

Whale Wars: A Somewhat Psychoanalytic Review

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ABSTRACT--- *Freudian metapsychology can be used to understand cultural phenomenon, especially when there is conflict between differing groups. Reality television, in depicting such conflicts, provides an opportunity to glimpse the underlying unconscious currents motivating group behavior that are at times, seemingly irrational. The television show Whale Wars is a prime example of this aspect of reality-based television. Through its portrayal of the real conflict between Japanese whalers and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, the show reveals unconscious motivations and group dynamics that conform to Freud's theories. This paper will review the psychology of the Sea Shepherds and their relation to the Japanese whalers in an attempt to bring greater perspective and understanding to the conflict.*

Keywords--- Psychoanalysis, Whales, Sea Shepherds, Whaling, Japan

1. INTRODUCTION

The Antarctic Ocean is one of the most desolate places on earth, yet there are penises everywhere. Phallic shaped whales swim in the vast sea; spurning water cannons festoon the Japanese whaling fleet; And the *Ady Gil* (a black futuristic speedboat looking like a hi-tech phallus with two testicles) powers menacingly through the water. This is the setting for Animal Planet's television show *Whale Wars*, which follows the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society as they try to thwart the Japanese whaling fleet and prevent the killing of whales. This is a show about men and the drama is mostly male-oriented. There are some women around to be sure, but they mostly play supporting roles as cook, nurse, doctor, and sometimes love interests for the menfolk.¹

2. JAPANESE WHALERS

Why are these men and *phalli* in the Antarctic? Because of whales. Either because they are the Japanese hunting them for 'research' - a flimsy cover story at best - or trying to protect them from the Japanese. This is the job of the Sea Shepherds who are not content to lobby governments and argue policies while whales are being slaughtered. Instead they choose action on the high seas, seeking to directly impede the Japanese whaling fleet.

In *Whale Wars* we learn very little about the Japanese whalers and it would be interesting to hear the reasons they hunt whales. In the show they remain a mysterious 'other', a dark and often out of focus foil for our unconscious projections. The Japanese are portrayed as an evil enemy; the murderers of intelligent, majestic, peaceful, and utterly helpless whales. Not since Allied propaganda films of WWII have we seen such a negative and a one-sided depiction of the Japanese. Unfortunately for them this makes for good television.

Still, the Japanese seem to have it in for sea mammals such as whales and dolphins. This has made for some great parody such as the episode of the animated series *Southpark* where whales and dolphins are shown to have been responsible for the atomic bombing of Japan.² Even though these cetaceans are traditional menu items at some Japanese restaurants, most modern Japanese do not eat them. Whaling is a small industry, hardly worth the ruin of the international reputation of a progressive modern country. As one article indicates, much of the whale meat intended to be sold as a delicacy for humans ends up as cheap school lunches and dog food.

Japanese traditions are vanishing and perhaps this compels them to passionately retain to those few traditions they have left. To be sure, there is money to be made by whaling, but not much. Due in large part, to the activities of the Sea Shepherds, the Japanese only took about half their quota of whales (around 500) this season. Supposedly they need to kill 700 whales to break even. The expense of hunting whales has also increased (again in part because of the interference of the Sea Shepherds). It supposedly costs \$2.5 million just to fuel the whaling ships for the hunting season. (For a more detailed examination of why the Japanese support whaling see Hirata, 2005).

¹ Someone at Animal Planet must have noticed this because the Sea Shepherd women are more prominently featured in the 3rd season of the show. Still, the women generally are supporting characters while the men are prominently featured.

² This episode also mercilessly makes fun of the Sea Shepherds as well.

3. PAUL WATSON AND THE SEA SHEPHERDS

The primary antagonist of the Japanese whalers is the extraordinary founder of the Sea Shepherds, Captain Paul Watson. He was one of the founders of Greenpeace who left that organization when he felt they had compromised their core beliefs. His story is inspirational and impressive, yet on the show he comes across as laconic and calculating. He has been an activist for a long time and is well aware of the political consequences of his actions as well as the public's perception of his efforts. Equal parts, *senex* (wise old man) and *puer aeternus* (peter pan), he serves both as controlling father (and hence THE target for the oedipal projections of the other Sea Shepherd men) and originator of rather sketchy, possibly dangerous command decisions that demonstrate a certain degree of impulsiveness. It quickly becomes clear when watching Whale Wars that Watson takes chances - calculated chances, but chances just the same. Surprisingly, Watson is not shown having much in depth to say about the whales he is protecting.

The impression is that Watson and his crew are primarily motivated by their unconscious feelings about whales, suggesting that the whales carry a deeper symbolic meaning for the Sea Shepherds. In some ways, the whale serves as a mother totem for the Sea Shepherds with Watson serving in the role of the totemic father. As Freud says in Totem and Taboo "the clansmen are under a sacred obligation (subject to automatic sanctions) not to kill or destroy their totem and to avoid eating its flesh (or deriving benefit from it in other ways." (pg. 55). In the case of the Sea Shepherds there is an almost obsessional need to protect the totemic whale. In Watson's case we can speculate that this may stem from his unconscious response to his mother's death when he was 14. According to Freud the loss of a loved family member may lead to obsessional thoughts:

"When a wife has lost her husband or a daughter her mother, it not infrequently happens that the survivor is overwhelmed by tormenting doubts (to which we give the name of 'obsessive self-reproaches') as to whether she may not herself have been responsible for the death...The psychoanalytic investigation of such cases has revealed the secret motives of the disorder. We find that in a certain sense these obsessive self-reproaches are justified, and that this is why they are proof against contradictions and protests. It is not that the mourner was really responsible for the death... None the less there was something in her - a wish that was unconscious to herself - which would not have been dissatisfied by the occurrence of death." (pg. 116).

It may be that Watson has unconscious feelings of guilt over his mother's death and his obsession with whales and his willingness to do almost anything to protect them stems from this. This leads Watson to do some pretty risky things. Recently, Watson's behavior has resulted in a lot of trouble for him and the Sea Shepherd organization. An INTERPOL arrest warrant has been issued for Watson and a legal injunction filed against him in the U.S. courts (Nagtzaam, 2014; Darby, 2012). In order to protect the Sea Shepherds Watson experiences a symbolic death, he must sacrifice his power and authority and resign from the organization. In Freud's conception this sacrifice occurs in the context of a cannibal feast. Indeed there is a solemn scene shown in the program where Watson gathers his crew in the dining galley of the ship and announces that he is stepping down as captain and resigning from the Sea Shepherd organization. Of course we do not see Freud's band of brothers kill Watson and eat him. Nevertheless Watson's departure allows for similar psychological processes, which allow the brothers to take the place of the father. These young men, who perhaps rankled under the father's decisions, rules and strictures, now take on his role as the authority figure with even more zeal. The cannibalism is symbolic for the incorporation of the father's viewpoint into the young men. This leads this group of brothers to take even more risks than the original father. In the case of the Sea Shepherds the new young captains seemingly try to outdo each other in exceeding Watson's risk taking. As a result the physical confrontations with the Japanese whalers become increasingly physical, violent, and dangerous. While this can't help but increase the ratings of the show, one gets the sense that this escalation would make even the most hardened television executives nervous. At some point the logical conclusion of the escalation of violence will lead to something that will not be suitable as entertainment. Recently the show seems to draw near this unseen boundary.

4. THE WHALES

Whales, by and large, are gentle, majestic creatures, highly intelligent, with impressive linguistic capabilities. They form tight knit families and social groups, and perhaps even 'cultures' (Morisaka, 2007; Simmonds, 2006; "Zeroing in on Whale Culture: Language is the Key," n.d.). To harm them seems absurd. Yet many other animals are in the same boat - pigs come to mind as intelligent, social creatures (Angier, 2009). Many other food animals fare poorly, raised in terrifying and painful conditions in order to be killed and consumed by humans. So why so much emotion about whales? What do whales represent in our unconscious that inspires so many people to care about them while the plight of other deserving animals is ignored?

Not much has been written specifically about whales from a psychodynamic point of view. However, it is possible to extrapolate from the symbolic meaning of other sea creatures. In psychoanalytic theory the ocean can represent the unconscious mind; a vast repository of images and feelings that are unacceptable to the conscious. Within the unconscious, animals can be symbolic images of our deepest fears and anxieties (Akhtar & Volkan, 2004).

Sea creatures often appear in dreams and myths as dreaded monsters or as peaceful mermaids. In these guises these sea creatures represent mother or father, both as gentle and loving like the manatee, or as angry and devouring like the shark. Yet both types of parental images threaten to envelope and swallow us whole, submerging our identity into theirs, our conscious drowned into the ocean of the infinite unconscious. We are either devoured by the monsters from the deep or taken back into the *uroboric* womb. In either case we cease being individuated humans, returning instead to a helpless, undifferentiated state.

An example of the devouring mother would be the Kraken. This creature is a giant squid that rises from the depths, enveloping ships in its tentacles, and dragging them down into the sea. The Kraken is decidedly female in shape. It reminds us of female genitalia - the *vagina dentata*, only with a sharp castrating beak. Sailors feared the Kraken and wove stories of it, perhaps based on sightings of real giant squid that would sometimes be seen dead on the surface of the ocean (in life these creatures dwell exclusively in the depths). Psychoanalytically speaking, the Kraken is the image of the internalized bad parent (or object), the frustrating, angry, devouring, all-powerful mother of our infancy.

The whale is the opposite, a good mother to the Kraken's bad. Like the Kraken, the whale is devouring, but this results in a blissful return to the womb, to the loving mother of our babyhood that had been lost forever. For those who have perhaps lost their mother in real life, or never experienced motherly love as infants, the whale can be an alluring creature

This gentle devouring also relates to the journey of the hero. In the biblical story of Jonah, the whale is a creature of God, who consumes Jonah to protect him. Being consumed in this way is akin to dying in order to be reborn. As the Bible says "... just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights." (Matthew 12:40, King James Version). By being devoured and then spit out again into the world we become fully individuated and changed for the better. The belly of the whale is the crucible for our enlightenment.

The popular conception, therefore, of whales is as a kind, life-giving, mother whose love transforms us and the television show does nothing to dissuade the viewer of this idea. *Whale Wars* typically shows whales and other cetaceans as peaceful creatures, living in pods and playing together in families. When the Sea Shepherds come across them they experience a few moments of blissful satori. (The hostile, aggressive side of whales was not shown until near the end of the 2010 season when the Sea Shepherds witness a pod of Orcas ambushing a Sea Lion. Cetaceans, like many intelligent, social, creatures have a dark side to their nature. Orcas, or Killer Whales, have been known to devour seals and porpoises for fun, while male Bottlenose Dolphins have been observed gang raping females of their species - c.f. Ford, Ellis, & Balcomb, 2000; Conner, Wells, Mann, & Read, 2000; Mann, 2006).

Nevertheless, the whale is an androgynous symbol, also having a phallic meaning. This is a state of male innocence and freedom that precedes the Oedipal conflict. While we might long to return to the womb, we also desire the state of relative freedom when our genitals were a source of pleasure without guilt. The whales represent this, and the irony of so many Sea Shepard men in the thralls of Oedipal strife on the Antarctic seas does not go unnoticed. One gets the sense that while these guys are in the midst of their Oedipal struggles they would sometimes like to give up and return to a more blissful pre-conflictual psychic existence. Of course they can't do this and so instead idolize the whale as representative of this state while continuing to act out their Oedipal dramas.

5. OEDIPAL DRAMA ON THE HIGH SEAS

On the 2010 season of *Whale Wars* one of the most interesting of these dramas involved the *Ady Gil*, a futuristic hi-tech black trimaran (imagine Batman's penis). The crew of the *Ady Gil*, led by Captain Pete Bethune, shave their heads before embarking on the ship, looking like human-sized *homunculi*. They challenge the Japanese whaling fleet with a phallic arsenal of air-powered spud guns and bottles of butyric acid (the same chemical that gives rancid butter its intense smell) and bows and arrows. Like an enraged father, the Japanese ship the *Shonan Maru 2* responds, as might be expected, by ramming the *Ady Gil*, cutting the ship in two and essentially castrating it. The desire for the whale-mother has led to the greatest fear of these 'little boys', the loss of the penis. The traumatized crew of the *Ady Gil* deal with this in their own ways. One crew member challenges the less imposing father figure of Chuck Swift, Captain of the *Bob Barker* (the other new Sea Shepherd ship), while Pete Bethune devises a number of methods of gaining revenge which include a flaming high powered cutting torch that almost starts the *Bob Barker* on fire. After considering many (somewhat hair-brained) schemes Bethune eventually takes a jet ski over to the *Shonan Maru* in the dark, jumps aboard, penetrates the ship's defenses (literally using a knife), and confronts the crew. He is arrested and taken back to Japan to stand trial.³

Given the repetitive nature of the Oedipal drama on *Whale Wars*, it is not surprising that we do not see other approaches to reducing the slaughter of whales. For instance, no one on the Sea Shepherds seems to have any expertise in

³ After five months in Japanese prison Bethune was convicted of crime of trespassing, vandalism, carrying a knife, obstructing commercial activities, and assault. He received a two year suspended sentence, was banned from Japan for five years, and promptly deported back to New Zealand where he is a citizen.

whale behavior. A rather obvious thought was that the Sea Shepherds might want to attempt to teach whales to be afraid of humans. The ship often comes across whales and dolphins that frolic nearby while the Sea Shepherds watch them in a state of near bliss. It could be suggested to the Sea Shepherd leadership that they include some whale behavioral experts (biologist/ethologist/psychologist) on-board (they could even be women!) and the Sea Shepherds stage a campaign to teach whales to be frightened of humans and their ships.

While watching the episode where the *Ady Gil*, or in later seasons the larger ships, are rammed it is easy to get caught up in the drama of the crew (helpless little boys) frustrated to impotent anger by the Japanese *Shonan Maru* (all powerful, but remote father). It is easy for the viewer to develop some counter-transference at these scenes. We can ask ourselves questions such as why did the Sea Shepherds spend three million dollars on the *Ady Gil*? For much less money, they could have bought a much more formidable vessel. In keeping with the Oedipal nature of the conflict a World War II era submarine comes to mind. More phallic than even the *Ady Gil*, a submarine is very fast on the surface of the water and would easily be able to keep up with the Japanese whaling fleet. Add in the stealth capabilities of being able to travel underwater, the 'prop fouling' possibilities (one of the Sea Shepherds favorite methods of stopping the Japanese ships), the safety of being able to submerge when a ship tries to run you down, and of course, the pure visual i.e., sexual potency of being confronted by a submarine and this really starts to seem like a good idea. It would certainly be interesting to watch on television!

6. CONCLUSION

It is hard not to root for the Sea Shepherds. And even though the Japanese are not evil, many people around the world would be very happy if they stopped slaughtering whales.⁴ For all their psychological conflicts, the Sea Shepherds are actively standing up for something they deeply believe in. They are willing to walk the walk and put themselves in harm's way to save whales. This deserves support and respect, although it is regrettable that the Japanese are demonized in the process. The television show documents the efforts of the Sea Shepherds in a brilliant and compelling way. It is well worth watching, both to see the ships in action and for the human drama.

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⁴ In fact, this seems to be the prevailing international legal opinion. The International Court of Justice recently ruled that Japan's whaling in Antarctica is illegal (Alberts, 2014).

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