

LE PIÈGE DE KERGUELEN / 2000 [QR49]

A decoy

Sent by King Louis XV in search of a hypothetical southern continent which cartographers imagined to be lying to the south of the Strait of Magellan, Yves de Kerguelen discovered in 1772 the “Islands of Desolation” that today bear his name. Back in France without even having set foot ashore, he claimed to have found the mythical continent and was received as a new Christopher Columbus. He had supposedly discovered “a country peopled and cultivated with forethought”, to which he attributed, as he wrote in his journal, “the greatest fertility”. Convinced by his own chimeras, he set off again the following year with a view to colonising these new lands, which in the end turned out to be nothing more than a handful of deserted islands devoid of natural resources, covered in snow, battered by the winds and inhabited by a colony of penguins and elephant seals.



Drawn to distant, desert lands, Rob Rombout had read Jean-Paul Kauffmann’s book *L’Arche des Kerguelen*. After his long and painful captivity in Lebanon, the French journalist, in search of extreme solitude, had withdrawn to the island for a time, with no other aim than to live freely in a hostile natural world and give himself over to meditation. Since 1996, Rob Rombout has been working with Rogier van Eck on their film *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, part of which is shot on Amsterdam Island, in the southern Indian Ocean. To reach that land, one must board the *Marion Dufresne*, chartered by the administration of the French Southern and Antarctic Lands and responsible for supplying the islands of that region of the globe, the Kerguelens among them. Rombout then proposes to his producer that they take advantage of the expedition to Amsterdam Island to make a second film, on the Islands of Desolation. Contrary to his usual practice, the filmmaker writes no script. The project is vague, but the producer agrees.

The Kerguelen archipelago is home to penguins, elephant seals, albatrosses and feral cats, distant descendants of the cats abandoned in the 18th century by the crew of the French navigator. There is also a military base there, which hosts scientists who come to make observations and take samples. Among them, a few

researchers in evolutionary biology have the task of observing the behaviour of the feral cats. Rombout centres his film on this team's expedition, which he sets in parallel with Kerguelen's discovery of the islands. He films the voyage by ship, the settling-in at the base and the start of the research, in the course of which the biologist hoping to observe the cats finds none at all. Seeing that the trap into which Kerguelen had fallen is closing once more on the researchers, the filmmaker redirects his film: for want of cats, he observes the observers, the penguins and the elephant seals.

The film constructs a twofold discourse: the first describes the scientists' mission and listens to the explanations that they give of their work; the second, taken on by Rombout's own voice, comments upon this voyage with an undisguised irony and expresses his disappointment: "These desolate lands are a trap for the cats, for the scientists observing the cats and for the observer observing the scientists." The filmmaker's voice recounts the voyages of Kerguelen, recalling his errors, his lies, his cowardice, his solitude and the legal troubles that awaited him on his return. The superimposition of this voice on the images is enough to make plain the constant analogies the film establishes between the two expeditions: "Yves de Kerguelen knows that he is heading towards new ordeals," it says as the *Marion Dufresne* is seen beneath a twilight sky. Over a shot showing a researcher working at his computer in the half-light of his cabin, the voice speaks of Kerguelen, who "records every detail in his logbook". His voyage "on a mission" for the King of France is compared with that of the scientists "on a mission" for the CNRS or the University of Lyon. The young researcher who lands on the island for the first time admits that he did not decide to come here. He was chosen by the team, just as Kerguelen himself, says Rombout, "was chosen by Louis XV". And he adds: "Today's heroes, too, have been chosen. Each of them is about to venture deep into a strange land."

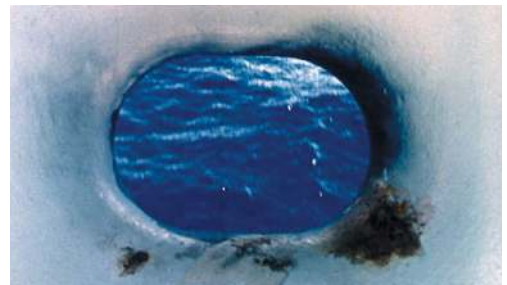
This play of comparison gives rise to the diffuse impression that these voyages to the antipodes lead nowhere. The failure is patent: Kerguelen's, the scientists' and, in a certain way, that of Rob Rombout, who no longer knows what to do with his film. The parallel he builds between two expeditions, one historical and the other contemporary, offers a reflection on the futility of human undertakings, his own included. While research into the sociability of feral cats is not without interest, one may question the need to conduct it *there*, so far away and in such difficult conditions of observation, just as one may wonder whether it was really advisable to go to the other end of the world to film, for want of cats, penguins and elephant seals.

The film's interest lies elsewhere, on another level of reflection that underlies the first. Rob Rombout's cinema, as has already been said, fits only with difficulty

into the traditional “documentary” box, whose lines it shifts. *Le Piège de Kerguelen* is neither a travel film, nor a scientific film, nor an anthropological film, nor a wildlife film, while brushing up a little against all of these documentary sub-genres. It is first and foremost an essay which, beneath its explicit subject, proposes a second one, implicit, which is cinema itself and its expressive possibilities. It is the hallmark of true “art et essai” cinema to renew its writing in order to push back the limits of the medium.

The trap that gives the film its title is not only the one into which the French navigator, the team of scientists and then Rob Rombout himself fell in turn. The film is a lure, a decoy that deflects the viewer’s gaze in order to make him see something other than what it shows, and to make him understand that what matters most is not what he sees. The opening shot foreshadows this: the sea seen through an opening, with no horizon line, a sea of intense blue, stirred by a heavy swell. Brown stains and a metallic glint at the edge of the opening make it clear that the sea is being seen through a hole in the bluish, slightly rusted bulwark of a ship. The high-angle viewpoint disturbs the perception of the distance between the sea and the bulwark, as if this image were the product of a video keying effect. But this shot can be seen in another way, in the manner of those optical illusions that show a duck’s head which is at the same time a rabbit’s head. The blue of the sea within an opening evokes an eye in its socket. Or again: a lake in a landscape. Or again, the inverse of a lake: an island. The following shot offers a variation on the same forms and the same idea: the wheel of a navigation instrument that makes it possible to steer towards where the human eye cannot see [QR18].

The question of the gaze is constant. The film multiplies the shots showing now officers on the ship, now scientists on the island looking through their binoculars, followed by subjective shots that seem to be seen through binoculars, as in certain comic strips [QR20]. By the end, these shots are no longer associated with a scientist but with Rombout’s own camera, which gets caught up in its own game and turns the device back on the observers, asking, in *voice-over*: “But... who is observing whom?” Rombout loves analogies. He plays with forms as he plays with words. The formal symmetry of which he is so fond is matched by a similar verbal symmetry, which con-





sists in establishing dual categories: the sailors of the *Marion Dufresne* are the “specialists of the sea”, who communicate by gestures and confront the elements outside; the researchers are the “specialists of the land”, who gather inside the ship and communicate in a language only they understand, a “coded language”, says the voice, which reminds us that carrying out an observation in the field is called a “manip” and that the scientific mission goes by the name of “popchat”. Rob Rombout’s slow and mocking voice, which its Dutch accent sets apart from all the canons in force in documentary cinema, breathes irony into the film. It says: “Man never arrives alone. He is always accompanied by cats, rats and blowflies, better known as shit flies. It is thanks to their presence that one recognises a civilised place.” Over these words we see the scientists preparing to land on the island. They will bring the afore-said “civilisation” to the island, and together with it what the flies feed on.

The irony is not merely verbal. It is born of the distance that Rombout inscribes between image and speech, *a fortiori* when the latter is delivered in *voice-over* – the traditional seat of a learned authority that is supposed to utter a truth. But in this film, which is not a documentary, it is not truth that is at stake. “The ‘Popchat’ mission is on site, ready to get to work,” says Rombout, showing a column of penguins which, heads held high, waddle along the beach to the sound of music that seems to come straight out of a cartoon and synchronises its rhythm with the birds’ cadence [QR20]. The sentence on its own is true, but over those images it performs another function, which is no longer to give meaning but rather to divert it, to create nonsense, and thus to make the good-natured viewer laugh – a viewer who, from that moment on, will no longer be able to take the scientific mission seriously. “The departure on *manip* takes place without fanfare,” says the voice while an elephant seal yawns fit to dislocate its jaws, throwing its head back like a trumpet

player. Here and there Rombout adds the hoarse grunts of these marine mammals in places where they are not seen but where the biologist is working. These sounds are not incongruous, since an elephant seal may well be present off-screen, but they act upon the image, or rather: they comment on it. No need for words here; the animal says better than anyone that none of this stops it from yawning.

As the gap between speech and image widens in this way, the trap closes on the viewer's gaze. A subjective shot imitating the view through binoculars shows an indeterminate brown surface, earth or dried grass, one cannot tell which. The next shot shows the biologist clinging to her binoculars. Back to the landscape, which suddenly parts and then opens wide onto the gaping mouth of a yawning elephant seal. Irony turns into schoolboy humour. The viewer has been warned. He knows he can no longer take anything seriously. Doubt has taken hold of him. No need, from then on, to confess to him that the only feral cat to be seen in the film is not one at all. Out of frustration, Rombout had to take a domestic cat to play the part of a feral cat supposedly released into the wild, supposedly caught in a trap and supposedly examined by the biologist [QR20]. Music in the manner of Henry Mancini sharpens the viewer's sagacity by letting him glimpse that the feline in question has more of the Pink Panther about it than of the wild cat. It is up to him to understand and to admit, if he did not know it already, that the film can lie. Kerguelen, after all, had lied to the King of France.



COMMENTS

❑ No script for this film.

❑ I'd read *L'Arche des Kerguelen. Voyage aux îles de la Désolation* by Jean-Paul Kauffmann, the journalist long held hostage in Lebanon. To recover, he had gone off to the Kerguelen Islands, and his account evokes a place where you can forget everything, reinvent yourself, a place where you are truly far from the world. Where there is nothing. Where human beings are in the minority. Where there are no predators. The only place on earth where the wind circling the globe is not slowed down by continents. Very pure air. A world the size of Corsica, inhabited by some fifty French people, researchers and military personnel. They are called "the winterers". No native population: the place is inaccessible, except by supply ship – and with the agreement of Paris.

❑ Yves de Kerguelen was a sort of anti-Christopher Columbus. Sent by Louis XV to discover the great southern continent, he spent three months at sea but did not dare to set foot on land. Back in France, nor did he dare to say what he had found in the way of a great continent. And Louis XV sent him back there. This time he illegally took a woman along with him, and still did not set foot on the island. On his return, he was imprisoned. The ship's officers accused him of having committed nine serious offences, in particular of having taken a stowaway on board and of not having gone ashore himself. At the end of a long trial, the court martial decided to punish the adventurer. On 15 May 1775 he was sentenced to permanent dismissal from the Navy, six years in a fortress and a ban on publishing his writings. Freed and rehabilitated three years later, he is bound forever to the trap of his discovery.

❑ On the ship taking me there, I opted for a portrait of the island through a character, a researcher. There were three who might do. The first measured the wind: not very visual. Another worked on micro-organisms. And the last one – a woman, in fact – focused her

research on the cats, brought over long ago by the ships that carried them aboard to hunt mice, and gone feral again since the island was abandoned.

❑ Once there, the ship drops off the scientists, stays for four days, then sets off again for Amsterdam. So we had four days to shoot.

❑ On the one hand, we had undertaken, together with the scientists, an expedition to go and find feral cats, and we experienced what is commonplace on wildlife film shoots: no (feral) cat to report. We had travelled 15,000 kilometres, thirty days of journeying, and not a single cat.

I did see one, but since we were shooting on film stock, in the time it took us to load a magazine and to clap the slate...

At the base, fortunately, the researchers had domesticated some feral cats.

And so, for the film, we turned those domestic cats feral again.

❑ An anthropological wildlife film.

I wanted to follow the researcher who studied the cats. The interview was conducted in difficult conditions: cold, bad sound... a sound-only interview, because I was working on film stock and could not afford to waste any. Twice we started that interview, but each time it was so deadly boring... the sound recordist fell asleep. She spoke the jargon of those who work on Kerguelen, full of surprising abbreviations. In the end she seemed stranger than the cats. So I decided to make a wildlife film about the researchers. With a professorial voice (in the style of the "cinéma de papa") combined with images that seem straight out of the 1950s, a slow, ponderous film. Not to be taken at face value. I like using a serious form that becomes ironic.

❑ In the end, this film was torture. There was no budget. And I made the biggest mistake of my career: I wanted a *voice-over* to deliver the commentary. The producer had found professionals (two voices, and therefore two actors).

I had explained myself badly. For me, the commentary had to be ironic. Instead of that, I ended up with a commercial-type voice (RTL style). My mistake was not to react. And the whole process got under way: mixing, 35 mm blow-up...

At a screening at the Cinémathèque, I noticed a scratch on the print. I pointed it out to the producer, who promised me another print. In the meantime, I managed to find some money to redo the *voice-overs*, and I used my own voice, less professional, and it was much better. But it cost a lot.

❑ The title *Le Piège de Kerguelen* sets in parallel the figure of Kerguelen, to whom his discovery brought nothing but misfortune, and the traps the scientists set to capture the cats (traps fitted with transmitters) in order to study them.

But the film itself became a trap for me.

CREDITS

Written and directed by: Rob Rombout.

Director of photography: Samuel Dravet.

Sound engineer: Griet van Reeth.

Assistant director: Rogier van Eck.

Editing: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.

Assistant editor: Ariane Mellet.

Sound editing: Tintamarre – Anne-Laure Guégan.

Mix: Benoît Biral, Peter Soldan

Special effects and titles: Michel Bertiaux, Jacques Campens.

Original music: Hughes Maréchal.

Commentary: Marie-Aude Godard, Christian Janssens, Rob Rombout.

Production managers: Olivier Caste, Patrick Lefèvre.

Associate producers: ASAP Production – Philippe Crespel – Dada Studios.

Format: 16 mm Fuji colour film.

Running time: 40 minutes.















