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## **It takes six strong men to lift the heart of a single whale**

Whaling has shown the extreme cruelty of human civilization, a scar that burns back in the documentary *Antarctic Traces* by director Michaela Grill

Seven thousand bottles to contain the blood of a single whale. A whole rail car by length. All the candles of St. Peter's Basilica, lit in a century, to exhaust the fat under the skin. And just a year to kill more than forty thousand off South Georgia.

On this island north of the Antarctic, between 1912 and 1970, whaling proved the extreme cruelty of human civilization. It was the Whaling Industry.

Antarctica has a toponymy by contrast. Antarctica is "the opposite of Arctic", as if this were enough to exhaust its meaning.

Tyrant is the first he names, as tyrannical is the now opaque name of the sperm whale: the etymology tells not its value in itself, but its function from a viewpoint of specifically human exploitation, paraphrased in "forehead rich in lubricants for watches". Oil. Candles. Bra sticks. Rods for sun visors. Gray ambers for perfumes. Feed for chickens. Fertilizers for crops. Belts. Glossy for photographs. Excipients for vitamin supplements. Margarine.

This. All of this served to drain the South Seas of cetaceans as big as cathedrals; dissecting, cooking, drying and then stacking the parts in storages of silent matter that a little earlier swam in the blue depths of an unsuspecting existence.

The first whaling station, founded by Carl A. Larsen, a Norwegian explorer, was called Grytviken. To visit it today is a cemetery of metal ossified by rust, of large femurs corroded by salt.

Not far from here is the tomb of Ernest Shackleton, another explorer from the Far South. His expedition aboard the *Endurance* spoke of the other story that could have been told. Of men who limited themselves to discovering without the anxiety of conquering; moved by knowledge of the watery part of the world like Ismael and not by plunder like Ahab.

**In Antarctica, all gestures are a scar, a fatal incision. Yet Michaela Grill has gone right into that arid frost to collect the remains of a story that time is consuming due to litholysis. Hence his masterpiece, *Antarctic Traces*.**

Antarctica is a bite of land that gathers ghosts, a desert in which you either get lost or find yourself. The Austrian director's camera returns it to motionless images, while a voiceover arrives with the unstoppable nature of an unruffled nature in its indomitable inhospitality.

It is the first time, Michaela tells me, that a dialogue between words and images finds space in her works. Out of urgency to say what, in the mystical imagination on the Southern Routes, had been all too omitted. To the point that even the only ships that today allow a tour of the island prefer not to even touch them with their eyes, those bays abandoned to themselves, of helpless nature.

Still life is only the rough translation of what Dutch painters called "The Silent Life of Things".

In the midst of these ice floes, lives have been rather silenced. Of the whale song remains the morna of loss that echoes in the word "whale" its nefarious fate, "wail", the last moan.

Like what you can only imagine after a fragmentation bomb explodes in the body leaving it at the mercy of a fire inside that there is no water that can extinguish, and it can be up to nine hours before the urge to live leaves its hold and , belly up in a crimson foam, surrender to his fate.

Whales are wonderful gregarious creatures, their neural circuits evolved to create double-knot bonds with clan members. Each one has its own language and culture, patiently taught in matrilineal ways. The pain of the loss of the other is a wound that leaves deep marks, and of mourning they explain "their voice as ancient as the language of the sea".

Even Irish whalers, in order not to die of nostalgia for their loved ones, raised Sea Shanties, in the crack of a heart that trembled like a glacier not to break.

An old whaling song in particular, "Paddy and the Whale", tells of a careless sailor who ends up in the throat of a whale and he too, like a new Jonah, at a certain point resurfaces.

The mythology about whales traces the indulgent and maternal soul of those who give a possibility of rebirth, of newfound candor.

"The whiteness of the whale" is the title of the 41st chapter of Moby Dick. White opal is the intensifying agent in things, what attracts most.

Looking at white too much, however, dazzles us. The afterimage remains, the residual image. A purplish phosphene, like Emily Dickinson's whale, in her chromatic rewrite of Jonah.

Throughout the documentary, whales are the semantic a-priori but they never appear, if not at the end, in archive photos, grainy and terrible.

Absence remains to clutter throughout the documentary.

The ghost world that we - ourselves - have canceled.