

The teratological imagination:
Fantasia and the creation of monsters in
Renaissance art theory

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Imitation VS Imagination

‘Copy nature; just copy nature. There is no greater delight, no finer triumph than an excellent copy of nature.’ This doctrine (the enemy of art) was alleged to apply not only to painting but to all the arts, even to the novel and to poetry. To these doctrinaires, who were so completely satisfied by Nature, a **man of imagination** would certainly have had the right to reply: ‘I consider it useless and tedious to represent what exists, because nothing that exists satisfies me. Nature is ugly, and I prefer the monsters of my fancy to what is positively trivial.



– Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Queen of the Faculties’, in: *The Salon of 1859*

Mimesis VS Phantasia

- Bernhard Schweitzer, *Der bildende Künstler und der Begriff des Künstlerischen in der Antike: eine Studie*, Heidelberg: G. Koester, 1925
- Bernhard Schweitzer, 'Mimesis und Phantasia', *Philologus* 89 (1934), pp. 286-300
- Martin Kemp, 'From *Mimesis* To *Fantasia*: The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in The Visual Arts', *Viator*, Vol. 8, 1977, pp. 347-398.

Mimesis VS Phantasia

1. No contradiction between imitation and imagination

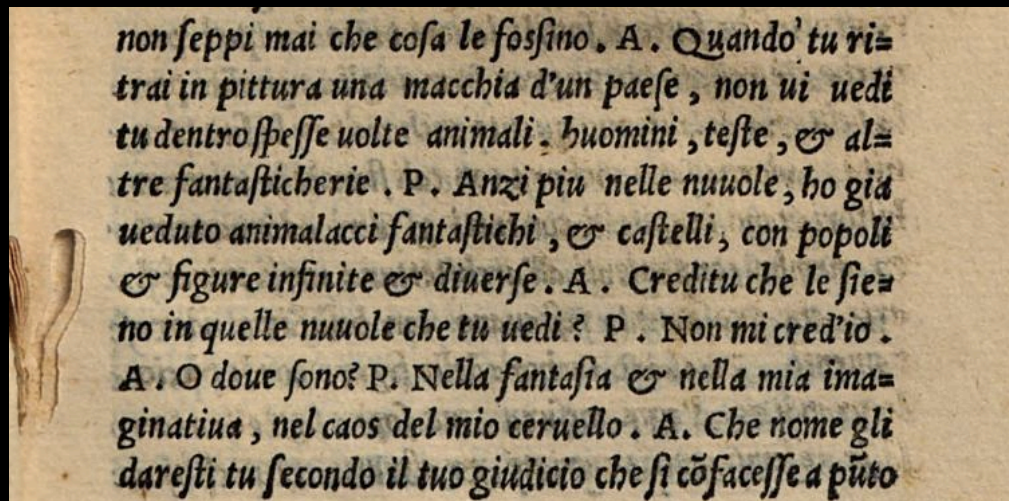
2. Imitation was a step of the imaginative process

A.F. Doni, *Il Disegno*, 1549

Painter: – In the clouds, I have seen fantastical beasts [...]

Art: – Do you think those were really in the clouds that you were looking at? [...]

Painter: – No, only in my fantasy [*fantasia*] and my imagination [*imaginativa*], in the chaos of my brain!



Benvenuto Cellini, *Autobiography*

‘...fanciful imaginings [*immaginazioni*]... as the ancients, who delighted in composing monsters out of goats, cows, and horses, called these chimerical hybrids by the name of **monsters** ... for these the proper name is therefore **monsters**, and not grotesques.



Cennino Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook* (14th c.)

‘Painting calls for imagination [*fantasia*], and skill of hand, in order to discover things not seen [...] The painter is given freedom to compose a figure, standing, seated, half-man, half-horse, as he pleases, according to his imagination.’



Anonymous, *Grotesque*, Italian, 16th c.

Marcello Donati, *De medica istoria*, 1586

‘...men with body parts truly resembling those of a beast, for instance with feet, or the head of a cow, of a ram, or the like; this, *he writes*, is conveyed in the imagination of the woman while she unites with her man, and conceives while thinking and grasping the form of the animal, which is then conveyed to the fetus.’

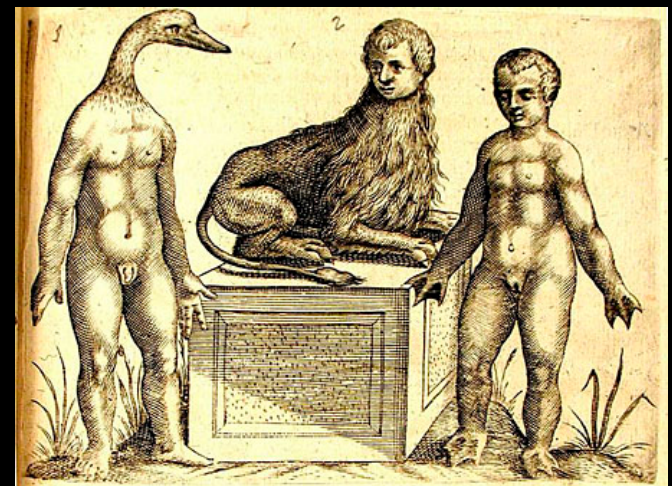


Illustration: Liceti, *De monstrorum caussi*, 1616

Mereological monsters



- *Imaginatio retentiva*
- *Imaginatio compositiva*

From: Ulisse Aldrovandi,
Monstrorum historia, 1642

Mereological monsters

realiter

idealiter

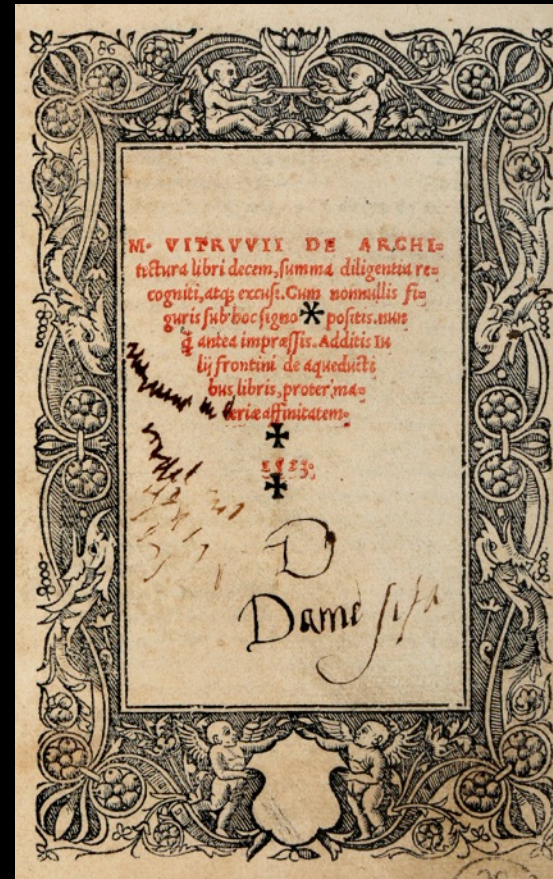


Hartmann Schedel, Nuremberg Chronicles, 1491

Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (Il Sodoma), 1505-8, Chostro Monte Oliveto Maggiore

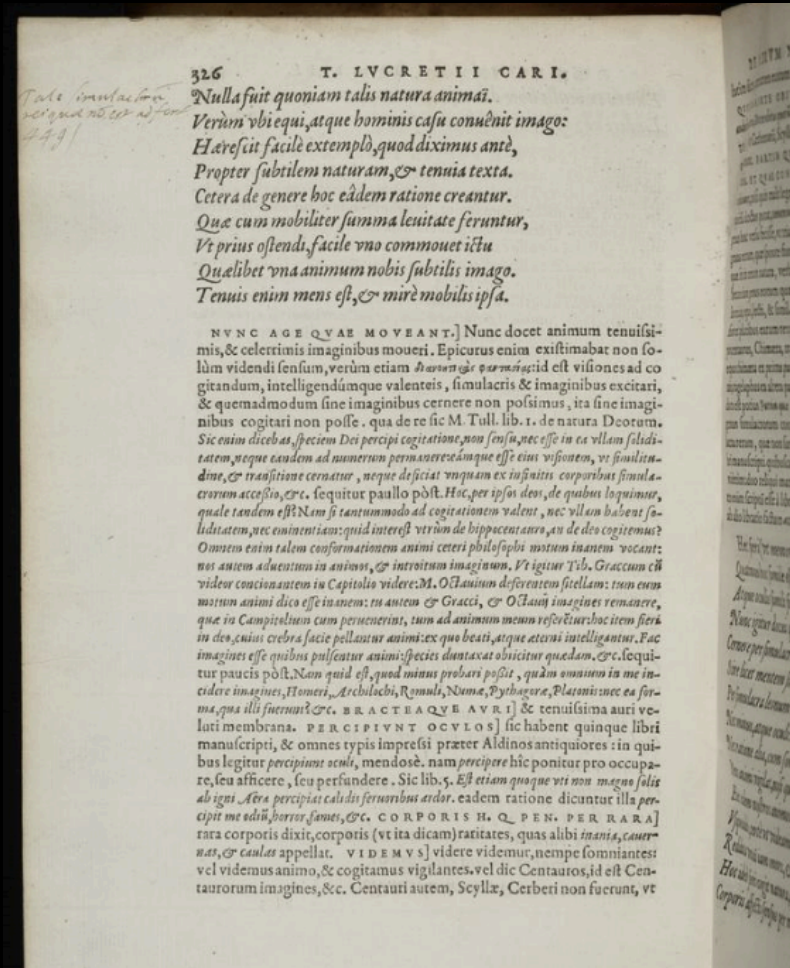
Cesare Cesariano in: Vitruvius, *De architectura, traducti de latino in vulgare*, 1521

‘Certainly, as the *Fantasia* in dreams can only confusingly recall things, and often puts together things of different nature, and thus, we may say, makes the grotesques, which without a doubt we can call painting’s reveries.’



Lucretius, *De rerum natura*

‘[In the mind] many images move in all directions, and often combine [...] Thus it is we see Centaurs [...] For certainly no image of a Centaur comes from one living, since there never was a living thing of this nature; but when the images of man and horse meet by accident, they easily adhere at once [...]’



Montaigne's copy of *De rerum natura*

Giordano Bruno, *On the Composition of Images, Signs & Ideas* (1591), I, I, 13

‘[in the imagination,] not only are the forms of natural species preserved within this most ample inlet, but also they will be able to be multiplied there [...], just as when we figure winged centaurs from a man and a stag, [...] we can produce, by a similar mingling, the infinite from the countless, more ample than all the words which are composed by the various kinds of combination and coordination out of the numbered elements of many languages.’

IORDANI
BRUNI NOLANI
DE IMAGINVM, SIGNORVM,
& Idéarum compositione. Ad
omnia Inventionum, Disposi-
tionum, & Memoriae
génera.

LIBRI TRES.

AD ILLVSTREM ET GENE-
ROSISS. IOAN. HAINRICVM
Haincellum Elcouia Do-
minum.

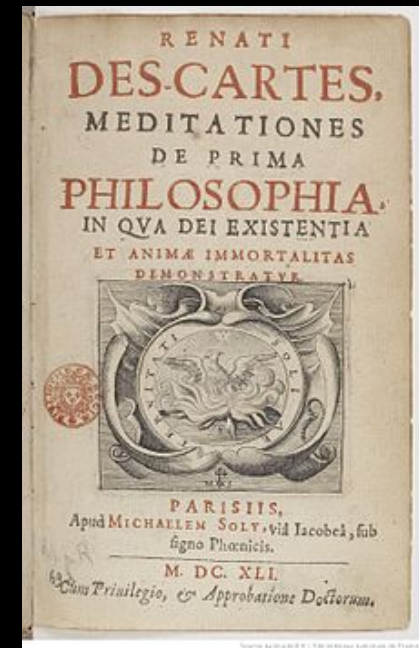
CREDITE ET INTELLIGETIS.



FRANCOFVRTI
Apud IOAN. Vvechelum & PETRVM
Fischerum consortes. 1591.

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), I

‘...as a matter of fact, painters, even when they study with the greatest skill to represent sirens and satyrs by forms the most strange and extraordinary, cannot give them natures which are entirely new, but merely make a certain medley of the members of different animals.’



Deus artifex

A.F. Doni, *Disegno*
(1549):

‘The first [drawing] was made
by God [...].

From this first drawing
everyone began to copy
[ritrarre].’



