

A Red Whale Dream

A sonic tribute to Moby Dick

By Daniel Bilenko

Editing: Alessio Sturaro

Original music: Ignazio Parisi

English version: Patricia Ranzi-Gedey



"A Red Whale Dream", mixed technique of oil pastels and watercolor crayons, original 30x70 cm (Davide Giovanzana)

Synopsis

A mastodontic red sperm whale in an aquarium: this is the beginning of our sonic (and partly underwater) story. It starts with a dream. A strange dream to decipher, born of an obsession. Not the fixation of a whaler, but of a man who, perhaps unprepared, ventures into a hunt without harpoons. What meaning does it hold? And could it possibly... Could it ever come true?

Precisely 200 years after the birth of Herman Melville, an attempt at *ars combinatoria* is applied to cetaceans and their top representative, Moby Dick. This is not a nightmare, but rather a sort of conscience flow of dialogue with scientists, entrepreneurs, artists and singing marine creatures.

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Script

00'00''

DREAM - Soundscape

AUTHOR It's... it's huge, gigantic! It's the first thing I pick up, even before I know what it is. I understand that it is *huge* and that it is underwater. Alive.

An underwater living creature, moving and swimming in front of my very eyes.

I don't feel threatened.

DREAM - Soundscape

00'54''

AUTHOR Only glass stands between us...

I'm standing there, and just in front of me is this gigantic, swimming creature. I can't make out its shape, it's still too close. It keeps gliding and gliding and gliding, very slowly before my eyes. I can see its skin... it looks reddish, and it's not smooth. This reddish skin appears furrowed, covered with bumps, lumps, crusty bits (actually crustaceans) and marked by long, dark streaks...

01'41''

I don't know why, but I know, I *feel* that these must be the scars of past, terrible wounds...

Perhaps a ship's propeller, a giant squid or a harpoon?

The creature swims further and, as it moves away, the distance allows me to gradually discern its shape and sense what it is. It's a whale! A huge red whale in an oversized marine aquarium.

I rest my hand on the glass. The whale turns around and slowly swims towards me.

DREAM – Music soundscape

02'33''

-TITLE -

A Red Whale Dream

A sonic tribute to Herman Melville and Moby Dick

by Daniel Bilenko and Alessio Sturaro

AUTHOR Relax! Relax! It's just a dream... it's just a silly dream... What is it?... I mean, the dream. Why? Why did I dream it? Where does it come from?... And what does it mean?

Change in atmos and tone

AUTHOR So, about where it came from... actually, it takes me no time to understand where this strange red whale dream comes from. If my mind has generated this *thing*, this scene, it's because of my boss who, a few months ago, asked me to do a "piece" on Moby Dick since its author, Herman Melville, was born exactly - and I mean exactly - 200 years ago. He, that is my boss, hasn't got the time to do anything about it, but it may be worth having something done.

I would have liked to have said "I would prefer not to" (to cite another of Melville's characters, Bartleby the scrivener): I should have said I didn't feel up to doing a piece on Moby Dick, as Moby Dick is an impossibly long novel... What's more, everything has already been said about this creature... but I couldn't tell my boss that, could I?

You don't argue with the boss.

04'04''

MOBY DICK Theme Song – Miles Davis

AUTHOR My boss *loves* Moby Dick. He must have read this novel five times. Or maybe more than that. He even used it as the title of a radio show.

He's crazy about Moby Dick; keeps talking about it.

SCENE with the Boss

BOSS ...It's the largest among whales. It must be a male whale as it's even called *sperm* whale in English.

WOMAN ...I've never thought of it as a *she*.

BOSS Sure, but in Italian we say "la" balena, i.e. "she-whale", you see...

WOMAN I never thought of that.

BOSS But I was asked the question while... *on air*!

WOMAN Good heavens! Tough question!

BOSS And Umberto Eco thanked me.

WOMAN You taught him something.

BOSS Yeah, I had underestimated myself until then.

WOMAN So you gave him a good explanation.

BOSS Yeah, it was very exciting...

04'52''

AUTHOR You've just heard my boss's voice. I've recorded him secretly with my phone in the office corridor, just to show you how much my boss talks about Moby Dick. A lot, and I must say, in quite an original way.

***Moby Dick* song by the band Banco**

Instrumental

AUTHOR Like, I don't know if you got this, but he was explaining to a famous professor of literature that Moby Dick is not a female, but a male.

***Moby Dick* song by the Banco band**

Lyrics: "Grande Moby Dick, dove saranno tutti gli amanti che hai..."

(Great Moby Dick, where are all of your *male* lovers...)

AUTHOR Moby Dick is a song by the Italian band Banco del Mutuo Soccorso, or simply *Banco*... I heard it on the radio for the first time when I was 10. It was back in 1983, and I loved the song.

***Moby Dick* song by the Banco band**

Lyrics: "Grande Moby Dick, regina madre che segui le stelle che sai..."

(Great Moby Dick, queen mother, follow the stars you know...)

AUTHOR Anahi was born on 1984, one year after this song came out.

Atmos Milan – UNDERGROUND

AUTHOR Anahi is an artist friend of mine who now lives in Milan.

WhatsApp Anahi:

“Sorry, hmm... Hi Daniel, hello, sorry, I didn’t hear the... er... phone. I was straightening out some stuff around the house, and, well, I’ll see you at the er... Duomo, near the underground stop, the bike station, next to... hmm, er, I’m not sure... not far from... no... whatever, in any case, just at...hmm, I don’t know where exactly, close to... anyhow, at the... not where the... “

AUTHOR The directions given by Anahi for an appointment in downtown Milan are longer than the unabridged version of Moby Dick, and I’ll spare you the details. However, one should not be led to think that Anahi is not blessed with the skills for synthesis.

In fact, this lady was able to condense Moby Dick into a single public reading lasting under 60 minutes, based on three different translations.

With this performance, she toured earthquake struck areas of Italy: because Moby Dick is *also* about the conflict of man vs Nature.

07'15''

ANAHI It was a powerful experience because you go to places where life is no longer viable, where there are no homes. There's nothing left. As if the mountain or nature had gobbled up everything in its huge maw. You feel helpless with these people watching you, their eyes full of fear, but also with a kind of... strength, the strength of survivors, of those who are willing to take more chances: "You see, I was born here; this is my land."

First, we met the children. Children experience everything as a game. Somehow, they're like little seamen who have fought against frightening whales, but nevertheless return to the sea to play.

Excerpt from the film "Moby Dick" by John Houston, 1956

08'24''

AUTHOR For many of us who haven't read the novel, "Moby Dick" is an old adventure film which we would see at the parish theatre or watch on TV at impossibly late broadcasting hours.

Excerpt from the film "Moby Dick" by John Houston, 1956

AUTHOR The film came out in 1956, the result of an obsession of director John Houston who is said to have memorized all 822 pages of the book and had dreamt for years of putting it on the big screen.

The film was a flop, meaning it cost more money to make than it took in, like the novel itself which took ages since its publication in 1851 before it was acclaimed and hailed as a universal masterpiece. It brought its author a paltry 500 dollars and little recognition in his lifetime.

Excerpt from the film “Moby Dick” by John Houston, 1956

09’28’’

AUTHOR In some way, it was Melville’s expressed wish for the novel to appear like the whale came into sight before the narrator, Ishmael, and the whaler captain Ahab: a faceless entity, conceived to encourage the imagination and discourage close combat.

In other words, a creature that is difficult, if not impossible, to classify...

DREAM – Music soundscape

09'55''

AUTHOR (mulling) ...Sperm Whale, sperm, sperm is sperm... Moby Dick... dick, Moby Dick, male or female, clearly male... yet it may also be a female...
Why is the novel titled "Moby Dick or The Whale" when actually it's a sperm whale, which technically is *not* a whale but an *Odontocetus*, i.e. a water mammal, similar to an orca... or a dolphin, as it has teeth. Ah, it escapes me, it eludes me... that darn whale!

DREAM – Music soundscape

AUTHOR Here comes the dream again... like the last one, only more static.
The red whale doesn't move, her mouth facing me. She's watching me. And I'm watching her. She's in the tank. I'm standing outside...

End of the DREAM

AUTHOR Now, as I've tried to explain, the origin of this initiating dream is clear, and possibly somewhat banal. THE REAL question that comes to mind is this: what can be dreaming of a red whale in a tank possibly mean?

MUSIC – The Shape of Water

AUTHOR To find out the meaning of a dream you need a shrink. The only one I know is on holiday, but I'll call him anyway.

11'43''

PSYCHOANALIST ON THE PHONE

SHRINK The image you've described, that of a red whale caught in a tank, has stayed with me over the last few days, partly because I'm now on a seaside holiday on a sprawling beach. But why did you call me? My impression is that the dreamer, yourself, is a kind of postmodern Ahab. We know about modern-time Ahab. It's the big battle against evil, the big battle against pervading technology and destiny... all these things that were said and discussed when Melville's book was first published. In other words, Ahab is like a tragic hero of modern times. However, in your dream, you make a completely opposite transposition. You imagine you have captured the whale (which in this case is red, I'm not sure if it is blushing from shame or coyness): you've captured it and you've turned it into something very important. You've put it in a tank, and this is the reason why I refer to this image as that of a postmodern hero who succeeds in capturing, trapping, subduing and taming – use any word you wish – and there's this tank in which this enormous monster, that is greatly feared, the symbol of terror in the oceans, is somehow tranquillized... I don't know if it's because they've given it some psychoactive drug to show our kids how dangerous they used to be, how grand all these species from our oceans were, not only those I'm looking at now, watching the Mediterranean, but the oceans we have within ourselves, that are much deeper and wider.

MUSIC – The Shape of Water

&

Excerpt from “Pinocchio” by Walt Disney, 1940

14’36’’

AUTHOR The very first film I ever saw in a theater as a child was Walt Disney’s Pinocchio. I remember my brother taking me, I was 4 at most.

I don’t know if you remember, but after escaping from Pleasure Island, Pinocchio finds himself in the sea where he is gobbled up by a kind of whale. *A kind of whale.*

In the original book by Collodi, in the children’s story which was published in instalments in 1881, the creature was described as “a shark larger than a five-story house, with a mouth so large and deep that it could easily fit a train”.

A whale of a shark, so to say.

In the cartoon, the creature has a huge head and teeth, no baleens. It’s much like a sperm whale. In other words, Disney got his inspiration from Moby Dick.

Excerpt from “Pinocchio” by Walt Disney, 1940

15'36''

Phone call to Schimpf, the man who was swallowed by a whale

...brief conversation in English with Mrs. Schimpf ...

AUTHOR (pondering) I'm really curious to find out what he has to say...
A survivor...
He's no Jonah, no Pinocchio...

SCHIMPF ... Hello?

AUTHOR Oh, hello.

SCHIMPF ... Yes, it's Rainer here.

AUTHOR Are you the man that was eaten by a whale?

SCHIMPF Yes... The inside Man...

16'24''

South African TV breaking news

AUTHOR Rainer Schimpf is an expert underwater diving instructor. He lives and works in South Africa.

He doesn't want me to record our conversation; he no longer trusts journalists, as many have distorted his truly incredible story.

Off the record, he explains that he will answer written questions via audio messaging.

SCHIMPF ... ***WhatsApp chats***

...

18'12''

AUTHOR To sum up: off Port Elizabeth, in the Indian Ocean near the South African coast, Rainer Schimpf was filming a school of sardines when he felt a vortex forming below his fins and an 11 meter long Bryde's whale opened its jaws for lunch, sucking him in, as his wife was watching and his friend Heinz Toperczer was taking pictures from the diving boat.

The whale, not finding human flesh palatable, quickly spat out the diver.

So, from Collodi's pen dipped in Melville's Disney-colored ink –and recalling the memorable biblical pages of Jonah— up to today's reality... Rainer Schimpf actually lived through the "tale" ... unruffled!

He maintained his cool, swam to his boat, and without even fixing his diving suit, dived into the ocean to better document those 2 seconds of his marine miracle...

The theory of the whale in the tank - AQUATIS

Sound of aquarium ventilation

19'34''

AUTHOR Switzerland is not a country for whales. It has neither a sea nor a coastline. Only freshwater shores and Western Europe's largest lake, Lake Lemman, sometimes incorrectly called Lake Geneva...

Believe it or not, when I look at this lake on a map, I see... a whale. Yes, this job is getting to me.

I swear, if you look at it from above, Lake Lemman eerily resembles a whale as it emerges from the water and arches its back before it dives back into the deep...

Well, yes, I've told you so... I'm clearly losing my mind, like captain Ahab, and that psychoanalytic interpretation may have been dead on... I'm becoming obsessed.

Lift / "Aquatis" announcement in French / the doors are closing opening...

AUTHOR To return to sanity I set out to the lakeshore.

Yeap, because Lausanne has recently witnessed the opening of Aquatis, a state-of-the-art aquarium. Waiting for me are three of the aquarium's specialists: Sara Tocchetti, Michel Ansermet and Adrien Martinotti.

WOMAN The Aquatis project was conceived 17 years ago by two French engineer-aquariologists with the aim of setting up a place dedicated to creating awareness and sustainable development through freshwater ecosystems. They used the topic of freshwater at an environmental as well as social level in order to sensitize the public at large. Clearly, you had to have animals, fishes, amphibia and reptiles. This was achieved with the integration of the Lausanne Vivarium in order to attract visitors and publicize this concept.

MAN Hmm, of course, it's a huge evolution. When people of our generation think of a zoo, we picture a small enclosure with a tiger pacing to and fro... But things have evolved since the 1800s, when families brought in animals from Africa. And I'm talking about large animals, not some small endangered fish, but lions, elephants... animals that fascinated the public. In the 1850s, Africans were encaged and exhibited to show their way of life, something which is inconceivable nowadays.

If we imagine displaying a whale in a zoo in the 1800s, it would be in a tank where it couldn't even move or turn around, with a tube to allow it to breathe.

22'12''

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, approximately 100 years later, you could see this whale in an Olympic-size tank where it could barely turn around.

Present zoology doesn't allow keeping a whale captive because it is an animal that travels for miles in its natural quest for food, and probably also following magnetic fields, which would be impossible to recreate in captivity. This animal could never be kept in captivity.

ATMOS DREAM

AUTHOR So, my dream of the gigantic red whale in an oversized tank has no connection with reality. Moreover, it is now clear that, besides having a large enough tank like the one in my dream, there is also the problem of transport, which my dream mercifully does not deal with...

Yet this problem is only seemingly insurmountable...

ATMOS DREAM

Mr. Rezzonico & Goliath

23'19''

REZZONICO It was a monster exhib*... * (Untranslatable pun: in Italian "mostra" means both "female-monster" and "exhibition")

AUTHOR A she-monster or a he-monster?

REZZONICO No, an educational exhibit...

AUTHOR Oh, I see, I just thought...

REZZONICO It was a male. When they were exhibiting it in Paris on the Esplanade des Invalides, the whale's penis was stolen. It normally measures 2 meters in length and, when erect, up to 5 meters.

AUTHOR ...Goliath!

REZZONICO Goliath (laughing), that's why it was named Goliath, poor thing, and they didn't only take away its eye... Still, it was ok, it traveled through more countries over land than when it was alive. After Switzerland and France, we found out that there were no other countries to go to because other whales had already been there, Jonas, Hercules, Miss Aroy and Moby Dick...

(MOBY DICK Theme – Miles Davis)

AUTHOR ...Did you hear that? Even Moby Dick.

In Italy, the novel gained popularity only much later. It came out at the height of the Fascist period thanks to the writer and Anglicist Cesare Pavese. He was just over 20 and earned a mere 500 liras for his translation of Melville's novel. Since then, there have been other translations, other whales and other hunting expeditions.

24'47''

In the 1950s, the rage in Europe culminated in a sort of Whale war. Embalmed whales were taken on the road by quite a number of entrepreneurs perennially in search of fortune, post litteram whalers like Jean Rezzonico, now 85, and his Goliath, the whale he acquired in Trondheim, Norway, which he carried around for years on a long trailer.

REZZONICO After Finland, we arrived in Switzerland. At customs, the whale became Swiss! They put this thing around its mouth, with a lead seal, a Swiss seal... At that time the whale looked disgusting... it was dirty. During the entire trip, we had to repair this, fix that, change a tire, change another tire... we went through all sorts of things. It was a mess, and when we arrived in Budapest, they put it in a park, a large public park.

AUTHOR Did it stink?

REZZONICO ...Er, but not too much, sort of normal, but it was dirty, nothing looked right. But on the opening day, we were ready. We washed it, sprayed it with formalin and some glycerin. It looked quite good. On the first day, there were 14,000 visitors. 14,000 in one single day! And it went on for one month with an average of 10,000 tickets a day. 10,000! Every day! Figure it out yourself. No show has ever had comparable success.

26'30''

AUTHOR The world's largest creature both in nature and in Western imagination turned into a portable source of entertainment...

A show lasting only a few minutes, motionless and silent.

What an ironic destiny for our Moby Dick.

ATMOS SHIP

Since my encounter with Jean Rezzonico I only dreamt of my red whale once...

Last dream – Soundscape

AUTHOR ...and now we are swimming together, the whale and I, side by side, me ridiculously small... we're free... and I hear it sing ...

WATER / WHALES & ...

...But we're not alone in the deep blue...

DRILLING – AIR GUN

27'48''

AUTHOR To keep us company, along with the songs and codas of fellow sperm whales, there are underwater earthquakes, ships polluting the equivalent of millions of cars, oil drilling, air guns generating compressed air bubbles, disorienting low frequency waves, a sound magma even more scary than harpoons. At least harpoons one can face... or flee...

Ciao Moby Dick, good-bye...

COMPOSITION - WATER WAVES MIX OF WHALES, DOLPHINS, SEALS, ETC.

-THE END-

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....And, not the least of all, the interviewees Anahi Traversi, Roberto Antonini, Graziano Martignoni, Rainer Schimpf, the Aquatis team and Jean Rezzonico.

On the subject of underwater noise, worth mentioning is a beautiful sound documentary in German produced by Brigitte Kramer Krawall im Meer. Danke Brigitte!