



NOTE OF INTENT

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The Promise

“Take care of animals, humans aren’t worth it.”

If I am to be completely honest, it is pretty obvious that I was an antisocial child. This promise that I made to myself was reinforced every day, four times a day, on my way to school. On that road, I collected butterflies that had been hit by cars, squashed praying mantises, eviscerated snakes, squirrels, and occasionally a neighbour’s cat or a dog I’d befriended.

That road was paradoxical. It was the Grim Reaper and at the same time it offered me some of my most beautiful discoveries. The beauty of an elytron, the pattern of a cicada wing, the blue skin of a lizard, the scales of a snake. Thanks to car tyres, I discovered a heart, viscera, a skull, hemolymph...

Even though my anger towards humans was constantly growing, the road to school was never dreary. It was nothing but a treasure trove of joyful finds. Ever since then, death and internal organs have never been synonymous with fear or disgust for me. On the contrary, they have opened doors to the mysteries of life and poetry.

The Encounter

About ten years later, in a magazine which primarily writes about storms, I read this: *“In 1989, in Port-La Nouvelle, a winegrower used his harvesting tools to cut up a whale that had been beached. He then reconstructed its skeleton in his cellar.”*

The image struck me. It resonated like an echo. I set off to meet that astonishing winegrower whose name is Jean-Louis Fabre.

With his southern accent and strong character, Jean-Louis welcomed me. In him I recognised a big brother. He, too, had always collected dead animals from the side of the road, as well as nests, fossils, shells... His attic was a fascinating cabinet of curiosities. He knew all the Latin names and a lot about biology. He also loved talking about Darwin. When he opened his cellar door and the 20-metre skeleton appeared, suspended between the vats, I immediately thought of Pinocchio, Jonah and Moby Dick. I had the feeling that I was standing in front of a contemporary legend, and it wouldn’t take much for the legend to become a myth.

It was beside the marsh that the idea for *La Baleine* crystallised.



After discovering the whale, Jean-Louis had the extraordinary idea of immersing the bones in muddy water so that micro-organisms would clean them. Ironically, death was a source of life. And so the ballet formed by the microscopic world became a virtuous circle. While this story talks of death, it does so by going beyond drama and individuals. It speaks of regeneration and the cycle of life. It suggests that we look at what we consider to be our finitude in another way.

A friend of mine, Benjamin Flao, who is a graphic author, once said to me: “Your story is *Moby Dick* in reverse” . Rather than being about man expressing his desire for domination, it’s a story of reconciliation with nature and matter.

A Fiction

It would seem obvious that a story like this calls for fiction.

A beach, twilight, the wind, the cry of a seagull and a beached whale. This image alone transports us into a state of melancholy, awakening existential emotions. Then, along comes a man who sets out against all odds to save this skeleton, going against his daughter and the suspicious villagers. And from this, an epic, quixotic tale takes shape.

Corbac emerges. He has a little of me as a child in him, he's a bit like Jean-Louis Fabre, he looks like Jim Harrison and is made up of the madness and poetry of Michel Simon in *L'Atalante*. He's a hybrid being, a fictional being. Corbac lives alone in his farmhouse. A building eaten away by ivy, just as he himself is eaten away by an, as yet unknown, disease. He has given up everything. His job, caring for himself, and the company of men. As far as he's concerned, nobody else can see it, but the world is dying. The vines and the wine are killing the birds, the trees and the insects. He has become a recluse. His only friends are a little group of animals. Blanche, the owl, who lives in his attic, Lazare, the crow, who is fascinated by strange humans, and Couille-Molle the dog, who finds the idea of recovering the bones of a whale very interesting!

Opposite Corbac and his furry and feathered friends are the villagers: Caesar, Gisèle, Raoul, Jo and Toinou. A hunter priest, a barmaid, a winegrower, a wine merchant and an undertaker. They all have drawn features, dark shadows under their eyes and worn out bodies. Their work in the vineyards, the wind, the soil treatments and the wine factory all show the wear and tear on their bodies and hearts. The village of *La Baleine* is not a good place to live.

And caught between Corbac's world and that of the villagers is Mathilde. Tensions are rising.

An Ecological Western

An anti-hero, a village, a high street and people with stone-faced expressions, tractors instead of horses, rifles and a woman who saves the world... *La Baleine* is constructed like a Western. Except for the fact that here, the population being exterminated are not American Indians but animals. In the tradition of films such as Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter*, Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, and, more recently, Rodrigo Sorogoyen's rural western, *The Beast*, *La Baleine* borrows from the genre to question the abuse of power, discrimination and the utopia of a new way of living together. But this time, the tensions are no longer between humans, but with all living beings.

La Baleine is an ecological western.

Westerns are films which are as much about wide open spaces as they are about close-ups of bodies. The diversity of scale tells of the multiplicity of worlds. *La Baleine* makes the great leap. From the microscopic scale of plankton to the macroscopic scale of the whale. Humans, and therefore the traditional close-up, are no longer the centre of gravity.

The image is crepuscular, the matter gungy, the sequence shots help build up the tension, and poetry is the guest in Corbac's planktonic dreams, on the whale's skin, with the sea and the starry sky. The film is inhabited by two great energies. An earthy, hard, intense energy,



inspiring percussive, grating music, with creaking strings that are sometimes off key. It's the dark energy of the village, of the distillery with its high chimneys, but also that of Corbac on his tractor, with his stony expression, unstoppable.... even in death. In contrast, a celestial energy. Of the sea, the starry sky, plankton and whales. The whole picture that counterpoints human tribulations. This energy is actually Corbac's heart, it's the energy of his love for the living world and his sadness at seeing it die, but it's also Mathilde's energy. She has inherited it. This is why the film is dark at the beginning and luminescent at the end. The energy is more orchestral, with choirs capable of carrying us away to more lyrical emotions, like the song of a whale.

Thus, when Corbac dies, the film doesn't stop. Just as in life, the story continues. Just as matter regenerates and multiplies, Corbac's adventure becomes collective. Biological transmission, the whale's body feeds planktonic beings, responds to cultural transmission. The whale becomes the object of a shared project that the village gradually adopts. Mathilde is at the head of the procession: From now on it's a woman who carries the film. Mathilde adds a whole new dimension to the adventure. She works in a team with Gisèle, Toinou, Jo and the children... She is the one who brings the story of the whale skeleton to its conclusion. The story is passed on.

In many westerns, women are the only hope of a new horizon

Reality Filmmaking

I like to defend the idea that cinéma vérité stimulates thought and imagination. That it alone can decentre us if we invite it sincerely onto our screens. This is why the film will be shot with a real whale. Real micro-organisms. Real plankton. Real wind. Real actors... and far from green screens.

To enter Corbac's world, to film the faces and landscapes, the wind, the rain, the poetry of a whale's entrails and the dance of planktonic beings, the film raises many technical and grammatical challenges. With the team, we are looking for a language capable of marrying human fiction and animal cinema. *La Baleine* is an interspecific film. A story like a territory where the living beings cohabit with no cultural hierarchy.

With this idea of working with reality, the film begins with a storm. You could call it a modern-day deluge to evoke fundamental myths. The storm devastates the vineyards, fills the village streets with mud, overturns cars, uproots trees, devastates people and leaves the remains of a whale.

Of course, this introduction echoes the crises we are currently facing: global warming, mass extinction of biodiversity, extreme soil and water pollution.

But the film takes place in the 1980s, at the heart of an era that was still blind to these major concerns, yet in the midst of a boom in this economic and societal model that had no regard for the rest of life. We must remember what we witnessed: roadsides littered with rubbish, open-air dumps, plastic in trees, shirtless winegrowers treating the soil, oil flowing like water. You have to remember that even the word «ecology» was largely unknown to the general public or laughed at.

The viscera, the vertebrae, the blood that trickles down the street as each convoy passes, awaken the collective unconscious, the cultural heritage, the relationship of each individual with death. The act of saving the whale's skeleton becomes, in a way, a totemic, unifying and sensitive gesture. The whale becomes a totem that expresses a turning point in the history of our relationship with the living and death.



One of the film's major challenges is to achieve an aesthetic and emotional shift in the way we view body matter. While we ourselves are made up of entrails, tendons, fluid and bones, we are the first to be disgusted and repulsed by the sight of such images.

This film takes us outside of our comfort zones. Both in the theatre and while filming, cinema seems to me to be one of the last places where you can explore the world and yourself.

The visual language of *La Baleine* draws inspiration from classic Western cinematography. The film begins with a play of light and shadow, gradually evolving into a brighter aesthetic. It delicately balances between the mundane and the poetic.

Setting:

In *La Baleine*, landscapes like vineyards, villages, marshes, and the sea aren't merely settings; they are narrative devices in their own right. To grant them this agency, I opt for sweeping wide shots, capturing the expanse of sky, ground, depth - particularly any movements or geospatial change within the landscape.

Pacing:

Manipulating pace is central to the narrative of *La Baleine*. Swift shifts in tempo create tension, suspense, and release.

Frame/Mise En Scène:

The film will be shot in Cinemascope. Each character, whether human or animal, will be framed meticulously - from framing humans at eye level to macro shots of the smallest of sea crabs. The cinematography will juxtapose expansive wide shots with intimate close-ups, ranging from microscope-like detail to panoramic vistas. Each element, from plankton to characters like Blanche, Corbac, and Lazare, will have a lens tailored to their viewpoint and narrative arc. Composition will be intricate yet natural, avoiding contrived stylization.

Editing:

La Baleine eschews rapid cuts in favor of long, immersive takes. While traditional shot-reverse-shot is sparingly used between human characters, it will be used in interactions between humans, animals, and landscapes. Our editing philosophy prioritizes subtlety over flashy effects.

Lighting:

The film's lighting scheme progresses from chiaroscuro and mystery to brightness and harmony. Directional lighting sets the tone in the initial stages, gradually giving way to softer, diffuse sources as the narrative unfolds.

Movement:

La Baleine employs static shots and deliberate tracks to convey its story. Static compositions capture the tranquility of farmhouse scenes, while tracking shots traverse the bustling village and winding roads. Subtle crane movements accentuate emotional shifts.

Colors:

La Baleine features a restrained color palette of browns, grays, and blacks, accented with dark blues and turquoises. From set design to costumes and lighting, every element adheres to this carefully curated palette.

Sound:

Sound design in *La Baleine* is minimalistic yet purposeful. Each sound, whether it's the hum of a tractor or the cawing of a crow, contributes to the immersive world-building. Sound effects play a vital role in bridging the gap between humans and animals, creating a shared sensory experience.

Music:

The musical score consists of two distinct movements: earthy, percussion-driven compositions with dissonant elements, juxtaposed against celestial, orchestral pieces. These contrasting sounds enrich the emotional tapestry of the film.



THERE WILL BE BLOOD by Paul Thomas Anderson, United States - 2007



JEAN DE FLORETTE by Marcel Pagnol & Claude Berri, France - 1986



THE PIANO by Jane Campion, New Zealand - 1993



THE BEAST by Rodrigo Sorogoyen, Spain - 2022



L'ARBRE AUX SABOTS by Ermanno Olmi, Italy - 1978



THELMA & LOUISE by Callie Khouri and Rydley Scott, United States - 1991