

P R O T E U S

A NINETEENTH CENTURY VISION

SYNOPSIS

The ocean is a wilderness reaching round the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle, and fuller of monsters, washing the very wharves of our cities and the gardens of our sea-side residences. – Henry David Thoreau, 1864

For the nineteenth century, the world beneath the sea played much the same role that "outer space" has played for the twentieth. The ocean depths were at once the ultimate scientific frontier and what Coleridge called "the reservoir of the soul": the place of the unconscious, of imagination and the fantastic. *Proteus* uses the undersea world as the locus for a meditation on the troubled intersection of scientific and artistic vision. The one-hour film is based almost entirely on the images of nineteenth century painters, graphic artists, photographers and scientific illustrators, photographed from rare materials in European and American collections and brought to life through innovative animation.

The central figure of the film is biologist and artist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). As a young man, he found himself torn between seeming irreconcilables: science and art, materialism and religion, rationality and passion, outer and inner worlds. Through his discoveries beneath the sea, Haeckel would eventually reconcile these dualities, bringing science and art together in a unitary, almost mystical vision. His work would profoundly influence not only biology but also movements, thinkers and authors as disparate as Art Nouveau and Surrealism, Sigmund Freud and D.H. Lawrence, Vladimir Lenin and Thomas Edison.

The key to Haeckel's vision was a tiny undersea organism called the radiolarian. They are among the earliest forms of life. Haeckel discovered, described, classified and painted four thousand species of these one-celled creatures. In their intricate geometric skeletons, Haeckel saw all the future possibilities of organic and created form. *Proteus* explores their metamorphoses and celebrates their stunning beauty and seemingly infinite variety in animation sequences based on Haeckel's graphic work.

Around Haeckel's story, *Proteus* weaves a tapestry of poetry and myth, biology and oceanography, scientific history and spiritual biography. Goethe's Faust and the alchemical journey of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner are part of the story, together with the laying of the transatlantic telegraphic cable and the epic oceanographic voyage of HMS Challenger. All these threads lead us back to Haeckel and the radiolaria. Ultimately the film is a parable of both the difficulty and the possibility of unitary vision.

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The visual core of the film is Haeckel's artwork, photographed from the originals at the Ernst Haeckel Haus in Jena. Texts are taken from period letters, poems, ship logs and scientific narratives. The images and words of *Proteus* are complemented by the narration of Tony and Obie award-winning Broadway actress Marian Seldes (*Three Tall Women, A Delicate Balance, Ivanov, Equus*) the sound design of George Lockwood (*The Living End, Water and Power, The Decay of Fiction*) and Yuval Ron's score for piano, keyboards, string quartet, woodwinds and percussion.