

ALLAN SEKULA: TITANIC's wake

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Los Angeles, July – September 2000

Early in 1997, I photographed the Mexican film set for *Titanic*: this was part of an earlier project called *Dead Letter Office*, a title owed obliquely to Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Bartleby's mysterious refusal to work may have begun with his job as a post office clerk sorting undeliverable mail. Re-reading the story, I suddenly imagined that it was difficult and even spiritually challenging to send a letter the short distance from Tijuana to San Diego, even if Hollywood movie-making had crossed the line.

Seeking to profit from lower Mexican wages, Twentieth Century Fox built the set next to the poor fishing village of Popotla, on the Baja California coast about forty miles south of the US border. The production facility features the largest freshwater filming tank in the world, bigger even than the one used in Malta to film *Popeye*. The neighboring village, just to the south of the walls and guard towers of the set, has no running water. Efflux from the filming tanks has lowered the salinity of the coastal tide pools, damaging the traditional mussel-gathering livelihood of the villagers.

The lugubrious arrogance of *Titanic* intrigues me. Is it a symptom of something larger? We peer morbidly into the vortex of industrialism's early nose-dive into the abyss. The film absolves us of any obligation to remember the disasters that followed. Quick as a wink, cartoon-like, the angel of history is flattened between a wall of steel and a wall of ice. It's an easy, premature way to mourn a bloody century.

Or maybe, more innocently, the movie is a bellwether of good-hearted American neoliberalism. When James Cameron accepted the first of his academy awards for the film, he thrust his Oscar statuette into the overheated air above the podium and bellowed out a line from the film: "King of the world." (Later, looking slightly abashed, he asked for a moment of the silence for the long dead passengers and crew.) Curiously, Cameron borrowed his triumphal line from Benjamin Britten's 1951 opera based on Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd*. Budd innocently exalts, even as he is shanghaied and set upon a path that leads to the yardarm. Could it be that Cameron secretly wanted to remake *Billy Budd*, or that he thinks of himself as the "handsome sailor" even more than he identifies with the cocky young artist played by Leonardo DiCaprio? It's a strange thought: Melville's (and Britten's) bleak, womenless, and covertly homoerotic parable—a tale of goodness flawed, evil intractable, a guilt-ridden captain—reworked to attract a repeat audience of prepubescent girls.

Five or ten years ago, I was confident that the sea had disappeared from the imaginative horizon of contemporary elites. Now I'm not so sure. The sea returns, often in gothic guise, remembered and forgotten at the same time, always linked to death, but in a strangely disembodied way. One can no longer be as direct as Jules Michelet was in his 1861 book *La Mer*, which begins with a blunt recognition of the sea's hostility, its essential being for humans as the "element of asphyxia". And yet Bill Gates buys Winslow Homer's *Lost on the Grand Banks* for more money than anyone has ever paid for an American painting. Frank Gehry builds a glistening titanium museum that resembles both a fish and a ship on the derelict site of a shipyard driven into bankruptcy by Spanish government policy, launching a new aerospace tourist future in the capital of one of the world's oldest maritime cultures. It was the Basques, after all, who probably discovered America, but they preferred to keep a secret and return without competition to the rich cod-fishing grounds of the North Atlantic.

For all of its acclaimed "vitalism," its primal links to the doomed carp swimming in Gehry's grandmother's bathtub in Toronto, the Guggenheim Bilbao is more accurately likened to a gigantic light modulator, introducing the inhuman glare and specular highlights of the Los Angeles cityscape into the muted tertiary palette of the deindustrialized Basque capital. By coincidence, one notices a certain corrosive potential: on the west flank of the museum, in the container transfer terminal, sit large cylinders of hydrofluoric acid, the extremely nasty agent used to dissolve titanium.

These photographs were made between the early spring of 1998 and the last day of 1999. Some were made during a residency at the Atelier Calder in Saché, France. Alexander Calder, who went to sea as a young man, and whose adolescence coincided with the last years of square-rigged merchant sailing vessels, translated the simple but profound motor logic of the wind, canvas, and rope into the sheet metal and cut steel of modernity. Like ships, mobiles go round in circles in ways that museums, however ship-like, don't.

Saché is linked to the sea through one of the tributaries of the Loire, and both the verdant encapsulation of this world and its connectedness to empire were traced much earlier by Balzac, drinking dangerous amounts of coffee and writing novels of unrequited desire and emergent capitalism late into the night just across the river from where Calder was to build his studio and tinker with wire and scraps of metal.

Other photographs were made in Seattle, and in Novorossiysk on the Black Sea, Russia's last remaining ice-free port: I can easily be accused of being all over the map. In fact, I spent good parts of 1999 tracking a redeemed rust-bucket freighter, the *Global Mariner*, on a curious snail-like circumnavigation, as it carried in otherwise empty cargo holds a remarkably installed exhibition about working conditions at sea. As Jimmy McCauley, the ship's Glaswegian quartermaster, put it: "A *Titanic* happens every year, but no one hears about it." All told, the ship visited some 78 port cities around the world, from Cape Town to Vladivostok, anticipating and encapsulating the critique of globalization that would erupt on the streets of Seattle last November. So there was something unwittingly apt in the nervous metaphor offered by the *New York Times* headline: "Shipwreck in Seattle".

The thread that links these pictures twists round a memory voiced by Miren del Olmo, trade union activist and chief mate aboard the *Global Mariner*. A Basque from a poor fishing village on the outskirts of Bilbao, daughter of a retired shipyard worker, she recalled crossing the Nervión river on her way to English class one Saturday in the late 1980s, preparing for the *lingua franca* of a life at sea. Looking back at the Puente de la Salve that ten years later would be incorporated into Frank Gehry's design for the Guggenheim, she saw the suspended roadway and steel towers suddenly disappear in a fog of tear gas, as displaced welders and shipwrights – her father's comrades – battled with the riot squads of the Guardia. When she finished this story, standing watch late one December night on another sort of bridge, as the *Global Mariner* plowed through the winter swells of the Black Sea, following the line of flight taken almost a century earlier by the mutinous battleship *Potemkin*, she commented that she had yet to spend enough time at home to be able to visit the new museum. But in her unprofessional opinion, speaking frankly to an American, it looked like it had been built "from every can of Coke drunk in Bilbao".

As Bartleby put it to his boss: "I would prefer not to". On August 3, 2000, having completed its mission as a good ship, an exemplary ship, a ship representing all the other invisible ships of the world, the *Global Mariner*, bearing a cargo of steel coil, was rammed and sunk at the mouth of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, not far from the fictional refuge of Robinson Crusoe, another *isolato* from an earlier mercantile era.