

The Enigmatic Voyage of Amparo Sard

Amparo Sard is a navigator who steers her ship through those perilous straits that separate pleasure and pain, the beautiful and the sinister, the real and the surreal. Among her countless seafaring predecessors is Ulysses, who braved the deadly monsters known as Scylla and Charybdis in pursuit of his homeward quest. The former, a many-headed creature rooted to the bottom of the sea, devoured sailors who passed too near, while the giant mouth of Charybdis opened at intervals to create a powerful whirlpool. Ulysses chose to steer a course closer to Scylla rather than risk the loss of his entire ship, sacrificing six men in the process. If the risks are less melodramatic, Sard's world nonetheless harbors its own intellectual and psychological threats. To comprehend these, it is necessary to remember the artist's own assertion that her work is comprised of metaphors, and that these in turn have an essentially narrative function. Among the most disturbing of those metaphors are the amputated hand and the fly – or fly-woman – that Sard identifies as her own surrogate and as "the beginning of the anguish in my work." Yet neither of these recurring images is as complex or as universal as the leitmotif of the boat.

Indeed, whether considered in terms of history, literature or the fine arts, the metaphor is so complex that it accommodates widely (even wildly) disparate meanings. It can signal rescue, romance, danger, nourishment, escape, dalliance, discovery, competition or simple pleasure. Children's rhymes often employ the figure of the boat, as parodied by the 19th century nonsense-author Edward Lear in a poem that begins: "The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea / In a beautiful pea-green boat..." and concludes with the wedding of the unlikely travel companions, who are married by a turkey. Along with such whimsical variations, there remains the primal fear of being "cast adrift" on the open sea, with accompanying nightmares of the sort documented in Théodore Géricault's monumental rendering of *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819), based on a celebrated shipwreck whose survivors indulged in cannibalism. It is, I believe, this multivalenced, often radically ambiguous aspect of the image that accounts for the boat's central function in the universe plotted by Amparo Sard.

Furthermore, her protagonists often board boats only to drill holes in the hull – an activity that the artist also describes as metaphorical. Bizarre drawings show lifeguards with their legs thrust through holes in the hull, making it easier for them to walk. In other compositions, figures are seen disappearing into holes or emerging from them. In turn, Sard's own wonderfully delicate, lyric works on paper consist of perforations – of holes that, in her own words, relate to "puncture, pleasure and pain." One might add the word "penetration," with its obvious sexual implications. In this context, it is interesting to read Sard's comments on the virginal state of the "pure and clean" white paper she employs for her pinhole drawings. She has compared it to "a white curtain that hides and at the same time permits us to perceive the sensation of the sinister or hideous." Simultaneously revealing and concealing, the white curtain is a further example of the ambiguity that haunts the artist's choice of imagery, finding its apogee in the metaphor of the boat.

Alongside Noah's ark as a symbol of forgiveness and a new beginning, the cultural historian can also encounter the allegorical Ship of Fools, aboard which the deranged and frivolous crisscross the waters of the world in fruitless search for a homeland. The myth of the Flying Dutchman – a ghost ship glowing with ghastly light – continues the theme of banishment. In many versions of that story, the captain is doomed to roam the seas as penance being for some heinous but unidentified crime. A romantic variation on the theme promises him redemption if he finds a woman who loves him so much that she is willing to share his fate. Yet more often than not, the passengers aboard such legendary vessels descend to a watery grave, or they become castaways like Robinson Crusoe or Jonathan Swift's satiric figure of Gulliver. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* concludes with the sinking of the fictional Pequod by a rampaging whale, while the sinking of the real-life Titanic has inspired a host of fictional variations.

As amply verified by both the television series entitled *Love Boat* and the film-franchise launched by *Pirates of the Karibik*, the ship remains firmly "anchored" in the

popular imagination. (Yet an entire moral universe separates the mincing Captain Sparrow from the merciless Somali pirates, or from the "boat people" who risk everything in hopes of finding refuge and a better life.) As further evidence of metaphoric complexity and cultural resonance, idioms related to the boat appear in virtually all languages. In English these include "dream boat," "to miss the boat," "to rock the boat," "to row your own boat," "all in the same boat," "burn your boats," "just off the boat," and the comical expression "anything that floats your boat." Reflecting on the ubiquitous nature of her subject, Amparo Sard notes that if the hands are cupped to cover one's face, "your hands are like a boat. And I liked the idea of a boat on the sea – with no waves, no time – to indicate that nothing happens. That is the impasse."

The Italian architect and sculptor Giampaolo DiCocco has created an entire series of miniature boats in a variety of materials, including porcelain. These, in turn, are mounted on bronze undercarriages. DiCocco has entitled the series "Carnavale" (from *carrus navales*) and argues that these "naval" carriers derive from the cult of Isis, in which young men rolled boats to the sea when shipping resumed in the spring – the origin, perhaps, of the elaborately decorated "floats" that accompany such celebrations today. Hence, he believes, the rituals of carnival are far more ancient than modern revelers believe, though all such observances obviously share an underlying theme of renewal. Transformation itself is at the heart of Sard's own unique aesthetic, though here it is not always a question of renewal. Dismemberment and doubt, anxiety and indecision accompany this metaphysical journey, as does the continuous threat of drowning that was made so painfully vivid in a video by Amparo Sard.

In *Rapture* (1999), one of her own most enigmatic video installations, the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat shows us on one screen an ancient fortified town where men swarm in apparently meaningless configurations. In a second projection vis-à-vis, women are seen advancing through the desert, their voices raised in an ululating chant, their black chadors flapping in the wind like the wings of giant crows. What one encounters here is an inversion of the geography of gender. Women are no longer at home, occupied with the traditional tasks of wife and mother within the protected confines of the town, but traverse a territory traditionally reserved for the hunter and horseman. (In this respect, the work can be seen as an antecedent to *Women without Men*, Neshat's award-winning feature film from 2008.) In the final moments of this gripping work, the women launch a large wooden boat into the sea while men watch in bewilderment from the battlements behind them. Is this simply an outing, a mere "boating trip"? Are the women setting out on some mission? Are they escaping the restrictions of tradition? Are they founding a new social order? (And in that case, why are they still wearing their chadors – unsuitable garb, surely, for a voyage in an open boat.)

There are no easy answers to such questions, for they encapsulate a fundamental ambiguity that we also encounter repeatedly in the works of Amparo Sard. As in *Rapture*, she frequently expresses such themes through the image of the boat. In doing so, she situates her oeuvre at the very heart of a transcultural phenomenon whose implications - and conundrums - are far too numerous to enunciate here, though they are all inherent in the artist's notion of metaphor. From exuberance and euphoria to self-doubt and bewilderment, from adventure and nurture to peril and pain, the register of emotions implicit in the recurrent image of the boat lend it both authenticity and a haunting metaphysical resonance.

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