

# Introduction

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This monographic section of volume 25 of *Itinera* stems largely from the discussions that took place during the two study days I organised on 13th and 14th. May 2021 at the Stensen Institute in Florence, entitled *Ricerche in corso*. These were planned on the occasion of the *Moral Philosophy Seminars*, held at the University of Florence, with the collaboration of Professor Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis and Professor Bruno Accarino, who were fundamental importance for these event, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them.

With the aim of continuing and enriching the debate of both days, this section not only brings together some of the contributions presented by the speakers, but it also aims to further involve other authors in the field of teratology, an area of study, which can seem somewhat impenetrable.

The original title of the seminar “The Anatomical Monster” (the subtitle of which reads: “Figures of Irregularity, Mechanisms of Exclusion and Biological Naturalism”) evidently referred to the theme of so-called “monstrous births”.

The attempt was to make evident certain themes that run through the various contributions; starting from the definition of abnormal and pathological as deviations from the norm, we move on to delineate the field of unforeseen variations - anomalies, alterations, and abnormalities. We continue to the visual representation of monstrosity, its aesthetic form and its capacity to reveal exaggerated figures that break the monotony of “normality” by virtue of unexpected juxtapositions. This includes the monsters that populated *Cabinets of Curiosities* as much as circuses, later housed in the collections and on the anatomical tables of 18th- and 19th-century naturalists; the analysis of the present perception of the monster, aimed at its ambiguity, considered as a union of contrasting features that stand out against a horizon that leads back to otherness and difference. The result is a varied and polymorphous collection, within which the investigation of the prodigious, the marvellous and the monstrous loom transversally from every single essay.

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Thus, the intention is to trace the development of modern interest in wonders through a single case: “monstrous births”, first fully included in the canon of wonders, then considered natural wonders,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this introduction, the term “monstrous births” refers to children born deformed, such as Siamese, headless, even abortions.

sources of amusement and pleasure, and finally studied as objects of scientific investigation. “Monstrous births” became protagonists, bringing together the multiple meanings of wonders as religious portents, popular entertainment, philosophical and scientific challenge and aesthetic outrage: monsters aroused the highest degree of wonder combined with horror and pleasure. A “monstrous birth” represented wonder coupled with fear, and was similar, though not identical to, wonder coupled with pleasure, or rather the same monstrous birth exhibited in a *Wunderkammer*.

The character of such marvels has changed throughout human history: if the models of medieval marvels were hybrid animals such as the Basilisk, later authors increasingly favoured cases of children born with two heads, hybridisations between man and animal, and Siamese twins that adorned flying sheets and learned books. Marvels and prodigies destabilised and contradicted an already variable and inconstant nature, and to record a marvellous event was to record the actual breaking of a boundary line.

The idea was therefore, starting from the theme that closely concerns my research, to understand what functions monsters play within the worldview, and what mediating roles they assume in the relations that man entertains with the universe and with the “other”.

A thorough investigation of the 19th and 20th century led me to believe that in modern times the monster is used for completely different purposes. What had intrigued me about ancient wonders and monsters was their evidence and necessity within a fully coherent, diverse and beautiful cosmos. They functioned as ornaments of the universe as sources of diversity; a universe in which the monster, representing a paradox, was witness to a higher meaning, invisible to human eyes, proof of how much nature loves to play. Today's monsters are much more abstract and interior. A study of the past implies a reworking of our present: the element most subject to change in contemporary monsters, compared to those of antiquity and the Middle Ages, is no longer in the monster itself, but in the use made of it according to culture, society, psychology and so on. It seems to us that in all epochs there exists an eternal and universal meaning of the monster, overlaid with one or more conventional meanings, peculiar to each epoch, which, if they can conceal the first meaning, cannot however prevent it from existing. In this way, a whole range of variants peculiar to the epoch, the artist and his environment, join the complex of constants, constituting almost its ornament. The horizon of the monster and the imaginary are so vast that it is impossible to reduce them through the use of exclusive systems and points of view.

Nature revels in it: the presence of the monster denies the order it has established, but at the same time also contains evidence of its power. In this way, the monster perpetuates itself, similar to itself, and is a continuous presence alongside man. Thus, to speak of monsters is to relate to the intimate nature of things, including, human nature.

Turning now to methodological issues, Ubaldo Fadini's article focuses on the idea of the monster as a “cultural predicate”, attributed to a broad linguistic and symbolic repertoire of overall human history. In this perspective, particular attention is paid to the various points of view on monstrosity, which, from the initial teratology of natural signs, develops into a teratology of a specifically social character.

Fadini shows, therefore, from a purely material point of view, how the transformations of feeling, thinking and acting in today's working activities allow certain characteristics of monstrosity to be associated with new productive subjects and cooperating singularities.

Vincenzo Maria Di Mino's contribution continues with a precise analysis of the different points of view on monstrosity. He posits teratology as the main core within which social practices are intertwined with extremely topical political-economic considerations, where philosophically meaningful concepts such as “necro-capitalism”, “dehumanisation”, “immunity” and “crisis” appear. By examining the reproduction of the monstrous form as a negation and overcoming of both the biological and social order, Di Mino proposes a vision of the monster as the “exaltation” of exceptional animal qualities and qualities of the rational and rationalising subject within an interpretative framework that sees the monster as that foreign body that breaks boundaries, freely disposing of its own form and at the same time hiding something harmful and destructive to the established order. In this context, the monster is called upon to represent the one who attacks the biopolitical constitution of the idea of nature.

The contribution also proposes a discussion of some theses contained in the volume *Making Monsters* by R. L. Smith, concerning the relationship between processes of dehumanisation and the production of monstrosities. Starting from the multiple facets of this link, the contribution highlights some lines of analysis that concern, on the one hand, the epistemic *status* of the concept of dehumanisation, and on the other hand, the real dimension of the processes of monstrosity production within the multiple social temporal and political levels of the concept of crisis.

Lorenzo Montemagno Ciseri's text opens the group of contributions devoted specifically to monstrous births and the studies of the great naturalists between the 18th and 19th centuries. Analysing some peculiar aspects of the conception of monsters and monstrous births in the centuries preceding the birth of modern teratology, Montemagno Ciseri offers a brief summary of the many different and heterogeneous theories that, at very different times, have attempted to explain the causes of the nature and genesis of monsters.

Caterina Tortoli links aesthetic studies on dissimilarity and therefore on the principle of disharmony, on which irregular movements are based, to the figure of the hermaphrodite, in an exploration that starts from ancient mythology and arrives at the analysis of the figure of the androgyne in 19th century

culture and in Foucault's studies. The main characteristic of this monstrous typology is represented by the "mixing of the sexes": the hermaphrodite is both male and female, a being made up of disparate anatomical elements, which together disrupt the normal physical appearance. Finally, Tortoli proposes the link between sexual ambiguity and the hermaphrodite's definition of a "double" monster to the literary works of Balzac and Hugo. In particular, the interest in Balzac, is central as in his novels the hermaphrodite is considered perfect as it is devoid of significant differences and emblematic of the union of different polarities.

Likewise, the intention of my article is to analyse the theme of anomaly as a deviation from the norm and derailment of development, combined with the autonomous *status* reserved for monstrous figures. Dealing with early forms of skepticism, i.e. those forms that naturalised the animal kingdom by removing it from the sphere of medieval spiritualism, I will show how monstrous species, considered extreme fringes of the animal and human kingdoms, were slowly reclassified under the conceptual lens of the new science of life. Finally, I will focus on the studies of naturalists such as John Hunter and Étienne Geoffroy Saint Hilaire, who discovered the internal logic of nature and began to develop a common language, and thanks to whom the first research on embryology was born.

With Giorgia Visentin's contribution on the view of the monster as that which unsettles, strangles and disquiets, the discussion examines the *status* of the monster and thus its representation as the irruption of the improper that threatens the stability of life, indicating how the commonality of life itself is a precious but contingent state. Starting from such assumptions and the evaluation of the monster as the one who shows the contingency of the norm, Visentin comes to touch upon concepts such as the transvaluation of values, the Great Health and the theory of the *hopeful monster*.

This is followed by the talk by Pierluigi Panza, whose contribution opens up the view to a more contemporary vision of the monster, focusing on the aesthetic experience of the new *Hybrid-Art* or *Genetic Art*, born thanks to a studied genetic manipulation of animals. While from an artistic point of view the results may have traits of continuity, even if only superficially, with the aesthetic effect of the *Wunderkammern* and with experiences such as those of Damien Hirst, the type of scientific research that accompanies it is unique. In fact, the Belgian artist-scientist Koen Vanmechelen, launching a real challenge to aesthetics, taxidermises animals born from cross-breeds that did not previously exist in nature, demonstrating that greater biodiversity favours the improvement of the species. When they die, these unique specimens (or monsters) become works of art in compositions that we could frame in the aesthetic terms of the monstrous or the grotesque.

The dialogue between teratology and artistic expressions continues with Alessandra Sala's essay. The author intends to investigate the relationship between the representation of monstrosity and the phenomenon of the *Wunderkammern*, or *Chambers of Wonders*.

The *Wunderkammern* housed precious materials, exotic objects and antiquities, natural and artificial oddities, and everything was piled up together to amaze the spectator: the objects, displayed thickly from floor to ceiling, only amplified the astonishment and admiration of the observer. *Artificialia* and *naturalia* were not only displayed side by side in the studied variety of the *Cabinet of Curiosities*, but also blended into each other, blurring the boundaries between wonders of art and wonders of nature. Collecting and handling marvellous objects carried with it a sense of unmediated contact with another world. Wonders could and should be put on display, to inspire and impress. Possession and control of some of the most amazing marvels represented the power of those who possessed them and their rarity reflected the uniqueness of the owner in terms of nobility and education.

Thus, the subject of the *Wunderkammern* and their examination fascinates, not only because of their peculiar characteristic of collecting marvellous objects from all over the world, but above all because of the importance attached to feelings such as curiosity, wonder and amazement necessary for the process of understanding the world, as they are recognised as mediators of knowledge.

At present, the artistic experience of the *Wunderkammern* continues to express itself in various forms of entertainment. Alessandra Sala focuses on the examination of two portraits of the collecting phenomenon in question, taken from the genre of popularisation in children's literature, recently promoted by a growing wave of experimentation in the specific form of the *Picturebook*. The thesis that emerges and constitutes the core of the author's reflection is the reciprocal contact between the visual artistic exercise and the didactic-educational experience. The popular non-fiction *Picturebooks* published in the last decade would seem to have in common a significant illustrative and design apparatus that, translated into a highly creative and aesthetic approach to knowledge, is capable of engaging the senses, and inspiring a whole series of feelings such as awe and wonder.

*Picturebooks*, therefore, contribute to restoring fascination to art and value to the learning process, bringing to mind the relationship of proximity that contributes to the *Wunderkammern* paradigm.

The essays by Emiliano Aguilar and the one co-written by Katlyn Samons and Justin Shay Easler close the reflection, proposing two different interpretations. Both essays resort to a different, mirror-image approach to the observations and theses set out above. Monstrosity is assessed in a totally different way, connecting the anatomical monster and thus the monstrous appearance, to the "visual representation" attributed to it in the contemporary, and then expressed in the film for Aguilar and in the comic strip for Samons and Easler.

From the outset, Emiliano Aguilar's essay focuses on the analysis of two films: *Sleepway Camp* (1982) and *XXY* (2007), both representing monstrosity from an exclusively genetic point of view. The author intends to demonstrate, through the analysis of the two films, how monstrosity embodies the production of everything that presents itself as "different", as a true deviation from the norm, a

concept that runs through and recurs several times, despite the different points of view, within the entire volume.

This diversity is continuously reaffirmed by the two protagonists, Angela and Alex respectively (understood as monsters), who inevitably, through this very reaffirmation, feel the need to confront and clash with the other. This happens because the place, which coincides with a more focused area of interaction, is vital not only in relation to the form the monster takes, but also to the levels of disturbance it produces. Aguilar emphasises how the decisions and actions that move the protagonists largely depend on the environment within which they are inserted. The contribution goes on to present the different sexual experiences lived by Angela and Alex through the notion of *Queer*, understood as the production of images of deconstruction and liminality, capable of questioning the existing binary structures and critiquing the barriers imposed by heteronormative power, towards our understanding of sexuality and the world, which is fundamental in order to understand the characters' actions.

The essay by the aforementioned Katlyn Samons and Justin Shay Easler concludes the volume. Here, the two authors focus on the representation of the monster as a metaphor for human wickedness and cruelty. The monster is presented as the device on which morally reprehensible actions are catalysed. Samons and Easler contrast the idea of the monster as a moral deformation of man with a vision in which the monster becomes a creature with whom one can “sympathise”. Starting from Hajime Isagama's *Attack on Titan* manga, the article tends to emphasise not only the end result of the monstrous creation, i.e. the monster, but also the dividing line between this monster and the human in the world created by Isagama. And it is precisely the questioning of this dividing line that forces the reader to question the human condition of ordinary monsters, who are often demonised and repressed.

To this end, I considered the support of iconographic material to be of fundamental importance, as images possess the capacity to remove that distance, that hiatus between the real and the unreal, between the earthly and the divine, between what appears metaphysical but is nevertheless represented as immanent.

Certain monsters, as well as certain myths, demonstrate that language is not always adequate for its purposes, that it does not always say what it wants to say, that it does not always implement the exact description of the world as perceived. The image is often more accessible than the written word, as it possesses in itself an immediate attractive power, which written expression lacks. Language is at a loss to describe forms, such as depth effects: the real form of things is excluded from the reach of language. Behind every image is the history of the origin of a content, its allegorical use, its symbolic meaning, more or less successful, to express cultural tools, historical-social factors in the course of

475

time and in the geography of spaces. Penetrating the content of an image means tracing its significant assumptions of a historical, literary, social and cultural nature, in all its aspects, held together by the subject itself also through the recovery of tradition. to which is added today to which is added today to which is added today In this sense, the image helps to perceive an era, to discover it in a much more sensory way.

With these references to the contemporary and the passage of time, the present issue of *Itinera* concludes a research path that finds its foundations in the tradition between the 18th and 20th centuries, a decisive period for the development of natural teratology as a discipline, and ideally opens up to future reflections in favour of an interdisciplinary approach that reinforces the complexity and depth of investigation of humanistic and, at the same time, scientific and philological knowledge, in the light of a necessary theoretical rigour.