Big Cruise Ships Going Feral: An Ecocritical Reading of Overtourism in Venice

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Abstract   The problem of big cruise ships overtourism in Venice is examined with an ecocritical approach, through two novel concepts: Feral entity and Plantationocene. The first one is adopted to describe big cruise ships as other-than-human subjects benefitting from human-built infrastructures to spread beyond human control, becoming undomesticated. Such ferality is evident in some of their attributes, such as being uncontainable, creating a toxic environment or producing legacy effects. Plantationocene, instead, is used to depict the cruise ships-induced touristic monoculture affecting the city, highlighting its major characteristics, namely that of global circulation of humans and capital and the homogenisation, simplification and exploitation of eco-social landscapes.

Keywords   Touristification. Ferality. Plantationocene. Anti-tourism movement. Touristic monoculture.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Methodology. – 3 Big Cruise Ships as Feral Entities. – 4 The Venetian Plantationocene. – 5 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

The world we inhabit is fluid, constantly moving and transforming at an ever-increasing pace – it is overheating, as Eriksen (2016) would phrase it. At every turn, unknown problems seem to mount, calling not only for original solutions, but also for new interpretations, apt to shed light on the infinite and complicated weaves in which we are all enmeshed. Old categories that once seemed convincing now fail to reflect the complexity of current dynamics, where the global becomes the local, the human becomes a natural force and the other-than-human is recognised as a subject and object of ecosystem disruption. Hence, new lens of analysis are called for to navigate these troubled times and to provide new meanings even for facts and events to which we are already well-accustomed.

For its own nature, Venice is a miniature, condensing in itself many of the processes occurring also at a global scale. It could be considered an open-sky laboratory, an extremely intriguing real-life experiment, and indeed it has already catalysed the efforts of many researchers, covering a variety of topics related to the city. One of them certainly is the problem of big cruise ships and overtourism.

Overtourism as a global trend has captured the mediatic and academic world's attention during the past thirty years (Perkumienė, Pranskūnienė 2019), gaining an increased weight in more recent times.[1] Indeed, in the last decades, tourism has rapidly expanded and diversified on a global scale (Heslinga 2018; Postma, Schmuecker 2017; UNWTO 2018), with Amsterdam, London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Florence, and, of course, Venice being some of the most affected cities in the European continent (Martín, Guaita Martínez, Salinas Fernández 2018). In Bertocchi and Visentin's view (2019), the term overtourism combines the physical dimension of an over-crowded place with the psychological burden experienced by its residents, who feel overwhelmed. Scholars have dealt with this issue under different angles: some point to the difficulties of mediating between the travellers' right of movement and the residents' right over their living place,[2] while others emphasise the negative implications, such as the disruption of local livelihoods and the eco-social fabric (Calzada 2020; Seraphin, Sheeran, Pilato 2018). As a response, a wave of anti-tourism resistance has spread all around the globe.[3] Moreover,

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[1] Dodds, Butler 2019; Erschbamer, Innerhofer, Pechlaner 2018; Koens, Postma, Papp 2018; Ribeiro De Almeida et al. 2020; Seraphin, Sheeran, Pilato 2018; Żemła 2024; Żemła, Szromek 2023.

[2] Dauvergne 2004; Gilbert 2014; Juss 2004; Tolkach, Pratt, Zeng 2017.

[3] Camisani 2018; Carballo, León, Carballo 2019; Kerr, Wardana 2019; García-Hernández, De la Calle-Vaquero, Yubero 2017; Ioannides, Leventis, Petridou 2016; Loperena 2017; Schiermeier 2004; Smith, Sziva, Olt 2019; Stanley 2021; Winengan 2019.

discussions on possible solutions have generated proposals including the implementation of a system thinking approach, rather than late emergency single policies (Cristiano, Gonella 2020), a combination of exploitation of existing markets and exploration of new ones (Seraphin, Sheeran, Pilato 2018), and degrowth (Buhr, Isaksson, Hagbert 2018; Ram, Hall 2018).

With its 21 million of visitors per year,[4] overtourism affects the city of Venice, producing what van der Borg (2017) has named "Venetianization", that is an unbridled growth in tourism supported by the expansion of touristic facilities. Indeed, residential tourism and excursionism have quadrupled and quintuplicated, respectively, compared to the late 1980s (van der Borg 2017). At the same time, major changes in the touristic sector – such as the rise of low-cost airlines, big cruise ships, B&B and rental platforms – have influenced not only the quantity, but also the quality of the visitors in the city (Bertocchi et al. 2020). Studies undertaken in 1988 applying the concept of tourism carrying capacity[5] had already warned that the number of visitors was excessive, thus sabotaging local socio-economic needs (Canestrelli, Costa 1991; Costa, van der Borg 1988), and such trend has been confirmed by more recent research (Bertocchi et al. 2020; van der Borg 2017). To reverse the situation, some of the proposed solutions point to a comprehensive rethinking of the whole urban system (Cristiano, Gonella 2020).

However, as I have previously suggested, we need novel interpretations to old problems. Therefore, despite the already existing abundant literature on the topic, my contribution is that of suggesting the suitability of two brand new theoretical frameworks to investigate the aforementioned questions. These frameworks are represented by the Feral Atlas and the concept of the Plantationocene.

The first stems from the efforts of a group of anthropologists trying to narrate our present as the outcome of a co-evolutionary process, during which human and non-human entities alike have played their role, entangling one with the other. In this endeavour, they formulated the category of "feral entity" (Tsing et al. 2021), namely those other-than-human subjects that benefited from human-built infrastructures to spread beyond human control, becoming somehow undomesticated. This is the conceptual category I applied on big cruise ships and to which I devote the first section of this paper.

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4 Città di Venezia, *Annuario del turismo dati 2022*. https://www.comune.venezia.it/sites/comune.venezia.it/files/immagini/Turismo/Annuario_del_Turismo_dati_2022.pdf.

5 Tourism carrying capacity can be defined as "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic and socio-cultural environment and unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction" (UNWTO 1981, as cited in Bertocchi et al. 2020).

Instead, the term Plantationocene represents another attempt to re-name our epoch in a way that conveys its most relevant aspects; in this case, a parallelism with the situation of the plantations (and not just metaphorically speaking) is chosen to describe the dominant socio-political, economic and ecological dynamics. In the second part of this paper, I illustrate how this concept serves the goal of describing the situation of Venice in relation to big cruise ships overtourism.

Before delving into such analysis, it is important to contextualise overtourism as the most recent expression of Venice's entanglement with the global circulation of people, goods and capitals, which has characterised the city's history as one deeply rooted in long-distance trade (Arbel 1989; Cecchini, Pezzolo 2012; Chambers, Pullan 2001) – although, for space and time constraints, this aspect will not be dealt in detail here. Venice's role as a commercial intersection point between the West and the East also resulted in its exposure to other forms of "feral entities", such as pests and plagues, especially between the fourteenth and seventeenth century (Nono et al. 1979; Palmer 1978), which were managed by supervising people and merchandise movements and by establishing a system of ship inspection and quarantines in designated areas (the lazzarettos) (Osheim 2011; Palmer 1978). However, while merchants and traders have historically been a prominent part for the development of the city (Cecchini, Pezzolo 2012; Chambers, Pullan 2001), present-day overtourism presents peculiar characteristics and requires special attention. On one hand, as previously mentioned, the magnitude of the process is unprecedented. On the other, it is the unintentionality of a human-induced phenomenon that makes it interesting. Indeed, in the fifteenth century, merchants and traders, supported by favourable institutions, would enhance the city's wealth (Cecchini, Pezzolo 2012; Chambers, Pullan 2001; Tucci 1981), while their negative side-effects – such as plagues and pests – were non-human and completely unplanned. In the case of big cruise ship overtourism, instead, the negative repercussions are a direct result of a planned human-built infrastructure, namely big cruise ships, terminals and touristic facilities, which, however, escape from human control and expand to the point of becoming noxious. Moreover, as it will be illustrated, such unintended consequences arise as a combination of human and non-human factors. And in a time where the lines between nature and culture, human and non-human are becoming blurred and increasingly questioned, together with the faith in the superiority of human rationality to control and shape nature for its own needs, re-phrasing the mental categories with which reality is described and stories are told might be a fruitful contribution. Hence, the relevance of applying the "ferality" lens to describe cruise ships overtourism.

2 Methodology

In developing this work, I resorted to a qualitative research method comprised of an ethnographic and sociological narrative literature review (Bryman 2012), as well as on fieldwork, undertaken between January 2022 and June 2024 in the city of Venice. My positionality as a university student allowed me to get in contact with university collectives (such as Li.S.C., Liberi Saperi Critici, 'Free Critical Thoughts') and grassroots groups such as the Comitato No Grandi Navi (No Big Ships Committee), a local organisation, born in 2012 to demand the expulsion of big cruise ships from the lagoon. These groups are active in their mobilisation against cruise ship overtourism, therefore I approached them with the aim of investigating their perspective on the topic. During their social events, gatherings and demonstrations, I adopted a participant observation approach and kept a written account of relevant data. In addition, I undertook six semi-structured interviews with members of the Comitato, which were recorded with their oral consent. The selection of interviewees followed a combined approach involving the snowball method (Mikkelsen 2005) and purposive sampling (Bryman 2012): while one contact led to others, the inclusion of new informants was evaluated based on their contribution's validity to the study. More specifically, members of the Comitato No Grandi Navi were considered relevant due to their in-depth expertise on the topic of cruise ship tourism, as well as for their personal experience as residents of the city. However, such choice represents also the main limitation of the present research, since its results represent primarily the Comitato's view on big cruise ships tourism, and lack a more heterogeneous and varied perspective. The data obtained both through participant observation and the interviews was then analysed via thematic coding and further elaborated in combination with ethnographic and anthropological academic sources, from which I gleaned some pivotal notions – such as that of feral entity, Plantationocene, but also Patchy Anthropocene and radical simplification. In addition, another set of sources were ethnographic and sociological accounts focusing on the topic of overtourism and big cruise ships tourism, both broadly speaking and in relation to the city of Venice.

3 Big Cruise Ships as Feral Entities

In the Feral Atlas, Tsing and others "explore the ecological worlds created when nonhuman entities become tangled up with human infrastructure projects" (2021). In doing so, they highlight the "feral qualities" of these entities, namely the unintended consequences that such entanglements have produced, spreading beyond human

control. This is the conceptual framework through which I intend to re-read the problem of big cruise ships in Venice. In my analysis, I consider big cruise ships as feral entities, whereas I identify as human infrastructure projects both the physical touristic infrastructures, but also the political decisions of the local administration.

Perhaps, the first conceptual tool from which it is useful to depart is that of Patchy Anthropocene.[6] With this term, the authors of the Feral Atlas adopt the philosophical-geological idea of the Anthropocene – the current era characterised by humankind being the dominant influence on the climate and on the environment – but they also point out the fact that, despite being a global phenomenon, it does not evenly materialise all around the globe. The Anthropocene takes different forms, according to the specificities of the single places. Therefore, it is through these lens that I read the phenomenon of big cruise ships tourism, by tracing its global outlook first, while then delving in its repercussions on the local level, namely the case of the city of Venice.

Starting in the Caribbean in the 1970s, after the decline of transatlantic maritime transport, big cruise ships tourism quickly expanded all around the globe, turning from an elite activity to a mass market. Due to this extraordinary fast growth, today it is one of the touristic sectors around which most profits and shareholder capital revolve (Baixinho 2015). During the last twenty years, it has grown like few other industries, arriving to account for around 2% of the global touristic sector (Gui, Russo 2011). According to Trancoso González (2018), since the beginning of this service, the demand for big cruise ships has been growing at an accelerated pace. Undeniably, the expansion of tourism is both a driver and a consequence of the globalisation process and the big cruise ships sector is no exception (Gui, Russo 2011). Indeed, Wood (2002; 2006) argues that no other segment of the touristic industry is so much embedded in globalisation dynamics, mainly because it relies on the deregulation of international regimes and the high capital mobility.

Reading the accounts of the history and development of big cruise ship tourism reveals that the expansion of this activity has been strongly marked by two recurring features: an accelerated growth and the involvement of high amounts of mobile capital. In the Feral Atlas, Acceleration and Capital are identified as two of the "Anthropocene Detonators", i.e. specific historical circumstances that have

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6 "Feral Atlas and the More-than-Human Anthropocene". *Feral Atlas* (2021). `https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=feral-atlas-and-the-more-than-human-anthropocene&ttype=essay&cd=true`.

been crucial for the development of the following events.[7] Increased and faster capital flows have undoubtedly been a distinctive feature of our epoch, to the point that some have even suggested the replacement of the term Anthropocene with that of Capitalocene, in order to stress the role that the commodification of human and non-human entities have played in the destabilisation and destruction of the world's ecologies (Moore 2016). Acceleration, instead, designates the period starting in 1945, which has seen an exponential growth of many phenomena – the population curve, the rate of commercial exchanges, the production of waste, to name a few. In the Feral Atlas, it is labelled as a combination and extension of colonial, imperial and capitalists projects.[8]

Big cruise ships tourism it thus a perfect expression of the convergence of typical aspects of the Anthropocene, namely globalisation, acceleration and capitalisation. And as any facet of globalisation, the range of its effects is both global and local. In this sense, as Tsing (2005) points out, interconnection and localisation are indissociable. The global conditions that have favoured the expansion of this touristic sector have also determined its repercussions at the local level. Globalisation processes shape the nature of places and this holds especially true in the case of big cruise ship tourism, whereby cruise lines are strongly dependent on port cities (Gui, Russo 2011). Venice is an exemplary case of this.

After spending almost three years living in this city, I can easily say that a walk around its streets will suffice to perceive it. Every corner flourishing with an astounding beauty, it almost feels like being trapped inside a post-card. The post-card offers a good metaphor: everything is perfect, but immobile. Meant to be looked at and admired, not lived. Next to vacant, unitilised spaces, restaurants and souvenir shops spring out like mushrooms. People passing through Venice will have no problem satisfying their most superficial needs (something delicious to eat, a new pair of sunglasses to buy...), but when it comes to daily-life necessities – like a shop for electronic devices or a hairdresser – the research becomes more difficult. In the luckiest case, you would have to search attentively in some hidden alley; in the worst case scenario, you would have to go Mestre (the part of the municipality of Venice that occupies the land just in front of the island) to be able to find what you need. My perception of Venice is that of a city emptied of its inhabitants and devoted to tourists. And, as I will describe later, such perception is not only mine.

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[7] "Anthropocene Detonators". *Feral Atlas* (2021). https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=ad-anthropocene-detonators&ttype=essay&cd=true.

[8] "Acceleration". *Feral Atlas* (2021). https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=ad-acceleration&ttype=essay&cd=true.

But how does this relate to big cruise ships? If big cruise ships are to be considered as a feral entity, I must now turn to the human infrastructures responsible for this entity to become 'undomesticated'.

Stefano is a high school professor. He teaches technical education in an artistic high school. The evening we meet, he confesses that the following day would be his last one as a teacher before retirement. We are in Sant'Elena gardens, one of the rare green and public areas of Venice. But drops of rain are falling heavily, so he invites me to continue our conversation in his house. It used to belong to his parents – he says, while we enter the old-fashioned white corridor. Stefano was born in Venice and has spent most of his life living in Sant'Elena, one of the neighbourhoods that have least been subjected to touristification. When I ask him about the development of the touristic sector in the city (referring also to cruise ship tourism), he tells me that its exceptional growth started when industries were moved to Marghera (the other terrestrial part of the Venetian municipality, just next to Mestre), but that it was also caused by market dynamics. A combination of intentional and involuntary choices, it would appear. Apart from being a Venetian and a teacher, Stefano is also an active part of a committee that has been fighting for the expulsion of big cruise ships from the lagoon, the Comitato No Grandi Navi (I will come back to this later). In a book edited by this committee, an account of the history of cruise ship tourism in Venice is provided: starting in the twentieth century, some infrastructural interventions were made in order to boost new productive activities. In this context, the commercial and touristic ports were created. Moreover, in the 1970s the canals were deepened to allow the transit of commercial and cruise ships (Fabbri, Tattara, Gregotti 2015).

The development of these touristic infrastructures has thus been pivotal for the further expansion of big cruise ship tourism and its feral effects, which will be analysed later. Indeed, as Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) point out, "the physical facility of a tourism destination entails the major tourism subsystem that affects the historical city" (6). Yet, considering solely the infrastructures is a partial and simplistic interpretation: the choices of the local administration have also determined an uncontrolled expansion of the touristic sector, including the one dependent on big cruise ships. On one hand, the neoliberal principles of free market and privatisation of public goods have been extensively followed, as it is proved by the liberalisation of retail stores and the privatisation of many post offices, schools and hospitals (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019; Dlabaja 2021). That is the case, for instance, of the hospital where Claudio, Venetian from birth and another historic member of the Comitato No Grandi Navi, had been treated during his childhood:

> When I was a child I had diphtheria, so when I was eight I was sent to an island where there was a hospital for infectious diseases. That also became a hotel.

On the other hand, the inadequacy of regulatory measures paved the way to the feral expansion of big cruise ship tourism. Suffice it to mention that the harbour town development plan (*piano regolatore portuale*), the regulatory instrument aimed at managing the port system, dates back to 1908 for Venice's historic centre and 1965 for the area of Porto Marghera, and has not yet been thoroughly updated,[9] thus failing to respond to the city's increasing needs of coping with the expansion of cruise ships arrivals. Indeed, the local administration has been repeatedly blamed for the "lack of initiatives", "inactivity", "emergency interventions, improvisations, paralysing conflicts, the prevailing of private interests" (Fabbri, Tattara, Gregotti 2015, 49; transl. by the Author), "lack of tourists' flow management and regulation of tourist facilities and infrastructures", "uncontrolled and unplanned strategies" (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019).

One major advancement, in this sense, was the Clini-Passera Inter-ministry Decree no. 79, issued in March 2012, which prohibits the transit of vessels over 40,000 tons in the St. Mark Channel and Giudecca Channel (art. 2). However, in the absence of alternative safe navigation routes, such decision was not implemented up until the emanation of the Draghi Decree no. 103, in July 2021, which launched a competition of ideas to identify alternative landing point for big cruise ships. The Fusina terminal, in Porto Marghera, was selected and is set to become operational in August 2024 (Ansa 2024). However, apart from diverting cruise ships' navigation routes, such decision does not limit their arrival; instead, the number of passengers is expected to grow by 9% compared to 2023, reaching 5wq (Delle Case 2024). This confirms what Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) and Dlabaja (2021) had already highlighted: when supposedly regulatory measures are implemented, they result ineffective at responding to the Venetians' needs and mostly devoted to promoting the interests of the touristic sector. Another blatant example, in this sense, is the creation of an entrance fee to access the city of Venice, which started its experimental phase in April 2024[10] and has already been highly criticised by grassroots movements (Bison 2024), since, as Claudio stresses, "the ticket is completely useless, it will not reduce [the

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9 Autorità di Sistema portuale del mare adriatico settentrionale, *Piani regolatori portuali*. https://www.port.venice.it/governance/piani-e-programmi/piani-regolatori-portuali/.

10 Città di Venezia, *Come funziona il contributo di accesso a Venezia*. https://www.veneziaunica.it/it/content/come-funziona-il-contributo-di-accesso-venezia.

number of tourists] by one person, it will only serve to raise more money". This strikes me: how is it possible that a local administration, elected by its residents, acts against the interests of its own citizens? To my doubts, Stefano has a ready answer:

> Well, who's left in Venice? Red bourgeois, big professors, myself with my old parent's house… and then, all the people that live off tourism.

According to Claudio, what prevents regulatory measures from actually being implemented is the prominence of private interests over the collective ones: "There are huge interests at stake, huge. Just think of the hotel business… whole islands have become hotels". This becomes even clearer when it concerns big cruise chips management, where the interests of private companies become inextricably entangled with the political decisions. As Chiara, a thirty-five years old woman, who has lived in Venice for the past twelve years, participating in the activities of the Comitato No Grandi Navi since its creation, reminds me:

> [The cruise ships] are not stopped because for them what it is more important is the economic flow that keeps coming in to the Costa, to MSC, to Royal Caribbean and all the various companies, rather than the damage they do. That was actually the political, economic choice. Why this? I don't know, the city hasn't profited or profits much from that… also because most of the shares held by the Venice Passenger Terminal are half regional public and the other half belongs to the cruise companies. So the interests are private anyway.

While the increased presence of big cruise ships in the lagoon of Venice and the consequent expansion of tourism brings some positive economic gains, as it is repeatedly stressed by mayors and port authorities (Trancoso González 2018), at the same time it generates unintended negative consequences, due to the fact that these feral entities (big cruise ships) have become so well entangled with human infrastructures (touristic facilities and political decisions) as to escape human control. Their feral qualities describe precisely the ways in which they have become feral in the presence of human infrastructures.[11]

The most evident feral quality relating to big cruise ships is that of being uncontainable and it takes the form of overtourism. Indeed, such entities further enhance the wider dynamics of overtourism that

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[11] "Feral Qualities". *Feral Atlas* (2021). https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=fq-feral-qualities&ttype=essay&cd=true.

affect the city of Venice (Dlabaja 2021). During the last decades, the flow of tourists has continued to rise, together with the expansion of touristic facilities (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019). Between 1997 and 2010, the number of cruise ship passengers increased by 440%, whereas the ships' landings increased by 263%, meaning that not only their number, but also their size increased. Today, 66,000 tourists arrive each day, around 30 million per year: of all of them, two and a half million travel on cruise ships (Trancoso González 2018). In this context, it is important to stress that overtourism and its related problems do not depend solely on the presence of big cruise ships. Venice attracts visitors in multiple ways and through various infrastructures: from those interested in cultural events, like the art Biennale, to long-distance travellers, who arrive by plane and book a B&B to stay several days. According to Bertocchi and others (2020), cruise ships tourism differs from the residential one insofar as it represents a form of "false day tourism" (11) that does not contribute much to the local economy. Moreover, it lacks a direct impact on housing facilities (Cristiano, Gonella 2020). Choosing to focus on the effect of big cruise ship tourism, however, does not imply that other forms of tourism are not equally impactful, or that they do not follow patterns similar to those referred to as "feral qualities" (Baldin, Bertocchi, Camatti 2024). Rather, the choice depends on the willingness to investigate the phenomenon under the framework of ferality, which suggests the need to concentrate on a single entity – in this case, big cruise ships. However, further research could expand this point, by applying the framework to other entities – such as the railway stations, airports, cultural festival, or booking platforms – and their "feral qualities" in relation to their entanglement with the city of Venice.

Going back to cruise ship overtourism, it can be argued that its ferality is expressed by the reiteration of words like "unlimited", "uncontrolled", "wildfire effect", "unplanned", "not controlled" when scholars try to describe it. Trancoso González even compares it to the spread of a pandemic (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019, 3-16; Trancoso González 2018, 37-8). Instead, when they consider potential solutions, words like "monitor", "control" and "regulate" are adopted (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019, 16). This somehow depicts the idea of an untamed process that needs to be domesticated.

As anticipated, the negative unintended consequences of such ferality are many and different. Some of them are directly linked to big cruise ships themselves, some others to the overtourism they participate in unleashing. During my conversation with Stefano, I ask him why the Comitato No Grandi Navi is against big cruise ships. He is eager to clarify that not all the people in the committee are against cruise ships themselves, but that "the common denominator is the ban of big cruise ships from the lagoon". This answer resonates with another perspective I had received just some days before, when I had participated

in setting up some stands around the city to sponsor a demonstration organised by the Comitato No Grandi Navi together with other local groups and associations. I was handing flyers around with Eleonora, a young student from the University of Venice, who is part of the university collective Li.S.C.. She had explained to me that the huge achievement of the Comitato No Grandi Navi had been that of creating an intergenerational movement that was broad in its reclamations. Indeed, it was precisely the vagueness of their claim that allowed such a wide public participation (they were able to gather 10,000 people in San Marco square in 2019). Within the committee, people take different stances on the subject of big cruise ships: some of them question them in principle, some other simply criticise their presence inside the lagoon. The important thing – Eleonora had told me – was not to fight for one specific solution, but to raise the question. This had encouraged a widespread popular support, because the movement was not seen as a "radical environmental movement led by people from social centres".

Nevertheless, there are reasons to be against big cruise ships. This aspect was not so accentuated in 2012, when the committee was born. "But then Greta arrived, and with her the Fridays For Future movement…" Stefano explains to me. Therefore, now part of the committee is strongly against big cruise ships. Stefano appears quite convinced when he affirms that "cruise ship tourism is bad, it is unsustainable. In fact there are committee everywhere against it". The most commonly mentioned reasons span from the visual impacts to the risk of collisions. Moreover, cruise ships contribute to air and water pollution, posing a direct threat to the residents' health, but also exacerbating climate change (Trancoso González 2018; Fabbri, Tattara, Gregotti 2015).[12] Some of these problems are emphasised during my conversation with Chiara. She got to know many of the residents of Santa Marta, the neighbourhood located just next to what used to be the cruise ships' terminal, and among the disturbances caused by their presence, she mentions that "the Internet would not work at home, you couldn't see the television, there was always noise, all day long, glass vibrating, and an acrid smell…".

Another problem that is referred to relates to the specificity of the lagoon of Venice and its fragile and delicate ecosystem (Trancoso González 2018; Fabbri, Tattara, Gregotti 2015). Interestingly, during a conference organised by the Comitato No Grandi Navi on 29 April 2022, one of its representatives had underlined that they are against big cruise ships "because we have seen them, we have seen their hulls", therefore they know the damage they were causing to the lagoon. Chiara also confesses that one of the first impacts connected

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12 Comitato No Grandi Navi, *Cosa Chiediamo*. http://www.nograndinavi.it/cosa-chiediamo-2/.

to the presence of big cruise ships was the fear that stemmed from seeing them from the water:

> Living in Giudecca, doing so many things by boat, going to so many places by boat, going to university or going out with friends or going to work, what I used to do was to cross the Giudecca Canal every day, which was the one concerned with the passage of the big ships. And of course, when you're with a barge that holds three, four people at the most, and you're in front of a big ship with five, six decks, let's say, you realise the impact that they have on the city, also for those who live it on the water, in the sense that you find yourself, I mean, you are actually scared.

However, the impact of big cruise ships extends beyond their mere presence, and must also include the repercussions of the overtourism to which they contribute. One of the ways in which overtourism affects cities is by causing the touristification of their historical centres, which are turned into commercial value (Dlabaja 2021). While I speak with Claudio, his eyes shimmer while he depicts the nights spent, in his young age, in the taverns that used to sustain the social fabric of the city, rather than the touristic business:

> There was this city that you lived in until night. I've always been a bit a night owl, I would study after dinner and so on. Maybe I would finish at half past nine, half past ten, and go out, because it used to be full of taverns, where you would go and find a friend and have a glass of wine and chat. They used to be social meeting points, very, very frequent, so the whole city was alive.

Other dramatic changes brought about by the touristification of the city are the privatisation or disappearance of public infrastructures, the further withdrawal of everyday life shops and the rise of housing prices (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019; Dlabaja 2021). Claudio has experienced such change during his lifetime:

> I am already very old, so I have lived almost a century in this city. When I was a child, the problem of tourism was already felt, but I remember playing in the *campi* ('squares') of Venice, with my child friends, with marbles and cards. And there was a newsstand every two *campi*. In Campo Santa Maria Formosa there used to be five, six vegetable markets, two fish markets. Campo Santa Margherita, up until fifteen years ago, used to have three fish markets, four vegetable markets, and today it has one and one.... Venice used to have dozens and dozens of small neighbourhood shops that have all slowly disappeared.

The privatisation and disappearance of public infrastructures is another major negative change. This is the case also for nursery schools. Chiara, for instance, who has a nine months old child, made a request for a school in Venice, but it was rejected, since the offer is not enough to meet the demands. Therefore, she saw herself forced to register her daughter in a school on the mainland. The same happened with her office, due to the inaccessibility of the rental rates:

> We also tried to open the office in Venice, because most of the people who are registered are Venetian, they are Venetian workers who work in hotels and restaurants, so they work in tourism. But it is impossible to bear the cost of renting the office in Venice. We tried for a year then, unfortunately, it was really impossible to stay there economically.

In a survey distributed to around 6 000 people, Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) collected the major negative consequences felt by residents due to overtourism. They are the excessive number of tourists who crowd in the streets of the city, the scarcity of services for residents, the exorbitant costs of living and the absence of jobs unrelated to the touristic sector. Chiara's lived experience attunes with the previous points:

> when you encounter a group of, I don't know, one hundred people passing a *calle* [street] and blocking it for twenty minutes, that is a cost for you, your personal time, that maybe you have to go to work.

Since big cruise ships and their connected overtourism disrupt the environment in which they are introduced in the ways described so far, thus altering the lives of the other inhabitants to the point of making it almost unliveable, according to the taxonomy of the Feral Atlas such entities fall within the feral quality of "toxic environment".[13] The modality of their interference includes also pushing the systems to exceed its limits (thus undermining the conditions in which other entities can thrive), but also introducing new threats, for which the previous inhabitants lack sufficient defence mechanisms. Both these dynamics perfectly match with the way big cruise ship overtourism unfolds.

All of this leads to another apparently inevitable result, one that was signalled by the odd apparition of posters displaying the figure 49,999. They had been hanged overnight, filling the walls and corners of the streets of Venice, and I, among many others, had been

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13   "Toxic Environment". *Feral Atlas* (2021). `https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=fq-toxic-environment&ttype=essay&cd=true`.

wondering what they could mean. The answer came on 28 May 2022, the day of the aforementioned demonstration. One of the bands that was playing on stage that day introduced one of its songs by stating that for the first time in the history of Venice, the number of its residents had dropped below 50,000. 49,999, indeed. The depopulation of the city is a direct consequence of the disruption of the lives of its inhabitants, brought about by big cruise ships overtourism. This effect is not limited to a single moment, but it stretches across generations, intensifying over time. In the Feral Atlas, this feral quality is called "legacy effects".[14] However, as I have already suggested before, I would argue that none of these outcomes had been forecasted or intentionally planned when the city opened up to big cruise ships tourism. Therefore, these entities are characterised by another feral quality, that of being a sort of "industrial stowaways".[15] If the authors of the Feral Atlas define industrial stowaways as "pests and pathogens unintentionally imported through large-scale commercial nursery trade", what I have described so far are the 'pathogenic' consequences unintentionally caused by large-scale international cruise ship tourism.

4 The Venetian Plantationocene

The last feral quality that is worth mentioning with respect to big cruise ships goes by the name of "thrives with the plantation condition"[16] and introduces another suitable conceptual tool for this analysis: the Plantationocene. The term was first used in 2014, during a conversation among some anthropologists around the idea of the Anthropocene (Haraway et al. 2016). As Moore (2016) has opted for Capitalocene in order to stress the role of capitalism in the current socio-ecological crisis, in that occasion Haraway proposed the use of Plantationocene to highlight some defining features of the current era, namely the global and long-distance circulation of capital investments, people and plants and the resulting simplification of landscapes, together with dynamics of homogenisation and control (Davis et al. 2019). Although such interpretation mainly refers to plant landscapes, I would argue that its meaning could be extended as to encompass also the processes characterising hybrid eco-social

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14 "Legacy Effects". *Feral Atlas* (2021). https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=fq-legacy-effects&ttype=essay&cd=true.

15 "Industrial Stowaways". *Feral Atlas* (2021). https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=fq-industrial-stowaways&ttype=essay&cd=true.

16 "Thrives with the Plantation Condition". *Feral Atlas*. (2021). https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=fq-thrives-with-the-plantation-condition&ttype=essay&cd=true.

places, where natural, human and non-human (feral) entities become entangled. That is the case of the Venice lagoon and its relation with big cruise ships and their feral qualities. Indeed, as it was previously mentioned, on one hand big cruise ship tourism is rendered possible by the high mobility of capital and people; on the other hand, at the local level it produces a social, cultural and economic simplification and homogenisation, whereby tourism appears to be at once the only possible economic activity and cultural identity of the city.

Unsurprisingly, a similar concept has emerged also within the vocabulary of local groups, associations and committees advocating for a different, more inclusive and caring city, many of which had participated in the demonstration of 28 May 2022. That day, many of them had appeared on stage, covering a variety of issues, from the problem of overtourism to the housing crisis, from the absence of public infrastructures to the need for the protection of the lagoon environment. During her speech, the representative of the group *Quartieri in movimento* (Neighbourhoods on the move), a determined and galvanised dark-haired woman, spoke passionately against

> the touristic monoculture and its speculative projects: extracting profits from the territory through the exploitation of its common goods.

'Touristic monoculture' is the term that would resonate over and over in the context of such mobilisations. The affinity between the concept of the Plantationocene and that of touristic monoculture is striking. But it is also a confirmation of the fact that Haraway's intuition was accurate, since it is mirrored by a local situation and by the words through which its protagonists have decided to describe it.

The term 'touristic monoculture' is adopted to criticise the idea of an economic development solely based on the expansion of the touristic sector. What is denounced about this axiom is that it overlooks the long-term negative consequences for the majority of the people and for the safeguard of the lagoon ecosystem, in the name of short-term benefits for a few. In fact, despite the economic advantages that tourism brings, the negative side-effects are too pervasive to be ignored. Apart from the ones already mentioned, there is another that deserves attention: it is the problem of the high vulnerability of monocultures (both literally and metaphorically speaking).

In his ethnography *Seeing like a State* (1998), Scott provides an illuminating account to illustrate this concept. He describes scientific forestry as the process whereby old-growth, complex forest would be replaced with orderly and easily manageable rows of trees, belonging to a much more limited range of species. This forest management plan was applied in Germany all along the nineteenth century with the aim of controlling, manipulating and measuring the forests'

yields and to maximise the profit generated by a single commodity (represented by timber, in that case). All that was not considered productive or efficient was eliminated. This proved effective in the short run, but after the second rotation of conifers had been planted, the negative long-term consequences started to arise, with the ultimate result that the production dropped by 20-30%. With the promise of maximising the return of one single commodity, an extremely complex and rich ecosystem had been disrupted, and this led to a further impoverishment. What had seemed a system able to isolate one fruitful item from which to extract the highest possible profit turned out to be the very recipe to irretrievably damage the whole system on which that item used to rely on. The problem at the core of scientific forestry had been that of overlooking all the factors unrelated to profitable production: in doing so, it had ignored the most important and underlying richness of forests (and, broadly speaking, of any ecosystem), that is its biodiversity. Ecology teaches us that diverse ecosystems are also the most resilient, meaning that they are more capable of absorbing disruptive inputs by adapting to them without collapsing. On the contrary, ecosystems composed by few species tend to be less resilient, and thus more vulnerable (Scott 1998).

Monocultures are the epitome of fragile and vulnerable ecosystems. Due to their radical simplification, they easily fall victims of external pests and pathogens that undermine the whole cultivation. Even though ecology studies the relations pertaining to natural ecosystems, the same analysis can be extended to socio-natural systems, such as the lagoon of Venice and its socio-political dynamics. As in the case of scientific forestry, the Venetian economic and cultural landscape has been radically simplified in the name of the touristic monoculture. This may have rendered some short-term benefits, but in the long run it appears to have destabilised the whole ecosystem in a way that is going to undermine the very basis of its capacity to provide profits. Indeed, as Dlabaja (2012) warns, "Venice could sink due to overtourism", and not just metaphorically (166). The inherent weakness of an economic system uniquely based on tourism became blatant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as plant monocultures are fragile and tend to collapse when they are invaded by pests and pathogens, Venice's economy has easily fallen down when the virus spread, and the touristic sector suddenly stopped (Salerno, Russo 2020). However, the fragility of the touristic monoculture goes beyond extraordinary situations, such as the pandemic. As the members of the Comitato with whom I spoke repeatedly stressed, a city relying solely on tourism becomes weaker, because it is emptied by its inhabitants. In the words of Claudio: "the city becomes a chrysalis".

Hence, diversity is the key characteristic capable of counterbalancing the danger of vulnerability. This is true for real plantations as well as for the touristic monoculture in Venice. In fact, it is precisely

a diversified economy that the citizens present at that demonstration are advocating for, one resting upon other non-touristic sectors, such as that of the creative industry, renewable energy or new technologies (Dlabaja 2021). In their view, by reintroducing a similar economic diversification, many other problems, such as the touristification of the city and its progressive abandonment, would be solved at once. Of course, this represents only one perspective on the issue of overtourism in Venice and it is not necessarily shared by everyone, especially when it includes also the problem of big cruise ships. According to Trancoso González (2018), an extremely high percentage of citizens still perceive (big cruise ship) tourism as a positive source of income and employment. As Stefano pointed out during our conversation, "it is difficult to face the environment-work divide", although when I asked him what kind of employment the touristic sector provides, he was also ready to admit that "of course, it is exploitation", referring to the awful working condition in which the employees of the sector usually operate.

However, in spite of the resistance of all of those people that still have faith in the benefits obtained through (big cruise ship) tourism, grassroots responses proposing an alternative vision are multiplying, almost mirroring the feral expansion of big cruise ships. If these entities have increasingly entered the lagoon of Venice, bringing with them the pathogenic disruptive consequences so far examined, I would argue that grassroots movements such as Comitato No Grandi Navi or Quartieri in Movimento are the antibodies that the city is producing to respond to such external threats. Their transformative potential goes well beyond the critique they advance, since they also propose and enact the change they imagine for the city. The association *Poveglia per tutti* (Poveglia for Everyone),[17] for instance, has been fighting for the last ten years against the privatisation of the Poveglia island, but, in doing so, has also advanced an alternative use for that space: the creation of a public urban park. To accomplish such project, meetings and weekends of collective work have been organised on the island, in order to re-establish the connection between the land and the community that is taking care of it. The *VERAS* association, on the other hand, is working in a similar direction, by planning an agroecological park and a renewable energy community on the Vignole island.[18] These examples are accompanied by many others: the *Gruppo 25 Aprile* (25 April Group), working for a sustainable, inclusive and respectful tourism; *O.Cio Osservatorio*

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[17] Poveglia per tutti. https://www.facebook.com/povegliapertutti/about?locale=it_IT.

[18] Associazione VERAS. https://www.facebook.com/p/Associazione-VERAS-100070400553942/.

Civico Indipendente sulla casa e residenzialità (Civic and Independent Observatory for housing and residency), established in 2018 to analyse the housing issue in insular Venice; *Venezia Autentica* (Authentic Venice), supporting and enhancing the local artisan community; and *Generazione 90* (Generation 90), an association of young Venetians working to discover new approaches and perspectives for a liveable city beyond just tourism (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019). The term 'ferality', then, appears apt to describe the uncontained expansion of such grassroots responses. Their heterogeneity, on the other hand, seems the most coherent reaction to the problems described by the Plantationocene concept. If, as it was argued, a homogenous economic and social fabric represents a threat for the survival of the city, the variety and biodiversity of grassroots actions are lifeblood that might revitalise this fragile Venetian socio-ecological system.

5 Conclusion

The issue of big cruise ships and overtourism in Venice is far from being a novel topic of research; however, the aim of this paper has been that of analysing an already well-known subject with new conceptual tools. In this endeavour, I have drawn mainly from two theoretical sources: the Feral Atlas, a comprehensive account of human and more-than-human eco-systemic interactions in the context of the Anthropocene, and the Plantationocene, a term coined by Haraway to encapsulate some of the determining aspects of our current epoch, such as that of the global circulation of plants, humans and capital, the homogenisation, simplification and exploitation of eco-social landscapes. It is with the help of these two critical lens that I have re-read the ecological, social and political dynamics regulating the relation between the lagoon of Venice, its human inhabitants and the more-than-human entities that interfere in this ecosystem, namely big cruise ships.

After having bridged the specific case of Venice with the wider trends of globalisation, international mobility and expansion of big cruise ship tourism, I have started investigating big cruise ships as feral entities, describing first the human infrastructures on which they depend – namely, touristic infrastructures and political decisions – and then providing an account of the feral qualities they are characterised by, i.e. being 'uncontainable', 'toxic environment', 'legacy effects', 'industrial stowaways' and 'thrives with the plantation condition'. The latter paved the way for the introduction of a second pivotal concept, that of the Plantationocene. Indeed, in the second section I have illustrated how such definition is suitable for describing the situation of overtourism in Venice, as it mirrors that of 'touristic monoculture' coined by local grassroots movements. Eventually,

emphasis was placed on the contrast between radical simplification and diversification, the latter being a means to safe Venice from being overpowered by its own touristic economy. Ultimately, I have suggested that the grassroots movements' reactions, which are also spreading in a feral way, could be read as the inner defence mechanism of a city that is at once sick, but still filled with a glimpse of passion and desire to be inhabited, lived and restored, to provide a dignified life to the lagoon and its inhabitants.

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