

Nausea

OONA LIBENS

Deep-sea orchestration



Marina Srnka

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The deep ocean is perhaps the last refuge of myth. As we descend away from sunlight, the borders between scientific knowledge and imagination crumble, and strange creatures start to appear: transparent bodies, blinking eyes, impossible reproductive systems, little lights glowing in complete darkness. In Oona Libens' '*Nausea*', this descent becomes something between a documentary, a fake-scientific lecture and a quirky nature programme. Perhaps most of all, it resembles a small cabinet of curiosities.

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The journey lasts only around twenty minutes. We start relatively close to the surface, with plankton, fish and shrimps. The facts are real enough, but quickly become contaminated by fiction. The lives of these creatures are anthropomorphised: herrings whose collective mentality is apparently more synchronised than that of the most autocratic human societies; a shrimp whose seven legs acquire different psychological functions, one reserved for social anxiety. The jokes are simple. They work.

As we descend, the creatures become stranger and our knowledge of them thinner. An anglerfish appears with its little lamp hanging in front of its head. Jellyfish reproduce by splitting themselves, which on stage turns into a visual hallucination of doubling and multiplication. Eventually we arrive at a creature we never properly see at all, known only through remains found inside the body of a whale. An enormous eye appears. We zoom further and further into it, apparently towards its deepest desires. Food appears. So much for the sublime.

This deep sea is curious, strange, cosy, whimsical, tender: this is not really the terrifying abyss of Romantic imagination.

This constant pulling of the alien back towards the familiar gives '*Nausea*' its humour. The creatures dance, organise themselves, desire, reproduce and apparently suffer from recognisably human problems. This deep sea is curious, strange, cosy, whimsical, tender: this is not really the terrifying abyss of Romantic imagination, even if some traces of its darkness remain underneath.

The title itself intrigues me. Why *Nausea*? There is very little nausea in the bodily sense and hardly anything unpleasant about the experience. Is it an amalgamation of Nautic and sea? At some point the narrator offers a phrase along the lines of 'Nausea, deep-sea orchestration'. I am still not sure this explains the title, but 'orchestration' comes close to describing what happens on stage.

A cabinet of curiosities

The performance orchestrates creatures, facts, jokes, images and little pieces of machinery. It also occasionally borrows the vocabulary of dance and choreography to describe underwater movement. Bodies float, divide, synchronise and organise themselves. Yet the choreography that interests me most takes place not between human bodies but between objects, images and the performer's hands.

Libens spends much of the piece focused on cameras, projectors, film negatives, crystals, wires and small handmade constructions. She never tries to hide how the images are produced. Quite the opposite. We watch her place things beneath lenses, manipulate objects, adjust projections and construct transformations in front of us. She resembles less an all-knowing lecturer than a tinkerer. Or perhaps a magician who has decided there is no reason to conceal the trick. And somehow, knowing the trick does not make it less magical. Once exposed, the craftsmanship of the magician is magic enough.

The jellyfish provide perhaps the clearest example. A crystal placed in front of the projection creates a hallucinatory multiplication: bodies double, split and slide across one another. A biological process becomes an optical one. Elsewhere, negatives, projections and little constructions produce their own miniature versions of underwater movement. Nothing tries to achieve the seamless perfection of a digital image.

I like this imperfection. There is something pleasurable about images that retain their materiality: edges, textures, mechanisms, visible labour. Here, the analogue machinery gives the performance much of its charm. Images are assembled, adjusted and transformed in real time. The performer herself remains focused on this process. Attention passes through her towards the objects. Tiny instruments in a deep-sea orchestra.

A magic lantern

There is also something fitting about using such unstable, handmade methods to represent a world we can barely access directly. Our image of the deep sea is anyhow mediated. We know these creatures through scientific cameras, recordings, specimens, photographs and stories. '*Nausea*' takes these fragments of knowledge and transforms them once again into something openly artificial and partly invented.

The narration occupies a similarly unstable space. A rather monotone British English voice-over follows the original French voice with a minor delay, producing another slightly awkward layer of mediation. Its tone slips between documentary and educational explanation and deliberate absurdity. We are

clearly being taught things, but the facts are never allowed to remain entirely factual.

The deeper we go, the less we know. And the less we know, the more room there seems to be for invention.

This made me wonder who exactly the performance is for. For children the combination may work exceptionally well: strange biological facts become memorable through jokes and visual transformations, while the visible machinery turns knowledge itself into something tactile and playful. Yet '*Nausea*' never felt too childish for me. I enjoyed its lightness although, as an adult spectator, I occasionally hoped some of the doors it opens might lead to some place beyond the limits of human knowledge, despite our irresistible tendency to anthropomorphise other species, and despite the technological mediation that gives us access to an inaccessible world. 'Nausea' touches these possibilities lightly and continues its descent. Perhaps twenty minutes is exactly what allows it to do so.

The performance ends before its charm can become repetitive. It remains a miniature: a tiny world filled with creatures that are partly scientific fact, partly human fantasy and partly whatever can be conjured from a crystal, a projector, some wires and a pair of curious hands. The deeper we go, the less we know. And the less we know, the more room there seems to be for invention.