

## THE FILM *LEVIATHAN*: AN APPRECIATION

*It opens with a quotation, extremely pertinent to the film, from the Book of Job c.41: "v.31 He maketh the deep to boil like a pot: he maketh the sea like a pot of ointment. v.32 He maketh a path to shine after him; one would think the deep to be hoary. v.33 Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear."*

1

As the earth is made up of four elements, earth, air, fire and water, so film has its own quartet: images, sounds, words, music. At a time when words dominate our understanding of film, of what is spoken and the way words are delivered, how consoling to watch a film composed entirely of images and sounds. Words are heard but they remain indecipherable above the noise of the ship and the noise of the ocean, and even then they sound in an echo chamber, both amplified and muffled, distant yet quite close by, heard definitely but not fathomed, as if ripped from meaning. The current convention would be to saturate the sequences in music, providing an orchestral overlay that supposedly 'glues' everything together, but the film-makers eschew such obvious padding, opting instead for a 'concrete music' of sounds, artfully mixed into the film, transforming the images – as film sound should properly do.

This is a film that purposefully avoids explanation, as if that was to ground the film, to break some essential rule of the game. But we glean this much from what we are shown: *Leviathan* takes as its subject the work of a fishing-boat sailing out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, on the north east coast of north America, a supposition based on the fact that the end credits dedicate the film to a number of fishing boats from there lost at sea in the North Atlantic. That unappeasable sea? Certainly, in view of the deaths it keeps taking, as witnessed in that hyperbolic weepie, *Perfect Storm* (1991), in Robert Lowell's, 'A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' (1948) and, most magisterially, in Melville's 'Moby Dick' (1851).

This makes it sound like a documentary, and indeed it is a film document, a record of actual time spent on a boat fishing in the Atlantic, but that is to box it when some vastier purpose swells inside. It is in the tradition of *Drifters* (1930, marvellous record of the north sea fleet fishing for herring, in a mere pond really), but is much more original. Any tradition of film as a document of what men and women do, culturally and historically, and their reasons for it, and our judgement on it, is pushed aside as unceremoniously as unneeded fish offal spewed into the sea. The film strives to be outside history, outside time even, a camera that happens to intersect with a boat in a particular place at a particular time but which portrays an event as sure as the turning of the Earth, happening each season since men walked upright and began to lord the seas, even as they threatened to prevent him, and do on occasion destroy him. You might think there would be a message about the human rape of the ocean, brutally Hoovering the finny harvest and harrowing the sea floor until all its fruits are gone, but there is – emphatically – no message like that. Instead, it is a story of fish-taking, the difficulty of it, the danger of it, but also the rewards of it. It is a quick step from getting insight into these facts to inventing a God who has made humans lords of creation,

as in Genesis 1.26 "and, God said . . . And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea". But then a century or two of thought inverts this idea: is it not creation that is the lord of humanity? If mankind chooses to destroy itself, then the seas will roll on, and the mountains will stand in their eternal files, obedient to a natural order that paltry *homo sapiens* is unable to upset.

The clue is in the quotation from the Book of Job that opens the film. Chapter 41 is the celebrated chapter of that extraordinary book, for it introduces the readers of the world to the idea of 'leviathan', a Hebrew word (of which my dictionary fittingly says, "ultimate origin unknown" as if it were lost in a pre-Biblical antiquity) meaning a sea monster "frequently mentioned in Hebrew poetry" (my dictionary again). This is a creature whose hugeness is a match for the sea, for he "maketh the deep to boil like a pot," and we are told "he is made without fear". Applying that idea to the film, I conclude that to be an ocean fisherman makes a necessity of fearlessness. For the film-going landlubber on the other hand the natural reaction to *Leviathan* is one of our alarm at the noise of it all: I counted clanking, whirring, wheezing, whistling, thundering, thrumming, throbbing, roaring, although there are not adjectives enough to enumerate all its sounds. And I recoiled at the threat of it all. Item: the glistening ugliness of the fish whose eye-popping heads thrashing hopelessly for life trouble our unconscious. Item: the boiled surface of the water is seen from beneath the waves then the camera lifts above it, affording a glimpse for a fraction of a second of the jigsaw of seagulls, not birds but 'The Birds', silhouetted against the light and in their multitude almost blocking it out in a bid to overwhelm us. And amidst all this pounding menace, who betrays no sense of alarm? The men fishing, earning their dangerous and uncertain livelihood from this surreal harvest, an activity as natural to them as keying figures on a computer is to an accountant. We marvel at their efficiency, in the way they haul the gear about, in the way they gut the fish, gouge the clams, gather shells and so on. And then having done it once, they do it again, perhaps for the 500th time, or even, taking account of the time since man first set to sea in a boat with a hook on board and predatory intent, for the five millionth time. For this is a film about eternity, or as Melville's 'Moby-Dick' puts it in chapter 13 ('Wheelbarrow'): ". . . that one more perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye. Such is the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort."

2

It is a film of images, and many of its images are of light and dark. The clue is in the King James word, 'hoary' (v.32: "One would think the deep to be hoary"). Here hoary means white, and the film is full of whiteness as light - streaked on the screen, smeared on it, bursting upon it in abstract strokes, from which emerge the discernible: fish, birds, waves breaking, men at work, all fighting for a place in the blackness threatening to engulf them all.

This obsession with light as an abstraction suggests a chain of thought: Erigena to Ezra Pound to Stan Brakhage to the makers of *Leviathan*. "All things that are are lights" (the Latin

is a question not a proposition: “Quomodo omnia, quae sunt, lumina sunt?”) was pronounced by the first-millennium metaphysician, Scotus Erigena, and this apothegm makes its way into Ezra Pound's ‘Pisan Cantos’ (Canto 74), published in 1948. Now, Pound was an important figure for the counter-mainstream poetry of Charles Olson, a wild man of American letters and ‘father’ to a school of American poetry, which was then encountered by Stan Brakhage in the 1950s. Brakhage thought he wanted to be a poet first, but took up film-making, while not ignoring the Pound tradition as he did so, as witnessed by his interview with Hollis Frampton from 1972 (published in *Artforum*, January 1973, pp.72 sq.): “. . . It was a long time ago that I was startled by Scotus Erigena’s ‘All things that are are lights.’ Along with all the many gifts of Ezra Pound, this was certainly one of the most startling and immediately meaningful to me.” It is the mastery of this idea in Brakhage’s film-making that links to his jettisoning of renaissance perspective as a ground for vision, and that informs his artistic credo of 1963, ‘Metaphors on Vision’: “Imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.” *Leviathan* inherits that version of camera-eye vision, renewing it by applying it to the digital camera, to make capital out of its virtues and thus embarking on a new adventure of perception: I envisage the film-makers putting it in a waterproof blimp from which it gazes out like a fish in the ocean and then records and records, capturing all that swims into its vision. Nor is it static or stable but it swings and careers through the ship and the sea. If all this turbulence on screen makes you feel a bit seasick, then that is fitting because the single most appropriate adjective for *Leviathan* is ‘visceral’, “affecting the *viscera* or bowels regarded as the seat of emotion” (first meaning, my dictionary again), and second meaning: “Pertaining to the *viscera* of animals”, in other words “the soft contents of the principal cavities of the body”. Fish gutted produce an abundance of *viscera* swilling about in the hold before being sluiced into the sea as seagulls’ treasure: what mankind spurns, gullkind consumes. The sanguinary nature of it all is shown in the dilute blood pouring from the boat into the sea, as if it were a harpooned whale, “spouting out blood and water as it rolls . . . *clamavimus, O depths*”, to quote another masterpiece inspired by the whaling culture of the North East of the USA, Robert Lowell’s poem, ‘A Quaker graveyard in Nantucket’. This is certainly a ‘killer boat’, to recycle the description Olson gives to the tool of the 19th-century whale fishery, in ‘Call me Ishmael’, his pioneering study of ‘Moby-Dick’ (1947).

The placing of the camera where no human eye can go is brought to the fore in two sequences. The first is a close-up of a bird, maybe a large skua that, in characteristically piratical mode, has got into the hold to steal for itself. It struggles to get into a half-barrel, flapping and slipping, the close-up bird disseminating the terror that wild feathers can make, while the camera struggles to follow it. In the second sequence, the camera is used in a particular way to mark an important climax. This time it is static, and is placed beneath a television with its back to it (so we do not see the screen, although we do hear the soundtrack). From this position the camera looks unflinchingly at the captain alone on the mess deck watching the screen, barely moving, and after several minutes, the purpose of

the shot is revealed: his exhaustion makes him drop-off, and produces a 'first' on film as far as I am aware, namely someone not acting falling asleep but actually doing so in front of the camera.

This sequence of the captain falling asleep comes about 70 minutes into a 90-minute film, and lasts 5 or 10 minutes. It therefore constitutes a climax and in effect a deceleration to a halt, except there is a coda to close the film, in which the images revert to their previous frenetic quality, as if to remind us the film is as much an abstract one as an observational one.

Indeed, the film tackles with considerable finesse the question of abstraction. It opens in darkness, assaulting us with sounds not pictures, and from this darkness we see blurs of colour, starting in the corners as in a Morris Louis painting, then gradually occupying the centre of the screen. Eventually, and by no instant process, we decipher the figure of a man in full wet-weather gear reeling in chains, and after this something we cannot determine until it is revealed to us to be a net bulging with fish. This tension between abstractions of light, dark, colour and decipherable activity is maintained through the film (even when the captain takes a shower, a misting up in the shower of the waterproofing blimp envelops him in a fog of indefiniteness) up until the fixed camera watches the captain fixed on watching television, finally resolving an overall tension between optical kinetics, apparently seamless for the most part – where does one shot end and another begin? – and the camera as observer, although, even in this case, answers to questions like what is he watching on TV and what is he thinking and why does he keep peering at that cup are withheld.

The static, focused image of the captain, the most 'documentary' of the film, brings to mind a phrase Bruce Baillie used to describe the appearance of the brakeman in his *Castro Street* (1966). This is another film that combines the recognisable world of rail engines, of wagons, of cabooses, with a parade of abstract colour images that use the device of the matte to flow into, through and over one another. Right at the end, a human figure is discernible, a brakeman used as a silhouette, whom Baillie called "the essential image of consciousness". The captain in *Leviathan* is the same.

3

His exhaustion is our exhaustion too: the sequence offers a welcome repose after so much eyeball-shaking, and if sleep truly is the counterfeit of death, then this is a fitting image to underscore the jeopardy in which these men place themselves. Melville's 'Moby-Dick', which the makers of *Leviathan* surely have at the back of their minds as a spur, is wonderfully eloquent on the Job-like theme of a God beyond human reckoning. For the novel explores a universe that is immense, made of things beyond the reach of those who live on land; it is a trial at articulating human tinyness, a theme which the twentieth century would reveal more deeply still as humans embarked on the exploration of space. Like the makers of *Leviathan*, Melville makes the sea his intergalactic space, and this outer space he parallels in the way he conceives the inner space of God. For example, this finds its way into the description of the mysterious Bulkington in c.27 ('The Lee Shore'): ". . . in landlessness

alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God.” Difficult as it is to grasp, Melville had wonderfully got hold of the idea of a creator far beyond human knowledge. In a letter of 1851 he writes with a touch of humour: “We are inclined to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little information upon certain points Himself.” God is omniscient or at least far more omniscient than we can conceive, but even so this omniscience may not extend to every corner of his creation. From this suggestion of dark, unknowable corners, he takes the step of describing Captain Ahab (in c.41, ‘Moby Dick’) in his obsessive pursuit of the white whale as having within him, like God, something unknowable and therefore frightening: “Ahab’s larger, darker, deeper part remains unhinted.”

In its own filmic way, *Leviathan* has used the blackness of the screen, and in places the blocking out and blacking out of what we see, to describe the unknowability of the universe. These fishermen are heroes in their way, but for the spectator the whole enterprise, even as it lands fish on the table, certainly provides discomfort – and may also be considered troubling.

4

So, credit where credit is due: to Lucien Castaing-Taylor (born in Liverpool) and Verena Paravel (born in France) as directing, filming and editing the film, to Ernst Karel for ‘sound composition: edit and mix/ sound’, and to Dogwoof Productions, a UK film distributor. Considering the narrow criteria used to choose films for us to see in cinemas, it seems to me a miracle that somehow *Leviathan* has breached the rules, like a rare fish found in a bulging net of commonplace ones, and made its appearance in a provincial cinema in the UK.

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