

# Prosopopoeia of the Super-polluters

*by Giulia Mensitieri*

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**Ever more numerous, ever more polluting, superyachts are a 'Capitalo-scene': in a space that is at once vast yet highly circumscribed, they embody the hidden face of contemporary capitalism, in all its planet-killing splendor.**

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Reviewed: Grégory Salle, *Superyachts, Luxe, calme et écocide*, Éditions Amsterdam 2021. 176 pp., €13.

## What do we know about superyachts ?

"Let's speak frankly, we're among friends" (p. 18), apostrophizes French sociologist Grégory Salle, as he launches his book *Superyachts : Luxe, calme et écocide* ("Superyachts: Luxury, Calm and Ecocide"). He addresses us, the readers, when he's not giving a voice to his floating luxury Hotel-Palaces (chapter 3). And he does so willingly, through prosopopoeia:

'A' is my name, nothing to do with anarchy, as you'd expect. Don't worry: it's just the first initial of the wife of my owner, a Russian banker by the name of Andrey Melnichenko, who recently made the Forbes list of the world's 100 richest people (p. 37).

'A' is one of the superyachts to which Grégory Salle lends a voice. She is 119 meters long, with 7 cabins and capacity for 14 passengers and 42 crew members.

All right, it's true that I consume around 2,000 liters of fuel per hour, and it costs almost one and a half million dollars to fill my tank. But look how classy I am! I don't sail, I glide smoothly, with no splashing" (p. 38). The value of 'A' is estimated at 325 million dollars. If that seems steep, you can settle for renting "Axioma, 72 meters, 635,000 euros a week in high winter season, not including food, drinks, gas or crew" (p. 51).

Gregory Salle's book is a hybrid essay, drawing on a wide range of data. It is a kind of non-investigation. It is a study conducted neither *on* (he was unable to gain access), nor *around* superyachts (the marine perimeters of these boats are patrolled by bodyguards). His subject is superyachts, which he was able to observe from afar, studying the limited academic literature published on the topic<sup>1</sup>, and analyzing the gray literature, commercial platforms and general media. There is a lack of qualitative data and interviews. The sociologist tried to approach the nabobs through the Marine Observatory team, whose aim is to " promote sustainable coastal development " on the Côte d'Azur. He failed.

This abundance of sources and hooks in the story is by no means a mere stylistic exercise on the super-rich – in whom Grégory Salle had already shown an interest (Bruno and Salle 2018) – and their floating vehicles. Though presented in a lively style, his research is rigorous. He uses sarcasm and rhetorical devices to distance us, once he has established the full extent of the excessiveness (chapter 1). Phrases, puns, personification and irony are used in an effort to avoid being overwhelmed by the mammoth weight of inequality and dizzying figures.

Despite the current health, social and ecological crises, and despite the series of structural crises that capitalism is causing and experiencing, the superyacht market is doing just fine. This is confirmed by the [Superyacht Times website](#), in an article dated November 2021: "*Much has been said about the remarkable recovery of the superyacht market from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. To refer to the current state of the market as a mere recovery actually does not do justice to its situation. At the time of writing (mid-September 2021) the superyacht sales market was positively booming and it looked like new yacht sales over 30 metres would exceed the 200 mark for the full year 2021.*" (Dazert 2021). Far from being anecdotal, these data speak volumes about the state of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Spence's study is the reference work that focuses most closely on this subject (Spence 2014).

## Where do these floating exceptions fit in?

Over 18 short chapters with snappy titles, Salle describes the world of superyachts: their interiors, their costs, their crews, their owners and users, their showrooms, their specialized magazines, their ports and their routes. But he also looks at the manufacturers, regulations and jurisdictions that affect these vessels, the tax regimes under which they operate, and their relationship with the territories, states, coastlines and beach resorts they rub shoulders with.

Looking at vessels from these numerous angles, the sociologist examines the weight of superyachts and their place within capitalism. As a specialist in prisons (Salle 2016), he focuses here on another of those "other spaces" that the philosopher Michel Foucault dubbed "heterotopias". These are places of radical otherness in relation to "the norm" (prison is one of the most frequently used examples of heterotopia, where men and women are locked up, under supervision, deprived of their freedom). In Michel Foucault's own words, a yacht, as "*a piece of floating space, a place without a place, living by itself, closed in on itself [...] is the heterotopia par excellence*" (p. 36; Defert et Foucault 2009). Despite this exemplarity, Salle does not think of superyachts as heterotopias. The concept does not appear in his book, perhaps because he did not intend it to be abstract. However, this glaring absence may be explained in other ways.

Salle does not conceive these superyachts as counter-spaces. "Just because luxury vessels have freed themselves from the common human presence does not mean they exist outside the world." (p. 22).

Indeed, are superyachts really 'other spaces' in relation to a presupposed normal order of things? If the norm is defined by the possession of economic wealth, then of course we are floating in the waters of the supreme exception, i.e. the one percent of the famous one percent. But if the normal order of things is capitalism itself, which is what creates these inequalities, then we are dealing with objects that are in no way exceptional. They are exemplary; paradigmatic of our economic system and its values. They in no way exist outside of it.

And what if, instead of thinking in terms of whimsy, eccentricity and drift, we spoke instead in terms of reflection, expression or indication? We would then say touchstone and not anomaly, reliable sample and not aberration, moderation rather than excess – a means of weighing up the general delirium that goes by the name of social order (p. 21).

The superyachts described by Gregory Salle are the ultimate manifestation of capitalism and the Capitalocene (Ferdinand 2019) – the era in which geological changes are driven by capitalism. We could almost say that superyachts are a 'Capitalo-scene', in the sense that they allow us to *see capital* (Buck-Morss 2010). They are the materialization within a space, at once vast yet highly circumscribed, of today's capitalism, with its pomp, its glittering excesses and its big winners.

This materialization entails a great deal of work. Work carried out on board by dozens of hostesses, skippers, valets, captains, masseuses, chefs, nannies, bodyguards, deckhands and other professionals. These are the men and women we barely notice when we look at superyachts from afar. We glimpse them gliding along the gangways in their uniforms – key figures in this subtle game of *ostentatious reclusion* (chapter 11), which would make a fine subject for visual studies (Boidy 2017).

As for the work done ashore by the workers who build and maintain these vessels, it is manual, precarious, dangerous, delocalized, fragmented labor that is kept well off-stage, as Salle writes in the chapter entitled "The lair of production".

And then there is another kind of work: the efforts of national and transnational politicians, and of interest groups and lobbies, to regulate these boats (or rather leave them to it). This is the work carried out to ensure the continued existence of a tax privilege on an unprecedented scale (chapter 9).

Work is also done by localities to make themselves appealing and tempting in terms of prices and (un)regulation, as well as entertainment opportunities (chapter 12). They have to attract these moguls and then make them stay. Then there is the work of all those involved in concealing the environmental impact of superyachts. This is a difficult task, because no matter how hard they try to green the issue, "*superyachting is intrinsically a polluting activity. First of all, there is the pollution generated by the boats themselves, from exhaust emissions (a full tank is equivalent to several tens or even hundreds of thousands of liters of diesel), to the use of anti-fouling paints containing harmful substances*" (p. 95). In addition to these toxic materials, they create water pollution, litter, noise pollution, vibrations and artificial lights that disrupt ecosystems. Anchoring practices that destroy marine life are also part of this deadly list. In one of the book's most compelling chapters, the posidonia, a marine plant species endemic to the Mediterranean, takes center stage (chapter 14). It is from the perspective of this flowering plant – inaccurately called seaweed and a sign of the Mediterranean's good health – that we grasp the impact of unchecked ecocide, mechanically caused by the anchors and chains of these marine behemoths.

Grégory Salle links these floating devices to all those forces on which superyachts rely, and which they exhaust, in order to stay afloat. He shows how big yachts have thus well and truly emerged from their position above ground to become dense nodes of capitalism.

## **Criminals in Bermuda shorts**

Tax evasion, labor law violations, environmental crime: this is the other side of the yachting world. As we turn the pages, we see white-collar workers in Bermuda shorts strip off their corporate garb to reveal a new skin: that of criminals. It is this reversal, done with grace and subtlety (quite the opposite of a superyacht), that is one of the book's most powerful contributions. It shows us the spectacular manifestation of inequality from an entirely new angle; we see who the actors are in this violence against the living world in the broadest sense. And this changes their status. The sociologist is no newcomer to the subject, having already studied green criminology and white-collar crime. (Salle 2019).

Indeed, Salle has studied the super-rich and powerful before. He is well placed to know that it is easier to access a prison than to board a superyacht or interact with a powerful person. This is another of the book's contributions, revealing all the methodological and pragmatic difficulties involved in investigating the affluent. It is about employing the right tactics and drawing on all the strings researchers have to their bow. They need to have, or build, the right networks and maintain them, as Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot have done throughout their careers (Pinçon et Pinçon-Charlot 2021). Or they need to gain access to the workers who interact with the powerful, such as the sports coaches described by Sébastien Chauvin and Bruno Cousin (Cousin & Chauvin 2019). It helps to have the right bodily capital, like Ashley Mears, who frequented superyachts and their occupants as a society girl at jet-set parties (Mears 2020). They can also study the wealth-concealing tactics of New York's progressive super-rich. This is what sociologist Rachel Sherman has done, in a book she is quick to describe as the result of the most difficult research she has ever undertaken (Sherman 2019, p. 239).

Research into the powerful is difficult to access, conduct and fund, but it is increasingly necessary. We cannot understand power and inequality without taking on the task of studying the places where they are generated. The call issued by

anthropologist Laura Nader (Nader 1972) to her colleagues inviting them to study the top social strata back in 1972 has lost none of its relevance. In a world where climate change is being driven not by the common man (the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene), but by the powerful men of capitalism, this plea has taken on a new urgency. As Grégory Salle does in *Superyachts : Luxe, calme et écocide*, we need to give the rightful place to these exceptions that define the rule.

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