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Cruise ships
non-human modern monsters

Abstract
The aim of this article is to literally explore the declinations of the status of the "monstruous thing", investigating if and when monsters are abnormal phenomena, not of nature but of culture. Which features, of both expression and content, must a non-living artificial subject (one that is neither human or animal) present in order to be perceived and judged as a "monster"? In the West, the image of the monster is traditionally associated with an abominable creature belonging to the universe of nature whose touchstone is a standard unit of measurement associated with a human or animal body. Here, we are interested in seeing what happens when these value judgments about monsters are applied to non-organic entities. Our case study of the large cruise ships, starting with ocean liners and moving toward the modern behemoths that now enter our historic cities, discloses a new semiosis of monstrosity caused by the war of movement produced by globalization.

Keywords
Monsters, Ocean Liners, Cruise Ships, Semiotics, Globalization

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The title of this edition of "Studi di estetica" should be taken literally. Or rather, this is the mini *Gedankenexperiment* we will attempt to carry out over the next few pages. At a linguistic level, *Monstrous things* sounds like an oxymoron, if by "thing" we mean an inanimate and static object, and by "monster" we mean an animated and dynamic being. To investigate "monstrous things" would, therefore, require a reflection on the unfolding and determining of artificial products that, in both cultures and in the relationships between non-humans, humans and animals, are considered unnatural, monstruous. The field of analysis here is what we might call the 'counter-nature culture', or rather, the counter-naturalisation of culture.

Which traits of expression and content render a non-living thing – a cultural construct that is neither human nor animal nor an anthropomorph – fit to be judged a "monster"? What are the constitutive traits of a new semiotics of monstrosity?

1. *"*Monster*". Seeing, from the perspective of what is visible (and enunciable)*

I wish to start by making clear that the category of "monster" is not a mental or abstract one, but one that is exteroceptive and figurative. The "monster" is, first and foremost, a phenomenon, a visual experience that can either be direct or mediated by tales of various kinds whose value and intensity depend on the pathemic, cognitive and pragmatic transformations this experience provokes in the individual. "Monstrous" is that which exceeds the limits of imagination. Much like what happens with the sublime, in which we find an equally overwhelming excess and an implosive, negative abyss[1], the intellect ends up containing the emotion, but in the aesthetic of the monstrous, the seeing (the subject who looks) and the visible (the monster) articulate with one another as if in a chiasm, in a way that is not only more rigorous, but more unique.

We form an understanding of monstrosity thanks to language, and we learn to understand the nexus between the seeing and the visible to the extent that these become enunciable. Language tends to demonstrate how the characteristics of the "monster" can change both between cultures and over time as the abnormality grows famil-

[1] On the special feature of the excessive and unbounded size (in volume, weight, height, strength, etc.) in the sublime see Migliore (2016).

iar and is assimilated. The fact we can name a "monstrous thing", that we can find the means with which to express it, is already an act of reflection and a domestication of the enormity with which we are faced. Verbal language has the magical power of expressing this concept with a single word, *monstrum*, which is neutral, neither male nor female. The Italian language plays on the pairing of *vedente* (seeing) and *visibile* (visible), typical of monstrosity, making use of a homonymic relationship between noun and verb. The "monster" marks the effect, the action to which it has been exposed. It is the attribution of a quality, a judgement of external taste by the person who sees. The Italian word "*Mostro*" (show), in both its intransitive pronominal form ("*mi mostro*" – I show myself) and its transitive form ("*ti (vi) mostro*" – I show myself to you), instead marks the action that is being carried out. It flips the perspective and moves the seeing into the position, in all senses, of the visible. This reversibility is created by a cogent association between the seeing and the visible in the same way as a mirror image: "the mirror-image is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field" (Deleuze 1995: 70).

For Deleuze "monsters are born actors" (1995: 71). Indivisible from their role, from the act of performing something, exhibiting and exhibiting themselves, monsters embody both objective enunciative instances and inter-subjective enunciative instances, instances that call on and reproach the interlocuter.

2. *A question of alterity*

No monster is ever an identity in and of itself. On the one hand, the monster "shows themselves" to the person observing them and without whom they would not exist as a "monster". The monster is born as a result of it being put into perspective. It can only exist "in any respect" (Peirce), as a sign of an other's gaze. Its essence is, from the outset, relational and differential. Indeed, the *status* of monster is based on both the relation and the difference: a structure of two inter-dependent terms constituted by someone who sees and someone who is seen. On the other hand, the monster gives the non-monster and the anti-monster the possibility to negatively define their own identities through the comparison of their own characteristics with those of the "monster".

Somehow, the monster is there as a testament to how the other beings that look upon it, the senders of this judgement, are more normal than it, in a juridico-biological domain (Foucault 1999). In this sense, the transgressive monster offers reassurance with regards to the social order in which all the others are included, and is the point from which it is possible to "stigmatise" any deviations (Goffman 1986).

The judgement of monstrosity is indeed negative, denoting discrimination that is both aesthetic and moral. Anomalous appearances or behaviour in their configuration of a way of current existence that could be our own, repel us. The instinctive reaction is one of disgust, of reinforcement of the stereotypes of a bond between abnormal expressive form and a form of deplorable content. A personal defence of one's integrity and physical safety against something that cannot be traced back to a known cultural model. At times, the details of a monstrous creature find justification within the frame of local practices or other conceptual systems. In the past, the authenticity of a voyage beyond known borders was confirmed by the sighting of monsters. "Abnormal" does not necessarily mean ugly or evil, but possessing a different aspect or mode of organisation. Some monsters even appear beautiful (Kappler 1980: 90).

Precisely because it is so far from a recognised and classified species, and because it crosses boundaries, therefore making distinct states compossible (male and female, human and animal, virtual and actual), the monster never fails to provoke awe. It attracts, piques curiosity, fascinates. Its aspect as a being outside the norm denotes a power and origin that are supernatural. *Téras*, the corresponding Greek term, characterises this more effectively. But even the performative, expositive nature of the Latin *monstrum* is not an end in itself. Instead, it takes on the significance of an admonishment, a prophesy, a divine warning that mortals must interpret.

3. *Types of monstrosity*

Traditionally in teratology, religious studies or studies into myths and folklore, the monster is associated with a living being whose body has deformed limbs that are heterogenous or extraneous to the usual order. A being that, precisely because they are aberrant, provokes fear and astonishment. The semantics and syntax of the monster belong to and function at the heart of the natural universe. We rarely think

about it, but the common image we have of the "monster" is that of an "abominable" creature whose specific point of reference is the human or animal body with their standard units of measure. It could be a composite figure, a mixture of incongruous parts, a beast like the Sphinx, the Minotaur or the Chimera. But the parameters for defining something monstrous, the proof of a radical difference to normality, is provided by a single, or at most dual reference: the *soma* of man (not of woman, who as a mammal is already considered wild!).

What happens, then, when the semantics of the monster is taken on by a dispositive that is neither human nor animal? It is because we are anchored to the idea that the human body is "one perceived among others, but the measurant of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 248-9) that we miss the efficacy of other monstrosities. According to Francisco Toledo, "monstrum est effectus naturalis a recta e solita secundum speciem dispositione degenerans" (*Physica*, *Liber* II, *Quaestio* XIII, f. 75, c. 4). This is a natural and not an artificial effect because, in that which is artificial, the monster exists only by "*similitudine et analogia ad res naturales*" (see Guidi 2012), or in comparison with human or animal bodies. However, it is useful to investigate what this analogy consists of, particularly today.

As such, on the theme of monstrosity, we are interested in examining the monstruous that is neither human nor an anthropomorph, and reconsider this concept in light of the relationship between the conformation of things and the value judgements attributed to the monstrous. When is a thing – an inorganic, artificial being – monstruous today? As ever, in aesthetics and in semiotics, entities are less important than the concepts they generate, and which are defined through processes of pairing, encounters and clashes between instances of action. The monster is a judgement value much more than and long before it is an entity. This is the result of a moral reaction to its manifestation, and any proclamation of the expert that affirms a monstruous nature is, by definition, responsible for the judicial outcome. I had initially wanted to focus on mass tourism souvenirs as an example of contemporary monstrosity, the shape-shifting malformations produced by a global merchandising industry that distort the rule of collecting memorabilia from one's travels or that governing the *naturalia* and *mirabilia* of the ancient scholars and *Wunderkammer*. But this would have been a far broader discourse that would have required the constitution of a body of texts for analysis that would be excessively heteroclitic. Indeed, the souvenir type includes and is characterised by all kinds of to-

kens. Instead, we will focus on a specific case study: cruise ships. This subject is isotopic to the theme of souvenirs, because it too combines the extra-ordinary time of the tour with the ordinary time of everyday life, while allowing a unique focus.

4. *Monsters of the sea*

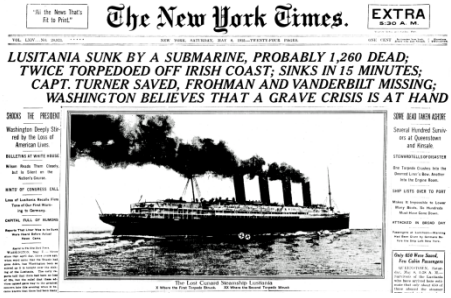
Cruise ships share the topical space with traditional monsters. From the times of Ulysses to today, passing through Saint Brendan, Gulliver, Melville's spectral seas, Stevenson and Hodgson, the ocean has acted as a backdrop and provided primary material for a wealth of fantastical representations. It is a receptacle of monsters, marvels and visionary islands, the location *par excellence* for all dangers (Le Goff 1985). The most imposing and terrifying animals find their natural habitat among the waters that, as Paolo Diacono tells us at the end of the VIII century, are replete with profound whirlpools and large open mouths ready to devour anyone who gets too close. Moving north towards the West, an incredibly deep vortex, known as "the navel of the sea", suddenly opens up in the ocean twice a day. The ships passing over it at that moment are swallowed whole (Fumagalli 1994: 99ff.). Similarly, Jonah was devoured by an enormous marine monster, a fish as big as an island, covered with sand and vegetation. But the Western tradition is not the only one to populate the waters with fear. Works by medieval Arab geographers and travellers, based on an exceptional knowledge of the commercial routes through the East all the way to China and Japan, describe peoples without heads, Cynocephali, Panotti, Macrobi and Imantopods (Tardiola 1990). Regardless of whether the context is the East or the West, their value is always negative, perhaps as a result of the fatalism linked to the arduous and uncertain nature of going by sea. The medieval *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, as well as describing monsters of all kinds, also comments on their variety:

> The races of marine beasts are, without doubt, infinite in number, beasts that with outsized bodies like tall mountains shake the most gigantic of waves and stretches of water almost uprooted from the depths […]. Disturbing the waters with terrible undercurrents, waters already agitated by the great mass of their bodies, they aim for the beach, offering a terrifying spectacle to anyone watching. (ed. Bologna 1977: 100-1; my translation)

5. *Sinister ocean liners*

The non-human giants of modernity are no less harmful, to others or themselves. In the Western imagination, the last century and the first decades of this one have been punctuated by the sight of ocean liners in harbours, photographed as they are inaugurated or about to take their maiden voyage. Built for inter-continental routes between Europe and America from the first half of the XIX century, and used predominantly between the two world wars, ocean liners separated their passengers into different classes – tourists, professional travellers and migrants, becoming increasingly luxurious, well-appointed and larger over time. Yet the Kaiser-class vessels offered public rooms of a grandeur never seen before that point. Until then, salons with 5m high ceilings had only existed in the first-class dining rooms of the Kaiser-class ocean liners with their central domes.

At a certain point, "the rise of the ocean liner came to represent their countries. It was an international competition where ships were hierarchical, like a cultural arms race" (Finamore, Wood, 2017).



"All the News That's Fit to Print."

The New York Times.

EXTRA 5:30 A. M.

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MAY 8, 1915.—TWENTY-FOUR PAGES. ONE CENT

LUSITANIA SUNK BY A SUBMARINE, PROBABLY 1,260 DEAD; TWICE TORPEDOED OFF IRISH COAST; SINKS IN 15 MINUTES; CAPT. TURNER SAVED, FROHMAN AND VANDERBILT MISSING; WASHINGTON BELIEVES THAT A GRAVE CRISIS IS AT HAND

SHOCKS THE PRESIDENT

Washington Deeply Stirred by the Loss of American Lives.

BULLETINS AT WHITE HOUSE

Wilson Reads Them Closely, and Is Quiet as the Nation's Guest.

WRITE OF CONGRESS CALL

Line of Leadership Results From Time of the First Warning to Germany.

CAPITAL FULL OF RUMORS

America Will Not Take Step in Haste Many Hours Before Actual Report Comes.

SOME DEAD TAKEN ASHORE

Several Hundred Survivors at Queenstown and Kinsale.

STOWAWAYS ALSO OF DISASTER

Five Victims Crawley into the Overturned Lifeboat, Another Into the Engine Room.

SHIP LISTS DUE TO PORT

Within 8 Seconds to Locate Many Decks, Its Steadiness Most Noted Seen Crisis.

ATTACKED IN BRIGHT DAY

Passengers at Luncheon—Warning Given Only Twenty Minutes Before the Blow Struck Said New York.

Only 650 Were Saved, Five Cabin Passengers

AT BELFAST, Ireland, May 8.—Only 650 survivors of the Cunard steamship Lusitania, which was torpedoed and sunk off Ireland, have reached this city.

The Last Cunard Steamship Lusitania

A Where the First Torpedo Struck. B Where the Second Torpedo Struck

Fig. 1 – Sinking of the Lusitania. Cover of The New York Times, September, May, 8.

Fig. 2 – J.R. Tooby, Poster for Canadian Pacific Railway featuring the Empress of Britain, London, 1920-31.

In September 1907, the British ocean liner RMS *Lusitania* was fitted with a new kind of engine that differed from that of its rivals: a turbine engine. It was sunk on 7 May 1915 by a German U-boat 11 miles (18

km) off the southern coast of Ireland, killing 1,198 passengers and crew (Fig. 1), two years before the United States declared war on Germany. Germany had declared the seas around the United Kingdom a war zone, and the German embassy in the United States had placed fifty newspaper advertisements warning people of the dangers of sailing on the *Lusitania*. The British objected, insisting that threatening to torpedo all ships indiscriminately was wrong, whether the attack was announced in advance or not. Later, in an attempt to justify their actions, the Germans argued that the *Lusitania*'s identity had been disguised, that it was actually transporting war munitions and flew no flags. The Germans insisted the ship could be converted into an armed auxiliary cruiser to join the war, that it was a non-neutral vessel in a declared war zone, with orders to evade, capture and attack enemy submarines. Although the sinking of the HMS *Lusitania* was a major factor in building support for war, war was only eventually declared after the Imperial German Government resumed the use of unrestricted submarine warfare against American shipping in an attempt to break the transatlantic supply chain from the USA to Britain.

As we can see, the overseas reception of these behemoths highlights the complex relationship between Britain, the United States, and Germany (Russell 2020). Ocean liners, as the products of business decisions shaped by the imperatives of international travel, immigration, and trade, were the driving force behind the processes of globalization prior to 1914. The Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft (HAPAG) steamships, between 1912 and 1914 in particular, bear witness to Germany's ambition and its national and international dimensions at the time. In short, marvel and fear in the face of the gargantuan enormity of these ships go hand in hand. Their ever-growing size is directly correlated to the political power and authority of the country of which they are the simulacrum (Fig. 2), feeding the suspicion that they are neither neutral nor inoffensive, but bellicose. The bewitching *Duilio*, the first ocean liner built in Italy that made its maiden voyage in 1906, also fell victim to military operations. It was requisitioned by the Fascist State in 1941 to repatriate Italian soldiers from the Horn of Africa, and was torpedoed by Allied bombers in 1944. It burned for two days before remaining semi-sunken in the same spot until it was demolished in 1948. The drawing of the hull's cross-section (Fig. 3) not only gives us access to the belly of the monster, with its eight bridges, but allows us to better observe its outline from the front, which, positioned on the shore and standing out against a minimal background, is even more impressive.

When it wasn't nationalistic conflicts bringing about the end of these ships, it was fire (as happened with the RMS Queen *Elizabeth* in 1972), capsizing and sinking (emblematic of this is the fate of the *Andrea Doria* in 1956), shipwrecks or demolitions that never took place, leaving the evidence of their suffering for more than a century: the *Titanic*, which sank in 1912, was still a submerged relic in 2020 (Fig. 4).

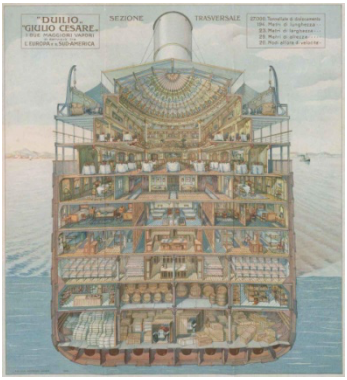


Fig. 3 – *Duilio*, cross-section of the hull.
Fig. 4 – *Titanic*, 1912-2021.

It would be both time-consuming and unhelpful to run through the vicissitudes of the various ocean liners, from the *Amerique* of Marseilles, which had its maiden voyage in 1879 and ended up crashing into the Italian steamship *Solferino* off the Sicilian coast in 1904, to the Italian ship *Raffaello*, built in 1960, sold to the Iranian government and hit in 1982 by Iraqi incendiary missiles. In summary of what we have already said, we can see two traits that are essential for understanding how today's concept of this kind of monster has developed: their ever-increasing tonnage as an expression of the builder's desire for power, and the fact that these floating palaces were actually warships in disguise, or at least believed to be. By the end of the 1800s, as faster air travel substituted lengthy crossings, ocean liners had already started to be used for recreational purposes and journeys in stages. As early as 1887, instead of keeping his *Augusta Victoria* safely in port during the rough winter months, the ever-arrogant German merchant Albert Ballin sent it to the Mediterranean for a 'society voyage' (*Geselschaftsreise*), and the modern concept of the cruise was born.

In genealogical terms, or rather, in terms of the archaeology of knowledge, the descendence of cruise ships from ocean liners is tacit

or minimally explicit, but essential for demonstrating the monstrous (unnatural) culture on which they are based.

6. *The mediatisation of large ships*

When it comes to the affirmation of a collective legacy of beliefs and knowledge regarding large ships in general (ocean liners first and later, cruise ships), the sensationalism of their communication has been significantly influential. Morphological characteristics and events related to these giants ensured that every launch ceremony and event-laden voyage filled the front pages of newspapers the world over. The usual, doubly violent effect of testimony and scene-setting emerges here, with each built into the other: worry or anxiety about a disaster appeared at the same moment in which the spectacular form of reception, the aesthetic *pathos*, anaesthetised the pain and produced a long-enduring habit. One recent, 21st century example is the tragedy of the *Costa Concordia* on the night of January 13th 2012, which collided with a group of rocks just a stone's throw from the town Giglio Porto on the Island of Giglio, causing the deaths of 32 people (Fig. 5). The event was covered so extensively, in the form of television debates, publications and commentary on the telephonic recordings, appearances by and interviews with the ship's commander, Schettino, as well as films, documentaries and artistic photography, that, on the one hand, the victims were forgotten, while on the other, the routes and the size of cruise ships in historical cities began to be viewed with alarm as a result of the coverage's reference to the tragic history of the ship's ocean-going antecedents (Fig. 6).

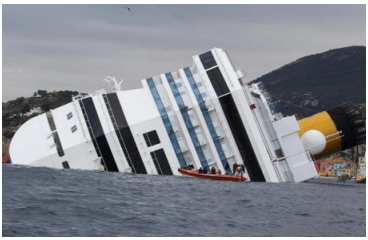


Fig. 5 – The sinking of the Costa Concordia, 2012.

Fig. 6 – G. Turano, "Che affare i mostri a Venezia", L'Espresso, September 23rd 2013.

Among the most incisive texts are the documentary film, *Terror at sea. The sinking of the Concordia* (2014), by Paul O'Connor and Marc Tileye, and the photo series by Jonathan Danko Kielkowski titled *Concordia* (2014). They abandon the journalistic representation of the large ship and attempt to bring it closer to the spectator so that they might interact with its vast size. O'Connor and Tileye make the most of external perspectives, shooting from below or from the side, and in close-up, and the resulting effect is intimidatory, suggesting threat and subordination for those watching. Conversely, Kielkowski places himself within the ship and reveals its gutted belly.

This proximal restitution of the relic runs parallel to the most important change currently taking place in the ocean liner's transformation into the cruise ship: their entrance into and movement through historic cities (Fig. 7), where routes had previously been external and limited to stopping at urban ports. It is one thing to observe the size of such boats when they are out at sea, and quite another to have to reckon with the difference in size between those ships and the walls of houses and buildings close up and on a daily basis (as happens for those living in Venice, Genoa, Istanbul, Lisbon, Dubrovnik, and so on).

7. *Giving things a name*

Let's focus on the issue of denomination. At a certain point, the media began to use the label "monster" for cruise ships. It is used not so much for macroscopic entities, but for phenomena the media cannot quite place, and whose level of risk they are unable to calculate, a concept that comes from ancient mythologies and religious and popular traditions. Here, as we have noted, the monster designates the anomaly, any person or animal that goes against nature (Fig. 9).

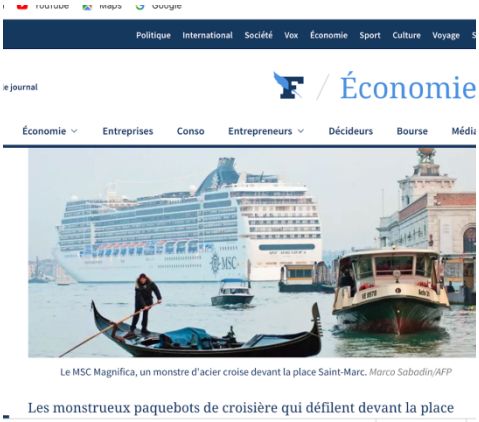


Fig. 8 – R. Heuzé, "Venise interdit les paquebots géants devant la place Saint-Marc", Le Figaro, January 1st 2014.

Fig. 9 – P. D. de Montfort, *Colossal Octopus*, 1801.

8. *The experience of new monsters*

Now, if giving things a name is not providing information on a form of already ontologically-defined essences that present themselves to the world, but discovering them through a "talent" that provokes a metamorphosis of meaning beginning with an available signified, from an analogy of the new thing that has been seen (Ortega y Gasset 1983: 636, 384-8), this slippage of the monstrous' properties from the natural order to the cultural one is relevant. It indicates a jump from the unknown that is carried out through inferences in perception and by adjusting one's own observation to previous experience. A metaphor that opens new horizons on knowledge. This leads to the elaboration of a complex mental schema, a "cognitive type" (CT) of the monster that is modern, private, but that implies a "nuclear content" (NC), a collection of interpretants (morphological traits and motor characteristics) that are inter-subjectively shared, that exist in the public[2].

[2] This hypothesising the ways of knowing and understanding the new monstrosity draws on Eco's interpretive theory from *Kant and the Platypus* (1997).

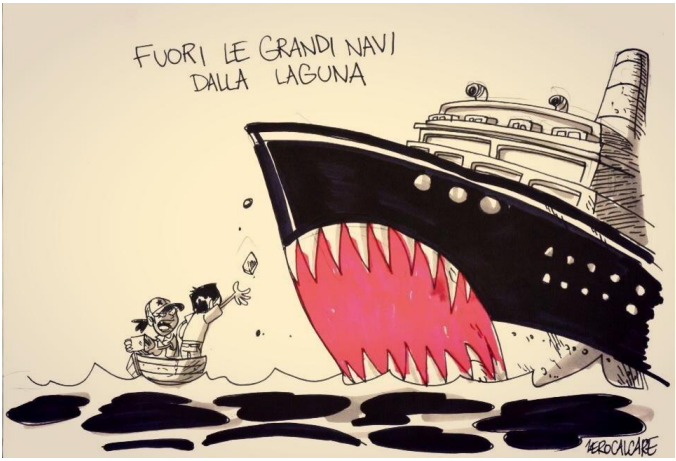


Fig. 10 – Zerocalcare, *Fuori le grandi navi*..., June 4th 2013.

I would hypothesise that the monster's forms of content in nature have, today, become forms of expression for a new form of content of monstrosity. Aiming to protect its *continuum*, the world resists cognitive processes and feasible negotiations. By assigning a name that is already codified and connotated (in the West) to a thing (such as a large ship) that does not present the typical attributes of monsters, its expressive form imaginarily re-assumes and re-translates the plane of content of legendary *tokens* within the same context, from the leviathan whale and Pinocchio's shark, from Nessie and Godzilla, all the way to the creature from the black lagoon (Fig. 10).

9. *Invariants of the monster and innovation*

In his analysis of the Latin vocabulary of signs and omens, Émile Benveniste highlighted how the neutral term *monstrum* is connected to the present *monstrare*, but with one substantial difference: it is not possible to decide *a priori* which one came first, *monstrum* or *monstrare* (Benveniste 2016: 508-9). This is what we were asking at the beginning: is it truly possibly to disassociate the monster from the enunciatory act, that process of showing and how it shows itself?

10. *The Warning. Banksy,* Venice in oil

Leaning on this unsayability, Benveniste insisted that *monstrum* was derived from *moneo*, "to warn". He compares *monstrum* with other terms used to designate incredible events – *omen*, "true prophesy"; *ostentum*, a phenomenon that unfolds within the observer's visual field; *portentum*, a broad perspective offered to the gaze that reveals the future; *prodigium*, a word invested with divine authority uttered in public as a prophesy (Benveniste 2016: 509). The French linguist specifies that *monstrum* is traditionally a "being outside the ordinary", at times horrible, that repugnantly violates the natural order of things, "*monstrum horrendum*", as Virgil said. With the anomalous form it assumes, however, *monstrum* means, above all, "teaching a behaviour, prescribing a path to follow", much like a tutor ("*quotiens monstravi tibi ut*... ", "how often I have advised you to...", Plauto, *Menaechmi*, 788)[3], if for no other reason than to ward off an imminent misadventure.

This happened with Banksy in his recent intervention in Venice, *Venice in oil* (2019), captured in the video the artist posted on his Instagram feed and which the city's "No Grandi Navi" (No Big Ships) Committee found convincing enough to publish its website. In *Venice in Oil*, a man with his face covered has set up his stand as a street artist close to the Palazzo Ducale, between the market stalls and portraitists (Fig. 11). He is exhibiting a "de-constructed" painting, typical of the 18th century tradition, in which he has depicted a "whim", a fantasy in which an enormous cruise ship sails in between the island of San Giorgio and Rialto.

Fig. 11 – Banksy, *Venice in oil* (2019), from the video.
Fig. 12 – Banksy, Venice in oil (2019), detail.

[3] Benveniste (2016: 510). Here, Benveniste clearly draws on the most authoritative teratological sources of the Middle Ages, from Augustine to Isidore of Seville to Thomas Aquinas. See Le Goff (1985).

The boat depicted (which the video shows in detail) has a number of unusual tears and dents on the left side of its hull, next to the anchor's hawse, which are pointed to by internal observers and informers (Fig. 12). Signs of collision that are premonitory, prophetic. Ten days after the video's publication on the internet, an MSC cruise ship rammed a tourist tugboat in Venice (Fig. 13), justifying the warnings given by the media on the consequences mass tourism would have for the city (Fig. 14). Paolo Fabbri, who has written extensively about *zombies*, spoke about the monster as a "semiotic reminder", a "social semiophore".

Fig. 13 – Accident involving the MSC Opera in Venice, June 2nd 2019.

Fig. 14 – Cover of *Der Spiegel*, n. 33, 10/08/2019.

In Banksy's painting, the police speedboat, moving in the same direction as the ship, underscores which side the law is on. The ship and speedboat clash with Venice's 18th century aspect, giving the impression that this is both out of time and out of place in terms of their "modernity" (Latour 1991), something also revealed by the painting's title, *Venice in oil*, visible in the first still from the video and printed clearly on a black-rimmed sign sitting on the easel below the painting. *Oil* is not simply a reference to the painting technique involved, but an allusion to the fuel used by the behemoths that cut through the Grand Canal.

As the man sits reading, several passers-by stop, stunned, to look at and comment on the picture. "It's fine for cruise ships to sail. But this one arrives, it is a monster", one woman observes. So, the ships are conceded the possibility of existing, but only on the proviso they stay

out at sea (given how much they pollute) and do not enter the city.[4] From this we can deduce that these non-humans became monstruous under given circumstances. The exemplification of the "large ship" in Banksy's work confirms the invariant of the intimidatory act, of admonishment, of the monster, with the difference that, while the ancient monster was either born as such or displayed itself as a monster from the outset, the modern monster is the result not only of a hulking form, but of inopportune placement and improper "behaviour". The modern monster is inadequate, a bull in a china shop. Or perhaps the opposite is true, as we have said, that the advance of all these steel beings makes Venice seem inadequate.

11. *Irrationality of the monster*

In the well-known "panoramic" photographs by Gianni Berengo Gardin, the cruise ship is a grotesque decoration of the *mediascape* (Fig. 15). It appears awkward and unbalanced, imposed upon the city as if it were necessary and inevitable. Whether ancient or modern, monsters provoke conflicting sentiments as they are the "irrational that we have created" (Eco 1964). It is no coincidence that dictionaries have approved the verb monstrify: "the sleep of reason creates monsters" (Goya).

[4] For more on *Venice in Oil* by Banksy, see Migliore (2021a) and Migliore (2021b). There has recently been news of a legislative decree stating that the docking of cruise ships in Venice must be planned in advance and must take place outside the lagoon. It's a shame that this news come nine years after the Clini-Passera decree, blocking ships larger than 40 thousand tonnes from stopping in front of Piazza San Marco or along the Giudecca canal, and that it came out on April 1st!

Fig. 15 – G. Berengo Gardin, *Venezia e le grandi navi*, 2013

The abnormality of the steel monster is not illogical in itself, but in comparison with what is around it, due to its being oversized with regards to the reduced size of others (Eco 2007). A passage by Berengo Gardin, whose family owned a Murano glass shop in San Marco, is significant with regards to this and as prophetic, as Banksy's painting:

> It would take nothing for what happened in Genoa to occur [in Venice], for one of these horizontal skyscrapers to crash into the Palazzo Ducale, San Giorgio, or the Punta della Dogana. I photographed them so that people could see not only that they are horrendous, but that they are terrifying. Seen like this, Venice is reduced to a model, a miniature, a toy. There is no longer any difference between this Venice seen from the top of the monster and the artificial Venices that have been created in the US […] Not to mention the accidents that are alarmingly possible. These ships are already smashing up Venice, even without physically touching it. (Berengo Gardin 2013)

Cruise ships are overbearing, then, in proportion with the city. The "large ship" is twice as tall as the palazzo Ducale, twice as long as piazza San Marco, it is foreign to the environment. Yet it passes through the city as if it were a given. Berengo Gardin chose to "reveal", to unmask this "innocent" fact in the language of Barthes. The photographs

that might, at first sight, be mistaken for having been photoshopped, are unfortunately a lucid reportage.

But Berengo Gardin's discourse is more subtle than that. His first point is that the neo-monster of the lagoon ends up monstrifying its surroundings by altering Venice's physiognomy, transforming it into a Disney-esque theme park. Whilst in Banksy's art, the use of an 18th century style creates a temporal contrast with the modern ship and speedboat, here, the use of black and white homogenises the dyschrony and drags the city into its new era. Secondly, Berengo Gardin's shrewd photographic angles capture Venice's deterioration portending a terrifying dystopia caused by these passages. Before Covid-19, four gigantic catamarans entered the San Marco basin. The vision of real monsters leads to dark predictions. Thirdly, even Berengo Gardin notes the monster's dual nature, their ontological and phenomenal undecidability – not only are they horrendous, they also terrify. We have to ascertain, however, the intensity of this terror, drugged as we are by its spectacularization by the media. Fourthly, the semantics of the admonishment, embodied by the nose and the tonnage of the "large ships" is charged with moral judgements. These monsters repel because, as well as travelling and stopping where they should not, affecting the landscape and endangering artistic heritage, they are terrifyingly costly, they pollute, they teach society to waste food, and encourage "hit and run" tourism. And crowded holiday vessels, particularly in the Mediterranean, clash with the image of dinghies filled with migrants left to the mercy of the waves.

Fabbri often said that "ethics is a label". By qualifying cruise ships as "monsters", there is also a rejection of the madness of this behaviour, of the primacy of economic gain that blinds men, leading them to wrongly consider the earth and the seas to be their property[5].

12. *Exit. Cruise ships, the aesthetic of the monstrous and the war of global movement*

In summary, it is not a given that public opinion will define cruise ships as monsters. The transference of the term from the axis of nature, where it traditionally functioned, to that of culture, of a serially pro-

[5] What is Covid-19 if not yet another man-made monster according to this same logic, due to the sale of inedible meats considered the property of those trading them?

duced industrial product, far from being the simple mutation of a term, entails a slippage of meaning in terms of the conception of monstrosity. The cruise ship is neither human nor animal, but artificial, despite not being alien-like, extra-terrestrial monsters. Like natural monsters, the cruise ship is also linked to a journey, an obscure provenance and a manifestation that, in the eyes of those who see it, embodies evil. Its XXL dimensions no longer act as absolute superlatives, but as comparative adjectives. It maintains the distinctive traits of intimidatory action, of admonishment with regards to its potential consequences, and the irrationality from which it results. It is worth comparing this new aesthetic of the monstruous with the sublime and the abject. Monstrous, sublime and abject share boundlessness and an absence of form. They precede any sense of self or of an identifiable object. The monstrous, however, is the first to arrive at self-determination, while the sublime is determined once the experience has ended, and the abject is entirely unsayable, resistant to language. Between these three sentiments, the abject, this "mixture of disgust and ecstasy" (Kristeva 1980), is the one most associated to perversion and transgression. It disavows morality and the law, leaning towards evil. Nature's errors are quite always ethical and social errors.

Contemporary monstrosity is closer to evil as a human responsibility (Kant 1781), something that should not exist and must be fought. It is no coincidence we hear talk of the "the time of the crime of the monstrous" (Sloterdijk 2004), the result of the association between the cult of the sublime and capitalist consumerism, mass experimentation (Lyotard 1984). Returning to the first part of this article, there is a reversibility between the seeing and the visible, in being so involved in monstrosity that the sublime majesty of the law of cruise ships is transformed into a repugnant, obscene monstrosity. That which to the eyes of some is seen as good, is revealed to be evil (Žižek 1997), the symptom of the omnipresence of power and power's capacity to reproduce itself in different forms and contexts.

Thinking back to the function of ocean liners in the first half of the 20th century, it could be said that the form of content conveyed by cruise ships through mass tourism is a war of global movement. Seemingly innocuous and publicised as the ticket to your dream vacation, in reality it violently asserts the policy of globalisation. The allegorical tale *La balena in laguna (The whale in the lagoon)* by Berti (2019), a musical storyteller (something we need more of!) imagines the whale

ending up in the Grand Canal. Its moral is one of rescaling powers and showing respect for the other forms of life that populate the planet.

Ha perso il senno, povera balena
Non ha capito che non è un'anguilla,
Nella laguna la ci passa appena!
Tutta contenta fa la mossa e prilla
Solleva onde alte fino al cielo
Muove il fondale e porta via l'argilla.
Glie l'hanno detto tutti: "È uno sfacelo!"
Protestano il branzino, lo storione,
La ràza, el passerìn, el paganèlo.
Ma proprio al culminare dell'azione
Il gigante s'insabbia in una secca
E non riprende la navigazione.
In festa il Canalgrande, la Giudecca
Il sarago e l'acciuga all'Arsenale
Ogni gabbian che passa la rimbecca:
"Volevi far la danza boreale,
Ma questa è la vacanza che ti spetta
per quella tua catastrofe ambientale".
Se una morale il mio cantar ti detta
È star sempre nell'acqua al tuo livello.
E rispettar la legge più perfetta.

She's lost her mind, poor whale,
She didn't see she was not an eel,
And barely fits in the lagoon!
She's so happy, she moves and spins,
Making waves as high as the sky.
She moves the seabed and sweeps away the clay.
Everyone told her, "this is a disaster!"
The seabass and the sturgeon told her,
As did the ray, the plaice and the goby.
But right at the climax of her show,
The giant gets stuck in the shallow
And cannot resume her trip.
Canalgrande and the Giudecca are celebrating,
The seabream and the anchovy are at the Arsenale.
Every passing seagull reproaches her,
"You wanted to do the boreal waltz,
But this is the holiday you deserve
For the environmental catastrophe you've caused".
If I may teach you with my song,
I'd tell you stay in the deep waters
And abide by that most perfect of laws.

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