The contested shoe box

Revisiting the role of aesthetics in the modern cargo shipping industry

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> For ten years, I've […] let myself be seduced by glossy images of beautiful red-yellow tankers (those of Argonaut, gliding across a deep blue sea with a shimmering propeller water) … Similarly, I have got inebriated by Concordia's well-maintained, super strong black and white tankers, fell in love with Bergesen's light green giants or with Frontlines blue-gray Suezmax-OBO (Anders Rydberg in Svensk Sjöfarts Tidning 1995/6-7, p. 11).

Introduction

In this paper, we seek to understand how aesthetic expression and experience might play a role in the maritime shipping industry, particularly focusing on cargo ships, a heavy industry that constitutes the backbone of economic globalisation. We will argue that shipping research is by and large aesthetically mute,[1] in other words, that aesthetics is not a topic that is discussed, and that the dominant discourse in the current cargo shipping industry is that shipping is so competitive that in the end the only thing that matters is the rational optimization of operations or the accurate timing of buying and selling ships. References to beautiful cargo ships in the shipping literature are often related to a distant past before the onslaught of competition and market logics. The rational representations of the cargo shipping industry have almost completely taken over.

As we will return to later in this paper, in the period from the 1960s and onwards, Hans Åkerlind claims that the aesthetic ideals that for long permeated the industry lost significance. He illustrates this with a quote of a major shipyard representative who said in the 1990s that the uglier a ship is, the more rational it is. Perhaps the most paradigmatic example of this could be a car carrier which as we will see, is claimed to look like a shoe box. However, this does not conform to our own experiences of doing research in shipping. In informal discussions, stakeholders in the shipping industry seemed to have ideas about what constitutes a beautiful modern cargo ship and they were able to name examples of specific vessels right away when asked. On numerous occasions respondents would pause to pull out a photo or walk to a ship model to comment with an obvious sense of awe about how beautiful—or ugly—a given ship was. On a personal level, we have been interested in exploring this mismatch between aesthetically mute shipping research and our experiences of being provided with empirical examples of aesthetic judgments within the cargo shipping industry.

With this contribution, we aim to explore the potential importance of aesthetics in the shipping industry, particularly in the cargo shipping industry, in the era from the 1960s and onwards. Our argument is that the aesthetic dimensions of shipping might have shifted or become downplayed but that they are still there, and should, as a phenomenon, be of interest to shipping researchers; that a shoe box, although it could be seen as ugly from some perspectives, might be seen as the epitome of a perfect ship. In order to propose ways to study the aesthetics of the shipping industry going beyond the scarce literature on the aesthetics of ship design, we draw inspiration from the field of organisational aesthetics, a field that, in short, studies aesthetic experience in organisational life, and makes use of arts-based methods for changing organisations. Through following the development of the field

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from the interplay between personal experiences and organizationally shared aesthetic codes to new calls for highlighting a more institutional dimension of aesthetics, we propose different ways in which shipping research can study aesthetics.

The outline of the paper is as follows: in the subsequent part, we review how aesthetics have (not) been present in modern shipping research, but that there is an interest, albeit limited, among design researchers and shipping enthusiasts. After that, we present research from the field of organisational aesthetics to get inspiration for how studies on aesthetics in the shipping industry can be conducted. We then present examples, or glimpses, from Lennerfors and colleagues' empirical research on the Swedish shipping industry, where aesthetic issues have been raised by respondents or noticed in archival materials, as sources of inspiration for where researchers can dig deeper to further explore the role of aesthetics. We sum up the paper in a concluding discussion.

Aesthetics in shipping literatures: a review

In this section, we provide an overview of various kinds of shipping literature in order to explore to what extent and how aesthetics have been discussed. We will argue that most literature neglects 'non-rational'[2] aspects of the shipping industry. Such rationalistic representation of shipping could be seen as surprising. Indeed, ships have not only been, according to Michel Foucault, "for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development […] but [...] simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination".[3] Moreover, Le Corbusier wrote that "[t]he house of the earth-man is the expression of a circumscribed world. The steamship is the first stage in the realisation of a world organised according to the new spirit".[4]

In any case, in the general literature about the shipping industry, epitomised by Martin Stopford's textbook *Maritime economics*, it is written that for all the "flamboyance" of shipping investors, "they operate within a strict economic regime, which could be immediately recognizable by nineteenth-century classical economists. It is, more or less, the 'perfect' market place at work, an economic Jurassic Park where the dinosaurs of classical economics roam free and consumers get a very good deal".[5] Although one should not overlook the metaphoric qualities of this quote as well as the somewhat ironic description of ship owners as flamboyant, the gist still is that shipping is dominated by a rational view of the shipping companies. This is confirmed by a report from Clarkson—a prominent consultancy firm in shipping—in which it is written that tramp shipping (where ships operate on the spot market) meet many of the criteria for a perfect market: what is offered is equivalent, there are low barriers of entry, many companies are competing on each business deal, and the markets are transparent.[6] Wijnolst and Wergeland in their shipping textbook argue that crude oil transport (to which we will return in our empirical illustrations) is a so-called commoditized shipping, which means that the offered transport services are similar and that one cannot really differentiate from the competition.[7]

In terms of research work, we find that most contributions related to the operations of ships or ports, freight logistics to and from these, the behaviour of stakeholders involved in conducting and financing such operations, as well as the public framework in which they do business are mostly published in two specialised journals: *Maritime Policy and Management* and *Maritime Economics and Logistics*. Other articles on shipping commonly appear in journals covering all modes of transport, for example, *Transportation Research Part A to E*, *Transport Reviews* or *Journal of Transport Geography* to name a few. In recent years a number of articles have used bibliometric approaches to characterise this corpus.[8] In one of the most comprehensive bibliographical studies, Woo et al. reviewed all the articles published during the first 40 years of *Maritime Policy and Management*.[9] The authors concluded that "shipping policy" was the most frequent topic with a particular predilection for "operations management." Furthermore, economics, operational research and geography were the major approaches in this field. In managerial research within the field, only 1.8 percent of the articles drew on organisational studies. And amongst these, Woo et al. found that more than 98 percent of the articles were based on a functionalist

paradigm, while only a handful were identified as taking an interpretative approach.[10] In the past 30 years, there are no articles that explicitly address visual aspects of shipping, nor shipping aesthetics more generally in *Maritime Policy and Management* and *Maritime Economics and Logistics*. A welcome exception within *Maritime Policy and Management* is the short, poetic essay by Fleming[11], which discusses the concept of seascape and highlights its aesthetic dimensions. He explores how people have experienced different seas, storms and calms, and a life at sea. There is also a text by Kathy Mack[12] about Norwegian seafarers published in *Maritime Policy and Management*, but her work will be covered when we discuss the few contributions about shipping from organisation studies.

Within research and popular literature about ship design, aesthetics and an interest in the visual is prevalent. Scholars have written popular overviews of ship design and the experiences, images, and impressions of those ships.[13] Massey re-reads ocean liner design from the perspective of gender history and presents how the spaces within ocean liners are gendered.[14] Lanz discusses interior ship design and the importance of the Italian designers up to the Second World War.[15] Leidenborg discusses Svenska Amerika Linien's ship *Kungsholm* (built in 1966) in terms of ship design and interior design, arguing that design could be used to secure a competitive advantage over other companies.[16] Bruce Peter writes books that are richly illustrated and contain detailed aesthetic and technical descriptions of the vessels, such as hull shape, lines, speed, cargo handling, interior design, etc.[17]

Hans Åkerlind identified three periods in 20th century ship design.[18] The first period stretched until the 1930s. The ships were of a three-island type, meaning that they had forecastle, bridge deck, and poop, which could look like three islands when seen from afar and from the side. The colours changed in the 1920s from soot black to lighter colours (concurrent with the switch from coal to diesel propulsion). What characterised the aesthetic design was functionalism without unnecessary and decorative details. The 1930s to the 1960s and 1970s, Åkerlind describes as the "golden age of ship design." The ships started to have a rounded, strongly precipitating stem, and cruiser stern. There

was a visual balance, the ships were well trimmed and sea-kindly. The ships were long and low, with a forward directionality. Often they had a painted "belt" with the shipping company's colours. Builders, owners, and the public were said to like these ships. In the period from the 1960s and onwards, Åkerlind claims that the aesthetic ideals lost significance, illustrating this with the quote from the shipyard representative mentioned in the introduction. While aesthetic references in that quote are clear, the term is understood here as a link to inferred design criteria of beauty. The proposition emphasises that contemporary shipping is "ugly," with ships designed on purely functional/rational consideration, which is claimed to be a demonstration that aesthetics is no longer a factor in the industry.

One should not forget the shipping enthusiasts' or so-called boatologists' written output. Boatologists are passionate about ships, and write books and articles focusing on ships, and their technical and design characteristics. Such texts can be found for example in the Swedish magazine *Båtologen*. For example, in an article about funnel design Anders Rydberg writes that from funnels being painted in black, some shipping companies started painting their chimneys in other colours in the second half of the 19th century.[19] Often there was a red, blue or yellow funnel with a black top. At the beginning of the 20th century shipping companies experimented with colours and different stripes. When the motor ships came, they initially only had a very narrow chimney, but eventually the chimneys began to grow and became part of the aesthetic of the ships. The shipping companies started to create their own chimney decoration, often with letters or symbols that gave the shipping company a distinctive feature.

Within organisation studies, Griffiths and Mack draw upon the personal memories of one of the authors to explore the sense of place of those working and living on or in proximity of ships.[20] The notion *shipscape* here is based on the link between architecture and organisation studies, and particularly deals with how seafarers experience their workplace through the senses. Mack also explores the aesthetic experiences of seafarers, explicitly drawing on organisational aesthetics.[21]

To sum up, literature about aesthetics in shipping is almost entirely

absent in mainstream scholarship on shipping as surveyed in *Maritime Policy and Management* and *Maritime Economics and Logistics*. However, for example within literature on ship design, discussions about the aesthetic qualities of exterior and interior design are prevalent. Within organisation studies, there are a few examples that employ aesthetic approaches, taking the seafarers aesthetic experiences as an object for analysis. However, there are no direct studies for example concerning the aesthetic expressions of the companies themselves, studying visual representations of shipping companies, and the aesthetic experiences of those who are not seafarers but still working in shipping.

Organisational Aesthetics: personal aesthetic experiences, aesthetic codes, and inter-organizational aesthetics

In this part, we present an overview of organisational aesthetics research to get inspiration for how to study aesthetics in the modern shipping industry. We start out with organisational aesthetics as focused on sensory, aesthetic experience in an organisational setting, to move on to the inter-subjectively created aesthetic code of an organisation. Then we discuss the more recent turn within organisational aesthetics to a more macro-level institutional perspective, and finally present our own approach which integrates parts of the previously reviewed literature.

In general, organisational aesthetics researchers turn against the predominant rationalistic approaches within management and organisation studies, and instead take so-called 'non-rational' elements of organisational life into consideration.[22] In other words, organisational members do not only engage in cognition, but experience organisational life through the senses; through vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.[23] While an obvious focus is on aesthetic, sensory experiences of the beautiful, aesthetic experiences can also concern the ugly, grotesque, tragic, sublime, sacred and rhythmic.[24] With this broad definition, it is reasonable that such experiences penetrate organisational life. While the aesthetic experiences, for example mechanics hearing that an engine is not working properly, construction workers who feel the roof with their feet, employees who sense the organisational culture, are personally experienced, they can be shared and discussed verbally.

The social judgement of aesthetic experiences is something that Warren calls aesthetic judgement, which concerns the "intersubjective constructed appraisal" of the aesthetic experience, by socialisation processes.[25] This intersubjectively constructed appraisal of what is beautiful, ugly, desirable, grotesque and so on in a particular organisation can be called the organisation's aesthetic code. Gagliardi argues that "every cultural system seems to have structural correspondences between its ontological or deontological codes and its aesthetic codes, that is to say, between systems of beliefs and of values on the one hand, and specific patterns of relation/combination between formal elements on the other."[26] The aesthetic code is therefore not just an add-on but linked to the very being of the organisation, which we can get access to by studying how the aesthetic code is expressed with images, sounds, smells, and other sensory means. Gagliardi claims that much research is based on the assumption that the linkage between beliefs and values on the one hand and the physical aesthetic organisation is unidirectional – that the latter is merely mirroring the former. However, Gagliardi argues that the relation between systems of meanings and systems of sensations is probably circular in nature. In other words, the aesthetic code not only represents what the organisational members see as aesthetically appealing, but also becomes inscribed "into the eye" of organisational members. So, one could say that the organisation can express its aesthetic code to internal and external stakeholders, but that the aesthetic expressions can also contribute to shaping the aesthetic code.

The study of such aesthetic codes and how they link to personal aesthetic experiences is commonplace in the field of organisational aesthetics. However, in its recent developments, the field has favoured approaches focusing on how organisations are experienced by individuals, in particular through arts-based methods.[27] The literature review of Taylor and Hansen highlighted the potential of arts-based approaches to study how individuals experience organisations, as a promising path for organisational aesthetics to make a unique contribution to research.[28] In a recent editorial of the journal *Organizational Aesthetics*, Taylor comes back to the affirmation that the artistic

perspective is the most promising to bring the field of organisational aesthetics forward.[29] However, he notes that while studying how individuals experience organisational life through their own senses and emotions, it is important at the same time not to disconnect from perspectives studying the organisational and institutional settings of this experience.

Similarly to Taylor, other scholars suggested a turn back towards the social setting, through the concept of institutional aesthetics.[30] In their comprehensive review of research on the visual dimension in organisation studies, Meyer et al. also see the potential in a meeting between visual approaches and institutional theory on a macro-level. They argue that institutional theory could "add the visual dimension to existing lines of thought on legitimation, institutionalised vocabularies and accounts, logics and social identities, theorization, translation, or bricolage".[31] They also hold that visuals can be assumed to influence the speed, trajectory and success of institutional work and institutional change. Meyer et al. proposes that the most prominent concept that elaborates the macro-level context of sense-making and institutionalised activities is that of institutional logics,[32] defined as the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, assumptions, values and beliefs by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their daily activity.[33] Höllerer et al. explores the role of the visual in institutional theory and argues that different institutional logics are framed in particular modes of visual expression.[34] Creed et al. also obliquely draw on institutional logics to develop their theoretical framework about institutional aesthetics.[35] Rather than emphasising the aesthetic code of a community,[36] in the framework of Creed et al. there are a multiplicity of aesthetic codes corresponding to different communities which people take part in.

What is central in the institutional logics perspective is that there is a plurality of logics, for example in an industry, which allows actors some autonomy to choose their own way of being in the world, drawing on or mobilising the different logics. In the work by Thornton et al., the authors argue that ideal types of institutional logics can help us develop a typology that can assist researchers' analytical work.[37] The institutional orders that are described by Thornton[38] are markets, corporations, professions, states, families, and religions. Each institutional order can be explained by a set of dimensions such as the root metaphors, sources of legitimacy, identity, norms, and authority, and the basis of attention. In their contribution to institutional logics, Höllerer et al. show how visual artefacts can help reconcile the conflicting logics of profession, corporation, community, religion and to some extent market logic within Corporate Social Responsibility in Austria, since the visual language is more useful in communicating novel ideas, it is more immediate, and it is less controlled than verbal discourse. Jancsary et al. developed a theoretical model proposing how institutions are constructed multimodally, both in visual and verbal registers.[39] By Meyer et al. an institutional approach is seen as hitherto neglected and a promising way forward.[40] For us, an institutional aesthetics approach could focus on an industry consisting of a multiplicity of interrelated organisations. It would try to elucidate how organisations in an industry construct their identity, align themselves with stakeholders, as well as differentiate themselves from competitors through aesthetic expression, which could concern all kinds of expression aimed to appeal not to the cognitive, rational thinking of stakeholders, but to their sensory experience. In this institutional approach, one does not only focus on the aesthetic expression of a single organisation but also that of other related organisations, as well as how they experience each others' aesthetic expressions.

Given this overview of the field, we hold that particular three interrelated perspectives could be used when studying aesthetics in the shipping industry. First, one could focus on personal experiences of people working in or related to the shipping industry. Second, one could study organizationally shared aesthetic codes. Third, one could go beyond the organisational level, to study institutional or inter-organizational aesthetics, for example the development of similar or different aesthetic codes and the interplay between them, in a shipping segment or the shipping industry as a whole.

Glimpses from the Swedish shipping industry from the 1960s and onwards

In this section, we will present a range of examples from Lennerfors' research on the Swedish shipping industry. The empirical studies were done in the years 2008-2023 and were part of a research initiative analysing the development of primarily the Sweden-based shipping industry but to some extent also companies based in other countries, more or less from the 1950s until the present. The project has followed a range of different segments: oil shipping, roll-on-roll-off shipping, pulp and paper shipping, refrigerated cargo shipping and others. The general methodological approach has been one of openness and inclusion, studying the history and development of companies ranging from financial performance, fleet sizes, ship types, and trade routes, as well as the culture, narratives, discourses and visual expression of these companies, through a combination of archival studies and interviews. In short, a combination of analysing the verbal and the visual, but with a focus on the verbal. In the empirical studies, Lennerfors and colleagues have therefore not singled out the aesthetic dimension but rather included it into his studies of a more general nature.

The reefer industry

In the book *Snow in the Tropics*, Lennerfors and Birch discuss the history of the independent reefer operators, companies that commercially operate refrigerated cargo vessels.[41] We have repeatedly heard that reefer vessels are conceived as one of the most beautiful types of cargo ship. In the book, the authors describe a Danish company – Lauritzen – who struggled with breaking the aesthetic code in the industry. In the 1980s, Lauritzen had just discontinued a relationship with P&O, and started anew to develop their operations. Part of this development consisted of creating a new kind of reefer, namely the ULRC – the Ultra Large Reefer Carrier. This is an obvious wink to ULCCs, Ultra Large Crude Carriers, the largest type of crude oil tanker, reflecting the wish to be seen as a big, rational and efficient ship. As Lennerfors and Birch write, the jumbo ships are sometimes described as boxes with an engine in the aft, and as stable workhorses.

By representatives of Lauritzen, these ships are described as neither as beautiful nor as fast as the previous reefers. At around the same time, the Swedish competitor Salén was building Winter ships that by Lauritzen representatives were seen as fancy and advanced – beautiful racing ships. The reefer division was obviously identifying themselves with and feeling strongly for the rational Jumbo ships, and proud of not following the predominant aesthetic code in the industry. However, from the upper echelons of the organisation came the idea to develop a new ship type – the Family Class – which was built at a Danish shipyard and technologically advanced, and seen more as the next iteration of the traditional, beautiful reefer ship. However, perhaps the representatives of the reefer division were not that critical of the aesthetical aspects of the Family class, but more about the cost. The Family class vessels cost more than double in comparison to the Jumbo class, although they could also carry more cargo. In this short empirical example, we can see how Lauritzen employees felt a strong sense of pride in distancing themselves from the aesthetic ideals of the reefer industry, by developing a highly rational ship, a workhorse more reminiscent of a tanker than a reefer. However, although the ships were appreciated externally by customers, internally within Lauritzen, there were other concerns that dominated, which meant that the reefer division including its Jumbo vessels, were deprioritized in relation to the grander objectives of the company, for example to be the most high-quality, innovative company in the segment.

Yet another example from *Snow in the Tropics*, is from an interview with a Japanese owner of reefers, who stated that he was very proud of his reefers, and would absolutely not change them for car carriers that look like shoe boxes. In this case, it was obvious that there was much more at stake for some ship owners than only rationally carrying cargo from A to B. Rather, concerns about what ships are desirable to own also from an aesthetic perspective should not be downplayed, and at least in this case is probably one of many factors that are taken into consideration when the ship owner makes business decisions. Similarly to the example given by the Japanese reefer owner, car carriers are often described as shoe boxes. In the book The Business of Shipping, by Lane Kendall, the author presents a photo of a car carrier with the caption: "The starkly utilitarian design of

A car carrier with a starkly utilitarian design. Photographer: Terje Fredh

the Japanese automobile/truck carrier Nada V is her dominant characteristic", where "starkly utilitarian", can be interpreted as not following the aesthetic code of the industry.[42]

The pulp and paper (P&P) shipping industry

In previous studies on the pulp and paper shipping industry[43], there are also a few glimpses of aesthetic concerns. For example, when the Swedish P&P company Assi chartered three new vessels from the shipping company Gorthon in 1987, to provide a just-in-time service to their customers, the head of Purchasing and Transports at Assi said:

> The ships, which look like shoe boxes, have been a strike of luck. With loading through both hatches and stern ramp the ships only need 16 hours in port.[44]

In other words, while commenting on the aesthetic appearance of the ships, the manager highlights the rational aspects of the ships. In a later issue of Transport and Hantering,[45] John Murray cites Harald Lindahl, allegedly the father of logistics in Sweden, stating that "a cargo ship should look like a shoe box. Then you put a peak in both ends, and you have stem and stern". In this light, the reference to different ships to being shoe boxes, should not be seen as something pejorative, but rather something desirable.

Another glimpse comes from when Transforest was created, a joint venture between P&P company SCA and the transport company Bilspedition. When discussing how to think about painting of the ships, it is discussed that the top side of the ship, which was currently painted grey, should be painted with a red-brown colour, the same colour that the hatches and bottom of the ship was painted in. This would make the maintenance of the deck easier, the ship would be more fresh-looking, as the rust which runs down on the outside will not be visible, and the same goes for damages related to impact from the tether and quay. It would also lead to cheaper visits to the shipyard, since no new water line needs to be painted. Also, it would visually show that Transforest is a new company. When it came to the painting of the corporate name Transforest, it was decided that it should be painted on both sides of the topside of the ship. This would mean that the letters could be made larger and thus seen at a greater distance. Also, the letters would be seen from land (since letters on the hull are often made invisible due to the quay). The maintenance would be minimal as the letters will not be damaged by the quay, and the assembly of the letters would not be dependent on the weather.[46] Here we can see that most of the aesthetic concerns are related to maintenance, while there might also be diversions from that logic, for example that some investment is made in additional letters on the ship to boast the company name.

Yet another example comes from a mail correspondence between the chief designer of the second generation open hatch bulk carriers for SCA (the first generation being the ships *Munksund*, *Holmsund*, and *Tunadal* delivered in 1967-1968), expected to be bought in the 1970s, but ultimately never ordered. Finalising a three page response letter about the proposed design, the head of Shipping at SCA stated:

> Finally, as something less serious, I must say that you design very nice and efficient vessels [name of designer] but that you did not succeed very well with the funnels on our present vessels. The funnels are placed to [sic] much forward and look as they are pressed into the superstructure. I enclose a drawing showing how the funnels should have looked like. Please use this type on the S-class.[47]

This is an indication that at least the head of shipping was not entirely pleased with the funnel design of the present vessels, and saw the need to point that out, and ask for an improvement for the next generation of vessels. Incidentally, we talked to a broker of newbuildings who said that a shipowner had been very peculiar regarding the placement of a mast on the cargo ship, and paid extra to change the design and place it where he wanted to.

A final example that comes from the domain of P&P carriers concerns the Väner Shuttles. The Väner shuttles were part of a new integrated transport solution by the Swedish P&P company Stora, namely the West Coast System. In this system, the produce from P&P mills would be partly transported by rail to Gothenburg, and partly by ship from the mills on lake Vänern. For the latter purpose, the idea came up to design road ferries to go from Karlstad to Gothenburg, and the shipping company VNG suggested a ship type that could also carry oil back to Vänern. In an article in Transport och Hantering,[48] the Shuttle Göteborg's first visit to Trollhätte Canal was documented. It was written that

> … a summerlike spring Tuesday, the blue painted float – as abruptly cut off in the nose as in the stern – sailed from Gothenburg and completed its 18 hour maiden voyage to Karlstad.

In an image caption in the article the journalist wrote that

> A beauty prize will never be awarded to Shuttle Göteborg. An uglier "bow" has hardly been seen in Trollhätte Canal.

In this example, we can also see an aesthetic code lying in the background of the evaluation of *Shuttle Göteborg*.

Funnels too much to the front on the Tunadal? Photographer: Robert J. Boman

Tankers – Sweden-based oil shipping companies in the 1980s and onwards

A salient example of aesthetics in the modern Swedish shipping industry is the work done by Concordia Maritime, which was a publicly listed corporation with Stena as main owner, and Stena Bulk, with Stena as sole owner, which operated the ships and marketed them in relation to oil companies and other customers. This has already been documented extensively in the book *Att skapa en värld*[49] and *Över älven och ut på världshaven*[50], and the below text is primarily based on *Att skapa en värld*.

In the mid-1980s, in their search for new good deals, Stena Bulk found a number of oil tankers that would contribute to shaping their history. While Stena Bulk had previously asserted itself visually by painting its name "as large as possible" on the ship, the aesthetic dimension developed with the Ludwig ships. The ships, when acquired, were described at Stena Bulk as "rust brown", "LandRover Defenders" and "with not one single white spot on the ships in order to avoid that they looked dirty".[51] Following the transition of ownership to Stena Bulk, the ships were

An uglier "bow" than that on Shuttle Karlstad has hardly been seen in the Trollhätte Canal? Photographer: Terje Fredh

painted in more vivid colours, opposing the functionality of Ludwig. The ships were painted with a modern figurehead with the Stena logo, something borrowed from earlier generations of ships. In the late 1980s, the company started to produce images of the ships, by a dedicated photographer who experimented with new angles, new lenses, and new focal points, in order for the images to look different from those of other shipping companies. Standard images were taken from the front/side where the port side is not visible (since that side is often more worn out). Furthermore, Stena's photographer used a helicopter rather than an airplane which was standard procedure. This made it possible to take more lively pictures, giving viewers the sensation of being very close to the ship, yet showing the vessel's whole silhouette. At first, the images were spread to oil companies, shipping companies, and media, but then Stena Bulk started to use them in ads. The images of the Stena Bulk were not only spread in the media, but to a number of central and less central stakeholders, in an attempt to strengthen the corporate brand. In the annual report of 1988, *Stena Queen*, newly painted, is shown. Given that this annual report was

published before the *Exxon Valdez* accident (to be discussed below), there is no link between the oil spill and the aesthetic work done at Stena Bulk. The aesthetic work was thus ongoing before the real quality turn within the oil shipping industry.

On 24 March 1989, the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound causing great environmental harm. The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill might not have been the worst in history, but it was the first of this magnitude to occur in North-American waters: the tragedy generated tremendous media attention and public outcry. After the disaster, oil majors became increasingly interested in operational excellence. Ships inspections made by shippers prior to chartering a specific vessel became the norm in the tanker trade: a process known as vetting in the industry. That shipowners engaged in asset play as their major strategy indicated a more short-sighted strategy, potentially less focused on safety, at least in appearance. The aesthetic work continued at Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime and played a part in the identity work of branding the company as a quality company, arguing that "oil should always travel first class".

In relation to the other Sweden based crude oil tanker companies, Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime had older tonnage. The other actors, in their advertisement positioned themselves differently stating that they had modern tonnage. The competitor Argonaut, in their advertisement, continued to promote their "modern tanker fleet" and that they "continue their bet on large, modern tankers".[52] Nordström & Thulin expressed: "We are one of the oldest shipping companies in the world. Our fleet is one of the world's youngest".[53] Frontline wrote: "wet or dry, large or small, modern ships, for safe transport".[54] That the ships of Stena Bulk's competitors were modern was seen as a quality mark in itself.

From 1992 and onwards, the quality discourse was emphasised by Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime and the companies were seen in advertisements in the shipping press. While always pushing a quality agenda using words, the images of well-maintained ships complemented the verbal messages. Further, the company used images of

people on board to highlight the human dimension of shipping. In the mid-1990s, Stena Bulk adopted a discourse and storytelling about seafarer romanticism using accompanying images. The ads are called "The face of responsibility", "True seafarer love", "Our people", "Silent safety", "Rigorous safety routines", and "Knowledge leads to safer shipping". The ads are personalised and the names of the depicted persons appear in the narratives.

While Stena Bulk's competitors Nordström & Thulin, ICB, and Frontline kept their advertisements in line with the discourse of modern ships, Argonaut, perhaps the most direct competitor to Concordia Maritime given its fleet composition, changed its discourse in 1992 and onwards, emphasising quality, safety and environmental concern. Argonaut experimented with photos of details of ships, rather than the standard depiction of a ship from afar, also showing seafarers' work. The aesthetic strategy (in addition to other work) was successful in that Stena Bulk managed to not only keep their ships in operation, and also get a good quality reputation, despite the age of the ships.

In the end of the 1990s a fleet renewal with new, innovative ships started that would last through the first decades of the 2000s. To complement the change of the material dimension of the business, the visual representation and the discourse also changed. The discourse of seafarer romanticism was replaced with a discourse of innovation, almost naturally accompanying the shift from old ships to new. However, the aspect of quality was still present and the discourse of safety became more prevalent. The slogan "oil should always travel first class" lived on, but the advertisements' narrative focus disappeared.

To strengthen the visual design, Stena Bulk used the services of a visual designer, who contributed to the design of ships. His impression of Stena at the time was that they were forerunners and that they received a lot of publicity and exposure through the availability of attractive photos of the ships. Stena Bulk's new ships were painted with modern figureheads like the previous generation of vessels. Also, on the *Stena Arctica*, designed for icy waters, an ice bear was painted on the side of the ship, and a fluorescent strip with the Stena Bulk brand name was put the across front of the accommodation tower, a highly

Stena Arctica, with an polar bear painted on the side of the ship. Photographer: Terje Fredh

visible spot commonly used to posted safety reminders such as "No Smoking". A similar design was done for the new LNG vessels, where a dragon was painted.

Already in the 1990s, Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime had built a quality reputation where the visual aspect played a central role, and this was continued and refined during the 2000s and onwards, when the company communicated a discourse related to innovation and safety, which was accompanied by images of vulnerable environments and new, innovative ships.

We maintain that the aesthetic expression has been contributing to the image of Stena Bulk as a high-quality shipping company and as an extrovert company which is in the market to make a difference. But can one make a difference in a perfect market that crude oil shipping is seen to be? Although the logic of competition would still be unit cost, with high quality a company may end up whitelisted and thus less exposed to risk inspection-related delays. Perhaps more importantly, a shipping company with high quality may become a preferred supplier to an oil company having the possibility of chartering out ships on a long-term basis, reducing its exposition to short-term market variations. Furthermore, the investments in aesthetic expression are not that large

compared to other costs within this capital intensive industry. And such investments might be valuable to employees since they feel more motivated to work with ships they can be proud of. We, similarly to most of our respondents, believe that the drivers for aesthetic expression were done both out of interest from the CEO and colleagues, but also that they could easily be seen to make economic sense. However, when interviewing Stena employees, the aesthetic expression had become an important part of Stena Bulk's and Concordia Maritime's identity and a symbol of how the company was different from others.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, we have aimed to show how aesthetics within cargo shipping is a neglected topic within shipping research, except for some research on exterior and interior ship design. However, aesthetic judgments and concerns are prevalent within the shipping industry. Drawing on organisational aesthetics we highlighted three perspectives that could be combined in studies on aesthetics in the shipping industry, going beyond interior and exterior design.

The first concerns personal aesthetic judgments. Here, we have seen judgments from people working in the shipping industry, such as the SCA shipping director pointing out to a designer how he was not content with the funnel design, the head of Purchasing and Transport at ASSI who stated that their ships were rational shoe boxes, the Japanese reefer owner who stated how proud he was to own reefers rather than shoe boxes, the journalist writing that the Väner Shuttles perhaps had the most ugly "bow" that the Trollhätte Canal has seen, etc. An observation is the contested nature of the shoe box – seeing ships as a shoe box is for some a desired characteristic, while for others a source of aversion. The existence of such personal judgments is interesting and one could study how such personal judgments are formed, how they are explained and rationalised, how they differ from another, and so on. We are of course aware that most of the examples that we have provided are about ships being ugly, which go in line with Åkerlind's papers, but perhaps does not mean that aesthetics is

no longer important in the industry, but rather that the aesthetic values have been changed and perhaps downplayed. In other words, despite being described as ugly, such statements are indications that there are aesthetic codes in the industry.

The second perspective concerns the study of aesthetic codes within an organisation. An organisational level perspective is for example the study of Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime,[55] which discussed how the aesthetic code of the organisation has developed and why. It discussed the strategic importance of the aesthetic work being done, for example whether it was done for branding towards customers, current and potential employees, or other stakeholders. Studies can also be conducted about tensions between the personal and organisational level. Perhaps there could be organisational barriers for pushing more attractive designs, for example *if* the funnel design proposed by the SCA shipping director would be more expensive and thus be in direct conflict with a logic of profitability. However, it could also be the other way around. In the Lauritzen reefer case, perhaps the most reasonable interpretation is that the reefer division focused more on a rational, what they considered to be more ugly, design, while there was an aesthetic code within Lauritzen as a company which was more directed towards high-end, sophisticated ships. Within this perspective, it becomes important to understand the impact of aesthetic judgments on the operations of the company. What we have seen at least in the Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime case, aesthetics is an important dimension of the company and part of their quality identity and not something that is just bolted on.

The third area concerns the study of aesthetics beyond the organisation, taking into account the inter-organizational and institutional setting. Here, we presented an embryo of such study, which compared and contrasted the aesthetic expressions of Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime on the one hand and other Swedish crude oil shipping companies in the 1980s and 1990s. We could indicate that aesthetics did play a role, alongside other work, to create a quality image of Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime, and that this quality work was intensified in the institutionally turbulent setting after the *Exxon Valdez*

incident. We also saw that the other companies started to be affected by the aesthetic work of Stena Bulk and Concordia Maritime and partly augmented or adapted their own aesthetic expression. It is here obvious that aesthetic expression is dependent on the inter-organizational and institutional context.

We invite other researchers to continue reviving and reigniting the discussions about aesthetics in the shipping industry, for example by focusing on the above mentioned perspectives and their interplay. Studies about aesthetics in the shipping industry could benefit by involving interdisciplinary collaborations for example between researchers in shipping and those in art and design. Given the interest that there is about aesthetics amongst shipping enthusiasts, collaborations between boatologists and academic researchers could also be a way forward.

Sammanfattning

I denna artikel lyfter vi behovet av att studera estetik inom sjöfartsindustrin i vad som har påstått vara den fula moderna eran från 1960-talet och framåt. Vi granskar forskning om sjöfart för att visa att det inte finns några studier inom dominerande sjöfartsforskning om estetik inom sjöfartsnäringen, medan det finns litteratur om de estetiska dimensionerna av teknisk och inredning av fartygsdesign, samt entusiaster som skriver om fartygs estetik. Eftersom vi är intresserade av att gå längre än fartygens estetik och lyfta fram den roll estetik kan spela i ett större sammanhang, utgår vi från fältet organisationsestetik. Vi föreslår olika sätt på vilka estetik inom den moderna sjöfartsnäringen skulle kunna studeras, vilket bildar en forskningsagenda. Tre perspektiv och samspelet mellan dessa kan vara användbara som utgångspunkter, nämligen personliga estetiska bedömningar, organisatoriska estetiska koder samt institutionell och interorganisatorisk estetik. Vi presenterar och reflekterar över några exempel på när estetik har haft en framträdande dimension i Lennerfors studier om svensk sjöfartsnäring från 1960-talet och framåt, framför allt inom kyl-, papper/massa- och tanksjöfarten.

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