a foreign mental world'.*

Robert Darnton: *The Great Cat Massacre* (2001, 6)

This dissertation is first and foremost a cultural history. But it is also a cultural history which is interested in the effects of a new technology as it is introduced. I am specifically intrigued, for the purpose of this dissertation, in a moment of 'step-change' in diving – the moment where Cousteau, with the invention of the aqualung, opened up the sea.

Robert Darnton's 'The Great Cat Massacre' attempts to uncover a history of specific 'mentalités' – or ways of looking at the world<sup>1</sup>. 'Anthropologists', says Darnton, 'have found that the best points of entry in an attempt to penetrate an alien culture can be those where it seems to be most opaque'. (2001: 78). He demonstrates that peasants made sense of the world, with all its unfairness, using materials they had at hand, namely a vast reservoir of tales derived from Indo-European traditions. They were '*good to think with*', he says. (2001, 64). This dissertation will therefore spend time looking at Cousteau is able to deploy to 'think with' as he encounters the undersea world.

One such opacity is a typical criticism held against Cousteau, i.e. the question of how scientifically rigorous his experiments were. Equally, he is criticized for having an unhealthy thirst for publicity. This may be true, but just as Peter Burke warns of the retrospective attribution of our own intentions and values, I must avoid 'the risk of present-mindedness' (1997: 3). The various perspectives or 'refractions' I will cast on the early adventures of Cousteau will hopefully demonstrate that a series of other considerations, quite unique to the time, were in play. These should help to explain the concerns about the validity of this earlier work.

This is also the story of an individual consciousness expressing a new mode of human endeavour. Schivelbusch's 'The Railway Journey' suggests 'that we look for evidence of culture at those minute points of contact between new things and old habits, and that we include in our sense of history the power of things themselves to impress and shape and evoke a response within consciousness' (1986, xv). I have therefore taken Cousteau's experiences to look at modernism eccentrically, that is to say from its edges, or more precisely from the point of view of *an interface* between technology and a much older world. What seems to me to be exciting is that a step-change not unlike that of rail travel should have taken place so recently, and been largely ignored.

I also intend to borrow from the literature of colonialism and postcolonial theory, in particular at the level of discourse<sup>2</sup> and rhetoric. Said's 'Orientalism', for example, focuses on the variety of textual forms in which the West produced and codified knowledge about non-metropolitan areas & cultures. (1978). Derrida's notion of discursive violence: 'a violence of the letter...of difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations' (1976: 107) leads David Spurr to suggest that seemingly innocent texts such as

travel brochures are built upon the same notions as the more evident tools of empire building (1999, 36). Clearly, there is a particular interest for me in evaluating Cousteau's (1964) desire to claim 'for mankind' the entire continental shelf of the Indian Ocean at the very moment that France's colonial empire is disintegrating. In this respect, Kristin Ross's outstanding 'Fast Cars, Clean Bodies' (1995) is a pivotal text to this dissertation, in particular in respect of my first two chapters. Her analysis of the discourse of cleanliness and its deployment in the late stages of empire is an excellent model for much of my analysis.

This dissertation also draws heavily on Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, a collection of essays written around the time of the film *Le Monde Du Silence*. It is an exercise in a nascent semiology, based on the idea that language, because of the arbitrary link between signifier and signified, could be appropriated by powerful groups to create 'myth', which he depicted as 'stolen language'. Myth, he said, served the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie, or those who own the industrial, commercial & political institutions of society. Barthes' approach can be seen as quite revolutionary because he used critical tools hitherto reserved for 'high' art to unpack popular phenomena. In terms of the application of the semiological approach within history, Clifford Geertz has defined culture as 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols'. (1993: 89). Such an approach will allow culture to be interpreted as a symbolic, linguistic and representational system, with the foregrounding of symbols, rituals, discourse and cultural practices into this piece of cultural research. This makes certain moments of this study *interpretive*. As Darnton points out, there are perils in any form of interpretive activity, but there are a number of moments in the books and films of Cousteau where I will be concerned with the production of meaning at a symbolic level and attempt to unpack some of the assumptions encoded within certain scenes. Cousteau's technical importance to the history of diving is matched by the popular language and the imaginary he developed for it. Hence, I will probe the dimensions locked away in statements such as my opening quotation ('my eyes were opened to the sea'). Though the science of semiotics anticipated by Barthes has never quite established itself, his essays nevertheless contains a number of useful perspectives from which to refract my own observations.

## **Sources: Immersion**

Finally, although Cousteau's *oeuvre* in its totality is vast, I will focus on three primary texts. Confusingly, Cousteau brought out a book entitled 'Le Monde Du Silence' (The Silent World) in 1953, then a film of the same name (however with different content) in 1956. The similarly-titled 'Le Monde Sans Soleil' (World Without Sun) followed in 1964.

To add further confusion, my copy of the book of 'Le Monde du Silence' is the English translation, and my videos of the two films are in French. I have endeavoured to quote in the language of the original source text, therefore some quotations are in English and some in French, with translations in brackets.

I researched this dissertation using the British Library's archive of *Le Monde* newspaper in its original French. I also visited the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco, and the Fountain of Vaucluse.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mentalite' translates as 'mentality' but is a much broader notion in French than in English, more akin to the German 'Weltanschauung' or 'way of looking at the world'.

<sup>2</sup> By Discourse I mean Foucault's close scrutiny of power relations (1974) which led him to suggest that there are discourses which codify techniques and practices for the purposes of social control and domination.