

## ***Tales of a Sea Cow*** **A Fabulatory Science Story**

by Annick Bureau

Once upon a time there were some sea cows placidly grazing in the cold waters of the Arctic Pacific Ocean...

“In ancient times, those creatures called men used to hunt us, until they almost exterminated us. Only a few of our ancestors survived, in Greenland, in the cold waters of the Arctic Atlantic Ocean. We learned to pick up their language, thanks to the strange objects they use to communicate”.

The Steller’s sea cow – is a marine mammal now extinct, exterminated by eighteenth-century man in less than 30 years. Faced with the loss of biodiversity, artists like Brandon Ballangée<sup>1</sup> get involved in real life and explore the ways in which technoscience can make reparation.

Through *Tales of a Sea Cow*, Etienne de France instead chooses to dive into a fabulatory science approach. Neither science fiction, nor mystification, the story unfolds between impossibility and untruthfulness, both explicit from the start. It lies, rather, on the borderline between the possible and the plausible, blending true and false, the codes of art and poetry with those belonging to science, instilling doubt, that very foundation of the scientific method.

*Tales of a Sea Cow* plays upon two dreams, two of human’s desires: the first is to see species that we have destroyed reappear; the second is to understand and communicate with other life forms.

*“Has the human species lost the biological and physiological ability to emit fields of electrocommunication or electrolocalisation, like electric fishes? Does this amputation underlie our invention of radio?”* – writes Louis Bec. Communication and language that pass through the media, and are interpreted by the technosciences, are at the heart of *Tales of a Sea Cow*: they are its central point.

Indeed, it is thanks to recordings and digital analysis of their song – in reality sound creations made by the artist, inspired by the song of the humpback whale – that these mammals can be identified as Steller’s sea cows, and it is thanks to the surprising decodification of the contents of their song that we understand that the story is a fake.

We thus take note of the reappearance of the sea cow and of its migration around the Arctic. We are ready to accept that it is capable of picking up the electromagnetic waves produced by our technological instruments. Indeed, we know that the existence and impact of our acoustic pollution in the undersea environment comprises a reason for ecological concern. But we cannot believe that animals can “talk” about us, still less about our means of communication.

Hidden behind what appears to be an obvious statement, Etienne de France gives shape to a game of Chinese boxes, a *mise en abîme*, whose goal is our vision of the Other, and the position we take towards non-human living beings. When it boils down to it, what do we really know about animal communication? *Tales of a Sea Cow* invites us to reconsider our knowledge, to take another look at our “certainties”, and at the commonplace view that animals are unable to elaborate language or thought, less still to tell stories or construct their own viewpoint about us. To conceive of narration and to give meaning to the world is, according to this view, human’s prerogative.

This attitude is not only dictated by our common sense. It also reflects a dominant scientific position that, likewise, places man at the top of a hierarchy of living beings.

While it acknowledges animal communications, even very complex ones as in the case

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<sup>1</sup> *Praeter Naturam*. Brandon Ballangée, PAV - Parco Arte Vivente, Ed. Eventi & Progetti, Biella, 2010

of dolphins, whales and bees, it still denies the possibilities or the capacity to animals for language and abstraction. Animal behaviour would simply seem to be a response to perception, but not the expression of an act of cognition. Today, this model is contested by some ethologists and philosophers like Dominique Lestel<sup>2</sup>, who take a different approach, hypothesising the existence of animal cultures.

With regard to our desire for interspecies communication, *Tales of a Sea Cow*, not without irony and humour, overturns our typical viewpoint: we study animal communications, and animals study human communications. This reciprocity, which is so hard to accept but which gratifies our narcissism, provides us with that recognition of Otherness that, without denying the differences, splits the vertical hierarchy of the living in favour of a richer horizontal arrangement. To include this viewpoint means accepting the Other.

Etienne de France leaves open the meaning of the presence of our technological communications devices in the animals' song: do they represent Humans from the viewpoint of the sea cow, in an approach that, attractively, is almost McLuhanian? Are these instruments used by those mammals in order to understand us and avoid us or... are they functional to their needs, since they relate to the rhythms of the tides?

In any case, (human) technology is the link between animals and ourselves, and in a sense it brings us closer to the concept of technozoosemiotics proposed<sup>3</sup> by Louis Bec.

Half way between art and science, *Tales of a Sea Cow* borrows elements from zoology, neurology, ethology: but also from information theory and computer science, as well as from various different artistic and aesthetic registers – video, visual and digital arts, music – to weave multiple levels of meaning in a work that appears polymorphous.

The story develops linearly through a film constructed like a documentary, and unfolds in the exhibition space through photographs, charts and various objects that are hard to classify: a false scientific instrument becomes a true sound and visual interactive installation that plays upon an aesthetics of data visualisation that, at one and the same time, is relevant to the technical, scientific and artistic fields. The charts, that are components of the narrative fragmented all over the exhibition, employ the formal codes of informative scientific posters, while at the same time including images that seem to have been designed in virtual worlds like *Second Life*. All these elements are counterbalanced by the aesthetics of the photographs and video material, which introduce a poetic, dream-like although ultra real image, enhanced by the sound – the "song" of Steller's sea cows – by turns enchanting and moving.

While Louis Bec invents digital creatures that do not exist (but that might), and Joan Fontcuberta plays with the mythical by means of his fossil mermaids found in the Alps of Haute Provence, Etienne de France – for his part – proposes a reflection on the anthropocene and on our impact on the environment. But he has in common with the former two artists the humour that runs through all of his artistic research, and of which a piquant example is the explanation of "the vibrissa, the natural link with human telecommunications" escribed in the panel illustrating the neurological structure of the rhytine.

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<sup>2</sup> Lestel Dominique, *Les origines animales de la culture*, Paris, Flammarion, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Bec, Manifesto on the occasion of the exhibition *Les 6 jours de la peinture*, Salle Vallier, Marseille, October 1976: "Technozoosemiotics lies at the cross-roads of semiotics, ethology, cognitive science, the technologies, computer science and experimental artistic practices. [...] Technozoosemiotics tends to establish unusual links in the production of signs, if possible intelligible ones, between different living and artificial species. It suggests that a rationale of living beings exists that aims at establishing interspecies communication, extended to the whole set of living organisms of the biomass, and of which the human species might be one of the determinant agents."

Free of guilt-laden or moralistic approaches, *Tales of a Sea Cow* is a tongue-in-cheek and joyous but unsettling fable. Today, when science is both contested and considered something of a new oracle *Tales of a Sea Cow* invites audience to make use of its intelligence, critical spirit and sensitivity. It gives us a mirror and an acting-out of our desires, of our phantasms, of our contradictions: it overturns the way we look at the living.