

Reframing Souths

Ecological Perspectives on the South in Literature,
Film, and New Media

Edited by Carmen Concilio and
Alberto Baracco



Milano University Press

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For all those who gaze with hope towards the south

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The project was supported and sponsored by the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Modern Cultures at the University of Torino and the Department of Humanities at the University of Basilicata.

About This Book

This volume originates from the International Conference “Framing Souths” held at the University of Torino (Italy) on May 24-26, 2023. In order to give greater breadth to some of the topics discussed during the conference, the authors have decided to gather within this volume a collection of essays on the South, which — with different approaches and diverse viewpoints — returns to ponder on the various souths of the world from a specific ecocritical perspective.

Edited by Carmen Concilio and Alberto Baracco, this collection of essays is divided into two sections. The first part, titled “Literary, Ecocritical, Decolonial, and Comparative Readings”, contains chapters that map representations of Souths through literature by engaging with ecocriticism, blue ecology, transformative human-nonhuman relationships, multispecies entanglements, and decolonial practices. Opening the section, the first two chapters focus on the blue humanities and oceanic perspectives. Carmen Concilio’s paper examines Jane Urquhart’s *Sanctuary Line* (2010) and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* (2012), drawing on Donna Haraway and Rachel Carson to explore multispecies co-migration patterns and environmental justice: «The aim of this contribution is to follow Haraway’s suggestion — “it matters what thoughts think other thoughts” (2021: 63) — and thus demonstrate how Carson’s ocean imagery informs contemporary narratives which connect the South to the North». Then, Biancamaria Rizzardi analyses the semiotics of water in works by Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Zadie Smith, underlining «three paradigmatic sociocultural phenomena involving the relationships between the Global North and the Global South».

Other essays delve into literary productions from diverse parts of the world and various historical periods, using critical trajectories that move from Africa to India and cover contemporary literature as well as eighteenth-century writings. Exploring African magical realism and Afrofuturism in Khadija Abdalla Bajaber’s *The House of Rust* (2021) and Sharon Dodua Otoo’s *Adas Raum* (2021), Pietro Deandrea’s paper analyzes their visions of African future(s) and «the literary strategies that these two books employ in relation to time, space, animal beings and sentient objects». While Giulia A. Disanto’s chapter examines Goethe’s ecological thought, its relevance for contemporary conceptions of modernity, and «how Goethe’s perception of the arboreal meridian nature and understanding of atmospheric light in southern Europe has marked his conception of nature», Chiara Rolla’s essay is concerned with Matthieu Duperrex’s *Voyages en sol incertain* (2019) and investigates «the mechanisms of the stories, the

link they weave with the species to which they are matched, and the consequent multispecies dialogue they advocate».

Decolonial practices in education are explored in the chapter by Dora Renna and Annarita Taronna, which analyses «how an English language university course for Prospective Primary English Teachers (PPEs) can shape theoretical assumptions on complex discourse constructions and address problematic (de)colonial relationships». In his analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* (2022), Alessandro Vescovi discusses the literary genre of the work and how it «may gesture towards a new way of perceiving the opposition North vs. South, as an opposition of epistemic paradigms rather than a territorial question». Testifying to the varying perceptions of South, Alessio Mattana argues that, in Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), the protagonist's detached viewpoint on the condition of Scotland after the Act of Union allows Smollett to «convey a complex, multifaceted view of eighteenth-century Scotland as “global south”, meant as a society which stands in a subaltern position to the hegemonic “north” represented by London». Both Gaetano Albergo and Gabriel Serbu's contributions focus on J.M. Coetzee's works and examine the moral character of literature through philosophical approaches. Serbu adopts a post-critical perspective to *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) proposing that «[b]y mimicking the very language of criticism that tends to frame the other according to a grandiose rhetoric of subversion, the novel seems to cast suspicion on the transformative potential of literature». Albergo draws on Robert Pippin and Stephen Mulhall in his analysis of Coetzee's *Jesus Trilogy*, emphasizing its «philosophical commitment, with particular attention to the way Coetzee manages to make literature a device for the human search for meaning and understanding». Focusing on Giorgio Vasta's and Elio Vittorini's works, Lavinia Torti sheds light on «the theme of *nostos*, or return, highlighting the contrast between the seemingly static nature of the South and the ostensibly dynamic character of the North».

The second section of the volume, “Images, Representations, and Visual Cultures”, adopts the critical lens of visibility and media to frame representations of Souths. Contributions in this section develop reflections on media, including photography, film, and social networks. For example, Alberto Baracco's chapter examines depictions of Lucania in the 1950s and 1970s in the works of Henri Cartier-Bresson and other photographers, «focus[ing] on the question of image agency (Mitchell 2005; Bredekamp 2010) in relation to the environmental issue and visual ecocriticism». Essays by Emily Antenucci, Víctor Martín García, Fabien Landron, and Alberto Spadafora focus on audiovisual representations of environmental themes and South. Centered on the portrayal of Puglia in the documentary *In viaggio con Cecilia* (2013), Emily Antenucci's essay explores an ethos of reflection and return, «necessary for environmental and social remediation, and a conception of progress that does not view

modernity as a race to either wealth or death», highlighting cinematic re-use in the documentary. Víctor Martín García analyses utopia and the character of the *femminiello* Europa in Massimo Andrei's film *Mater Natura* (2005), aiming to clarify «the symbolic function of both the identity conditions of the character and the utopian project itself». Then, dystopia is the focus of Fabien Landron's paper, which «looks at how contemporary Italian audiovisual productions, such as Niccolò Ammaniti's mini-series *Anna* and Alessandro Celli's film *Mondocane*, reinvent a dystopia "all'italiana", based on different models and current concerns». Drawing on ecomaterialism and ecocriticism, Alberto Spadafora presents *Honeyland* (2019), a documentary on beekeeping in North Macedonia, as an example of ecocinema, aiming to capture its "film ecology" as a «cinematic practice that acknowledges the environment, adapts to it, and is inspired by it». Bees and beekeeping feature also in Lia Zola's contribution, using her ethnographical fieldwork in the Italian Alps and drawing on Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing to reveal how «sympoiesis and assemblage can be seen to surface in the context of bee-beekeeping and bee culture, as they emerge as multi-species activities where everything and everyone involved can be regarded as a social actor». Focusing on contemporary literature and multimedia traits, Paola Della Valle's chapter highlights the Pacific performance poetry from young poets who «make use of the potential offered by new technologies and the web to form a multimedia participatory environment, which can give visibility to people who need to have their voices heard». New technologies and environmental activism are also at the core of Lorenzo Denicolai and Valentina Domenici's contribution, which examines «profiles that exploit the potential of TikTok to communicate the climate emergency of southern areas, such as Africa, India, and territories with complex management of environmental policies». In line with contemporary literature and visuality, Miriam Begliuomini considers graphic novels from the French-speaking world depicting themes of hunger, revolt, and migration «as *topoi* of a systemic crisis and an imbalance between a "North" and "South" in which the Mediterranean remains the fundamental barycenter».

Through its array of interdisciplinary and timely contributions, *Reframing Souths* offers a nuanced exploration of ecocritical concerns, capturing the shifting, dynamic quality of Souths and their role today in postcolonial literature, audiovisual production, and the humanities.

The authors have chosen to allow each contributor the freedom to choose between the use of lowercase or uppercase for the terms 'south' (or 'global south') and 'souths' on a case-by-case basis. In light of the themes of de-westernization, decentralization, and denationalization that underpin this volume, we have opted not to codify our perspectives on the south(s) in a rigid, marked form.

About the Authors

Carmen Concilio is Full Professor of English and Postcolonial Literature at the University of Torino, Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Modern Cultures. She is recipient of the Canada-Italy Innovation Award 2021; she is former President of the Italian Association of Postcolonial Studies (www.aiscli.it) and Director of its Summer School (2012-2020); she is former Director of the BA course in Modern Languages and Literatures. She is part of the Scientific Board of the Centre for research in Digital Humanities - DISH, as well as a member of the Scientific Board of the Phd program in Digital Humanities. She is a member of the Didactic board of the School of Superior Studies "F. Rossi" at the University of Torino. Her research concerns postcolonial studies, migration and diaspora studies, environmental studies and ecocriticism, digital humanities, photography and literature, Alzheimer's and ageing studies. Her works include *Imagining Ageing, Representation of Age and Ageing in Anglophone Literatures* (Transcript 2018); *New Critical Patterns in Postcolonial Discourse. Historical Traumas and Environmental Issues* (Trauben 2012). She has coedited (with D. Fargione) *Trees in Literatures and the Arts. Human.Arboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene* (Lexington 2021) and *Antroposcenari. Storie, paesaggi, ecologie* (Mulino 2018); she has guest edited *Italian-Canadiana* vol. 37 n. 1-2 (Toronto 2023). She is a co-founding member of the Turin Interdisciplinary Group of Environmental Humanities (Tigehr).

Alberto Baracco is Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Basilicata, Department of Humanities. For over 18 years, he has been working at the University of Torino, where he conducted research on film as Director of the Audiovisual Laboratory at the Department of Art, Music, Cinema and Theatre (2001-2012), and as Head of the Research Office at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and Modern Cultures (2013-2019). At present, he is in charge of the project LiFE, an extensive research project focused on southern Italy, film and ecology. His main areas of research are film philosophy and film ecocriticism. His recent publications include the two volumes *Basilicata and Southern Italy Between Film and Ecology* (2022, coedited with M. Gieri) and *Italian Experiences of Trauma through Film and Media* (2022, coedited with R. Pollicino), and the two essays "Narratives of Mediterranean migrants in Italian cinema: The camera angle and close-up in *Terraferma* and *Fuocoammare*" (2024) and "Cinema documentario dell'eco-trauma. Le fabbriche dei veleni e i colori della morte al lavoro" (2023). Since 2016, he is member of the Turin Interdisciplinary Group of Environmental Humanities (Tigehr) and the American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS).

List of Contributors

Gaetano ALBERGO
Independent scholar.
gaetanoalbergo@yahoo.it

Emily ANTENUCCI
Vassar College, New York.
emily.antenucci@gmail.com

Alberto BARACCO
University of Basilicata, Italy.
alberto.baracco@unibas.it

Miriam BEGLIUMINI
University of Torino, Italy.
miriam.begliumini@unito.it

Carmen CONCILIO
University of Torino, Italy.
carmen.concilio@unito.it

Pietro DEANDREA
University of Torino, Italy.
pietro.deandrea@unito.it

Paola DELLA VALLE
University of Torino, Italy.
paola.dellavalle@unito.it

Lorenzo DENICOLAI
University of Torino, Italy.
lorenzo.denicolai@unito.it

Giulia A. DISANTO
University of Salento, Italy.
giulia.disanto@unisalento.it

Valentina DOMENICI
University of Roma Tre, Italy.
valentina.domenici@uniroma3.it

Fabien LANDRON
University of Corsica, France
(UMR CNRS 6240 LISA).
landron_f@univ-corse.fr

Víctor MARTÍN GARCÍA
Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain.
vmartingmarin@hotmail.com

Alessio MATTANA
University of Torino, Italy.
alessio.mattana@unito.it

Dora RENNA
University for Foreigners of Siena, Italy.
dora.renna@unistrasi.it

Biancamaria RIZZARDI
University of Pisa, Italy.
biancamaria.rizzardi@unipi.it

Chiara ROLLA
University of Genova, Italy.
chiara.rolla@unige.it

Gabriel SERBU
University of Rijeka, Croatia.
floring.serbu@uniri.hr

Annarita TARONNA
University of Bari, Italy.
annarita.taronna@uniba.it

Lavinia TORTI
University of Bologna, Italy.
lavinia.torti2@unibo.it

Alessandro VESCOVI
University of Milano, Italy.
alessandro.vescovi@unimi.it

Alberto SPADAFORA
University of Torino, Italy.
alberto.spadafora@unito.it

Lia ZOLA
University of Torino, Italy.
lia.zola@unito.it

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Introduction*

Carmen Concilio

University of Torino, Italy.

carmen.concilio@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-0853-7107

Alberto Baracco

University of Basilicata, Italy.

alberto.baracco@unibas.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-5276-4999

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South Reflections: Literary, Ecocritical, Decolonial, and Comparative Readings

Reframing Souths is a collection of scholarly essays that position themselves in dialogue with diverse south(s) — real, geographical, and imaginary — through a variety of disciplinary competences, but, above all, through ecocritical lenses. The fact that the present collection stems from Southern Europe — that is, Italy — helps relativizing and revitalizing the multiple perspectives offered by transdisciplinary scholars — literati, linguists, film and visual studies experts, anthropologists — who adhered to the call and joint research project launched by the University of Torino and the University of Basilicata, and with the partnership of the University of Genoa and the University of Pescara.

By no means “reframing” is to be intended as a way to contain and fix the ideas or ideologies about the south(s), fixing a status or a standard once and for all. Rather, the prefix “re” maintains an open and ever regenerative entry into the wide field of studies around and about the south(s), including the Mediterranean, as well as southern Italy and southern Europe, but also gazing out to the southern Oceans and shores of Oceania, to the South of the United States, to South America and to some African countries. All this within the framework of the Environmental Humanities.

* This introduction is the result of the joint efforts by the authors. In particular, Carmen Concilio wrote the section: “South Reflections: Literary, Ecocritical, Decolonial, and Comparative Readings”, while Alberto Baracco penned the section: “Plural South: Images, Representations, and Visual Cultures”.

Perhaps, a first meaning of south — as concept — must be circumscribed: we do not intend to discuss only or merely the Global South, for we share a certain anxiety against this neoliberal, capitalist cultural construct, which inevitably opposes the global North to the global South. As said, for us south starts within the national, Italian — post-Gramscian — literary, filmic and visual tradition, and embraces the Mediterranean Sea and the countries facing that same Sea from its southern shores.

Moreover, our multimedia critical studies include the southern Oceans and some of the countries of the southern hemisphere. To better clarify what we mean with the term “anxiety”, we tend to agree with J.M. Coetzee’s assumption that there is a circulation of works of art in the south(s), but also of philosophies and theories, similar to the circulation of oceanic currents, that do not necessarily enter the Western or Northern canon, but create a composite reality among them and a dialogue with each other, with no need to be authorized, accepted or judged by- or judged in- the North.

The term “Global South” originally came into use in the late 1970s to refer to economically disadvantaged nation-states and as a replacement for the term “Third World”, thus shifting the East-West framework of European colonialism and Cold War decolonization to a Gramscian North-South vision of power relations in which multidirectional capital flows mostly benefit the geographic North. (Mahler 2015: 100)

Coetzee’s establishment of a “J.M. Coetzee Cathedra: Literatures of the South” at the University of San Martín in Buenos Aires, with the purpose to invite writers from South Africa and Australia to present their works there, and then encouraging the translation of South American writers into English and of Anglophone writers into Spanish, is in itself a virtuous experiment in emancipation and decolonization, or even delinking as Walter Dignolo would say — substantially, creating a discontinuity — from the imprint of Northern Institutions, Universities, and Literary Contests and Prizes. Coetzee also insists that he refuses to use the phrase Global South, for this is a way to instill a view of asymmetric power relations, be they economic, political, or cultural. It is worth quoting his words at length:

Since 2015, I have occupied a personal Cathedra at the University of San Martín in Buenos Aires, where I have dedicated my energies to bring together writers from three continents that are far apart in geography and in language but it seems to me that they have affiliations in their history and in their relation to the land, and I refer to — on the one hand, the vast literature of Latin America, more specifically the Literature of Argentina, and to the less vast, but still considerable, literatures of Southern Africa and Australia. As part of my duties, I have brought writers from Southern Africa and Australia to Argentina to offer courses in their respective Literatures and these courses have been attended not only

by students from Buenos Aires, but also by students elsewhere from Argentina and Latin America more widely. What have been the fruits of their visits? Some of the fruits, I think, are intangible, some are more tangible. Let me just list some of the more tangible results. First of all, a number of works of fiction by Australian, by South African and by Mozambican writers have been published in Argentina by the Press of Universidad de San Martín, and in the reverse direction, an Australian publishing house has initiated a series of translations of Argentine writers, also through the kindness of Australian tax-payers we have been able to bring some of the Argentine writers to Australia on extended residencies. My overriding concern as professor at UNSAM, has been that students of the three literatures I mentioned should be able to meet and interact with writers from the South, without northern mediation. By which I mean without having to pass the cultural gate-keepers of the metropolises of the North; the people who decide which books from Latin America will be translated into English and which books will not, and decide which figures from the South will be promoted worldwide and which will not. And most importantly, who decides which stories by the South, about itself, will be accepted into the repertoire of World Literature and which will not. You will have noticed that in speaking of Literatures of the South, I have not used the term the Global South. And there is a reason for this: to my way of thinking the South is a real part of the world, with a climate and a flora and fauna of its own, indeed, with more than just natural features in common, but with a strong commonality of history and culture. The commonalities of history include a long and complex history of colonization. The so-called Global South, on the other hand, is a concept merely, an abstraction invented by social scientists, it is the negative Other of the North, a site of absences: absence of wealth, absence of infrastructure, absence of communications. By emphasizing the real, tangible commonalities of the lands of the South, by bringing their poets and thinkers a little closer together, and therefore I am doing my best to counteract the hegemony of the North. (Coetzee 2018: 05:28-10:24; my transcription)

Coetzee's position, although well argued and quite original, is anyway debatable, for the Spanish language is a colonial language exactly like English. Moreover, the so-called Global North is not necessarily as censorious as Coetzee claims it to be. For instance, the translation industry in Italy, in particular, and in Europe more in general, is quite lively and very active in translating literary works from all over the World. Of course, this is less true for the Anglo Saxon World, which still tends to be monolingual.

With Coetzee, however, we inaugurate a perambulation in the south(s) to provide examples of alternative ways of thinking and looking at reality. Thus, remaining in South Africa, as a way to look at the South and at the North from the southern side of history — of course, depending on the positioning, on the latitude and longitude of one's positioning — the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff write:

Western enlightenment thought has, from the first, posited itself as the wellspring of universal learning, of Science and Philosophy, uppercase; concomitantly, it has regarded the non-West – variously known as the ancient world, the developing world, and now the global south – primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means. Above all, of unprocessed data.

But what if, and here is the idea in interrogative form, we invert that order of things? What if we subvert the epistemic scaffolding on which it is erected? What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the global south that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large? That is from here that our empirical grasp of its lineaments, and our theory-work in accounting for them, is and ought to be coming, at least in significant part? [...]

Because the history of the present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes, it challenges us to make sense of it, empirically and theoretically, from that distinctive vantage. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 5-7)

Having been lucky enough to attend the book launch while the Comaroffs were touring Italy and lecturing in our home town, Torino, it was possible for us to appreciate their argumentation. Europe, specifically, and Euro-America, more generally, should look at the south in order to understand how the world is «evolving toward Africa»:

That species of action, which tends to be more visible in the south than in the north, takes on many guises: mobilizations against the privatization of the means of subsistence; against rising homelessness and, in particular, against mass eviction from either commons rendered into real estate or zones of abandonment gentrified; against deepening poverty, unemployment, and the absence or withdrawal of government services. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 41)

Besides the list of the instances quoted above, the impending dysfunctionality of the Health Care System in Italy, and elsewhere in Europe, or the financial cuts to the Education System are just the last examples demonstrating how vulnerable our infrastructures might turn out to be, not differently from what has already happened in countries in the south from which the West might learn strategies of resilience and adaptation. The Comaroffs refer largely to the South African crisis due to the AIDS pandemic, which was partly solved once the situation was acknowledged by the political authorities and antiretroviral medicines started being prescribed and distributed. Interesting, too, is the case of Cuba, where the medical personnel is excellently professional, as demonstrates the fact that not only during the Covid pandemic doctors from Cuba were hired to operate in Italy, but periodically the lack of medical staff in Italy is integrated with Cuban medical doctors or with foreign medical staff. In spite of this, in Cuba there is a tremendous scarcity of medicines. Lately, in Italy

medical screening and testing facilities are being slowly privatized, thus limiting the possibility of public health screenings for all.

More crucially, the Comaroffs argue that it is with discourses and reactions against migrations that the north and south end up resembling each other:

As northern governments resort to the language of wagon trains and frontiers, as journalists talk of an “apartheid planet”, as the post-Cold War world gives way to a state of “ordered anarchy,” we may be forgiven for thinking that the colonial societies of the south, and the postcolonies that have grown out of them, may be seen less as historical inversions of Euro-America than foreshadowing of what, in a postmodern world, it might become. Or is becoming. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 106)

Written in 2012 this essay about «the exclusion of the stranger» as a reaction to «social and economic uncertainties, and the destabilization of borders, set in motion by rising global flows of labor, capital, commodities, and persons» was and is not only true for South Africa as «similar processes are evident everywhere that the nation-state is perceived to be plagued by conditions that threaten to dissolve its borders» (2012: 105), but is dramatically true for Italy now, where migrants are shipped to “detention” centers in Albania.

From the south, indeed, there are lessons to be learned. The reference to the above-quoted Latin American of Piedmontese origins Walter Dignolo deserves to be repropounded here in his programmatic and introductory words that function as a definition of what de-colonial thinking means:

The decolonial option requires a different type of thinking (Catherine Walsh theorizes it as an-other-thinking), a non-linear and chronological (but spatial) epistemological break; it requires border epistemology (e.g. epistemic disobedience), a non-capitalist political economy, and a pluri-national (that is, non-mono-traditional) concept of the state. (Dignolo and Escobar 2010: 2)

From Australia, for instance, the warning reaches us launched by scholar Kate Crawford about AI. The exhibition she curated together with Vladan Joler, entitled *Calculating Empires. A genealogy of technology and power 1500-2025*, held in Milan at Fondazione Prada (Nov 23, 2023-Jan 29, 2024), shows a panel in the shape of a majestic black flow charter, with images and graphs drawn in white — as if it were white chalk on a blackboard. In the words of Kate Crawford:

Calculating Empires is a visual manifesto. We are offering people a map to help translate, to help locate where they are in these systems, and what is happening at this deeper level. Looking at the relationship between technology and power over five centuries. Beginning in 1500 we see this extraordinary interlacing of the ways in which Empires have used technologies to centralize power. For us the question here is not what kind of world can technology build, but what kind of world do we want to live in? (Crawford 2023: 00:24-01:01; my transcription)

What is quite amazing in this flow-chart about the development of AI is to find a slave ship and European colonial history at the basis of a whole and long history of technology at the service of empire and imperialist powers. What the two scientists Crawford and Joler really want to warn us about are the new possible inequalities AI can produce, the new means of total surveillance and face recognition control that are being enhanced and what kind of extractivism is implied in the development of AI, for artificial intelligence is «an extractive industry» with incalculable anthropogenic impact on our Earth (Crawford 2021: 15).

As a way to mitigate the by now unstoppable rush towards AI, it would be interesting to turn to New Zealand philosopher Carl Mika, who proposes an alternative metaphysics from the one Europe adopted since Plato's times. This view is not dissimilar to what de-colonial scholars call «an indigenous episteme [...] based on a model of horizontal solidarity that extends not only to all humans but also to non-humans in the natural and cosmological world» (Mignolo and Escobar 2010: 18). Carl Mika writes more precisely about Maori thinking:

One thing is never alone, and all things actively construct and compose it. [...] A thing emerges in front of the self with its relationship to the whole world. (Mika 2017: 4-5)

For indigenous peoples the complexity of the world lies in its thorough interconnectedness. Moreover, indigenous peoples understand the world not just as inter-related but animate. By this, I mean that its entities are animate as well. Thus, “the rivers, mountains, land, soil, lakes, rocks, and animals are sentient.” (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2008, in Mika 2017: 19)

The impossibility, so to speak, to single out one thing from the entanglements of its relations with the whole world marks the difference between Western or Northern metaphysics and Maori's philosophical thought. This holistic way of perceiving reality is certainly a teaching we might look at as a new model for dealing with human vs more-than-human relations in the Anthropocene, as some chapters of the present volume indeed do.

Among the writers who have explored the polarities of North and South, Jack London stands out for his iconic representations of the Yukon in the extreme circumpolar North and for his adventurous photographic journeys in the Pacific Ocean, in the southern hemisphere. Jack London and his wife Charmian started their sailing on the *Snark*, on April 23, 1907. London certainly is a man and a writer who has learned a lesson while navigating along the southern shores: there, he and his wife met indigenous peoples who were trying to resist colonization and they became recipient of London's total empathy. His anti-racist and anti-colonial attitudes were voiced in his Hawaiian tale: “The House of Pride”. While the South was being transformed from colonial ground

of conquest to colonial ground for tourism, London portrayed the great dignity of Hawaiian surfers, with admiration and a photographic vision that was not exoticizing the Other. The voyage ended up in Sydney, where London had to be cured for a rare tropical illness. London shot 4000 photographs of indigenous peoples not yet all well-known elsewhere. He did not pursue exoticization and did not fall prey of orientalism, rather, he was fascinated by the dignity and individuality of the people he met. The result of this long and rich journey by sea was the volume *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), a hybrid text made up of photos, a journal, an anthropological essay and a navigational treaty (London 2015).

What the authors and editors of the volume *The Global South Atlantic* (2018) achieved with their research is somehow true also for the present volume about south(s):

Oceanic regions are neither communities nor polities [...]. They do not share a single language, law, or literature – even if there develop common creoles or trade language, sets of maritime and coastal customs, and a circulating literature of the sea. Oceans as human units may not have a single unifying principle, and they do not have a single chronotope, even if the ship—as figure and fact, in Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic”—might provide a good starting place for charting sea life. Indeed, the South Atlantic, even more than the North Atlantic, is a multilingual, multitemporal, and multidimensional space. It is, then, an intrinsically comparative and relativizing space (perhaps a sea of comparison), united not by a single language or history, but by multiple intersecting, diverging, dissolving, and overlapping languages, laws, cultures, and histories. (Bystrom and Slaughter 2018: 9)

The collection of essays gathered in the present volume attempts at re-framing south(s) through a variety of perspectives, languages, methodologies. The constellation of the literary scholarly writings clustering the first part of the volume do not respond to a monolithic and rigid project, rather they comply with an opening of the field for discussion, imagination and critical projections that allow a constant re-reading of literary works about various South(s), about south-to-south discourses, and about south-north reciprocity, or the lack of it.

Thus, circling back to the Mediterranean Sea, which represents our closest south, two concepts become urgently relevant.

One is the — already mentioned — conceptualization of a Black Mediterranean, inaugurated by Paul Gilroy and further developed by several Italian scholars in Postcolonial studies. The slave ship has returned in our contemporary world in the boats full of migrants which cross the Mediterranean, not always successfully, thus producing the toll of macabre deaths that we all know too well (Gualtieri 2018).

It is in the south of Italy, in the Mediterranean, that the Nigerian-New Yorker writer Teju Cole met Caravaggio's masterpieces and the suffering of migrants, and from here, he was also able to connect, from south to south, to the migrants along the Mexican border with the US and thus doing he also criticized the divergence between North and South:

Humanity is on the move. As of 2019, there were some sixty-seven million people in one condition of migrancy or another. [...] Part of what draws me to Caravaggio is his imagination for the unhoused, the unhomed. His sympathy for those marginal conditions was shaped by his own experience. When I look at his tender, violent work, I see that experience transmuted into a work of witness. [...] When I went down to the U.S.-Mexico border in 2011 to understand better what was happening there, I saw many things that altered my sense of my belonging in the United States; not only my sense of belonging, but also my sense of responsibility. I saw people with swollen feet dropped back from a failed migration, cared for by volunteers in Mexico. I saw border agents practicing their shooting at an open-air firing range. And I saw the Border wall like a gash, like a wound, between the two. (Cole 2021: 198)

Two: the Black Mediterranean of today, once was a body of water that fostered partnership. Along the coasts of the Mediterranean, in prehistoric times, a partnership-oriented society developed, worshiping the Mother Goddess as shown in Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987). This evidence was drawn from the works — among others — of the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas: i.e., *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1982), or *The Language of the Goddess* (1989). This shows that the Mediterranean had been and still might be a different place and should not surrender to becoming a place of death:

One of the most striking things about Neolithic art is what it does *not* depict. [...] There are here no images of “noble warriors” or scenes of battles. Nor are there any signs of “heroic conquerors” dragging captives around in chains or other evidences of slavery. [...]

Indeed, this theme of the unity of all things in nature, as personified by the Goddess, seems to permeate Neolithic art. [...]

The Goddess-centered art we have been examining, with its striking absence of images of male domination of warfare, seems to have reflected a social order in which women, first as heads of clans and priestesses and later on in other important roles, played a central part, and in which both men and women worked together in equal partnership for the common good. (Eisler 1987: 20)

Riane Eisler goes on claiming that if images of war, use of weapons, male heroes and chieftains were missing, it meant that there were no *real* counterparts

for them. The basis and reference for this type of certainties derives from the massive archaeological work by Marija Gimbutas:

This book explicitly seeks to identify the Old European patterns that cross the boundaries of time and space. These systematic associations in the Near East, southeastern Europe, the Mediterranean area, and in central, western, and northern Europe indicate the extension of the same Goddess religion to all of these regions as a cohesive and persistent ideological system. (Gimbutas 1989: xv)

Once upon a time the Euro-Mediterranean region was a peaceful, agricultural, even — one might say — ecological (gylanic, nonviolent, earth-centered culture). Then, «a very different Neolithic culture with the domesticated horse and lethal weapons emerged in the Volga basin of South Russia [...]. This new force inevitably changed the course of European prehistory» (Gimbutas 1989: xx). Thus, the symbolic chalice left the place to the blade, patrilineal substituted matrilineal, warfare substituted peace and partnership.

Now that one more of the innumerable wars is being waged in the Middle East, now that the Mediterranean is becoming a solid sea of black corpses, new enslaved black people and people of color, one might ask together with J.M. Coetzee's character, Mrs. Elizabeth Curren:

The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? (Coetzee 1990: 50)

History is proving that there is no hope for tenderness, for softness. Already in 2009, Teju Cole was writing in his novel *Open City*: «the Palestinian question is the central question of our time» (Cole 2011: 121). Similarly, the Nigerian psychiatrist and philosopher based in Chennai, India, Báýò Akómoláfé, whom we had the honor of meeting and presenting in our hometown, in his essay *These Wilds Beyond our Fences. Letters to My Daughter on Humanity's Search for Home* asked pressing questions: «What about the misery at our fences? What about the Gaza Strip?» (2017: 42). We have reached the year 2024 to witness the answer to those questions. Therefore, it feels necessary to conclude with the words by Edward Said:

Therefore, film, photography, and even music, along with all the arts of writing can be aspects of this activity. Part of what we do as intellectuals is not only to define the situation, but also to discern the possibility for active intervention, whether we then perform them ourselves or acknowledge them in others who have either gone before or are already at work, the intellectual as lookout. (Said 2004: 140)

In this volume we do present writings, films, photographs about a pluriverse of south(s), through new angles, with new methodologies that not only look at the human-to-human relationships but also look at the relationships between humans and non-humans, at landscapes, mindscapes, and ecosystems of an evolving reality that is not the Other of the North, but a multifarious reality with which the North has to “catch up” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 14), or to “re-frame”.

Plural South: Images, Representations, and Visual Cultures

At the turn of the last century, during a lecture he gave at the University of Westminster in London, focusing on cultural representations and the inherent processes of signification, the Jamaican Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall argued that any event (cultural or otherwise) «has no fixed meaning, no real meaning in the obvious sense, *until* it has been represented» (1997a: 7)². In this light, Hall observed, «representation doesn't occur *after* the event; representation is *constitutive* of the event» (7-8; emphasis in original). According to Hall's constructivist perspective, media representations are not merely a reflection of situations and aspects of reality; rather, they actively participate in the construction of meanings. Representation is neither impartial nor neutral, nor is it objectively and undeniably determined by the real, and therefore true (or false); rather, it is inherently a political act. For this reason, Hall contends that every society possesses a distinct politics of representation, whereby meanings are established based on positions and relationships of power. No matter how realistic or natural they may appear, the representations that mainstream media offer are constructed upon the dominant and hegemonic ideology of the specific historical context in which they are produced. From this perspective, within the political discourse on representation, Hall considers the role of imagery and visual culture to be central — a relevance that also underpins our endeavor of reframing souths. Echoing Hall's own words, for the second part of this volume we

choose visual representation because it's a kind of cliché to assert that in the modern world our culture is saturated by images in a variety of forms. The image itself—whether moving or still and transmitted through various media—seems to be, or has become, the prevailing sign of late-modern culture. (5)

Within the realm of visual representation, Hall has extensively examined the themes of marginalization and the representation of otherness, asserting that popular culture is an arena where «a struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle» (1981:

2 Hall's lecture was filmed and edited for the production of the Sut Jhally's documentary *Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media* (1997).

239). In other words, through visual representation, popular culture vividly illustrates the opposition between the dominant, majority group and the minority, marginalized ones. In this regard, in “The Spectacle of the Other” (1997b), Hall defines marginalization as “construction of difference” and creation of the “other”. The dichotomy between the dominant social group and the others is thus conceptually constructed, with difference being exaggerated to uphold the hierarchical and hegemonic order.

Visual representations of southern regions around the world have been profoundly shaped by narratives of colonialism and economic inequality, ecological disasters, and identity struggles. These depictions have been imbued with negative elements and stereotypes, often concentrating on backwardness and poverty, crime, and both social and environmental degradation, or, at best, presenting picturesque and folkloric views. Constructed, reproduced, and amplified by mainstream media — particularly cinema and television — these representations have tended to provide a reductive and monolithic image of the South. This has resulted in a one-dimensional narrative that emphasizes humanitarian and environmental crises rather than uplifting stories of resilience, affirmation, and transformation.

These representations underestimate the complexity and plurality of souths, disregarding local voices and the emerging expressions of identity amid contamination and hybridization. In this context, authors such as Arjun Appadurai (1996, 1999), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003a, 2003b)³, Faye Ginsburg (1995, 2008)⁴, and Suman Seth (2017)⁵ have examined narratives and media representations along with their impact on the perception of the south, underscoring how

3 Distinguished scholar and activist in postcolonial feminism, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has focused her research on transnational theory, anti-racist education, and the politics of knowledge. In her article “Under Western Eyes”, she wrote: «I no longer live simply under the gaze of Western eyes. I also live inside it and negotiate it every day. I make my home in Ithaca, New York, but always as from Mumbai, India. My cross-race and cross-class work takes me to interconnected places and communities around the world—to a struggle contextualized by women of color and of the Third World, sometimes located in the Two-Thirds World, sometimes in the One-Third. So the borders here are not really fixed» (2003b: 530).

4 The anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has focused her work on social anthropology, ethnographic film, and indigenous media. In particular, with regard to the need to open a new “discursive space” for indigenous media, Faye observed: «the capabilities of visual media to transcend boundaries of time, space, and even language can be used effectively to mediate historically produced social ruptures that link past and present». In so doing, indigenous media and producers «are engaged in a powerful new process of constructing identities on their own terms but in ways that address the relationships between indigenous histories and cultures and the encompassing societies in which they live» (1995: 260).

5 Suman Seth’s work is centered on history of science, race, and colonialism. In his essay on colonial history and postcolonial science, the sociologist acknowledges the role of traditional postcolonial studies in analyzing the binary categories that characterized colonial modes of thought and governance. However, the sociologist emphasizes the need not to reify such binary logic but rather the usefulness of asking how such dichotomies have been produced

the tendency to emphasize oppositions and geographical affiliations confines intricate and hybrid cultures into simplified stereotypes. Among these authors, while critiquing the homogenizing and westernizing perspective underlying the media, Ginsburg notes how indigenous media provide alternative visions for understanding social spaces and present new models of modernity. In her essay “Rethinking the Digital Age”, Faye wrote:

As we all struggle to comprehend the remapping of social space that is occurring, indigenous media offer some other co-ordinates for understanding. Terms such as “the Digital Age” gloss over such phenomena in their own right or as examples of alternative modernities, resources of hope, new dynamics in social movements, or as part of the trajectory of indigenous life in twenty-first century. (2008: 141)

From a similar perspective, Appadurai critiques the traditional theoretical framework that confines identities geographically, socially, and culturally around the concept of nation. He emphasizes that cultures do not embody pure identities; rather, they are syncretic formations that intertwine characteristics and mutual influences. In the context of our globalized world, Appadurai employs the key term “scape” to delineate the various realms — financial (“financescapes”), ideological (“ideascapes”), technological (“technoscapes”), medial (“mediascapes”), and ethnographic (“ethnoscapes”) — through which the “global citizen” is formed in a hybrid manner, based on cultures and identities that are typically deterritorialized.

For this reason, with a distinctly transnational approach and through his philosophy of the diaspora, the Nigerian philosopher and poet Báýò Akómoláfé critiques the very notion of objectivity in representation. He argues that the attempt to clarify matters by analyzing a specific and circumscribed domain invariably entails the paradox of excluding other potential and broader perspectives: «the thing with seeing is that it comes with its own set of paradoxes—one which is that greater clarity or higher definition is always a trade-off for panoramic depth [...] It means that “seeing clearly” is a practice of occlusion» (2017: 28). This criticism also encompasses the concept of modernity: «even the idea of modernity is a product of a Eurocentric analysis that looks “back” on “history” and arranges it in convenient thematic clusters amenable to contemporary discourse» (*ibidem*).

In the process of framing (Goffman 1986) and in relation to our discussion for reframing souths, the media play a pivotal role in the creation and dissemination of representations that directly influence perceptions of reality. As the Senegalese scholar and writer Felwine Sarr suggests in *Afrotopia* (2020), «it is necessary to win the battle of representation», because the world will be different if we modify its representations.

and maintained: «the postcolonial history of colonial science must not be merely resuscitated, it must be re-formed» (2017: 64).

In this direction, through diverse research perspectives and multidisciplinary approaches, what recently tends to emerge is a mosaic of narratives and stories that challenge past stereotypes allowing for a more complex and pluralistic understanding of what souths can express and signify. The work of artists and filmmakers has ensured the composition and affirmation of counter-narratives in which imagery serves not only to enact practices of resistance and socio-ecological criticism but also becomes a distinctive artistic medium through which to convey a cultural and symbolic richness that transcends geographical boundaries and national contexts, engaging with other existential and cultural experiences. Thus, the iconographic representations of the souths unfold as a complex, multifaceted puzzle, each piece deriving from different and sometimes conflicting horizons, or even seemingly irreconcilable perspectives, yet managing in some way to relate to and engage in dialogue with one another.

In our endeavor to trace and examine southern iconographies, the idea of “constellation”⁶ proves particularly illustrative. This notion is aligned with the processes of hybridization, transculturation, and transnationalism that underpin our ecocritical research. It should therefore be regarded not merely as a compilation of case studies (the “stars”) but rather as a methodological and ecocritical perspective that encompasses a shift beyond national contexts towards dialogical and interactive practices.

The historical, cultural, and social connections among the various southern realities and the diverse souths of the world can be explored with the tools of ecocriticism through shared artistic practices and cultural projects. These intersections have the potential to engender new forms of relationships and mutual understanding. Rather than attempting to delimit and codify southern iconographies into a strict definition, which would be inherently reductive given a constellation of regions that is by its very nature composite, fluid, and constantly evolving, the idea underlying this volume is to endeavor to interpret, from an ecological standpoint, the images of the souths through a constellation of distinct productions and artistic creations. This gives rise to a cluster of essays that is inherently varied and porous, allowing for other configurations and opening the door to new readings and differing interpretations. It can be envisioned as a cohesive whole, yet also examined and analyzed by isolating and reflecting upon its distinct chapters. As a constellation of images (and gazes on these images), this southern iconography encompasses and fosters dialogue among various disciplines and artistic methodologies, taking into account both traditional media and new digital technologies and social platforms.

When contrasting and engaging in dialogue among different geographical areas, cultural forms, and historical-social contexts, relationships, affinities, and

6 The term “constellation”, which was drawn from a prior article by Brian Bergen-Aurand (2010) on the Mediterranean cinema, has inspired a recent work edited by Rosario Pollicino and Giovanna Summerfield and published on the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* under the title “Navigating the Mediterranean” (2024: 4).

resonances that warrant consideration may emerge. For these reasons, the collection proposed here organizes the essays based on the issues they raise and the artistic practices they explore, rather than adhering to a regional or thematic-disciplinary coherence. Such comparisons are inspired by an endeavor to acknowledge the agency of the various southern regions of the world in the production, distribution, and reception of audiovisual works, grounded in a rich and intricate spectrum of visual culture, which is not preconceived or defined in a binary opposition to an ostensibly global North. Current production technologies and the subsequent dissemination of visual works have advanced to such an extent that it is arguably less appropriate, and indeed less beneficial, to speak of a marginalized South (and consequently mythologized and iconized), cut off from the world and excluded. While transcending borders produces a direct experience of inequalities, discriminations, and ideological and political dissonances, it also simultaneously fosters the perception of a broader world that inevitably generates and refracts into more intricate images and narratives. As a result, artistic practices, as well as the processes of reception and viewing, are influenced and shaped by increasingly complex and intertwined cultures.

While photography, and documentary and fictional cinema have often endeavored to portray the places and peoples of the south through a distinctly realist lens, aiming — at times mythically — to present an authentic image of those territories, it has repeatedly been noted that these images simultaneously exert a direct influence on the definition and construction of identities. Thus, a consciousness has emerged within the ecocritical discourse regarding a continuous shift from the function of representation, as well as narration, denunciation, and testimony, to a role of reflection and self-recognition, wherein the image plays a crucial and active role in the processes of identification and understanding (and transformation).

In the second part of this volume, by examining various sources and approaching the southern question from ecocritical, aesthetic-anthropological, and historical-philosophical perspectives, we aim to present an initial collection of case studies centered on iconographic contributions, photographic reports, and audiovisual productions that have contributed to the expression of diverse realities of the south. This exploration highlights the aesthetic and cultural motivations that, in the post-war period, inspired illustrators, photographers, and filmmakers to visually investigate these territories. Considering the culture of the image across such a broad spectrum — including media and visual studies, film ecocriticism and ecocinema, as well as the aesthetics and philosophy of film — the contributions gathered in the second part of this volume represent an endeavor to de-westernize and decentralize ecocritical research by employing an emic perspective inspired by diversity and pluralism.

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PART 1

LITERARY, ECOCRITICAL, DECOLONIAL,
AND COMPARATIVE READINGS

Chapter 1

South to North Multispecies Co-Migrations in the Wake of Rachel Carson and Donna Haraway (Jane Urquhart and Barbara Kingsolver)

Carmen Concilio

University of Torino, Italy.

carmen.concilio@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-0853-7107

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Abstract

Rachel Carson is one of the most prominent voices in the field of environmental blue humanities. Her trilogy on Ocean studies is a milestone in Ecology. The aim of this contribution is to follow Haraway's suggestion — "it matters what thoughts think other thoughts" (2021: 63) — and thus demonstrate how Carson's Ocean imagery informs contemporary narratives which connect the South to the North. In particular this is true for Amitav Ghosh's novel, *Gun Island* (2019), as an answer to his own *The Great Derangement* (2016), which stages an intertextual revisitation of *Heart of Darkness*. Right in the middle of the Mediterranean, on the migration route from Africa to Italy, the *sympoiesis* of humans and more-than-humans (Haraway 2016) — migrants, cetaceans and birds — is described and celebrated in terms that are reminiscent of Rachel Carson's *Oceans* (Carson [1955] 2021). All this foregrounds Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line* (2010), which also explores multispecies migration narratives from Mexico to Canada of both people and butterflies. While anticipating Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) and thus exploring the Monarch butterfly migratory habits — as Haraway does in "The Camille Stories" (Haraway 2016) —, Urquhart's novel meets the novel by Kingsolver insofar as they both delve into multispecies co-migration from South to North thanks to the NAFTA/USMCA Treaty; they tackle human rights, in particular the right to migrate, and environmental justice, so as to grant the on-going migration of Monarch butterflies from Mexico, respectively, to Canada and to the US.

Keywords

Jane Urquhart; Barbara Kingsolver; Monarch butterflies; Mexican migrant workers; multispecies South-North migration; sympoiesis; Anglophone post-colonial environmental literature.

Introduction: Multispecies Co-Migrations with Rachel Carson and Amitav Ghosh

Famously, Amitav Ghosh provides one of the most crowded examples of multispecies co-migration. In his novel *Gun Island* (2019) the crucial moment of the arrival of migrants to Sicily is a long narrative passage built up through an accumulation of miraculous events and coincidences, one after the other. Not content with positioning a black queen reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in the middle of the Mediterranean on a floating blue boat crammed with migrants, — as follows —

The woman lifted her arms now, raising them until they were level with her shoulders, palms facing upwards. And almost instantly a funnel-like extrusion appeared in the storm that was spinning above us. It began to extend downwards, forming a whirling halo above her head.

She stood absolutely still for what was perhaps only a moment, with a halo of birds spinning above her, while down in the water a chakra of dolphins and whales whirled around the boat. (Ghosh 2019: 307)

Ghosh adds first a flock of migratory birds fanning overhead in spirals and then a pod of dolphins and cetaceans noisily splashing in the waters. This «miraculous spectacle» (*ibidem*) is certainly less frequent in the Mediterranean than it is in the wider oceans, as Rachel Carson illustrates:

Unmarked and trackless though it may seem to us, the surface of the ocean is divided into definite zones, and the pattern of the surface water controls the distribution of its life. Fishes and plankton, whales and squids, birds and sea turtles, all are linked by unbreakable ties to certain kinds of water — to warm water or cold water, to clear or turbid water, to water rich in phosphates or in silicates. For the animals higher in the food chains the ties are less direct; they are bound to water where their food is plentiful, and the food animals are there because the water conditions are right. [...] So Charles Darwin on H.M.S. *Beagle* one dark night off the coast of South America crossed from tropical water into that of the cool south. Instantly the vessel was surrounded by numerous seals and penguins, which made such a bedlam of strange noises that the officer on watch was deceived into thinking the ship [...] had run close inshore. (Carson 2021: 217)

The similarity between Rachel Carson's scientific and historical report on the multispecies crossings of oceanic zones, or 'ecotones'¹, and Ghosh's description of a similar 'bedlam' and upwelling in the Mediterranean is the result of a long wave of thinking with the ocean that Carson initiated, as she initiated blue ecology («an ocean-centric planetary ethic and philosophy of life», Steingraber 2021: xiii) with her *Sea Trilogy* (*Under the Sea Wind*, 1941; *The Sea Around Us*, 1950; *The Edge of the Sea*, 1955). But it is also a way to explore, and acknowledge South/North currents, flows, interdependencies and co-operative existences and animacies.

After all, it is perhaps well known the case of "The Unaccompanied Minor's Tale as told to Inua Ellams", in the first of the by now five volumes of *Refugee Tales* (Herd and Pincus 2016: 17-24), where one of the junior protagonists of 'the journey of hope' across the Mediterranean, Dani, first spots a pod of dolphins and then corpses, floating on the waves, from a previous boat that had capsized:

When the boat began to sink, when the weak engine started struggling, dolphins appeared on either side and in front, keeping pace with the boat, leaping in and out of the water, playing as they chugged towards Lampedusa, Dani would remember them for the rest of her life; he thought of them as water angels, a sign things would be alright [...].

At first they thought they were items of clothing, cast-offs from others who crossed, but the closer they got, the clearer they saw that caged among the fabric, some stiff, some swollen, were the water-drenched flesh of refugees like them. [...] The dolphins had vanished now. (Herd and Pincus 2016: 23)

This first-hand, eye-witnessed, sad and grim narrative counterbalances the narration by Ghosh, which is festive and optimistic. In this case the death and life of humans co-exist within the same frame, and the struggle for survival of the refugees strongly clashes against the vitality of migratory non-human species, "happily" inhabiting the Mediterranean waters and currents.

South to North Multispecies Symptoiesis and Co-Migration with Donna Haraway

Donna Haraway begins her essay *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) by using the metaphor of the string figures: games that are popular in all cultures. They consist in weaving multispecies stories and they have a representational power, such

1 «The term derived from the Greek words 'oikos' (household) and 'tonos' (tension), was introduced by botanist Frederic E. Clements to define 'the tension line between two zones,' or habitats. Clements noted that 'this stress line' (277) or 'the ecotone between two formations is never a sharp line, but it is an area of varying width (281)». See Frederic E. Clements (1905); quoted in Markus Arnold, Corinne Duboin, and Judith Misrahi-Barak (2020: 12).

as the one she illustrates, which belongs to the Navajo, and is named «Coyotes running in opposite directions» (Haraway 2016: 29).

When I first read the novels I will shortly introduce here, that is, Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line* (2010) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), immediately the string figures came to mind, since three interconnected geographies and ecosystems are involved in those narratives — Mexico, the US, and Canada —; multispecies migration flows — of both human beings and non-human animals, i.e., Mexicans and butterflies — are also featuring, and all this happens within NAFTA — or lately modified, USMCA commercial Treaty. Thus, various string figures might represent these interwoven and interpolated phenomena.

The NAFTA agreement between Mexico, Canada, and the United States is a commercial treaty that came into being in 1994 in order to grant free circulation of goods and products, whereas it limits the regulations regarding people's mobility. Or, better, it regulates the free circulation of business men and women and entrepreneurs and investors in and among all three confederations. Ironically, 1994 is the year when the Clinton administration, as part of the so-called Operation Gatekeeper, erected a barrier — an actual fence — along the border between Mexico and the United States. Indian-American investigative journalist and writer Suketu Mehta denounces how Friendship Park — «a small patch of land adjoining the Pacific Ocean, between San Diego and Tijuana» — was inaugurated in the far 1971 by Lady Pat Nixon, on the Californian tip of that border, and now «Families on both sides could meet across the barrier of twelve-foot-high steel bollards and pass food back and forth» (Mehta 2019: 14).

Although it allows free trade and increased market profits, what is interesting is what NAFTA does not cover or does not allow, as far as Canada is concerned: for instance, it does not assist permanent admission; it does not apply to permanent residents of the three countries; it does not replace the general provisions dealing with foreign workers; it does not extend special privileges to spouse and members of the family of temporary workers. The entry of foreign workers is governed by the provisions of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and the Regulations. Temporary entry to workers is granted only to a selected category of business persons, because «in order for trade to expand, individuals must have access to each other's country to sell»². Moreover, temporary entry for a worker must occur without intent to establish permanent residence, consistently with Canadian immigration laws. Workers authorized to enter Canada under the NAFTA are allowed to work temporarily either in a temporary or permanent position. The NAFTA cannot be used however as a means to remain in Canada indefinitely.

2 See Government of Canada, «International Mobility Program: Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA)» (Cusma 2024).

The NAFTA was substituted by USMCA, the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement in 2020. NAFTA managed to increase commerce between the three partners and contributed to the integration of their economies, but in the United States it was criticized for causing outsourcing and losses of job positions.

Thus, Suketu Mehta describes his own investigative experience:

The fence is a heavily rusted mesh structure, ugly, industrial, foreboding. It snakes down the hillsides and all the way into the sea. [...] Friendship Park is at once a monument to bureaucratic stupidity and the absurd rules that lawyers make, as well as to the power of love and family to surpass them. It is the cruellest and the most hopeful place I have ever seen. (Mehta 2019: 14, 17)

In the meanwhile, various artists have provided answers that call into being ‘artivism’, for instance the thousand-kilometer-long mural by Enrique Chiu on the Tijuana side, or the swings across the wall by architect Ronald Rael in New Mexico. Both challenge the idea of utter separation, partitioning, human obstacles and inhuman policies. Along the Mexican border photographer Teju Cole takes pictures of two white crosses, one bigger one smaller, a bit crooked, and of an inscription saying «*mujeres*»: «a code made of injuries», he writes as a sort of caption (2016: 147)³.

The NAFTA agreement or the USMCA agreement are already string figures that imbricate three populations and three federations: Mexico, Canada, and the US in free trade and free exchange of goods, but blocking the so-called «illegal» migrants:

The response of peasants and workers thus displaced has been clear and consistent: they have headed north in ever greater absolute numbers. Before NAFTA, undocumented Mexican immigration came mainly from four or five Mexican states and a limited number of mostly rural municipalities. Since NAFTA, migrants have originated in all Mexican states, practically all municipalities, and cities as well as towns and villages. A number of formerly vibrant places are now ghost towns, all their able adults having gone abroad; about one-third of all Mexican municipalities have lost population during the last decade, some by half or more. (Portes 2006)

The Mexico, US and Canada agreement is one way to look at South-to-North relational reciprocity, or lack of it:

the number of Mexican tourists to Canada has dropped significantly since the 2009 imposition of a visa requirement for Mexicans to stem a surge in false refugee claims. Since then, the number of false claimants has indeed dropped significantly (fewer than 1000 applicants in 2012, down from almost 10 000 in 2008) along with

3 See Enrique Chiu’s “Mural of Brotherhood” (Chiu 2023), Ronald Rael’s “Teeter-totter wall” (Rael 2021), and Teju Cole’s “Sasabe” (2011).

business and tourist visits, which dropped 50 percent. The requirement remains in place, leaving Mexico, the United States' NAFTA partner, in the company of countries such as Algeria and Iraq. (*The Economist*, 2014; quoted in Vereza 2014)

It is with this background in mind, that one must approach the two novels discussed here: *Sanctuary Line* by Canadian author Jane Urquhart published in 2010 and *Flight Behaviour* by US author Barbara Kingsolver published two years later in 2012. The two novels share a common double-bind topic, or they create a special, complex «string figure» after Donna Haraway's words, that is to say, multispecies co-migration of Mexican people and of Monarch butterflies, across opposite routes, or circular routes, between Mexico and Ontario and between Mexico and the Appalachians, and back again. More than uni-directional, these migratory phenomena become circular. In both novels, the Mexican Monarch butterflies are threatened by climate change, therefore they might modify their intercontinental South-North migration routes to the point of risking extinction, and deserving close scientific scrutiny and protection. Meanwhile, the destiny of Mexican migrants, following the same South-North direction, mostly temporary and seasonal workers, specifically fruit pickers, is even less certain and stable in both Northern countries, and in both novels Mexicans are marginal and umbratile figures.

Set in the so-called Ontario fruit belt, a strip of land along Lake Erie, very fruitful and blessed with a mild climate, *Sanctuary Line* tells the story of a once prosperous fruit farm, now in ruin, «in Kingsville, in the deep south of this northern province» (Urquhart 2010: 15)⁴.

The narrator, Liz Crane, is a forty-year-old woman, a scientist, the lonely inheritor of what remains of the farmland, who lives alone and works as an entomologist at a close-by research center. All the narrative pivots around the dead cousin, Mandy, a soldier, a senior officer, who died in Afghanistan and went through the repatriation ceremony which includes a last and final parade along «the highway renamed to honor the heroes of the current war. [...] As we moved [...], we passed beneath dozens of overpasses filled with onlookers respectfully holding flags and yellow ribbons» (Urquhart 2010: 14). The Highway is the so-called Sanctuary Line that gives the title to the novel, and the people on the overpasses are Canadian citizens who spontaneously and massively used to gather there, to honor and give a last tribute to dead soldiers: «I had read that crowds always lined the route when a soldier was brought home. Still my mother and I, and the boys too, were surprised and moved by the sheer size of the turnout» (*ibidem*).

4 From a geographical perspective, Kingsville is a town in Essex County in southwestern Ontario, Canada. It is Canada's southernmost municipality with town status (42°06'00"N 82°43'00"W).

The protagonist studies the Monarch butterflies at the (fictional) Sanctuary Research Centre. Each year butterflies come back to the same fields of milkweeds and the same tree, although biocides must have drastically reduced their numbers («the sprays that I had come to detest because of what they had done to the butterflies» (Urquhart 2010: 19):

As for the monarchs, in those early summers we didn't even know where they went or where they came from, depending on your point of view. We simply accepted them as something summer always brought to us, like our own fruit [...] or, for that matter, like the Mexicans. It would be years before the sanctuary on the Point began to tag the butterflies in order to follow the course of their migration, and several years more before the place where the specimens from our region "wintered over" would come to my attention. Still, each summer we were stunned anew by what we came to call the butterfly tree. (Urquhart 2010: 19-20)

Borders are porous and both butterflies and seasonal workers arrive from Mexico and then go back there, the latter under the temporary foreign worker permit, the former across five generations.

There was also a butterfly tree on that farm so that some summers my mother and her brothers saw that burning bush on the north side of the lake and other summers witnessed the same miracle to the south. My mother told me that until she was about fourteen she believed that every farm had such a tree and experienced such an event. (Urquhart 2010: 70)

Every bough glowed with an orange blaze. [...] Trees turned to fire, a burning bush. [...] The flame now appeared to lift from individual treetops in showers of orange sparks, exploding the way a pine log does in a campfire when it's poked. The sparks spiraled upward in swirls like funnel clouds. Twisters of brightness against a gray sky. [...] From the tops of the funnels the sparks lifted high and sailed out undirected above the dark forest. (Kingsolver 2012: 19)

Monarch butterflies come from the State of Michoacán, in Mexico. From there, in a natural reserve area between November and March, thousands of butterflies migrate. Since 1937, Canadian zoologist Frederick Urquhart and his wife Norah Patterson have studied Monarch butterflies, tagging them with the help of volunteers, and trying to follow their flight. They discovered that not all monarchs are migrants, they do not fly at night, and can cover up to 130 kilometers per day. In spite of the fact that the Urquharts had detected a directional path from northeast to southwest, they were not able to find the overwintering site in Mexico. Ken and Cathy Brugger, two American scientists, continued the exploration till 1975, when the precise site was spotted in the Mexican mountains. Now a dozen such places are known and are protected areas. Moreover, it is now known that several generations are involved in the journey northward,

while one special generation takes the flight from North to South, overwintering in Mexico, and giving life to a new generation that would start the migration process again.

For this unique phenomenon and its biodiversity the Mexican forest has been proclaimed Unesco World Heritage in 2008. It is ever since 1997 that the *Danaus plexippus*, commonly known as Monarch butterfly, has been also attributed 'Special Concern' by the COSEWIC, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, and it has been simultaneously put under special protection in Mexico and in the US. Mexico started already in the 1980s to protect the Monarch colonies and to hinder deforestation. After all Monarch butterflies are a fragile species:

Thrown off course by a sudden shift of the wind, a butterfly will never reach its intended destination. It will die in flight, without mating, and the exquisite possibilities it carries in its cells and in the thrall of its migration will simply never come to pass. (Urquhart 2010: 81)

Therefore, nowadays the same protection protocols and requirements are necessary in North America and Canada, where Monarchs are also threatened by human exploitation of the montane aromatic oyamel fir forests.

Moreover, as a further instance of this phenomenon, Aimee Nezhukumatathil in a chapter dedicated to *Danaus plexippus*, writes about a place not far away from Lake Erie, Lake Superior, where Monarch butterflies are noticed to swirl suddenly while flowing over the body of water. Only geologists could uncover the reason for that sudden change of direction: millennia ago, in that place a mountain was present; thus, the butterflies and their descendants remember that massive presence, although they had not seen it. They perceive a change in the sound waves and they immediately change direction. It is amazing how the memory of that lost mountain in the middle of Lake Superior still makes its voice heard and how the Monarchs are ready to recognize and acknowledge it (Nezhukumatathil 2020: 172). This is another example of *sympoiesis* and string figure between Canada and Mexico, including the (invisible) mountain, the lake, and the butterflies.

Butterflies might move freely across the continents from North to South and back (or, vice versa, «depending on your point of view» (Urquhart 2010: 18), although nowadays, pesticides, biocides, and climate change strongly endanger this species, among others. Similarly Mexican migrants never had an easy life. To Urquhart they are dehumanized to the point of being equated to cargo, that is to say to material things and goods connected to profits:

My uncle [...] had the bunkhouses built and the Mexicans flown to the cargo terminal at the Toronto airport and the governments of both countries convinced before anyone could question his purpose. [...] The same men came willingly

back year after year, the same men and a couple of women returned and worked steadily from dawn to dusk. (Urquhart 2010: 29)

The routine of seasonal fruit pickers coming all the way from Mexico, probably through the NAFTA agreement, was unquestioned and went unnoticed by the family, till doomsday, when everything changed, and the protagonist finds herself in need to retrieve and face the past:

I once tried to find the cargo terminal at the city airport in an effort to understand what it must have been like for Teo to arrive and depart from there, being human and not, therefore, technically cargo; what it would be like to be picked up and delivered like office supplies, or mufflers for cars, or, I suppose, more accurately, farm equipment, then transported from the shipper to the receiver. (Urquhart 2010: 37)

In a similar way, Barbara Kingsolver mentions Mexican seasonal workers, who work under the same circumstances allowed by the NAFTA agreement, in Tennessee:

She knew some farmers were planting Christmas trees again, hiring Mexican workers for the winter labor. Presumably the same men who showed up in summer to work tobacco. They used to go home in winter and now stayed year-round, like the geese at Great Lick that somehow quit flying south. (Kingsolver 2012: 70)

The comparison between humans and non-humans becomes even more evident in a further passage by Urquhart:

All the tough evolutions, the shedding of various skins, followed by those difficult migrations, over great stretches of open water, and across vast tracts of land, to and from Mexico, or America, or Kandahar. [...] Remember, unlike their predecessors, who live only six weeks, mating and dying en route to the north, the fourth generation of monarchs is the strongest, lasting a full nine months so that they can return to the place where they started, overwinter, and mate, and begin the whole process again. (Urquhart 2010: 253)

In this case, Kandahar alludes to the place of origin of Mandy's lover, who is a first-generation immigrant to Canada: Vahil, to whom the novel is destined as a sort of open letter; while the comparison is between the hardships of the journey compared to that of the butterflies who only live for six weeks (Rustin 2012).

Although technically speaking the Monarch butterflies and the Mexican laborers are not coterminous and they do not represent coevolutionary migration patterns, in both novels they are matched as somehow part of the same phenomenon of interdependence of South and North. In Kingsolver's novel, the narrator and protagonist is a young red-haired mother of three children, named Dellarobia — after an Italian sculptor — Della Robbia. She inadvertently makes

an association between the persistence of the presence and permanence of the Mexican laborers, of the geese, as well as of the Monarch butterflies that for the first time are indulging in the fir forests nearby over the winter season.

Not differently, Jane Urquhart also associates the presence of Mexicans with that of other non-human species:

At the end of summer, when the final bushels of harvested apples had been shipped and the last of the Mexicans had been bussed to the cargo terminal at the airport, my uncle would simply disappear. [...] It was always a disturbing and transitional time. The birds from the sanctuary were beginning to migrate; chevron after chevron appeared over the lake, heading south. [...] Teo was gone. His mother and the other Mexicans were gone. (Urquhart 2010: 106-107)

Yet Mexicans manifest themselves in a totally new form in Kingsolver's novel, when a family of three rings Dellarobia's bell: «The man and woman both about her own height, possibly even shorter. They looked Mexican, or very dark-skinned at any rate, especially the man» (Kingsolver 2012: 132). The couple has a small daughter who turns out to be a schoolmate of Dellarobia's little son, Preston. Immediately the two children cheerily greet each other and are ready to entertain themselves, but the girl has to translate English into Spanish for her parents, to make them comfortably come in and sit in the dining room. And through the child's English, Dellarobia understands that they want to visit the site where the butterflies have come to repose. Now the place has thrived into a tourist and local attraction, a scientific hub and lab, and a site for environmental activism against a plan for felling the forest that is now the refuge and sanctuary for the butterflies:

«We know about them a lot, [...] they are mariposas monarcas. They come from Mexico. The monarcas are from Michoacán, and we are from Michoacán.»

Are you saying that they used to be down there, and now they are all coming up here to live? Dellarobia recognized a familiar ring to those words, which people often said about immigrants themselves, and again she worried about causing accidental offence. But the girl was focused on the butterfly issue. (Kingsolver 2012: 136)

In this passage, the relation between migrants and butterflies is explicit. Dellarobia is well-aware of the formulaic acknowledgment of the migrants' presence on this side of the world, the Global North: «They used to be down there, and now they are coming up here» (*ibidem*). But the conversation adds another element to the story of the Mexican family moving to Tennessee:

«In Michoacán my father is a *guía* for the *mariposas monarcas*. He takes the people on horses in the forest to see the *monarcas*. He is explaining the people, and

counting the mariposas and other things for the *científicos*. And my mother makes *tamales* for the *lot* of peoples.»

«Do you have these butterflies all the time in Mexico? Or do they just show up sometimes?»

«Winter times, [...] In summer days the *monarcas* flies around everywhere [...] and in winter she all comes home to Angangueo. My Town.»

«If you don't mind my asking, why didn't you stay there?» Dellarobia asked.

«No more. It's gone.»

«Do you mean the butterflies stopped coming?» she asked. «Or just the tourists stopped coming?»

«Everything is gone!» the girl cried, in obvious distress. «The water was coming and the mud was coming on everything.... *Un diluvio*.»

«A flood?» Dellarobia asked gently. She thought of a landslide in Great Lick that had taken out a section of Highway 60 in September. [...] Josephina nodded soberly [...] «*Corrimiento de tierras*.» (135-140)

While answering all the questions, the little girl relives a trauma that befell her family: her house, her own home town and the whole ecosystem around there were swept away by a landslide due to torrential rainfalls. Thus, the family is an example of climate refugees, another type of today's migrants. They expect to recreate and reestablish kinship with those butterflies that they know from back home, moved by a feeling of compassion. The few words in Spanish — such as, «*Un diluvio*» — clearly evoke the Biblical Great Flood, and this family of Mexican refugees with the(ir) butterflies are like Noah's family and ark reaching out of the flood. The climatic event, as a result of a combination of climate change effects and deforestation, has split time into before and after, as Dellarobia noticed, there is a dichotomy between *then* and *now*, *there* and *here*. Where once was a paradise for the repose of *mariposas*, now there is nothing left, and they all have to migrate.

What the little girl does not say, at least not explicitly, is that to Mexicans, the butterflies represent the souls of the dead, particularly the dead soldiers (Powell 2022).

To the ancient Mexicans, the butterfly symbolizes flames for reasons not clearly understood. [...] Myths concerning butterflies are widespread among aboriginal cultures and frequently show the insects in a positive light. For example, butterflies were particularly associated with great God, Quetzalcoatl in ancient Mexico. In the city of the gods, Teotihuacan, Mexico there is a place which contains a frieze showing the god's first entry into the world in the shape of a chrysalis, out of which he breaks painfully to emerge into the full light of perfection symbolized by the butterfly (Nicholson 1983). (Kritsky and Cherry 2020: 9)

Flight Behaviour is built on scientific evidence, both regarding the landslides and the risks of deforestation, and particularly regarding the biology and behavior of the butterflies. Dellarobia explains to the African-American scientist,

named Ovid — quite emblematically — who has come all the way from New Mexico to study this unique phenomenon that «Year in year out, they've been going to the same place I guess forever. Since God made them. And now for whatever reason, instead of going to Mexico it looks like they decided to come here. Here» (Kingsolver 2012: 161). To this the scientist sadly and worriedly answers:

This roosting colony is a significant proportion of the entire North American monarch butterfly population. [...] We are seeing a bizarre alteration of a previously stable pattern. A continental ecosystem breaking down. Most likely, this is due to climate change. Really, I can tell you I'm sure of that. Climate change has disrupted this system. (Kingsolver 2012: 315)

The presence of those butterfly colonies which bring beauty to the forest also adds value to it, to the point that Dellarobia starts understanding that deforestation is a mistake, it could provoke landslides like the one occurred in Mexico and she starts joining some activists' protest about the necessity to preserve the forest as it is. The more she talks to the scientist the more she becomes aware of the value of trees, which is not the logger's profit-oriented idea. The fact is that the butterflies need an ecosystem, and the forest with its canopy provides it, felling the trees not only endangers the butterflies but also the soil which might slide downhill with heavy rains. This domino effect is typical of the net of entangled relations that constitute our world of nature, that the string figures clearly metaphorize and represent: «if we log the mountain, then the trees are gone» — wisely says Dellarobia, though the family's debts will continue to exist (Kingsolver 2012, 171).

The two novels — after building up on the entanglement of human migrants and non-human insects — at a certain point diverge, for one novel ends with a catastrophe and the other novel has a happy ending. Urquhart depicts the ruin of the farm, which is abandoned by the family and what little remains becomes unproductive after a big devastating fire. Moreover, the interracial relationships between the protagonist, Liz and Teo, the young Mexican boy, and her cousin Mandy's affair, her mysterious love affair with a Canadian-Muslim soldier, both miserably fail, leaving the reader, as well as the protagonist, with a feeling and mood of mourning. Kingsolver's novel, instead, has a positive conclusion, since Dellarobia, though divorcing her husband, will start going to College again, to pursue her interrupted career as a student, thanks to a donation by the scientist she helped and hosted over the winter. Although in this case a (black wealthy) male, and mature mentor is sponsoring the career of a young (white) woman, who thus gains access to research in the field of hard science, the final note is one of women's empowerment: «She hated walking on them, but that's what the others did. [...] With their tape measures, plastic sheeting, boxes of waxed-paper envelopes and smaller instruments she couldn't name» (Kingsolver 2012,

139). Urquhart, on her side, presents a woman entomologist working in a scientific lab: «she would never have examined such a wing carefully enough to know it resembled a map» (Urquhart 2010: 55) had she not become a scientist.

Moreover, Dellarobia also manages to convince her community to renounce felling the trees and selling the plot of forest to private companies. While butterflies will modify and adapt their migratory patterns under the condition that human beings pro-actively take care of the ecosystem for and with them, Mexican migrants in one novel are rejected, while in the other one they find integration, particularly through the schooling facilities for the younger generations. Climate change looms large in the background of both novels with its side and domino effects.

Thus, Kingsolver's novel has been read as an example of eco-feminism, (Gaard 2016; Fargione 2018), while Amitav Ghosh encouraged a reading of the novel among the few seriously committed to climate change (2016, 73, 124, 185n7). In this contribution the two strictly entangled novels by Urquhart and Kingsolver have been chosen for their double discourse on multispecies co-migration from South to North, on human rights, in particular the right to migrate, and on environmental justice, so as to grant the on-going migration of Monarch butterflies from Mexico, respectively, to Canada and to the US.

To conclude, what Donna Haraway adds to this picture is a scenario of future extinction and speculative fiction. She creates the figure of the Camille, daughter of the Compost, a future being who might cross five generations. These hybrid creatures are creatures of *sym fiction*, of *sympoiesis*. In a landscape of future catastrophes, humans and non-humans will cooperate to restore Planet Earth. Under the principle of «making kin, not babies», the repopulation of the Earth might happen thanks to a symbiont matching of humans with non-human fragile species that are bound to disappear.

Starting exactly from the same premises as the two novels here analyzed, the pretext for this fantasy is exactly the fact that in 2008 the Sanctuary for the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere has been included in the Unesco Heritage for protection⁵. The reserve was created to protect the species in its winter habitat, along the ecosystem of the volcanic Trans-Mexican belt, thanks to the surviving patches of forest. In North America the use of herbicides, particularly glyphosate, is drastically reducing the nectar-producing vegetation that allows the butterflies to fly (Asclepias or milkweeds), in Mexico the forests might be under threat as well. The result would be the loss of those beautiful butterflies and the fact that they are not strong enough to fly long distances (Haraway 2016: 229). The Camille stories are an extreme act of imagination to help us prevent the otherwise inevitable catastrophe.

5 Cf. Unesco (2020).

They have nothing to do with migration, of course, but I couldn't help but think of the weaker monarchs that, exhausted by the effort of crossing the lake, are drawn down from the sky and into the waves. And I couldn't help but think of Mandy either. (Urquhart 2010: 83)

Thus, in Urquhart's novel the «friendly fire» of an American war plane in Afghanistan killed by mistake Canadian soldiers among whom her cousin Mandy. Butterflies are similarly fragile. Thus, quite symbolically, Urquhart's novel is a tribute to a dead soldier, Liz's cousin Mandy, paid by taking care of Monarch butterflies, as an echo of ancient myths, as confirmed by archaeologists (Powell 2022).

Recently, in Milan, at the Piccolo Teatro, the first public national theater in Italy, founded in 1947 by Giorgio Strehler, the Camille stories have found a new mode for expressing this extinction anxiety and possible reparation. Italian actress Marta Cuscutà (2023) proposed a sci-fi show for actress and animatronic creatures, inspired by Donna Haraway's eco-feminist stories of the Camille. In order to obtain climate justice, the new hybrid species, here called Earthbound, are humans who had been transplanted or transfused with the DNA of species under extinction, in order to a) preserve their genetic patrimony, b) close the gap between humans and Nature, c) cure and take care of a renewed Earth.

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Chapter 2

Unidirectional Rivers and Reversible Seas: Global South and Water Metaphors in Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Zadie Smith

Biancamaria Rizzardi

University of Pisa, Italy.

biancamaria.rizzardi@unipi.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-5674-213X

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c405>

Abstract

This essay examines three water-based articulations of socio-environmental ecology as they emerge in the literary works of Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Zadie Smith. Special attention will be given to the cultural and aesthetic significance of water metaphors such as canals, rivers, seas, oceans, clouds, wells, and rain. The essay seeks to interpret the semiotics of water in relation to three paradigmatic sociocultural phenomena involving the relationships between the Global North and Global South: first, integration and complete fusion; second, dissimulation and contradiction; and third, indeterminacy and problematic coexistence. These forms of interrelation between the human and nonhuman will be analyzed as expressions of three types of humanity: unified agency, clash of differing identities, and existence in a post-epistemic world.

Keywords

semiotics of water; water-based (socio)spatiality; cultural cross-pollination; human-nonhuman agencies; diasporic memories.

Introduction

In line with the historical and socio-ecological reflections on the similarities and differences within the Global South, as well as on the relationships between North and South (i.e., post-industrial and developing worlds), literature — especially postcolonial literature — has investigated forms of anthropic coevolution in the places of origin and settlement of diasporic subjects. Furthermore, it has explored the links between cultural origins and cultural practices imposed by colonizers on colonized people.

As Bruno Latour points out, such relationships are so integrated that it is difficult to determine our position along the string connecting natural and non-natural phenomena. Nevertheless, through the use of landscape metaphors, postcolonial literature has often highlighted not only forms of profound interaction, but also the breaking points that result in cultural and axiological gaps between human beings (migrant people, exiles, unassimilated and resettled people) and the natural and social landscapes that have housed or co-opted them.

This essay intends to examine three peculiar kinds of landscape ecology and forms of association between human and non-human elements that are expressed in literary works through water metaphors (channels and basins such as canals, rivers, seas and oceans, but also clouds, wells, rain). These distinct ecologies and forms of interaction point towards three paradigmatic sociocultural phenomena:

1) *integration and complete fusion between North and South, namely between the culture of the black diasporic subject and the great classical tradition* (epitomized by Derek Walcott in his 1997 collection *The Bounty*, where the Aegean Sea of the ancient culture overlaps and identifies with the Ocean surrounding the poet's Caribbean island);

2) *dissimilation and contradiction* between the emotional and axiological dimensions of the Northern World (England) and those of the transplanted hero from the South (embodied by Kamau Brathwaite in his 1959 poem *South*);

3) *indeterminacy and problematic coexistence*, as in Zadie Smith's short-story collection *Grand Union* (2019), in which the water of the Grand Union Canal metaphorically brings with it and blends the remains and traces of conflicting experiences and values, partly nostalgic-archaizing (in relation to the culture of origin), and partly spoilt and distorted by the receiving society. Drains and industrial waste from England and America mingle with purely flowing primeval waters from Antigua, symbolizing not only a phenomenon of environmental contamination, but also a site of cultural and emotional resistance. Just as the huge water flow of the canal (the Grand Union) that originates in the Global South coexists with the industrial eyesore of the North, the diasporic subject's personal and endocultural memories withstand the racial repression suffered in the North. These aspects are emphasized in the short stories "Grand Union" and "Kelso Deconstructed".

The three moments that I have outlined above — integration, contradiction and problematic coexistence — evoke just as many different concepts of

humanity: humanity as unified agency (Walcott), humanity as a plurality of identities inhabiting divergent worlds at war with each other (Brathwaite), humanity in a post-epistemological standstill (Smith).

Humanity as Unified Agency

The first literary work that I consider is Derek Walcott's elegy *The Bounty*, which opens the collection of the same name. In this elegy, written in memory of his mother Alix, the poet uses natural metaphors to refer to different cultural systems, suggesting the need for hybridization between North and South: Canto 33 of Dante's *Paradiso* «cores» (Walcott 1997: 10) the dawn's clouds, while Dante's idea of Paradise — which is a theological and poetic entity — contrasts with the natural Caribbean Eden. Here, natural metaphors mainly pertain to the semantic domains of sun and water. In particular, clouds and rain represent the Global North, which not only impacts dramatically on the South, but also enriches it in imaginative and cultural terms. Clouds and rain are messengers from another culture that has both positive effects and drawbacks on the author's own culture.

The first metaphor of water used in the elegy appears in line 6, drawing a connection between the dawn's clouds and Dante's *Paradise*:

Between the vision of the Tourist Board and the true
Paradise lies the desert where Isaiah's elations
force a rose from the sand. The thirty-third canto
cores the dawn clouds with concentric radiance,
the breadfruit opens its palms in praise of the bounty
bois-pain, tree of bread, slave food, the bliss of John Clare,
(Walcott 1997: 3)

According to the ancient *topos*, attentively investigated by Curtius, nature is a book. In Walcott's verses, it is Dante's *Paradise*, which overlaps with the Caribbean scenery: Dante, the cloud-culture coming from the North, fertilizes the South, blending with the Caribbean natural eden.

The image of water reappears in some of the following lines, expressing how the relationship between colonizer and colonized is not merely antagonistic but also dialectically articulated:

There on the beach, in the desert, lies the dark well
where the rose of my life was lowered, near the shaken plants,
near a pool of fresh tears, tolled by the golden bell
of allamanda, thorns of the bougainvillea, and that is
their bounty!
(5)

The poet says that his life originated from a “dark well” sinking near “a pool of fresh tears”. Water — the essential element in the metaphorical chain that comprises the clouds, the well and the pool, and that involves the spatial dimensions of height, depth, and surface, symbolizes the Global North, which both overwhelms and nourishes the South. While the water coming from above is a metaphor for the regenerative power of cultural cross-pollination, the image of the well produces other meanings. Water digs deep, it creates a well. The darkness of the well represents the strong *black* origins of the poet, who elsewhere admitted his inability to choose between Africa and his beloved English language¹. Tears, a variation on the theme of water, represent the suffering caused by the conflicts arisen within his transcultural/multicultural self.

However, as is typical for Walcott, binarisms and oppositions are quickly dissolved on a textual level. The semantic field of water appears again in the third section of the poem in conjunction with other images of underground springs. This kind of groundwater has a positive metaphorical function: it loosens the grip of the roots, questioning the Caribbean poet’s presumption of self-sufficiency and isolation. According to Walcott, the poet can’t retreat into the limited horizon of his original culture and language. In his verses, he can’t just celebrate his own roots. Instead, in order to produce a poetry which is “fertile”, he should celebrate his roots while accepting the English language and culture as gifts (the titular “bounty”).

The trickle of underground
springs, the babble of swollen gulches under drenched ferns,
loosening the grip of their roots, till their hairy clods
like unclenching fists swirl wherever the gulch turns
them, and the shuddering aftermath bends the rods
of wild cane.
(7)

The “gift” of the language is thermalized in the third section of the elegy, which opens with the word “Bounty!”. If the “underground springs” are the native springs that symbolize the South’s ecological system, the «fresh Jacobean springs» (17), represent King James’ Bible, one of the founding texts of the English language and culture. They are «Soul-freshening waters» (16) from both a religious and poetic perspective; on the one hand, they recall the figure of the poet’s mother, who was a devout Christian; on the other, they symbolize a linguistic medium that allows Walcott to write his verses:

1 «I who have cursed / The drunken officer of British rule, how choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? / Betray them both, or give back what they give?» (Walcott 2007: 6).

In the light's parallelogram laid on the kitchen floor,
 for Thine is the Kingdom, the Glory, and the Power,
 the bells of Saint Clement's in the marigolds on the altar,

in the bougainvillea's thorns, in the imperial lilac
 and the feathery palms that nodded at the entry
 into Jerusalem, the weight of the world on the back

of an ass; dismounting, He left His cross there for sentry
 and sneering centurion; then I believed in His Word,
 in a widow's immaculate husband, in pews of brown wood,

when the cattle-bell of the chapel summoned our herd
 into the varnished stalls, in whose rustling hymnals I heard
 the fresh Jacobean springs, the murmur Clare heard

of bounty abiding, the clear language she taught us,
 "as the hart panteth," at this, her keen ears pronged
 while her three fawns nibbled the soul-freshening waters,

"as the hart panteth for the water-brooks" that belonged
 to the language in which I mourn her now, or when
 I showed her my first elegy, her husband's, and then her own.
 (8)

Walcott inserts the image of the springs in a coherent figurative series to recall the local community's meetings in the Christian church, which were also attended by his mother, Alix, to whom the elegy is dedicated. Even the sacred books read on those occasions are pervaded by water images: the "soul-freshening waters" and the wheezing deers along the rivers are drawn from the Bible and the sacred hymns. Every element originates from the semantic field of water, which stands for the Western Christian culture's power to fertilize the Caribbean cultural and literary world. The Christian culture, and the language of the colonizers enter the author's world through the mediation of his mother Alix. Furthermore, Walcott implicitly compares himself to the romantic poet and Byron's admirer John Clare, who more than any other deserves the label of *ecopoet*.

Walcott's motley poetry is the result of the intersection of a metaphorically "English" water and the Caribbean sun. Not only is Walcott unable to renounce Africa, but he also refuses to consider colonialism as a mere form of political domination. For Walcott, the heterogenesis of ends turned the tragedy of colonization into a process of cultural hybridization, during which Shakespeare's language, like a gift, added words and history to his island's language.

The whole poem is full of images of hybridization. The fifth section opens with oceanic waves that literally “crepitate from the culture of Ovid”, just as in the beginning of the poem the rain clouds are a hypostasis of Dante’s culture. The vital water from the Western world, which in this case is epitomized by a classical poet, moistens and fertilizes the Caribbean:

All of these waves crepitate from the culture of Ovid,
its sibilants and consonants; a universal metre
piles up these signatures like inscriptions of seaweed

that dry in the pungent sun, lines ruled by mitre
and laurel, or spray swiftly garlanding the forehead
of an outcrop (and I hope this settles the matter of presences)
(11)

What Walcott describes is neither a process of cultural indoctrination nor — in ecological terms — a case of allochthonous invasiveness. Water is dried by the sun (a “pungent sun”). In other words, Caribbean culture incorporates and holds, but, at the same time, it recreates and renews, almost dissolving the beneficial/poisonous gift from the West. It is not by chance that the waves that stand for the Caribbean nature fertilized by classical Latin culture, create “a universal metre”. This is not a fake Western-centric universality that identifies alien values with barbarism. In Walcott’s poem, Ovid’s lines echo in the rhythmic sound of the ocean, becoming universal when they submit to nature. The word “metre” is almost identical to “mitre”, which is the name of a plant: the metre is a natural metre. Even the classical poet’s “laurel” is an “outcrop” of the Earth. Natural ecology intersects with cultural ecology. In the end of the poem, the Global North is described by drawing once again on water-related images. In spring, after the bear’s self-burial, the stuttering

crocuses open and choir, glaciers shelf and thaw,
frozen ponds crack into maps, green lances spring

from the melting fields, flags of rooks rise and tatter
the pierced light, the crumbling quiet avalanches
of an unsteady sky; the vole uncoils and the otter

worries his sleek head through the verge’s branches;
crannies, culverts, and creeks roar with wrist-numbing water.
Deer vault invisible hurdles and sniff the sharp air,
squirrels spring up like questions, berries easily redden,
edges delight in their own shapes (whoever their shaper).
But here there is one season, our viridian Eden
is that of the primal garden that engendered decay,

from the seed of a beetle's shard or a dead hare
white and forgotten as winter with spring on its way.

There is no change now, no cycles of spring, autumn, winter,
nor an island's perpetual summer; she took time with her;
no climate, no calendar except for this bountiful day.
(15)

The North is the place where glaciers melt, and the fields get soaked. Cracks, sewers, and streams roar with «wrist-numbing water» (25). Instead, in the South, in the Caribbean Eden, there are no seasons. Nothing changes: «There is no change now, no cycles of spring, autumn, winter» (25). It is as if the poet's mother, while leaving, had taken away time and seasons.

The long elegy ends with the poet declaring that he wants to make use of his mother's lesson by writing about the gift of light. He intends to deal with familiar things that are on the verge of becoming extraordinary, namely the natural facts of his island, which are becoming history since colonization inserted them in a flow of events. But what are these familiar things? Walcott lists them in the last stanza of his elegy:

The crab, the frigate that floats on cruciform wings,
and that nailed and thorn-riddled tree that opens its pews
to the blackbird that hasn't forgotten her because it sings.
(26)

Every image in the end of the elegy has a peculiar relevance. Turning to the humblest and smallest forms of the ecosystem, Walcott mentions 1) the crab, symbolizing the constant temptation to retire in one's shell, defended by outgrowths and spines, driven by the utopian desire for stillness or sideways movement. It is the temptation of the native poets who speak only to their community and, rejecting the gift of English, refuse to proceed forward; 2) "cruciform wings" and "a nailed and thorn-riddled tree", symbols of a Christianity that comes as an imposition from the sea, on a hostile frigate; 3) finally, a "blackbird" that, perching on the ship's mast, conquers it, makes it its own, and sings, just as the postcolonial poet appropriates the expressive tools of the Western tradition — at the same time a gift and an imposition — to sing his elegy for his mother, who is unforgettable and unforgotten.

Humanity as a Plurality of Identities

The *dissimilation* and *contradiction* between the emotional and the axiological dimensions of the Northern world (England) and those of the hero coming from the South are evident in the 1959 poem "South" by Edward Kamau Brathwaite.

Kamau Brathwaite is a Barbadian poet who moved first to the United Kingdom and later to the United States. His poem “South”, composed of six stanzas of six lines each, is included in the 1967 volume *Rights of Passage* and thematizes the nostos – the homecoming journey of a Caribbean wanderer representative of the black diaspora. In this poem, water, and in particular the European rivers — symbols of unidirectionality and narrowness —, are contrasted with the Ocean of the homeland, which stands for vastness, inclusion, and multidirectional circulation of currents-values.

In “Tintern Abbey”, Wordsworth celebrates nature while remembering the tranquility and serenity of the landscapes of his childhood — in contrast with the Shakespearian *dim of towns and cities* that characterize the poet’s adulthood. In a similar way, Brathwaite *recaptures* his childhood’s landscape, where water, in the forms of fog, ocean, and sea, pervades the opening lines, introduced by the meaningful conjunction “but”:

But today I recapture the islands’
bright beaches: blue mist from the ocean
rolling into the fishermen’s houses.
By these shores I was born: sound of the sea
came in at my window, life heaved and breathed in me then
with the strength of that turbulent soil.

Since then I have travelled: moved far from the beaches:
sojourned in stoniest cities, walking the lands of the north
in sharp slanting sleet and the hail,
crossed countless saltless savannas and come
to this house in the forest where the shadows oppress me
and the only water is rain and the tepid taste of the river.

We who are born of the ocean can never seek solace
in rivers: their flowing runs on like our longing,
reproves us our lack of endeavour and purpose,
proves that our striving will founder on that.
We resent them this wisdom, this freedom: passing us
toiling, waiting and watching their cunning declension down to the sea.

But today I would join you, travelling river,
borne down the years of your patientest flowing,
past pains that would wreck us, sorrows arrest us,
hatred that washes us up on the flats;
and moving on through the plains that receive us,
processioned in tumult, come to the sea.

Bright waves splash up from the rocks to refresh us,
blue sea-shells shift in their wake

and there is the thatch of the fishermen's houses, the path
made of pebbles, and look!
Small urchins combing the beaches
look up from their traps to salute us:

they remember us just as we left them.
The fisherman, hawking the surf on this side
of the reef, stands up in his boat
and halloos us: a starfish lies in its pool.
And gulls, white sails slanted seaward,
fly into the limitless morning before us.
(Brathwaite 1967: 56-57)

The poem opens *in medias res*, starting with an adversative conjunction, as if the poet were going on with a topic introduced earlier in the text. Since he left the islands, he has always travelled without really finding a new homeplace: he has crossed savannas not lapped by the sea; he has settled in the middle of forests where rain was the only form water could take. The lack of water and the stoniness of the "lands of the north" symbolize dissimulation, the cultural alterity experienced by the diasporic subject during his errancy. Finally, he leaves the stony cities of the North to come back to the ocean, in the South.

The poet is indeed the ocean's son, and therefore he has always been dissatisfied with the rivers since they are unidirectional: their flow is rigidly regulated by two banks. He prefers the ocean, where movements are multidirectional, waters mingle, and sailors can follow endless currents and innumerable trajectories. In his view, rivers are symbols of frustration: they represent the effort to merge with the sea, vain hopes, and expectations that will be irremediably disappointed. However, in his imagination, the "travelling river" is bringing him home, so he is still pleased with its flow and movements.

In the first part of the journey, returning home does not result in the creation of an idyllic or sweetened vision. In fact, the river is full of history and painful memories: following backward the course of the river means retracing the personal and collective history of the black diaspora. It is a river that carries along memories, conflicts, personal and collective wounds, including colonial vexations: «pains that would wreck us, sorrows arrest us, / hatred that washes us up on the flats».

Only at the end of the journey the homeplace's seawater performs a beneficial and restorative function. It heals the spirit, consecrating the culmination of the *nostos*. The sea spray refreshes the travelers' faces: «Bright waves splash up from the rocks to refresh us».

Once the travel is completed, and the poet has come back to his islands, he precipitously leaves the realm of time. Time seems to stop at a precise moment preceding his departure: the fishers' thatched-roof houses are the same as those

he knew before leaving. Landscape cordially comes towards him. His eyes are caught by the same cobblestone paths, the same “urchins” that clean the beaches while welcoming the newcomers, the same fishers that say hello cheerfully. It is a complete return to his origins. However, the sensation of the *nostos* is not just a personal remembrance of real events. The poet feels at home because those who remained (i.e., the guys, the fisher) recognize and remember him. It is this recognition that makes him feel as if he never left.

Homecoming is characterized by two elements: first, the greeting addressed to the poet by young and adult people, which is a sign of recognition and welcoming; secondly, from a linguistic perspective, the constant oscillation between the first-person singular pronoun “I” and the first-person plural pronoun “we”. The poet alternates “I” and “we” to describe himself and the group of those who are returning home, like himself. The *self* is not isolated but is part of an itinerant community that ideally reunites with a settled community, just as a river flows into the sea and the ocean. In the end, the “I” — the singular — dissolves within the “we”, the plural. In the last seventeen lines, the self disappears: what is left is “we” and “us”.

From an axiological perspective, this poem is antipodal to Walcott’s elegy. Brathwaite underlines the differences between cultures rather than their productive overlapping. North and South cannot be assimilated, in the same way that the stone and rivers’ ecosystems cannot be assimilated into the ocean’s ecosystem. While Walcott emphasizes the fertility of intercultural relations, Brathwaite gives voice to the unassimilated subject’s diasporic melancholy and homesickness.

Humanity in a Post-Epistemological Standstill

The third kind of sociocultural phenomena related to peculiar landscape ecologies emerges in the works of Zadie Smith, a New-York based author who was born in London to a Jamaican mother and an English father. Also Smith writes about the diasporic experience, but considers it as an ancestral event. Indeed, her narrative reflects the development of the postmodern cultural discourse.

In the short story collection *Grand Union* (2019), postmodern themes and diasporic thinking intersect, and this interrelation is often expressed by means of water metaphors. In “The Lazy River”, for example, Smith imagines that the British tourists who stay in a hotel in Southern Spain are prisoners of a “lazy river”. This is the incipit of the short story:

We’re submerged, all of us. You, me, the children, our friends, their children, everybody else. Sometimes we get out for lunch, to read or to tan, never for very long. Then we all climb back into the metaphor. The Lazy River is a circle, it is wet, it has an artificial current. Even if you don’t move you will get where and then return to

wherever you started, and if we may speak of the depth of a metaphor, well, then, it is about three feet deep, excepting a brief stretch at which point it rises to six feet four. Here children scream- clinging to the walls or the nearest adult- until it is three feet deep once more. Round and round we go. All life is in here, flowing. Flowing! Responses vary. Most of us float in the direction of the current, swimming a little, or walking, or treading water. (Smith: 2019: 25)

Some tourists float on their backs; others — the ones who have a university education — swim against the current, but they are always brought back by the waterflow. Everyone is indeed dragged by the current.

The river, which is not particularly deep, and whose murky water flows in circle, takes on a metaphorical value: it is the river of cultural insignificance, wherein all characters bathe while making irrelevant, trivial and purposeless gestures. The narrator asserts that «Lazy River is a metaphor and at the same time a real body of artificial water, in an all-inclusive hotel, in Almeria, somewhere in southern Spain» (26). The river symbolizes the Western way of life practiced by countless and vain vacationers. Some characters sing karaoke, while others buy flotation devices or distractedly meet people ashore. Among the settlers there are two Africans that, for a living, braid tourists' hair. They are the only ones to go upstream. Overall, holidaymakers get accustomed to the circular flow of the current, and float.

The metaphor is almost obvious: the decaying West leaves excremental traces behind (at a certain point the river's water turns green because of human urine). The West is paralyzed, since it lacks *telos* and a core. The story ends with the image of two servants that try to clean the river by picking up «whatever scum we have left off the sides» (34). This enterprise, however, seems to be above their means.

In line with Brathwaite's ecological and aesthetic thinking, Smith contrasts the Lazy River with the waters of Grand Union, the canal connecting London and the Midlands which, to the eyes of Kelso Cochrane, protagonist of the short story "Kelso Deconstructed", resembles the canal of Antigua where he swam as a child. Kelso is an immigrant who strives for integrating into the English society, working and studying to improve himself. Despite his efforts and righteousness, he is killed in London by some white racists that remain unpunished. In his mind, the green muddy lagoon at the back of Antigua's canal overlaps with Hudson and Potomac, two rivers characterised by cold and dirty waters that remind him of America, the first landing place of his diasporic journey. For Kelso, the Grand Union unites past and present in a single event of mortification that destroys his expectations of fitting in with the social dynamics of the Global North. Nevertheless, like Brathwaite, also Smith ends her collection on a note of imaginative redemption. In the final short story, which is tellingly titled "Grand Union", «all the daughters of the world» (241) unite in a chain of solidarity that goes through all generations, and whose links are held

together by two bonding elements: «love, and the recognition of history» (242). If the waters of the Western lazy river are dead, stagnant, and fit only for senseless floating, the waters flowing from the unlimited source of the imagination return to the origins, go back to previous generations, and therefore create an intergenerational bond, holding together the human beings that inhabit the water and cultural ecosystems of both the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

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Chapter 3

Non-Human, Non-Living, and Gender: Developments of African Magic Realism in Khadija Abdalla Bajaber and Sharon Dodua Otoo

Pietro Deandrea

University of Torino, Italy.

pietro.deandrea@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-5584-8450

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c406>

Abstract

The chapter deals with two recent novels from the field of African magic realism: Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust* (2021) and Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum* (2021), both dealing with gender issues through their young protagonists. It develops an analysis of the literary strategies that these two books employ in relation to time, space, animal beings and sentient objects. It is here argued that both writers make use of ecocritical and Afro-futurist elements, even though they fall into such genres only marginally. Some reflections are devoted to their similarities and differences from the writers who inaugurated anglophone African magic realism in the 1980s and 1990s. In its conclusion, the chapter relates Abdalla Bajaber's and Otoo's forms of magic realism to visions of African future(s) elaborated by some of the continent's contemporary thinkers.

Keywords

Anglophone African literature; Afro-futurism; Afro-Europe; African philosophy; ecocriticism.

Introduction: New Ways in African Magic Realism

This chapter focuses on two recent novels which display a marked — if not indeed extreme — originality in their themes and imagery. Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust* (2021) and Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum*¹ (2021)² both deal with gender issues through plots revolving around (freedom of) travelling. They certainly belong to the genre of magic realism, with secondary traits of Afro-futurism and eco-fiction. However, the imageries of their magic realism are different: Abdalla Bajaber's novel is inhabited by humanized animal beings, while Otoo's plot is centered on sentient objects.

The following pages develop an analysis of the literary strategies that these two novels adopt to narrate gender issues through their protagonists. I argue that both Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo may be said to make use of ecocritical and Afro-futurist *topoi*, while not adhering to the tenets of such genres fully. Due attention will be devoted to their similarities and to differences from the so-called «third-generation African Writers» (Newell 2006: 182-191) who inaugurated anglophone African magic realism in the 1980s and 1990s — such as the Ghanaian Kojo Laing and the Nigerian Ben Okri. By way of conclusion, the chapter positions these two novels within theoretical visions of African future(s) formulated by some of the continent's contemporary thinkers.

Great as their similarities to, and differences from, those narrative genres may be, one should also consider *The House of Rust* and *Adas Raum* in their wider context. Nicoletta Vallorani (2022: 36) aptly calls attention to a recent flowering of sub-genres penned by African women writers who are still little known and who violate generic confines in order to propose radically new fictions. Although Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo are not explicitly influenced by science fiction and native cosmogonies (unlike the authors mentioned by Vallorani), they certainly belong to this general wave.

Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust*

The House of Rust, or at least its first half, is a fantastic sea-quest. Like the novel's author, Aisha lives in Mombasa with her family of Hadrami origins. As she is a girl, her life is supposed to be arranged for a future marriage: «You will make a happy household, God willing» (HR, 25). Against this, she pitches a determination that is experienced as a constant attitude: «On the twisting path she can imagine she is walking toward something rather than in between things» (HR, 3). When her beloved father, a shark-hunter, disappears at sea, she secretly

1 Original German title.

2 These two novels will be cited parenthetically within the text, with respectively HR and AR followed by page numbers.

embarks on a voyage after him against all odds, toward a mythical «undersea» (HR, 65) — a voyage also representing a way to escape gender oppression.

Daniela Fargione (2021: 57) presents Afro-futurism as a hybridization of different genres, including magic realism. This latter streak is certainly dominant in *The House of Rust*, which contains no sci-fi trope. All the same, it is appropriate to emphasize this novel's gender-related core because it certainly falls within the scope described by Fargione for the «aquatic turn of Afro-futurism» within the frame of «Blue Humanities», seen as intersecting feminism and feminist stories: «some Afro-futurist artists problematise feminist stories by expanding to water and oceanic forces of nonhumanness» (2021: 58).

First of all, this aquatic dimension offers Aisha (and readers) a change of perceptive experience, thus distancing itself from the dominant ocularcentrism in our approaches to the ocean, as Sidney Dobrin (2021: 175) notes: «the acoustics are all wrong on dry land [...] She heard a long, echoing croon, the long whine. It was a sound she had never heard before and she was struck by its strange, nameless beauty» (HR, 66, 76). In line with Fargione's view, the sea is presented as a dynamic, more-than-human force, peopled by multiple subjectivities and representing an alterity which is often humanized:

Philosophers here – or *there*, in the undersea, believe that some leviathans drag beings under water because they feel it as an act of love. They feel that the place above the water is some sort of hell and they must spring breathing things out of it. (HR, 65; italics in the text)

From such a peculiarly magic-realist perspective, therefore, *The House of Rust* falls within the scope of «blue ecocriticism» and of its «critical, ethical, cultural, and political positions that emerge from oceanic or aquatic frames of mind rather than traditional land-based approaches» (Dobrin 2021: i).

Bajaber's gender liberation is sought after through a non-human dimension. One of the key characters of this novel is Hamza, a magic, yellow, talking cat accompanying Aisha. Its voice is described as hummingly other-dimensional:

his murmur feathering like palm leaves along her ear [... like during the Ramadan]
You thought only in vibrations, stutter and stop and mind-numbing heaves [...]
a groundless elevation of the mind, which itself was a ringing dream. (HR, 96)

Hamza clearly plays a role akin to the folktale helper: in the realm of anglophone African magic realism, one model for this is constituted by the «folktale realism» of the Ghanaian Kojo Laing (1946-2017), who set some of his novels in an otherworldly realm which bears a resemblance to the folktale world of the Asante people (Deandrea 2002: 92-108). A similar role is played by another animal element, the skeleton boat which appears magically to transport Aisha through her outlandish ordeals, and whose ribs will become swords for her to

fight with: «The boat was a skeleton of some sort of... fish [...] A half-skull jutted lower jaw, lengthy grey fangs curving up and in. Prehistoric» (*HR*, 57).

In the course of her fantastic sea-quest, and indeed throughout the novel, Aisha's gender emancipation is also expressed through a diffused lyricism, in tune with the poetical prose that constantly characterized African magical realist writers from the 1980s/1990s, whose writings were rooted in the oral background of African literatures (Deandrea and Concilio 2020: 656). Aisha's physical energy, for example, is worded through a series of euphonic consonances and assonances:

Her fingertips tingled; beneath her skin there was a stinging sensation. A nearly painful, humming heat, like fishing thread fizzing through her fingers, plowed away by the bolting merlin. The tingling spread to her elbows, a numb ringing in her arms as though she had jarred the bone down onto a table too hard. (*HR*, 35)

Lyricism involves her identity, too: Aisha is a poet, as her mother was. Her «storycraft» will contribute to the success of her quest (Barnsley 2022: 294), even against Hamza's warning about the self-destructiveness of poetry:

I should not wish the soul of a poet on anyone – they look for divinity and beauty and ornament for meaning, meaning for ornament. They grieve for grace, they destroy their hearts with their own hands, eat their hearts [...] your mother] was crucified by it [...] by a longing too great to properly name. That which pulls you, pulled her – but she was already fastened to the floor of that place by her feet. So she sang and she died. (*HR*, 77)

During her voyage, Hamza also helps Aisha in relation to a fundamental facet of her emancipation, namely her acknowledgement of her need to develop a different conception of religion. In the environment where she has been growing up, religious worldviews are so pervasive that they inhabit every nuance of language and of life — not a marginal detail, for a would-be poet: «there is no such thing as taking God's name in vain, for it is always spoken, even in afterthought, ever present. If words have a shadow, then it is He who gives it shadow and shape» (*HR*, 5). It is Hamza who pushes Aisha to envision a critical sense of her religious faith:

Adam's folk these days read and memorize and graze beneath a roof called 'God' like bleating sheep. [...] Is one a believer in inheriting the true faith like a brass pot? Do you not think for yourself how to be improved by it and to improve it? [...] Are you alive if you do not question the world? (*HR*, 97-98)

Within the frame of gender liberation, what is suggested here is a non-orthodox form of faith, a conception of religion germane to the French-Tunisian psychopathologist and psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama's manifesto for progressive

Islam *Déclaration d'insoumission*: a vision of faith based on the free exercise of critical thinking, because open to «irreducible human diversity» and springboard for a «desiring existence» (Benslama 2005: 55, 37, 43; transl. mine). This call for openness follows in the wake of some fundamental hinges of blue ecocriticism, which is envisioned by Dobrin (2021: 14-15) as recognizing «the diverse cultural memories and histories that contribute to cultural imaginaries»; on a similar note, Zapkin emphasizes how «the ocean offers models for change, models for hybridity and refiguring the self» (2017: 79).

In the second half of the novel, back on dry land after she has miraculously recovered her father from the maws of the undersea, Aisha is again compelled to negotiate many terrains to safeguard her desiring existence. On her way to her final decision, and to the novel's ending, she will encounter further antagonists and helpers, human and non-human. Even though she renounces the mythical House of Rust (home to Hamza and wisdom) for her father's love, she still longs to reach that place by going back to sea. This schizophrenic state of being torn between family duties and her desire is concretized by her shadow separating from her:

The shadow was everything Aisha wasn't – like a carnival mirror, it became whatever people wanted beheld. It said all the right things, with no voice, and yet was heard. It apologized so sweetly to her grandmother, and was proof of a girl growing into an excellent woman. (*HR*, 238)

Turning a metaphor into a factual presence in the plot is a typical stylistic trait of magic realism in literature, characterized by «a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience. This magic happens when a metaphor is made real» (Faris 1995: 176).

Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum*

In terms of setting and narrative amplitude, the British-Ghanaian Sharon Dodua Otoo's work is even broader than Abdalla Bajaber's: chronologically, *Adas Raum* goes from 1459 to 2019. There are four titular Adas, who live in four different historical ages: 1) Totope, Gold Coast, March 1459, where Ada (a young Ashanti woman) is killed by a Portuguese invader for her golden bracelet with fertility beads; 2) Stratford-le-Bow, March 1848, where Ada Lovelace (Lord Byron's daughter and a pioneer of computer mathematics) is shot by her jealous husband because of her affair with Charles Dickens; 3) Kohnstein bei Nordhausen concentration camp, March 1945, where a Polish Ada is forced to live as a sexual slave for the troops; 4) Berlin 2019, where 23-year-old Black British Ada is a single pregnant woman looking for a place to live.

The stories of all these Adas from different epochs are narrated in the first person and sometimes by the voice of a single spirit, who follows the trans-historical and transcontinental meanderings of the first Ada's bracelet since 1451 and is incarnated in a different object in every age, respectively related to the four Adas: a broomstick, a lionhead-shaped door knocker, a brothel barrack, and a British passport. Only this fourth object is freely chosen by the spirit, whose preference comes instinctively: «I knew immediately. Something that brings joy, I said. Over the millennia, I had come to recognise what joyful beings look like. The condition seemed contagious» (*AR*, 124). As in Bajaber, women's freedom is associated to freedom of movement.

In between sections, the narrating spirit inhabits an other dimension where spirits mix before reincarnations and the narrator itself waits for its next incarnation, while joking with (or being mocked by) God — who, by the way, is female:

God had taken the form of a breeze. I was honestly a bit intimidated by her ability to drift so gracefully over the landscapes – but I, too, assumed the form of a breeze and followed suit. [...] God ruffled the downy feathers of a lonely pigeon, and I borrowed a toupee from an elderly gentleman and took it along with me. (*AR*, 113-114)

As Van Amelsvoort writes, Otoo's «playful rule-breaking» was also a defining aspect of her previous writings, which dealt with «ethical, political and epistemological questions» while teasing «dominant social relations and identification practices» (Van Amelsvoort 2022: 286). In *Adas Raum* this lightness of tone goes hand in hand with a marked readability. Altogether these features, coupled with the complexity of the novel's structure, have contributed to Otoo's popularity as a writer and intellectual in the context of German letters — her cultural context and writing language of adoption. Before the publication of *Adas Raum* (the original German title), she was awarded the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann prize in 2016.

The multi-layered complexity of this novel is further enhanced by other traits. First of all, the chronological phases mentioned above include shifts forwards and backwards, whereby the narrative structure progresses through coils and loops (Colvin 2022: 143). There are many intra-textual references among the four different ages, and repetitions with variations — eventually culminating when the fertility bracelet is recovered by the 2019 Ada. With regard to this, the fourth Ada finally has a baby, thus redeeming the suffering legacy of her three predecessors. In the context of African magic realism, here Otoo may be gesturing at Ben Okri's character Azaro, the spirit-child (*abiku*) of Yoruba lore who dies and is reborn from the same mother, until his determination to live gets the upper hand and sets the plot in motion (Deandrea 2002: 48-49)³.

3 Okri's *abiku* saga is composed of *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), and *Infinite Riches* (1998).

With reference to Otoo's living objects, Kojo Laing's animated objects and his «cartoon realism», in his 1992 novel *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, may be mentioned (102).

Secondly, the layers of *Adas Raum* build a cross-ethnic puzzle, because the four Adas do not share the same origins. However, in the narrator's voice:

In any case, the time had come to remind Ada that all beings – past, present and future – are connected to one another. That we always were and always will be. This message can be overwhelming, especially if a human believes they are hearing it for the first time. (*AR*, 113-114)

Thus, Otoo's magic realism goes well beyond the African pioneers of this narrative mode, whose novels were mostly centered on postcolonial national projects and preoccupations (Deandrea and Concilio 2020: 654-655).

Thirdly, from a social point of view the four Adas are not always reducible to gendered, underprivileged victims in a simplistic way. For example, Ada Byron's Irish servant Lizzie is a Chartist who ends up being unvoiced not only by her mistress, but also by Chartist men, as the following excerpt shows (with a humorous allusion to Friedrich Engels):

And so it was that Lizzie took part late that evening in yet another interminable meeting of the Women's Charter Association – and she stayed until each of the assembled men had commented on at least one of each other's contributions; until all arguments for and against women's suffrage had been debated and exchanged; and until a grey-haired gentleman – easily identified by his heavy accent as a German refugee – had broken the mould with an indefatigable lecture on the dehumanisation of the proletariat through Great Britain's Industrial Revolution. (*AR*, 59)

Otoo's range of characters and perspectives, then, strives for an intersectionality capable of bringing to light the overlapping of various forms of oppression. As Colvin argues (2022: 156), «[e]ach of the Adas is in a different oppressed/oppressing relationship with patriarchy, racism and necropolitics that reflect the different positionalities».

Fourthly, the novel's editorial history also contributes to its layers. Written and published in German by a Black Briton of Ghanaian origins (*Adas Raum*, 2021), it was later translated into English by Jon Cho-Polizzi for one British and one US version with different titles — respectively, *Ada's Realm* and *Ada's Room* (both 2023). Possibly, two titles for the same translation⁴.

Finally, the book's cross-ethnic worldview is also constructed linguistically. Readers are faced with a polyglot novel with many references to European and African languages. When the fourth Ada tells Elle «How cool it would be, [...]

4 This chapter quotes the British version, while referring to the book by using its original German title.

if we had Ga as our secret language», her German half-sister replies «Don't you know anything about Germany, Ada? They've tried to kill off all the multilingual people here once before» (AR, 199). This quote is significant insofar as the novel's multilingualism may be viewed as displaying a richness which undermines mono-cultural power structures, and as shedding light on one of the crucial implications of this many-layered narrative. Colvin aptly identifies in *Adas Raum* a «transtemporality» where «meaning is deepened and rendered complex across time-space»: a structure that is «temporally insurrectionary» against «the petrifying force that is necropolitical and racialised time»; a strategy to reveal the impermanence of power, «to historicise and denaturalise the present, to render different paths thinkable, and to address the shape that a future order might take» (Colvin 2022: 138-139), opening «perspectives on the might-have-been and yet-to-be» (165). In 2019, Ada constructs a «community of care» (164) beyond the limits of time, blood, ethnic, social, cultural, and linguistic bonds — involving not only the people around her, but also the other three Adas from previous ages — whereas, in the narrator's words, «[a]cross the many loops and orbits, I had learned that the living often maintain a difficult relationship with their own pasts. If they maintain any relationship with it at all» (AR, 248).

Conclusion

Colvin's analysis of the subversive charge of *Adas Raum* may be extended, I argue, to cover *The House of Rust*, too. Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo open up perspectives that have the potential to liberate African imaginaries. In doing so, they represent fictional equivalents to contemporary African thinkers who have been developing similar projects in the field of theory, such as the Senegalese Felwine Sarr and the Cameroonian Achille Mbembe. While trying to conceptualize metaphors for alternative African futures, these writers consider fiction to be extremely inspiring (Sarr 2018: 114; Mbembe 2018: 265-267). Their formulations often resonate with the two novels examined here. Sarr conceives of an «Afrotopia» based on the balance among economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, where cultural pluralism may retain fertile elements from both autochthonous and non-indigenous worlds (2018: 16, 26, 39). Similarly, Mbembe's Afropolitanism rejects nationalist paradigms in favor of wider, more transversal ways of creating community (Mbembe 2018: 274-285). Such is the theoretical lens that may be used to frame Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo: differently from Okri and Laing, who focused on the postcolonial nation, these two authors are to be positioned in a post-national frame. This is especially true when one takes into account Otoo's rejection of monocultural and monolingual identities (Van Amelsvoort 2022: 288) and Abdalla Bajaber's celebration of the Indian Ocean and its transcultural currents — which she shares with writers such as

the Kenyan Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and the British-Zanzibarian Abdulrazak Gurnah (Bassi 2022: 253-273).

In addition, their vast geographical or historical scope, back and forth between interconnected times, cultural traditions and geographic zones, bears important generic implications: Abdalla Bajaber's marginalization of colonial dichotomies through a «focus on daily practices of the Hadrami community» (Barnsley 2022: 294) and Otoo's complex structure both point at the trans-geographical aesthetics of Afro-futurism (Fargione 2021: 59).

All these features contribute to enrich their magic-realist literary strategies participating in the debate about gender issues, since these two novels, as argued above, certainly share a focus on gender liberation through freedom of movement. Both novels also move away from “victim stereotypes”: Aisha and Ada are self-realized protagonists living through significant happy endings that include an organic relation between subject and object. Not only is this aspect in tune with Sarr's philosophical reflections (2018: 94, 100), but it also resonates with the work by another contemporary African thinker, the Nigerian Bayo Akomolafe, who acknowledges the active materiality of the non-human and its importance for comprehension of the complexity of the universe (Akomolafe 2023: 155-158).

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Chapter 4

Arboreal Imagery of the South in German Literature: On the Example of J.W. von Goethe

Giulia A. Disanto

University of Salento, Italy.

giulia.disanto@unisalento.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-9671-996

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c407>

Abstract

Even if Goethe's work comes from a time before the emergence of a widespread sense of environmental awareness, for a plurality of reasons, his work represents a cornerstone for the German ecocritical debate. In particular, this essay investigates how Goethe's perception of the arboreal meridian nature and understanding of atmospheric light in southern Europe has marked his conception of nature. Furthermore, Goethe's participation in the scientific debate of a key moment in Europe's cultural history, namely, that period when the specialization of the sciences occurred, is a very interesting issue today because it makes us rethink what "modernity" really is in relation to the environment and what the role of literature can be in the climate change debate.

Keywords

ecocriticism; myth of nature; aesthetics and phenomenology of nature; sensory experience vs. systematization; meridian thought.

Ecocriticism and the Myth of Nature

The Abbey of St. Boniface in Munich boasts a series of frescoes dating back to the late 1830s that were created by the German painter Heinrich Maria Hess. One of them depicts St. Boniface, also known as the Apostle of the Germans, who, in 723, in order to convert the Germanic peoples to Christianity and make them abandon their pantheistic belief in the elements of nature, cut down the sacred oak tree near Geismar in Hesse, proving that no god lived in it¹. An animal sacrifice can also be seen in the foreground of the image, and above, all the horror in the eyes of the Germanic population in the face of such devastation is quite evident. St. Boniface succeeded in converting the Germans, but the German people's bond with what is regarded as "Bruder Baum", brother tree, a precious interlocutor to confide in amidst the silent solitude of the woods, had remained very strong for centuries to come².

Hess's fresco appears emblematic because the almost symmetrical division of the image through the central verticality of the tree clearly represents human beings' reign over nature as an expression of power domination between two contrasting cultures. In this case, we have the Christians on the left, the Germans on the right, a south and a north with balances that, over time, have been overturned and have utterly assumed different symbolic meanings. Tacitus in *De origine et situ Germanorum* (AD 98) already spoke of impenetrable forests, sacred to the Germanic peoples, and, in the centuries that followed, trees and forests continued to form a pillar of the so-called national identity and of the German artistic and literary imagination, of which it would be difficult here to offer even a brief summary thereof³.

The theme of nature that is evident in German-language literature has been widely studied over the years. Even thinking only of the genre of nature poetry («Naturdichtung»), it is difficult to find such an articulate development of this genre and its theorization in other European literatures⁴. Since the 1970s, moreover, when the environmental movement was gaining ground, the high level of environmental awareness among German citizens and the question of respecting nature in an area that had, in any case, been extensively modified over the

1 There are numerous artistic versions of this motif; a reproduction of the fresco in Munich can be seen online at Akg-Images (n.d.).

2 In this regard, see Silvia Ulrich (2020) and Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione (2021). See also Michael Braun und Amelia Valtolina (2021).

3 On the cultural-historical and identity developments around the Germanic forest myth, starting from Tacitus' own reading, through Kleist and the Grimms to Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys, see the important study, which also has ecological intentions, by Schama (1996: 75-134).

4 The terms «Naturpoesie» and «Naturdichtung» are already attested in the second half of the eighteenth century, as indicated in Häntzschel (2000: 691-693).

course of centuries, both in terms of deforestation and the forced channeling of watercourses⁵, began to find their way onto the political agenda.

It is surprising that the ecocritical discourse has developed in Germany much more slowly than in America, since at least the 1990s for example. If America is the country of “wilderness” and its idealization, nature is no less important for the overall makeup of German national identity. But it is precisely that very element which, over time, manifests itself as a type of limitation due to a mythologization of nature as a typically Germanic element used within the scope of twentieth-century nationalistic thinking, thereby being somewhat distorted⁶. Under this perspective of “Germanisation”, the National Socialists not only framed the myth of nature but also reinterpreted literary history, having approached even the works of authors such as Goethe himself in an ideological manner.

The question of the mythologization of nature is only one element to be considered in the debate on what an ecocritical discourse is and how it can be defined today in accordance with the tradition of German literary studies. The question concerning if it is possible to speak of “nature writing” for German-language literature is equally complex (Dürbeck and Kanz 2020a). We are now undoubtedly in a period of great discussion and definition of methodologies regarding the relationship between literature and ecology, above all, due to the urgency of climate issues and the speculations and assumptions that ensue from their debate. Contemporary German-language literature is also clearly reacting to these questions because writers are no less distressed by the environmental uncertainty than literary scholars, even if they do not easily yield to the labelling thereof that they can identify with⁷. However, the discourse

5 For a cultural history of human-induced environmental changes in Germany see David Blackbourn (2006).

6 This is the opinion of Axel Goodbody (2007: VIII-X): «The high level of environmental awareness among German citizens is a legitimate source of national pride, and German governments of differing political persuasions have taken a lead in international initiatives to clean up the oceans, reduce industrial pollution, make nuclear energy safer and combat global warming. A continuity of concern for nature and the environment in German culture would seem traceable back to the Romantics and is possibly rooted in earlier national self-understanding as a nature-loving people, whose relative poverty and political disunity could be taken as manifestations of a virtuous simplicity, elevating them above the arid intellectualism of French civilisation and rapacious British mercantilism. However, this image of Germany as a model in facing the ecological challenges of the future is a mere half-truth, which ignores crucial aspects of the country's twentieth-century history. Although Germany's path towards modernity is not necessarily universally representative, the Third Reich constitutes an extreme example of that logic of mastery over nature which has underpinned the Enlightenment project. [...] the shadow of the Nazi past, in which the ‘myth’ of nature played such a problematic part, means that preoccupation with nature has until very recently been viewed with suspicion in the humanities and arts faculties of German, Austrian and Swiss universities». See also Ursula K. Heise (2017: 3).

7 There is also a great deal of attention in publishing for nature writing topics, an excellent example being the «Naturkunde» series from the Berlin publisher Matthes & Seitz, edited by

is quite different for authors and literary works chronologically preceding the emergence of a widespread sense of environmental awareness⁸, for which a heuristic approach is essential. In both cases, it is necessary to investigate the peculiarities of the German ecocritical discourse and insert them into the tradition of thought from which it somehow derives. In its apparent contradiction, a quotation from the last book by Friedericke Mayröcker — the Austrian poetess linked to the avant-garde of the second half of the twentieth century who died a few years ago — is quite exemplary. In *da ich morgens und moosgrün. Ans Fenster trete*, written in a very particular mixed form of prose and poetry typical of the writer, Mayröcker mentioned at one point: «Modewort “nature writing”» (Mayröcker 2020: 57, 97). «Nature Writing» would be a «trendy word» in the German-speaking cultural scene, yet her books themselves are a singular example of reflecting upon art and nature, and even merely the role of the adjective «moosgrün» that she places in the middle of the title — as if «moss green» indicated a state of mind or, better still, a way of being in the world — would merit deeper reflection. The question of “nature writing” is then also compelling within the scope of German literature (Dürbeck and Kanz 2020b), but it is difficult to accept the English definition because taking up the terms of a debate means taking up its main features again, and the writing of nature in the German context differs greatly in tradition from the Anglo-American context.

The German tradition of critical reflection on nature has had its own specific lines of development over the course of time; the main German literary, philosophical, and cultural approaches to the ecological question can be primarily traced back to certain lines of thought of the twentieth century: phenomenology, from the reprise of Martin Heidegger’s thought to the nature aesthetics of Gernot Böhme and Martin Seel; critical theory (Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and the Frankfurt School); social theory inspired by the ethics of responsibility and humanism (Erich Fromm, Hans Jonas, Klaus Michael Mayer-Habich) (Goodbody 2014: 547). Important contributions came from both German Americanism and Germanic scholars abroad, including studies on the history of the environment (Grimm and Hermand 1981), the anthropological approach to textual analysis (Iser 1993) and the results of cultural ecology (Zapf 2002).

the writer Judith Schallansky.

8 If ecology as a discipline that studies the relationship of the organism with the outside world, to paraphrase one of Ernst Haeckel’s definitions (Haeckel coined the name of the discipline in German), was founded in the second half of the nineteenth century, the epochal turning point of ecology in the sense of environmental awareness only occurred in the 1970s (Bühler 2016: 17-18).

The Aesthetic Experience of Nature's System

Among the classics of German literature, one of the authors where an attempt is being made today to re-examine his works from an ecocritical perspective happens to be the “prince” of German poets, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. With works ranging from the poem *Maifest* to *Werther* all the way to *Wilhelm Meister* and to *Faust*, just to name a few of the works most frequently addressed by critics⁹, Goethe's work is full of significant thematizations of the relationship between humans and nature and opens itself up to the most diverse readings in times, such as those of today or the 1970s, in which orientation models are sought pertaining to issues (such as ecocriticism) that undoubtedly have an urgent and topical ethical value. However, it is essential to maintain a heuristic approach to the ecocritical investigations of an author such as Goethe who, although he tried throughout his life to understand nature as a system, did so in a very different way than would be done today and not along the lines of permanent damage to the ecosystem.

The same adoration that Ernst Haeckel, the founder of ecology, had for Goethe — in fact, he regarded the writer as a forerunner of evolutionary theory — had the effect of polarizing how Goethe's scientific writings were perceived in later years: while some regarded him as a forerunner of Darwinism, others read his scientific writings as mere speculation (Wenzel 2012: 261-263).

Nevertheless, for a plurality of reasons, Goethe is a cornerstone for the German ecocritical debate:

If any single German writer comes close to the importance which Henry David Thoreau possesses in American culture as principal founder of the national “environmental imagination” (Lawrence Buell), it is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. (Goodbody 2007: 47)

In my opinion, it is really important to emphasize how relevant the image of meridian nature was to the «environmental imagination» (Buell 1995) that Goethe avidly promoted.

With respect to the vast literature on the relationship between Goethe and nature or the growing number of studies on proto-ecologism in Goethe's work and thought, this essay aims to underscore three key aspects:

1. Reflection on arboreal nature becomes often relevant in German literature when confronted with the “otherness” of its counterpart, foreign nature, which comprises a landscape that differs from its origin via directly experiencing distant places by travelling or making journeys; and this is an element that characterizes Goethe's works. Namely, he advanced his botanical studies during his

⁹ Amongst the best results, I refer to Heinrich Detering (2020).

journey to Italy, writing his most important studies on plants but also a theory of colors (*Farbenlehre*). This theory is mainly based on the comparison and is strongly influenced by the perception of atmospheric light in southern Europe. The importance of the journey as a precondition for the maturation of nature awareness remained a constant in German-language literature throughout the following centuries. Goethe's aesthetic reflection also has the effect of a symbolic polarization between north and south, which is also useful to analyze in the context of the debate on current geopolitical and environmental balances in relation to the Global South.

2. Goethe's scientific reflection is not deemed separate from his aesthetic reflection; on the contrary, it arises from the very same element. For Goethe, the search for a law and a constant in the *sistema naturae* coincides with an investigation of shape and form and is therefore a search entailing both cognitive as well as aesthetic intentions, thereby confiding in visual perception in particular. This applies just as much to the study of the type, shape and form of plants as it does to the study of light. It was perhaps obvious that he arrived at different results than Newton in the field of optics because he did not start with optical instruments as a means to observation and examination nor the assumptions made within the field of physics but from an aesthetic and pictorial focus. Goethe perceived the Italian environment by posing aesthetic questions pertaining to artistically rendering shape, form and light by virtue of his *Doppelbegabung* (a kind of "dual talent") as a writer and painter. It is for this reason that the most interesting studies on the relationship between Goethe and a proto-ecological view of nature seem to me to derive from the aesthetic and phenomenological approach (Böhme 1998, 2000).

3. Goethe's participation in the scientific debate of the time is very significant today because this happened at a key moment in Europe's cultural history, namely that period in the middle of the late eighteenth century when the specialization of the sciences occurred, i.e., the separation of the philosophical-literary discourse on nature from the properly scientific one (in fact, that ramification of the «two cultures» of which Charles Percy Snow much more recently hoped for a reunification; Snow 1998). Some elements of Goethe's thought on the topic of nature, which is not systematic in itself but changed and developed over the course of years, are undoubtedly of interest to the debate at hand. From the perspective of a current reappraisal of what retrospectively turned out to be truly "modern" (Latour 1991) in the history of Western thought and from the viewpoint of reexamining what, by contrast, represented a step backward in the path of civilization with respect to environmental issues, the period of European scientific debate in the years in which Goethe became interested in science is a case study of enormous relevance.

The German poet was a profound connoisseur of the natural sciences. Around 1780, having been immersed in the natural environment of the countryside around the town of Weimar, he began to deal with mineralogy, geology, and botany. These were years in which he sought greater tranquility than in his Sturmerian beginnings, and his view of nature also changed. Goethe distances himself from the idea of a creative and destructive nature as expressed in the sceneries of *Werther*, from the same reception of Rousseau's concept of nature received by the *Sturm und Drang* poets for its potential for cultural and social criticism.

Having arrived in Weimar, where he personally tended his garden *Am Stern*, Goethe began to study botany systematically; the writer recalls those years in *Der Verfasser teilt die Geschichte seiner botanischen Studien mit* (Goethe [1831]; FA, I, 24: 732-752; *The Author Relates the History of His Botanical Studies*; Goethe 1952: 149-164): on the one hand, his meetings in Jena with the botanist and academic August Johann Georg Karl Batsch (1761-1802), and on the other, his acquaintance with Friedrich Gottlieb Dietrich (1765-1850), a descendant of a family of farmers who, for decades, had been supplying the area around Jena with plants, including locations ranging from universities all the way to pharmacies. Goethe valued Dietrich's botanical knowledge so much that the latter accompanied him on his trip to Karlsbad in June 1785. As was the case in those years, the theoretical study of the natural sciences was flanked by the growing importance of empirical verification, and the interchange between academics and dilettantes was not viewed negatively. On the contrary, it was felt that efforts should be made to greatly expand the knowledge of new plant species and to maximize the activity of classification, especially in the botanical field. Direct experience was fundamental, and travelers, in particular, were considered "apostles" of the expansion of this knowledge. Travelling was deemed a moment to test knowledge and expand the scope of botanical cataloguing. As early as 1759 Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) had drawn up an *Instructio peregrinatoris* with useful instructions for this type of research designed for naturalist travelers, as did Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), Jean Baptiste de Monet de Lamarck (1744-1829), and George Léopold Cuvier (1769-1832) (Lepénies 1978: 55). In this sense, Goethe valued his "dilettantism" to a great extent.

Even before he left for his trip to Italy in 1786, Goethe became interested in the germination of plants¹⁰. However, it is only in the direct sensory experience of the meridian arboreal landscape and its lights that the writer began to pursue a more accomplished level of theorization; the hypothesis of being able to find an original form in which a model for the development of all plant species can be found resurfaces and is strengthened within him.

10 The writer owned an herbarium with about 800 plants as early as 1780 (Wenzel 2012: 19).

In the *Italian Journey* on September 27, 1786 in Padua, he wrote:

The Botanical Garden is much more cheerful. Many plants can stay in the ground all through the winter if they are planted near the walls. But towards the end of October the place is roofed over and kept heated during the short winter months. To wander about among a vegetation which is new to one is pleasant and instructive. It is the same with familiar plants as with other familiar objects: in the end we cease to think about them at all. But what is seeing without thinking? Here where I am confronted with a great variety of plants, my hypothesis that it might be possible to derive all plant forms from one original plant becomes clearer to me and more exciting. Only when we have accepted this idea will it be possible to determine genera and species exactly. So far this has, I believe, been done in a very arbitrary way. (Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 54-55)

In Padua, he first recognized *Chamaerops humilis*, the only spontaneous palm that grows on continental European soil (Barbera 2021: 83), then in Palermo, he immersed himself in the aesthetic experience of an extremely varied vegetation that spread freely outside of pots and greenhouses; Goethe emphasized how Sicily comprises a rich and abundant territory even in the inland areas, characterized as an oxymoron by «deserted fertility» where the treeless hills become granaries (Caltanissetta, April 28, 1987; Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 267).

With its wealth of botanical varieties, Sicily became, in Goethe's eyes, a sort of point of origin of European arboreal history that Goethe perceived as a man of the eye and of letters; in fact, his thoughts were immediately directed towards the garden of Alcinous sung by Homer, as he had written on April 7, 1787, and he feels like translating that passage. Goethe dwelt in this passage on the lights and «the haze» of the atmosphere, which was reminiscent of the admired landscapes painted by Claude Lorraine.

I spent some happy, peaceful hours alone in the Public Gardens close to the harbour. It is the most wonderful spot on earth. Though laid out formally and not very old, it seems enchanted and transports one back into the antique world. Green borders surround exotic plants, espaliers of lemon trees form gracefully arched walks, high hedges of oleander, covered with thousands of red blossoms which resemble carnations, fascinate the eye.

Strange trees, probably from warmer climes, for they are still without leaves, spread out their peculiar ramifications. [...] The green of the plants is of a different shade, either more yellow or more blue, than the green we are used to. What gives this scenery its greatest charm, however, is the haze uniformly diffused over everything, which has a peculiar effect. [...] The enchanting look which distant objects like ships and promontories take on in this haze is most instructive for a painter who has to learn to distinguish distances and even measure them exactly, as I discovered when I walked to the top of a hill. I no longer saw Nature, but pictures; it was as if some very skilful painter had applied glaze to secure a proper gradation of tone. (Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 228-229)

Furthermore, plant diversity is read in a cultural key, through balances of dominance between “environmental imaginaries” and Goethe starts from the decoding of north-south differences as a cultural and aesthetic contrast. And indeed, in *Schicksal der Handschrift* (History of the Manuscript; Goethe 1952: 167-169), published in his journal «Zur Morphologie» (On Morphology), he explicitly distinguishes between «Italy, rich in forms» and «formless Germany» (167), a Germany without *Gestalt*. In the contrast between the landscape of *Mitteleuropa* and the Mediterranean, in the difference of light and climate, Goethe started off, as did his contemporaries, from a symbolization of cultural difference¹¹.

Goethe arrived in Italy with Linnaeus’ *Genera Plantarum* (IV ed., Halle 1752) in his pocket. He arrived primarily by observing the landscape as the poet and painting artist he had been. His is a phenomenological approach that moves from concrete observation of the current state of vegetation and the meridian landscape, which as atavistic and plural seemed to offer the human eye an understanding of the laws that have always governed nature:

The highest wisdom would be to comprehend that everything factual is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals to us the primary law of chromatics. Do not look for anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the lesson. (Goethe 1989: 308)

The unifying moment in the scientific and aesthetic study of plant and human nature consists for Goethe in the problem of shape and form. The poet coined the concept of «Morphologie», first evoked as a diaristic note in September 1796 (Wenzel 2012: 6). With this concept he understands both the development of the individual living being and the recurrence of certain analogies in which a principle of development, common to all living beings, could be discerned.

11 Lukas Bauer wrote: «The Grand Tour describes a practice of travel from the early seventeenth century up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and reaches its climax in the late seventeen hundreds. These travellers originated primarily from Britain, France and Germany, and up until 1800 were drawn almost exclusively from the aristocracy. The Grand Tour had a fixed itinerary lasting to three years and identified Rome as its principal destination. The journey was undertaken primarily for the purposes of education, through the exposure to the legacy of classical antiquity and the Renaissance, as well as for political reasons such as strengthening diplomatic ties. While Italian culture, art and history were idealized by the Grand Tourist, contemporary Italians were frequently derided as being backward and inferior to the economically advanced societies of the North. [...] By representing Italy as the centre of their individual traditions, northern Europeans dispossessed Italians of their own cultural heritage in order to claim it for themselves. These modes of collecting and appropriating Italian culture and history are analogous to the excavations carried out by Europeans in their overseas colonies where artefacts for the purposes of study were similarly collected and acquired in a way that had no regard for the sovereignty and entitlement of the native population» (Bauer 2015: 36-38).

As mentioned above, Goethe takes up and actively participates in the scientific debate on natural history (in the sense of «Naturgeschichte») in the second half of the eighteenth century, and this is a key point in understanding the onset of modernity and the scientification of culture in this period, as well as Goethe's attempt to make a concrete contribution to the discussion. According to Lepenies, a process of *Verzeitlichung* (temporalization) of the concept of nature took place in the decades between the publication of the first and last volumes of Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, i.e., between 1749 (Goethe's date of birth) and 1789 (the date of the French revolution, a year after Buffon's death). Up to that point, the term «Naturgeschichte» only improperly refers to a historical temporalization, but rather has to do with the description and logical systematization of knowledge about nature, which is referred to, for example, by means of nomenclature and *ars mnemotecnica*, not necessarily through perspectives that today we would call diachronic (for which the German uses the term «Historie»). However, in those decades, knowledge about species expanded exponentially, and it was difficult to continue to pursue a systematic order. Knowledge about nature specialized, and in the very early years of the nineteenth century, the concept of «biology» appeared with Karl Friedrich Burdach (1776-1847), Theodor Georg August Roose (1771-1803), Jean-Baptiste de Monet de Lamarck (1744-1829), and Gottfried Reinhold Treviranus (1776-1837) (Lepenies 1978: 29). Thus, the concept of temporization, the need to read nature in its chronological, temporal, evolutionary development, also came to the fore. Among others, Friedrich Schelling, whose thought Goethe took on board, also began to propose a properly historical («historisch») reading of «Naturgeschichte» (Lepenies 1978: 39; Matussek 1998). Goethe's thought on nature and its forms should be placed in this context because it is a demonstration of how the discourse on the sciences oscillates between an approach of systematization and a harmonious vision of the disciplines dealing with nature, typical of the past, shared for example by Aristotle and Lucretius, and a modern approach, in which the order of historical development is preferred to other principles of a systematic order. Paradoxically, Goethe's modernity lies not so much in pandering to the new, but in seeking the systematic nature of an order of nature that is still Enlightenment in type, for it is these aspects of his morphological studies that are most interesting from the point of view of the current conception of nature in terms of interconnectedness.

In this sense, also the concept of *Urpfanze* should be understood, which does not indicate the temporally original, historically preceding plant in the phylogenetic sense, but the model. *Urpfanze* is an articulation of the concept of *Urphänomen*, the original phenomenon of a nature that, contrary to what Newton believed, was not to be observed and studied primarily in the laboratory, but still intuited in the sensory and perceptive experience of the visible in the reality of things in their environment.

The first systematization hypothesis Goethe formulates in contact with the Italian landscape is «Alles ist Blatt» (All is leaf; Goethe, FA I, 24: 84). The leaf is consubstantial to the whole (the plant) at all stages of its development. Moreover, the leaf is a polar phenomenon, containing within itself the dynamism of contraries, dilation and contraction, as well as the power of *Steigerung* (i.e., the capacity for the gradual ascent of the parts into the harmony of a higher whole) and lends itself to serve as the central element of a systematization, thereby being particularly useful for understanding and representing the universal. In the *Urpflanze* therefore converge both the short-lived hope of concretely finding a plant, a «Typus», that was the model for all others, and the more lasting theorization that a recursiveness of principles valid for different species can be found in nature.

Seeing such a variety of new and renewed forms, my old fancy suddenly came back to mind: Among this multitude might I not discover the Primal Plant? There certainly must be one. Otherwise, how could I recognize that this or that form *was* a plant if all were not built upon the same basic model?

I tried to discover how all these divergent forms differed from one another, and I always found that they were more alike than unlike. But when I applied my botanical nomenclature, I got along all right to begin with, but then I stuck, which annoyed me without stimulating me. Gone were my fine poetic resolutions – the garden of Alcinous had vanished and a garden of the natural world had appeared in its stead. Why are we moderns so distracted, why do we let ourselves be challenged by problems which we can neither face nor solve! (Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 251-252)

Over time, Goethe abandoned the concept of *Urpflanze* precisely because it suggested the existence of a fixed type, while the idea that the ordering principle of nature is that of becoming, of metamorphosis, became increasingly evident to him. The Italian plant variety showed him, after initial enthusiasms guided by an intellectual curiosity with few equals, that shape and form do not exist without transformation.

The elaboration of a morphology understood as a method is one of the most interesting elements of Goethean reflection, which, however, as shown by him limiting himself to studying dicotyledons, is largely a dualist conception that does not fail to regard nature as an expression of a divine or even atheistic mysticism. His approach is not entirely systemic in the sense of some twentieth-century analyses; I think of the Gaia hypothesis as elaborated by scientists James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis (Lovelock and Margulis 1974). Goethe's attempt to grasp the regulating principle of the system of nature does not have to do with the idea of dynamic equilibrium of physical forces in a sense of consequentiality between a human behavior and an environmental change. Rather, he

understands the human being as part of that nature which the Enlightenment had already attempted to rationalize as a machine or a clock, a refined device that was in the hands of God nevertheless. What remains valid from the beginning on in Goethe's thoughts on nature is the cognitive power of the poetic act, the fact that a cognitive moment of ethical value can arise from the perception of nature in its beauty and diversity. Ultimately, this is perhaps the added value of literature, its contribution to the climate issue, and to the conjugation of cultural differences: «Nowhere would anyone grant that science and poetry can be united. They forgot that science arose from poetry, and did not see that when times change the two can meet again on a higher level as friends» (Goethe [1817] 1952: 171-172).

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Chapter 5

Thirty-One Stories for Thirty-One Different Animal and Plant Species. *Voyages en sol incertain* by Matthieu Duperrex

Chiara Rolla

University of Genova, Italy.

chiara.rolla@unige.it

ORCID: 0000-0003-2783-5078

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c408>

Abstract

Duperrex's volume *Voyages en sol incertain. Enquête dans les deltas du Rhône et du Mississippi* (2019) is situated within an inter- and trans-disciplinary ecopoetic debate that French ecological activism has been utilizing for several years to give voice to the renewed dialogue between human and non-human — or better said, following Bruno Latour, between *vivant* and *non-vivant* — and to decisively affirm the urgency and non-negotiability of human action in response to the ecological emergencies we witness daily. The book describes two fluvial territories that strongly characterize and represent the South of France and of the United States. The Rhône and Mississippi deltas are indeed the scene of major ecological, historical, industrial, sociological, and political challenges. The study, after highlighting the structure of the book and the intermedial dialogue that the text establishes with the iconographic part, will focus on the mechanisms of the stories, the link they weave with the species to which they are matched, and the consequent multispecies dialogue they advocate, concluding with the concept of *sédimentation* that Duperrex transforms into a true poetics of nature.

Keywords

Anthropocene; *straniamento* (uncanny); ecopoetics; uncertain landscapes and soils; sentinel landscapes.

Introduction

The volume *Voyages en sol incertain. Enquête dans les deltas du Rhône et du Mississippi* (Duperrex: 2019)¹ is part of an inter- and trans-disciplinary ecopoetic debate that French ecological activism has been using for several years now to give voice to the renewed dialogue between human and non-human or, more accurately, as Bruno Latour (2015) would frame it, between *vivant* and *non vivant*. This debate decisively affirms the urgency and indispensability of human action in response to the ecological crises we witness daily.

In this context, an important critical mass is forming in France, already the protagonist of impactful projects. Notable examples include the performances of Bruno Latour, directed by Frédérique Aït-Touati, culminating in the publication of *Trilogie terrestre* (Aït-Touati and Latour 2022). Another example is the *Parlement de Loire* project, animated by the writer Camille de Toledo, which has given as its first result the publication of *Le fleuve qui voulait écrire* (2021)². Additionally, the festival *Agir pour le vivant*³ has reached its fourth edition, and the collective of jurists *Notre affaire à tous* published *Les droits de la nature. Vers un nouveau paradigme de protection du vivant* in 2022, a volume in which a state of the art and a global state of advancement of the issue of the recognition of the legal rights of Nature is reconstructed (Notre affaire à tous 2022).

Within this varied and dynamic framework, the research conducted by Matthieu Duperrex certainly plays a crucial role. As a *Maître de conférences* in *Sciences de l'homme et de la société pour l'architecture* at the University of Aix-Marseille, and founder and artistic director of the *Urbain, trop urbain* collective⁴, Matthieu Duperrex is both an artist and a researcher. He is also animator at the *École de*

1 From now on *VSI* followed by the page number.

2 On De Toledo's volume, see Rolla (2023).

3 From 2020 in Arles, and from 2022 also in Liège and Medellín (Colombia), the festival offers debates, round tables and meetings aimed at raising public awareness of the now pressing problems related to the exploitation of the environment, in an attempt to propose a new model of society that integrates among its priorities «the question of the living, at once human, plant and animal» (APV 2024; «la question du vivant, à la fois humain, végétal et animal»; all the translations of French texts are my own). The festival in 2023 took place for the first time in Africa, in Cameroon, and in 2025 it will also take place in Japan.

4 «Led by Matthieu Duperrex and Claire Dutrait, *Urbain, trop urbain* has been working since 2010 to capture the current metamorphoses of the city and the world through resolutely subjective artistic and cultural practices, whether poetic or reflexive. Through documented journeys using text, sound and images, and digital, artistic and bibliographic monitoring, the collective offers multiple perspectives on the city and what goes beyond it» (UTU 2019; «Dirigé par Matthieu Duperrex et par Claire Dutrait, *Urbain, trop urbain* se propose depuis 2010 de saisir les métamorphoses actuelles de la ville et du monde par des pratiques artistiques et culturelles résolument subjectives, qu'elles soient poétiques ou réflexives. Par des parcours documentés au moyen du texte, du son et de l'image, de la veille numérique, artistique et bibliographique, le collectif propose des regards multiples sur la ville et ce qui la dépasse»).

l'Anthropocène, set up within the *École Urbaine de Lyon* (University of Lyon)⁵, an incubator of interdisciplinary research projects, as well as training and economic, social and cultural enhancement of scientific knowledge. Duperrex is also one of the *auditionnés* of the Loire Parliament. His artistic endeavor and his scientific work are based on the investigation of man-made environments and extend to literature, the humanities and the visual and digital arts. One example is *Voyages en sol incertain*, a volume that combines artistic and scientific research by experimenting with a literary narrative that intersects the ecological humanities and the natural sciences. Accompanied by Frédéric Malenfer's inks, the book describes two river territories that strongly characterize and represent the South of France and of the United States. The deltas of the Rhône and Mississippi are, in fact, the scene of great ecological, historical, industrial, sociological, and political challenges.

In his becoming a reporter, ethnographer, anthropologist, and geologist, Duperrex can undoubtedly join those *écrivains-enquêteurs* described by Laurent Demanze (2019). These are writers who, relying on scientific materials and investigations, create works to give visibility and voice to what is known only to specialists or what is deliberately removed and forgotten.

In fact, field research generates artistic and literary forms linked to the concreteness of reality that not only narrate, but also illustrate and show problematic and complex situations, thus soliciting and provoking questions and debates from the reader. For years, Duperrex has conducted research on the so-called *anthropocene rivers*, those watercourses that have been affected by the processes of anthropization and are therefore more exposed to environmental risks. These territories are profoundly hybrid and fragile and therefore emblematic of man's contemporary relationship with the planet. From his river investigations, Duperrex has produced thirty-one short stories, each titled after a different animal or plant species. Balancing theory and narration, the text invents an original form of writing, attentive to the interweaving of *vivant* and *non vivant* and to the narration of contemporary landscapes.

After highlighting the structure, the mechanisms of the narratives, and the multi-species dialogue of which they are the mouthpiece, I will focus on the notion of «sentinel landscape and character», of «uncertain soils» and the centrality and importance that Duperrex attaches to sediments, to the point of transforming their investigation into a veritable poetics of nature.

A Literary Device for «Writing with the Living»

Écrire avec les vivants (Camelin 2023): I borrow the title of a recently published collection of essays because it is emblematic of the thinking behind Matthieu

5 See AEA (2024).

Duperrex's project. The starting hypothesis of the book is in fact based on the observation of the solidaristic bonds that literature, as a participant in «landscapes, dwellings, places, gestures» (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 40)⁶, must entertain with the living. Literature, attentive to the different forms of life, must contribute to forming and strengthening our consciousness of being «terrestrial among terrestrials» (Latour 2017: 111)⁷, thereby erasing all boundaries between human and non-human. This concept positions literature as a «survival strategy» (Iovino 2006) capable of saving us from extinction (Benedetti 2021), aiding us in overcoming the challenges posed by the ecological crisis, articulating and translating our experience of the world, suggesting ways of living and new ways of experiencing that thin layer of the Earth known as the «critical zone»⁸ on which, for example, Bruno Latour's theatrical performances focus.

Along the lines traced by Marielle Macé, it also seems for Duperrex to be

[...] impossible [...] to consider works without considering the possibilities of being that they support, institute or criticize, without looking at the worlds they open up or spoil, without [taking] an interest above all in the paths of life that they are capable of liberating. (Macé [2011] 2022: 15)⁹

Thus, literature becomes «a space for the production of forces» (Macé [2011] 2022: 71)¹⁰ aimed at sharpening our sensitivity towards the protection of the living — of all living beings — by safeguarding the beauty of their diversity. As Colette Camelin points out, since the end of the twentieth century and in response to the vertiginous acceleration that the degradation and destruction of the environment in which we live has taken, it becomes inescapable and unavoidable for writers and artists to poetically and literally inhabit the landscape (Camelin 2023: 12).

Thus, adopting the *écouménale* perspective formulated by Augustin Berque (1996), Duperrex in *Voyages en sol incertain* narrates the ethical, loving, and vital relationship he established with the two river environments he explored.

Emblematically, the introduction to the volume is entitled «Entrée en matière» because this is indeed what it is about. The stories not only introduce us a delicate *matière* such as the denunciation of the consequences of anthropic impact on fragile environments; they also represent a descent, a penetration into

6 «Des paysages, des demeures, des lieux, des gestes».

7 «Terrestres au milieu des terrestres».

8 «The Earth Critical Zone (ECZ) represents a complex interplay of chemical, biological, physical, and geological processes at the planet's surface, essential for maintaining the ecological balance vital for human existence» (Zhou and Gu 2024).

9 «[...] impossible [...] de considérer les œuvres sans considérer les possibilités d'être qu'elles soutiennent, instituent ou critiquent, sans regarder les mondes qu'elles ouvrent ou qu'elles gâchent, sans [s']intéresser avant tout aux pistes de vie qu'elles sont capables de libérer».

10 «Un espace de production de forces».

the *matière* of which the silt of the two rivers is made up, into their «uncertain» sedimentary landscapes wounded by the hand of man:

The Rhône Delta, the Mississippi Delta. These territories are created by the river's capricious plume, carrying alluvial deposits from all over the world. The Mississippi river basin covers a third of the United States, while the Rhône basin covers more than a quarter of mainland France. The deltas of these rivers have inherited the depth of the soils that the water licks, penetrates, erodes and rinses away. (*VSI*, 11)¹¹

The book, the fruit and result of two residencies of the author in Louisiana and Marseille in 2015, is available in both print and digital versions. The thirty-one short stories that compose it — thirty-one like the days of the longest months of the year, as if to suggest reading them, or rather taking them daily as a therapy aimed at fostering the reader's ecological awareness? — represent an interweaving of a gallery of living beings with the landscapes that host them. The texts are of a different nature — observational stories, naturalistic descriptions, elegies in free verse, first-person accounts of experience — and in the digital version they open up to non-linear forms of reading that are enriched with additional content, such as photographs, maps, and videos.

The volume is divided into four parts: “Les Spectres”; “Les Résidents”; “Les Sentinelles”; “Les Voyants”. The first three parts consist of nine short stories each, while the fourth contains four stories. To fully understand the narrative mechanisms and plots that underpin the structure of the volume, it is essential to first shed light on the concept of sediment and sedimentation that underlies Duperrex's investigation.

Sentinel Landscapes and Characters: The Toxic Bios

The term *sentinelle* is emblematically listed in the *Dictionnaire critique de l'Anthropocène* (DCA 2020) published by the CNRS. It defines, within the complexity of the anthropocene landscape, everything that watches over and supervises the protection of the environment and is capable of raising prompt alarms¹². This term can designate technological but also living systems capable of detecting «the weak signals of a possible and imminent disaster, signals that are

11 «Delta du Rhône, delta du Mississippi. Ces territoires sont enfantés par le panache capricieux du fleuve charriant les alluvions de tout pays. Le bassin hydrogéographique du Mississippi couvre un tiers du territoire états-unien, celui du Rhône plus d'un quart de la France métropolitaine. Les deltas de ces fleuves héritent de cette profondeur des sols que l'eau lèche, pénètre, érode et rince».

12 The term *sentinelle* is defined together with *lanceur d'alerte* (DCA 2020: 752-753).

not perceptible to humans» (*ibidem*)¹³. The river landscapes of the Rhône and Mississippi deltas and their inhabitants — animals, plants, and minerals — thus become, in the economy of Duperrex's tales, sentinel landscapes and characters, theatres of uncertainty and insecurity unfortunately unheard by most humans¹⁴.

Therefore, referencing Donna Haraway, Duperrex posits that exploring these territories, electing certain species of living beings as our lookouts by listening to them enables us to better *becoming-with*¹⁵, that is, to come to terms with those who, like us, are bound — for better or worse — to that land, that soil.

I still had to find guides, beyond the books and scholarly articles I had devoured, to get to the heart of the “brain of the world” (Walt Whitman). These were the famous intercessors, the bearers of a whole cosmology, the living creatures — animals and plants — who form narrative families: the spectres, the residents, the sentinels and the seers. Then, and only then, could the story begin its journey, taking me along the sedimentary paths of literature. (Duperrex and Cavallin: 2019)¹⁶

13 «Les signaux faibles d'une catastrophe possible et imminente, signaux non perceptibles par les humains».

14 Here's how Duperrex himself defines «sentinel landscapes» in one of his recent studies: «A new type of landscape, characteristic of the Anthropocene, can be described as a “sentinel landscape”, a geological epoch that refers not only to a deleterious monopolisation of the living soil by humans, but also to a double interweaving of the human and the non-human, with natural processes (*biomes*) crossed by the social on the one hand, and societies (*anthromes*) crossed by nature on the other. In addition to the changes it has brought about in the way we think about our relationship with the environment, and the way we translate this into new scientific concepts, the Anthropocene also calls for a new aesthetic order. The notion of the sentinel landscape aims to respond to this call by embodying the second term in the definition of the Anthropocene, namely the now inextricable interweaving of the geological and the historical, the non-human and the human» (Duperrex 2021; «On peut qualifier de “paysage sentinelle” un nouveau type de paysage, caractéristique de l'Anthropocène, une époque géologique qui ne désigne pas seulement un accaparement délétère du sol vivant par les humains, mais aussi un double entrelacement de l'humain et du non-humain, avec d'un côté des processus naturels (biomes) traversés de social et de l'autre côté, des sociétés (anthromes) traversées de nature. Au-delà des mutations induites dans la manière de penser nos relations à l'environnement, de traduire ces dernières au moyen de nouveaux concepts scientifiques, l'Anthropocène appelle aussi une nouvelle donne esthétique. La notion de paysage sentinelle vise à répondre à cet appel en incarnant le second terme de la définition de l'Anthropocène, à savoir cet entrelacement devenu inextricable du géologique et de l'historique, du non-humain et de l'humain»).

15 «Becoming-with, not becoming [...] becoming-with is how partners are [...] rendered capable. Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding. Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings. Companion species are relentlessly becoming-with» (Haraway 2016: 12-13).

16 «Il me fallait encore trouver des guides, au-delà des livres et articles savants que j'avais dévorés, pour me rendre au cœur du « cerveau du monde » (Walt Whitman). Ce furent, pour m'y emmener, ces fameux intercesseurs porteurs de toute une cosmologie, ces vivants – animaux et végétaux – qui s'agencent en familles narratives : les spectres, les résidents, les sentinelles

The thirty-one animal and plant species featured in Duperrex's stories are the «existents» of the uncertain soils of the two river deltas. Forced to live in compromised sedimentary soils, they become the protagonists of real *toxic bios*¹⁷ — toxic biographies of living beings —, tales of resistance and struggle rendered by those who experience first-hand and with their own bodies the environmental injustices and consequences of ecological conflicts. Duperrex has chosen them as *intercesseurs*, mediators and guides who accompany the narrator — who expresses himself in the first person singular, *je* — and the reader on a sort of initiatory journey, a descent into the underworld of the sedimentary layers of the two deltas. The use of the first person allows Duperrex to define his narrator not only as a traveller-witness, but as the protagonist of a true coming-of-age story. The rejection of zero focus emphasizes to the reader the importance of the narrator's personal, sensitive and phenomenological experience of the world. Duperrex thus claims a position of «attention and listening» to the spaces investigated and the beings that inhabit them. Far from an idea of supremacy, he seeks to embody an impermanent attitude, characterized by slowness and decantation, which in this way tends to approach the geological processes of sedimentation and the patient attitude of animals.

The four parts, or to borrow Duperrex's definition, the four «familles narratives» (*VSI*, 29) that make up the book — “Les Spectres”, “Les Résidents”; “Les Sentinelles”, “Les Voyants” — are made up of animals or plants designated by their binomial Latin names. This approach potentially links them together, smoothing out differences and pre-eminences in favour of four large families of «intercessors»:

The “spectres” first help us measure the losses. “Residents” accompany us as we explore new territories. “Sentinels” are ahead of us, heralding turbulence and crisis. Finally, the “seers” initiate us into powerful rituals. (*VSI*, 29)¹⁸

Each story features a title paired with the Latin name of an animal or plant species, and each of the four parts is punctuated, in an almost perfect alternation, by stories set in French river territory and tales of the Mississippi Delta. The survey is organized as a sort of «galerie de portraits» in which emphasis is

et les voyants. Alors, et alors seulement, le récit a pu commencer son chemin et m'embarquer dans les voies sédimentaires de la littérature...».

17 The expression is borrowed from the name of a portal devised and launched by Marco Armiero and Ilenia Iengo, two Italian researchers working at the Laboratory of Environmental Humanities at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm University (Armiero and Iengo, n.d.).

18 «Les «spectres» nous font d'abord mesurer les pertes. Les «résidents» nous accompagnent dans l'exploration des nouveaux territoires. Les «sentinelles» nous devancent et sont annonciatrices des turbulences et des crises. Les «voyants» nous initient enfin à de puissants rituels».

placed each time on the relationship that each living protagonist of the story — i.e., each character-sentinel — has with an aspect of the territory analyzed. In an interview with the magazine *Diacritik*, Duperrex mentions a real «sentiment géographique» that stems from the encounter between his writing (*graphein*) with time and its sedimentation in the earth (*géo*) (Cavallin: 2019). In this process, the living, the sentinel characters, reveal themselves as the best mediators/translators of an otherwise opaque language. Following in the footsteps of Jean-Christophe Bailly¹⁹, they thus make it possible to bring out the invisible, to practice this «cure de vision» (Jurado: 2020) that Duperrex advocates and presents as a method to be able to perceive «background noises, labile things, in the vertigo of time» (*ibidem*)²⁰. The sentinel-characters of Duperrex's tales thus become «the ghosts of the Anthropocene that guide the description of the geological work of modernity» (*ibidem*)²¹.

«Black Matter Lives» or For a Poetics of Sediments

I have borrowed the subtle wordplay used in the title of this paragraph from a study by Duperrex published in 2016, just before the publication of the volume I am reflecting on. His research starts by comparing the geological, industrial, and ecosystem configurations of the Rhône and Mississippi deltas, referred to as two *fleuves travailleurs* by the nineteenth-century geographer Élisée Reclus (1866; quoted in Le Lay 2008). In fact, they belong to those rivers that, at the end of their course, write, or rather «calligraphy along the coast of rich lemon deltas» (Cavallin 2019)²². Thus, the deltas become their memory, a living archive of the territories they have traversed, of the roughness they have crossed even in a broader perspective that opens up to the contribution of their tributaries:

From the movement [...] of suspended particles to the physical expanse that we rightly call a “deposit”, since the residual then becomes an *archive*, a *poïétique* of water is expressed [...] which is a hybrid of matter and culture. (*VSI*, 22-23)²³

19 «Each animal inhabits the network of appearances in its own way, i.e., it hides within it» (Bailly 2009, *Le visible est le caché*; «Chaque animal habite le réseau des apparences à sa façon, c'est-à-dire qu'il s'y cache»).

20 «Des bruits de fond, des choses labiles, dans le vertige du temps».

21 «des fantômes de l'Anthropocène qui guident pour décrire le travail géologique de la modernité».

22 «Calligraphient sur la côte de riches deltas de limon». The image of the writing river certainly evokes the title of the volume *Le fleuve qui voulait écrire* (De Toledo 2021), a project in which Duperrex was involved.

23 «Du mouvement [...] des particules en suspension jusqu'à cette étendue physique qu'on appelle très justement «dépôt», puisque le résiduel devient alors *archive*, s'exprime une poïétique de l'eau [...] qui est un hybride de matière et de culture».

In *Voyages en sol incertain* the author reconstructs the history, or rather the archaeology, of sedimentary terrains, which thus becomes a paradigm of life's manifestations. Over the years, sediments shift and settle, forming fertile but fragile territories, a refuge for incredible biodiversity; erosion affects these lands, leading to their gradual disappearance, which inevitably entails the loss of life and cultures (plant, animal, and human) that they once sustained. In front of this «palimpsest of turbulence» (Cavallin 2019)²⁴, humans are not mere spectators, but rather engrave with concrete and cement of their artefacts, becoming the cause or instrument of acceleration of erosive phenomena. This is particularly true if we consider human practices that are so widespread in the South of France and of the United States such as hydraulic constructions, drainage, dredging, and mining activities with consequent industrial pollution of water and soil.

Therefore, the narratives that make up the volume, true *récits-paysages*, describe and gloss the river-human dialogue, emphasizing the conflict between the former's capacity for ingenious improvisation and the latter's desire to rationalize and regiment the uncertainty and extemporaneousness that arise from those improvisations. The result is a narrative that stages the encounter/clash between the violent anthropization of those territories and the living but silent memory of those rivers represented by their sediments. This epic and solemn tale narrates and describes the elaboration of a new grief, a contemporary *mal du siècle* — the *solastalgia* — an anguish that «afflicts those who have suffered an environmental tragedy caused by man's clumsy intervention in nature» (Treccani 2018, s.v. “solastalgia”; my translation).

The Rhône and Mississippi deltas thus become the starting point for an investigation into one of the many aspects of the Anthropocene, namely the brutal impact of anthropic transformation of watercourses on surrounding landscapes and sedimentary and wetland ecosystems. Through this original way of exploring the landscape, Duperrex understands how inexorable and inextricable the process of natural sedimentation is now with the anthropized one: «The first lesson to be learned from sediments is that it has become very difficult to consider a strict division between nature and artifice» (Duperrex and Cavallin: 2019)²⁵.

The Anthropocene portrayed by Duperrex thus evokes the «quiet apocalypse» described by Serenella Iovino:

It does not come with a meteorite from outer space, but it crawls slowly into the planet's systems from within. Via the technosphere, it infiltrates the atmosphere, the biosphere, the lithosphere and, moving all the way up to the semiosphere, it

24 «Palimpseste de turbulences».

25 «Une première leçon des sédiments est donc qu'il est devenu très difficile d'y considérer un partage strict entre la nature et l'artifice».

reveals this simple truth: we have become sedimenting agents, makers of new fossils and new fossils in-the-making. (Iovino 2017: 315)

Like the sediments it investigates, the book presents itself as a space for researching and developing a hybrid form of writing that accounts for the richness and variety of the life forms that inhabit these territories. It represents a true poetics of sediments, nourished by the forms and languages of the animals, plants, and mineral forms it contains. This aesthetic research also translates the brutal anthropic forces that manipulate and alter those river landscapes. From the scientific and documentary approach that constitutes its foundation, the book draws inspiration to create its narrative dimension, wherein the protagonists — the living creatures — illustrate to the reader how to physically and poetically experience those sedimentary river soils. In this pact with the reader, Frédéric Malenfer's inks act as a support, and expansion, synergistically combining with the text to become an integral part of its communicative structure. They consolidate the conveyed message, giving it the strength and incisiveness of a true icon-text²⁶. These illustrations propose a synthetic and essential image of the evoked animal or plant, capturing its form and highlighting the grace and energy it conveys.

Uncertain Landscapes and Soils of the South

«The contemporary writer would be more *uncertain*, prey to doubt, devoted to the obscure practices of investigation», states Dominique Viart in his *La Littérature française au présent* (Viart, Vercier, and Evrard 2008: 315; italics mine)²⁷. Uncertainty, insecurity, and precariousness seem to be the hallmark of contemporary society, and literature cannot but reflect this condition. Within the porous and fragile landscape of current French prose, the practice of investigation, of enquiry (*enquête*) so present in the writing of many authors of this first part of the twenty-first century appears to be one of the possible answers to contemporary precariousness. This renewed *âge de l'enquête*²⁸, reminiscent of Zola's time, expresses the desire to decipher and investigate reality and translates into a renewed interest in the investigation of *terrain*. The *littératures de terrain*²⁹ — Fieldwork Literatures³⁰ — can be translated, according to Dominique Viart, into documentary narratives, collections of interviews, *enquêtes de terrain*

26 For a definition of icon-texts see in particular Alain Montandon (1990a; 1990b) and Giuseppe Carrara (2017).

27 «L'écrivain contemporain serait plus *incertain*, en proie au doute, voué aux pratiques obscures de l'enquête».

28 The formula «l'âge de l'enquête» is used by Zola to characterise his era in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880: 293).

29 Cf. Viart (2019).

30 Cf. Viart (2015; 2016; 2018).

precisely, alternative forms that intersect the factual and the fictional, venturing beyond the boundary between literature, the social sciences and the hard sciences.

Duperrex can then be counted among the ranks of those *écrivains-enquêteurs* described as follows by Ivan Jablonka:

Blessed are the prophets, the soothsayers, the visionary poets, the writer-shamans! But if you're not one of the chosen few, you still have the chance to be an investigator, a militant, a surveyor, a *histôr*, a witness, a scribe, a "scrivain" as Perec calls it, a researcher on the trail of what has been lost, or of worlds that have collapsed, or of structures we can't see, or of people we've forgotten. [...] The democratization of knowledge is undoing the "sacredness of the writer". It opens up to the masses the cenacles of the *happy few* and the seminars of the specialists. (Jablonka 2014: 314)³¹

As part of a vast process of democratization of literature and the social sciences, and somewhere between the role of witness and scribe, Duperrex ventures into fragile and uncertain terrain to give voice, through fiction, to those who have none, those living whose existence has been severely compromised by human action. These also include those life forms that are usually described as «unworthy» or harmful: I am thinking of parasites such as the cochineal *Nipponaclerda bivakoensis* that plagues Louisiana³² or the *Naegleria fowleri*³³, a very dangerous amoeba that lives in the ever-warming waters of rivers; of harmful insects such as the yellow fever mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*)³⁴ or animals that are dangerous to humans, such as the *Alligator mississippiensis*³⁵.

Recently in France, several initiatives have been dedicated to the exploration of the *paysages incertains*. I am thinking, for example, of a seminar held at the EHESS (*École des hautes études en sciences sociales*) by the literary historian Marielle Macé during the 2020-2021 academic year and titled precisely "Paysages incertains (enquêtes, récits, poèmes)" (Macé 2021a) and her lecture in Marseille in November 2021 titled "Paysages incertains" (Macé 2021b). There are also two events in Strasbourg in December 2021 titled "Contemporary Ruins/Les ruines contemporaines" (Contemporary Ruins 2021) followed by the conference (October 2022) titled "Paysages incertains: représentations et pratiques

31 «Heureux les prophètes, les devins, poètes-voyants, écrivains-chamans ! Mais, si l'on ne fait pas partie de ces élus, on a toujours la possibilité d'être un enquêteur, un militant, un arpenteur, un *histôr*, un témoin, un scribe, un « scrivain » comme dit Perec, un chercheur parti sur les traces de ce qu'il a perdu, ou des mondes qui ont sombré, ou des structures qu'on ne voit pas, ou des gens qu'on a oubliés. [...] La démocratisation du savoir défait le "sacre de l'écrivain". Elle ouvre à la foule les cénacles des *happy few* et les séminaires des spécialistes».

32 Protagonist of the story "La part Maudite" (*VSI*, 155-158).

33 Protagonist of the story "La purge des canalisations" (*VSI*, 97-100).

34 Protagonist of the story "*Aedes aegypti*, ou le rituel de l'air" (*VSI*, 168-170).

35 Protagonist of the story "Le réseau noir" (*VSI*, 133-138).

de l'espace à l'heure de l'anthropocène" (Uncertain Landscapes 2022a), which extended into an exhibition of young artists (Uncertain Landscapes 2022b).

But what does it mean to live in an uncertain world, in ruins, «abîmé» as Marielle Macé (2019) defines it? How are these *paysages incertains* characterized? Making the French scholar's words our own, we could say that they are not necessarily hostile, polluted or lacking in beauty; they are uncertain because they are ambiguous, unreadable, confused, suspicious. These are unstable and precarious environments, theatres of great intertwining of life and death lines, interwoven with waste, ghosts, oblivion, contamination, dangers, but also with rebirths, potentialities, surprises. These are landscapes that do not clearly define their direction or identity, that we do not always know how to define, let alone to perceive and understand in order to bind ourselves to them. Making a journey through an uncertain landscape or terrain therefore means experiencing the *straniamento* (uncanny) Niccolò Scaffai (2017: 12 and chap. 1) speaks of, the ability to look at what surrounds us, and to which we are accustomed, from a new perspective, inverted or with different eyes; it therefore means dislocating, decentralizing our gaze from the human to the non-human, concentrating and privileging even marginal forms of life, in order to «think like a mountain» (Iovino 2015) or «allow a river to write»³⁶. In this sense, the four-part subdivision of the thirty-one stories refers to the changes taking place as a result of the evolution of the sedimentary space and considers the Anthropocene as a crucial historical moment that is witnessing the disappearance of some species, the artificial introduction of others and the interweaving of lives belonging to different geological strata.

Duperrex's journeys into uncertain terrain therefore begin with *Spectres*, those living things that represent the disappearance of the modern world, ghosts that evoke the ideas of loss, death, and extinction. For example, the *Taxodium distichum*³⁷, bald cypress trees of America that are sinking into the sinkhole caused by the collapse of a salt deposit operated by the Texas Brine petrochemical company in Bayou Corne, Louisiana, on August 2, 2012. The video that can be watched on the web is quite shocking (Boudreaux 2013).

The second section of Duperrex's travels focuses on *Résidents*, those newly-arrived living things, often hybrids such as the rocky aggregates of anthropogenic materials accumulated in river deltas. As on that of the Rhône, where human activities have favored the settlement of new species at the expense of local ones. In this regard, Duperrex defines the Camargue «a human invention [whose] wild beauty is a founding myth» (*VSI*, 77)³⁸. It is in fact a human made agro-industrial delta, «a balance between Pechiney's salt monopoly and

36 See the Loire Parliament project mentioned above.

37 «Les chassés du paradis – *Taxodium distichum*» (*VSI*, 43-45).

38 «Une invention humaine [dont] la beauté sauvage est un mythe de fondation».

the farmers' unions and groups» (*VSI*, 77)³⁹, a hybrid land, an artificial agglomeration symbolized by the heron and the wild boar — the *Bubulcus ibis* and the *Sus scrofa*, protagonists of the short stories “Un western agro-industriel” (*VSI*, 77-79) and “La tribu des hauts-fourneaux” (*VSI*, 111-114) respectively. For the former, the establishment of rice cultivation has created an attractive habitat; the latter, on the other hand, thrives artificially only thanks to the hunters who have nurtured it. Even the pink flamingo itself, a major tourist attraction in that region, is an indicator that the local «natural» heritage is actually «artificial». In fact, what saved the flamingos is precisely and paradoxically tourism: since these birds attract crowds of visitors to Camargue every year, an artificial island was created in the lagoon to facilitate their nesting.

The third part of Duperrex's travels is set under the sign of the *Sentinelles*, invisible beings and at the same time heralds and revealers of future crises caused by human damage to the natural environment. The cicada — the *Lyristes plebejus* protagonist of the story “Un paysage d'effroi” (*VSI*, 150-153) — is the animal that symbolizes the invisibility of attacks on living beings. Its powerful song betrays its presence, but it remains invisible to the eyes. It thus becomes a non-silent witness to what is happening in Cassis Bay where tons of toxic residues from the manufacture of aluminum have been buried for fifty years, all in the apparent preservation of the surrounding environment that must remain «natural and wild» (*VSI*, 150)⁴⁰ for the numerous tourists who visit it: «What the sublime landscape suffocates, but the cicadas sing, is the red scare of our attachments» (*VSI*, 153)⁴¹.

The cicadas therefore act as *sentinels* that urge us to awake from our torpor by drawing our attention to the dangers and damage that human beings cause.

The *Voyants* section closes the collection; it is shorter than the others because it consists of only four stories, four like the four elements of traditional cosmogony: water, fire, air, and earth. The living protagonists of this final part⁴² are *seers* because they reveal to humans, through their rituals, the forces at work in those places, offering insights to those territories of the South that simultaneously celebrate their landscapes. In this context, the eel becomes for Duperrex the «totem» animal of the book, both because it possesses «the science of surface sedimentary layers and the science of deep trenches» (*VSI*, 165)⁴³, and

39 «Un équilibre entre le monopole salinier de Pechiney et les syndicats et groupements agricoles».

40 «Naturel et sauvage».

41 «Ce que le paysage sublime étouffe, mais que les cigales chantent, c'est l'effroi rouge de nos attachements».

42 Here are the titles of the four stories from which the element the author has paired it with can be inferred: “*Magnolia grandiflora*, ou le rituel de l'eau”; “*Anguilla anguilla*, ou le rituel du feu”; “*Aedes aegypti*, ou le rituel de l'air”; “*Phragmites australis*, ou le rituel de la terre”.

43 «La science des couches sédimentaires de surface et la science des fossés profonds».

above all because it is the only one capable of uniting the Rhône with the Mississippi, of joining and connecting these two territories of the South.

Conclusion: The Omniscient Clairvoyant Eel

Anguilla rostrata, the American eel, swims down the Mississippi, leaving the marshes of the delta to breed in the Sargasso Sea. *Anguilla anguilla* is not very different from its American cousin. [...] It travels down the Rhône, leaves the delta marshes and goes to breed in the Sargasso Sea. (*VSI*, 165)⁴⁴

The reproductive cycle of this migratory animal remains shrouded in mystery and is incredibly complex. What is known is that all eels are born in the Sargasso Sea, the place in which the species reproduces itself. Due to this characteristic, within the narrative framework of Duperrex's book, the eel becomes the link between the two rivers, between the two deltas under investigation, but also between the two southern regions of the continents. It is no coincidence that the author assigns this animal a pivotal role, transforming it into a sort of priestess of the sediments, an omniscient narrator. Thanks to its journeys from the Sargasso Sea to the Mediterranean, it is the only living being capable of comparing, describing, and denouncing the human misdeeds in the Mississippi and Rhône deltas.

The eels of the two deltas meet at depth. Before giving birth to their offspring and before dying, they give each other news about their respective petrochemical landscapes. ExxonMobil, Texaco, Shell, BP, Valero, Chevron, for one. Total, Lyondell, Naphtachimie, Arkema, Geogaz, Esso for the other. (*VSI*, 165)⁴⁵

Due to its profound knowledge of both freshwater and saltwater territories, the eel becomes the ideal narrator for a book dedicated to the investigation of sedimentary worlds. This book addresses the contemporary need to find new ways of storytelling that express today's uncertainty and precariousness. It can be read not only as a practice of knowledge and denunciation but also as a preservation of memory and a celebration of worlds on the verge of extinction.

In line with the «sensory animism» described by David Abram (1997), Duperrex, with his *Voyages*, reaffirms the need to go beyond the apparent

44 «*Anguilla rostrata*, l'anguille d'Amérique, descend le Mississippi, quitte les marais du delta et va se reproduire en mer des Sargasses. *Anguilla anguilla* n'est guère différente de sa cousine américaine. [...] Elle descend le Rhône, quitte les marais du delta et va se reproduire en mer des Sargasses».

45 «Les anguilles des deux deltas se rencontrent donc en profondeur. Avant de donner naissance à leur descendance et avant de mourir, elles se donnent des nouvelles sur leurs paysages pétrochimiques respectifs. ExxonMobil, Texaco, Shell, BP, Valero, Chevron, pour l'une. Total, Lyondell, Naphtachimie, Arkema, Geogaz, Esso pour l'autre».

silence of the Earth, emphasizing the interconnection between all living beings. By giving voice to sediments and underscoring their importance — «black matter lives» — he transcends the idea of multispecies dialogue. He suggests, in line with Abram and with Anna Tsing (2015; 2022)⁴⁶, the sensory presence of everything, from plants to animals, rocks, and rivers, and the human ability to tune into these presences through greater awareness, attention, and listening skills. *Voyages en sol incertain* is thus a polyphonic work in which the author expresses his experience by giving voice to other living beings, making the human one of the many voices of Gaia. In this sense, the adopted perspective rejects both «catastrophic prophecy [and] confident opportunism» (Duperrex and Dutrait: 2013)⁴⁷ — two narratives that place the human viewpoint in the same position: that of not having a world from which to speak and act decisively. *Voyages en sol incertain*, on the other hand, advocates for the necessity of «non-simplistic counter-narratives»⁴⁸, as Duperrex mentioned in a 2013 interview with the newspaper *Libération* (*ibidem*). These are stories rooted in local histories and cultures that describe and aspire to a «habitable» world — a world that does not force all living beings to conform to the same language, values, and rules of calculation and play (*ibidem*). This is why, in my opinion, the book and Duperrex's broader work can be considered part of the resistance stories discussed by Serenella Iovino (2022) and Marco Armiero — efforts that attempt to contribute to dismantling the logic of the era of waste — the *Wasteocene* (Armiero 2021) —, in which we find ourselves living, with varying degrees of responsibility.

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46 Indeed, it seems that sediments function for Duperrex much like the mushroom does for Tsing. They become the emblem of the ability to survive, resist, and be reborn from the ruins of capitalism.

47 «La prophétie catastrophiste [et] l'opportunisme confiant».

48 «Contre-récits non simplistes».

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Chapter 6

Humanizing the English Language: Sustaining the Global South through Teaching*

Dora Renna

University for Foreigners of Siena, Italy.

dora.renna@unistrasi.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-8618-6376

Annarita Taronna

University of Bari, Italy.

annarita.taronna@uniba.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-6974-4484

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c409>

Abstract

In an era of global crises, there is a growing call for translingual and trans-cultural approaches to teaching humanities, particularly English. This contrasts with the prevalent view of English as a neutral, culture-free tool for professional success. This chapter examines how an English language university course for Prospective Primary English Teachers (PPETs) can shape theoretical assumptions on complex discourse constructions and address problematic (de)colonial relationships. It advocates for integrating migration narratives into ELT classes to re-position English in the global context, centering on human speakers. The analysis of two children's books selected from the PPET ELT syllabus as a case study is carried out with a transdisciplinary approach, and the methodology draws from multimodal critical discourse analysis to understand the potential of these readings to transform ELT by fostering deeper cultural and linguistic understanding.

* This chapter is the result of the joint efforts by the authors. In particular, Annarita Taronna authored the sections: "Introduction", "Theoretical Framework", "Materials and Methods: The Course and the Texts", and "Concluding Remarks", while Dora Renna penned the sections: "Materials and Methods: The Multimodal Analysis" and "Results and Discussion".

Keywords

ELT; multimodality; critical discourse analysis; decolonial studies; pedagogy.

Introduction

In an era of global crises on multiple scales (environmental, social, economic), there have been calls for an increasingly translingual and transcultural teaching of humanities, and in particular of the English language (Yazykova et al. 2020), against the view of English as a neutral, culture-free tool for professional success. This more “transactional” view of English Language Teaching (ELT) is nonetheless still widespread, as it is often expected to merely offer «the means to get what we need in the here and now or give service to another» (Chapman 2021: 92). Against this background, this chapter sets out to examine how an English language university course for Prospective Primary English Teachers (henceforth PPETs) could be a place for shaping theoretical assumptions on complex discourse constructions, framing deep and problematic (de)colonial relationships. Additionally, it proposes the reading of new teaching materials within ELT classes, i.e., migration narratives that could help re-position English in the global world, with the final aim to bring the human speakers back to the center.

First, the theoretical framework informing our work is outlined, in order to build a transdisciplinary context for our study on ELT. Following, the teaching context and the reading methodology, based on multimodal critical discourse analysis, are presented along with the two children books chosen as a case study. The case studies are explained and discussed in detail in the results and discussion session. The chapter closes with brief concluding remarks.

Theoretical Framework

The discussion around a pedagogy that is less concerned with learning as the acquisition of a semi-material good (which, in the case at hand, would be the English language) that can be tested and measured, and more with the potential of learning as a form of liberation is only relatively new, as it stemmed from Marxist philosophy starting in the last century. An example is Antonio Gramsci, who insisted on the fact that education cannot be neutral, but it must be critical and argumentative in order to be able to change reality, to have as an output individuals, rather than mere copies (1975 [1948-1951]). This idea of transformative action can be found in the work of Paulo Freire who, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explored the notion of *praxis* as reflection and action that transforms reality by developing in the interstitial spaces between action, policies, critical thinking, and relearning (1970: 100-101). This is very much in

line with later works by Gloria Jean Watkins, known with the pseudonym “bell hooks” (1994), encouraging teachers to be aware of themselves as practitioners and as human beings by enacting productive ways of constructing «progressive, holistic education, ‘engaged pedagogy’» (hooks 1994: 15). She advocates for a concept of *praxis* that merges reflection and action. This approach necessitates that teachers recognize themselves both as professionals and as individuals. To educate students in a supportive and inclusive manner, teachers must focus on self-awareness. Therefore, the primary objective for educators should be to foster self-actualization and intercultural competence. This can be achieved through the «decolonization of ways of knowing» (hooks 2003: 3) and ongoing self-critical examination. The conceptualization of decoloniality in pedagogy is a thread that joins Freire’s and hooks’ work, and can be also found in Walter Mignolo’s approach to education, which envisages and elaborates a decolonial epistemology. Known as «border thinking», it is the long and continuous process whereby one can pass «from imperial and territorial epistemology (e.g. global linear thinking) to an epistemology emerging from the places and bodies left out of the line (e.g. the Anthropos, the Orientals, the Third World, etc.)» (Mignolo 2011: 91-92). Border thinking is fundamental as a method to unveil the unspoken entanglement of modernity and coloniality (Quijano 2000). This decolonial approach is the ideal starting point for an investigation of the case studies at hand from a perspective of «epistemic disobedience» against the oppressive ways of knowing and imagining (Mignolo 2009: 159). Accordingly, in his view «education is a battle ground» between competing epistemologies for decolonization (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 241). He argues for the decolonization of education both inside and outside schools, with a shift from imperial and territorial epistemologies to those that emerge from marginalized communities and perspectives. This involves rethinking and reshaping the categories, entities, and objects that populate Western epistemologies, such as the concept of “representation”, which has long been used to regulate social and environmental life, as well as language.

In particular, a key concept for this work is Mignolo’s (2009) distinction between “representational” and “relational” knowledge. The former is rooted in European modernity and relies on macro-narratives and fixed principles that aim to categorize and control the world. Representational knowledge prioritizes static, hierarchical, and often oppressive structures, starting from the very concept of “representation”, key in preserving colonial power dynamics. On the other hand, relational knowledge emerges from decolonial epistemology. This approach values the interconnectedness and interdependence of different ways of knowing and being. Relational knowledge emphasizes adaptive, generative processes, and prioritizes the creative and contextual responses of individuals and communities to their unique circumstances. This form of knowledge challenges the fixed categories and normative rules imposed by Western thought,

advocating for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of reality that respects and incorporates diverse epistemologies, particularly those marginalized by colonialism. His promotion of a knowledge that is relational and adaptive, with an emphasis on the creative and generative dispositions that students can use in diverse and unpredictable communicative situations, is key in our approach to this study. In fact, a knowledge thus structured recognizes the value of the new linguistic models that arise around English and other languages, which reflect the creative power and agency of those who have historically been left at the margin.

Over the past thirty years, research on the evolution of English by scholars such as Alan Firth (1996), Suresh Canagarajah (1999, 2013), Juliane House (1999), Jennifer Jenkins (2000, 2007), and Barbara Seidlhofer (2004, 2011) has recognized the creativity and legitimacy of new English forms in our postcolonial, globalizing world. They note that non-native speakers now outnumber native speakers, significantly shaping English's international use (Seidlhofer 2004: 211-12). In this context, teachers and students can then relearn the knowledge and languages that have undergone centuries of systematic suppression and imaginatively construct pluriversal social, communicative, and educational institutions that will prove to be more inclusive and fairer for everyone. Such a pedagogy will require preparing students for lifelong learning, rather than giving them the false hope that a set of grammatical norms will help them. The aim of an ELT course for PPETs would be to cultivate in them dispositions that can be a support throughout a life of constant negotiation of meanings in diverse environments for social becoming and bonding. Consequently, we are guided to perceive and recognize the creative power of the English used in transnational contexts — a language that is becoming less and less monolithic and more adaptable for negotiation and for stories that come from all over the world. This was powerfully outlined by Canagarajah, who has long worked to apply decoloniality to ELT (1999, 2007, 2013, 2023). In his introduction to the special issue on “Decolonizing ELT” (2023), he redefines pedagogy as an expansive practice that transcends traditional classroom boundaries and conventional knowledge frameworks. He describes pedagogy as a *praxis* that adopts an ecological orientation, emphasizing the importance of incorporating diverse resources within the learning space that extend beyond the prescribed syllabus readings and, as previously proposed by hooks (1994), sees the teacher as a professional and a human:

Many teachers consider cultivating ethical or cultural values extraneous to teaching, preferring an instrumental pedagogy focusing on language norms. However, Southern orientations to embodiment and relationality question such separation. Learning will always be ecological, drawing from all the available resources both inside and outside the classroom, both those prescribed by policymakers and those that are not. (Canagarajah 2023: 291)

Canagarajah also proposes a dialogical pedagogy, where interactions between students and teachers actively develop stances against dominant language ideologies and narratives. He critiques traditional, codified versions of pedagogy found in textbooks, handbooks, and other published materials that often treat teachers as mere technicians implementing knowledge created by experts. These conventional pedagogies focus on norms and grammars for teaching one language at a time, which Canagarajah argues are ineffective in multilingual contexts where diverse languages coexist and interact. In terms of teaching models, Canagarajah points out that many educators view the cultivation of ethical or cultural values as outside the scope of their teaching responsibilities, and would rather focus on an instrumental pedagogy centered on language norms and predefined materials. However, the Southern perspectives on embodiment and relationality brought forward by Canagarajah challenge this separation, advocating for a more integrated approach. Ultimately, the current state of the world calls for a pedagogy of “becoming”, where students are encouraged to develop and adapt their skills by creatively negotiating communicative practices that reflect emergent repertoires, contexts, and meanings.

One thing that emerges clearly from this perspective on language teaching is the key role played by the physical world in a pedagogy based on “ecological learning”. In order to save ELT from the abstract idea of language as a set of fixed rules and from the decontextualized and de-historicized concept of English as a neutral tool, it is crucial to bring language and its teaching back to the real world, where such a conception of language may not be enough to investigate and learn it. Indeed, other conceptualizations may be more helpful here, like that of “*linguaging*”, as it is

a concept that gestures at large to dimensions of linguistic behaviour that cannot be captured by, or are purposefully excluded from, approaches focused on delineating language primarily as a rule-driven formal system. These aspects include embodied processes of sense-making wherein relational negotiation of meaning, attunement to context, and the non-linear unfolding of implicit assumptions demonstrably enact the constitutive entanglement of language use in the situational dynamics of its enactment. The gerund declension of “*language*” into ‘*linguaging*’, which draws attention to the verb-like quality of the concept, provides the most important clue to its dynamic conceptual deployment, which has traversed a number of fields since the 1980s. (Basile 2016: 83)

As seen, viewing language in terms of *linguaging* or *translinguaging* (Canagarajah 2013) is intrinsically linked to ecology through its entanglement with the environment. Another crucial link between *linguaging* and ecology is emotion, given the «culturally/ecologically embedded, naturalistically grounded, affect-based, dialogically coordinated, and socially enacted nature of *linguaging* as a form of whole-body behavior or whole-body sense making» (Thibault

2011: 211). The social and ecological spheres must not be seen as separated, as the environment is more than just a container for people to act socially that can be placed within an inner/outer dichotomy (Jensen and Cuffari 2014). In fact, there is also another element that comes into play when taking into consideration language/languageing, migration, and ecology, and it is the fact that they all belong to a world of actual people moving from one place to another for various reasons. Migration is a crucial force that redesigns global spaces, both physically and linguistically, and both globally and locally¹. The environmental crises yielded by climate change are increasingly cause for people movements across the world, and what has been defined as “environmental migration”² is actively contributing to the re-shaping of physical space, while the arrival of migrants from the Global South contributes to the emergence of new worldviews and stories.

The power of these stories and worldviews is at the core of the work by Arran Stibbe who, in his seminal works (2015, 2024)³ has explored ecolinguistics with a specific attention to narration⁴ and metaphor. Their importance lies in the fact that they have the power to (re)shape and promote certain attitudes and behaviors, as well as to establish and subvert power relations — a concept drawn from critical discourse analysis (CDA) — to the point that these are «stories-we-live-by», i.e., «stories in the minds of multiple individuals across a culture» (Stibbe 2015: 6). Stibbe attributes immense power to narration at the intersection of language and ecology:

The link between ecology and language is that how humans treat each other and the natural world is influenced by our thoughts, concepts, ideas, ideologies and worldviews, and these in turn are shaped through language. It is through language that economic systems are built, and when those systems are seen to lead to immense suffering and ecological destruction, it is through language that they are resisted and new forms of economy brought into being. (Stibbe 2015: 2)

1 A fascinating study on how urban spaces can determine different attitudes towards migration was carried out by Cristina Cassandra Murphy (2018), who advocates for a re-design of cities that disrupts segregation, since «‘in-between’ spaces foster opportunities for positive encounters among different groups in public spaces» (Murphy 2018: 159).

2 The term can be found on the website Environmental Migration Portal of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), «a one-stop service website to promote new research, information exchange and dialogue, intended to fill the existing data, research and knowledge gaps on the migration, environment and climate change (MECC) nexus» (EMP 2024).

3 In this analysis we used his least recent work as a reference because, at the time the course was delivered, the most recent one was not available yet.

4 Stories are here intended as cognitive structures in the minds of individuals which influence how they perceive the world and make sense of their existence through narration (Bruner 1987).

He uses the tools of CDA to reveal underlying ideologies that perpetuate harmful ecological practices, and demonstrates how language can be used to challenge and change these ideologies, and introduces the concept of positive discourse, which involves using language to promote sustainability, respect for nature, and ecological harmony. His analysis identifies various forms that stories can take and their linguistic manifestations (Stibbe 2015: 17), which are particularly important for this study, and deserve some explanation. The first form is *ideology*, which consists of stories about how the world is and should be, shared by members of a particular group. These ideological stories are manifested in language through discourses, clusters of linguistic features that are characteristically used by the group, helping to maintain and reinforce their shared beliefs and values. Through specific choices of words, phrases, and structures, these discourses perpetuate the worldview of the group, influencing how its members perceive and interact with the world around them. Next, *framing* involves stories that use a frame — a structured set of knowledge about one area of life — to shape understanding in another area. Linguistically, this is evident through the use of trigger words, which bring the frame to mind. These trigger words help listeners or readers quickly and effectively apply the established frame to new information, thereby shaping their understanding and reactions in a predictable way. Closely related is *metaphor*, a type of framing where a frame is used to structure a distinct and clearly different area of life. Metaphors are also linguistically manifested through trigger words that evoke a specific and distinct frame. By describing one domain of experience in terms of another, metaphors enable people to understand complex or unfamiliar concepts through more familiar terms, thus facilitating communication and comprehension. *Evaluation* stories focus on whether an area of life is perceived as good or bad. These stories are reflected in language through appraisal patterns — linguistic patterns that represent areas of life positively or negatively. These patterns influence how people judge and evaluate different aspects of their lives, guiding their attitudes and behaviors toward those aspects based on the language used. *Identity* stories describe what it means to be a particular kind of person. In language, these stories manifest as forms of language that define the characteristics of certain kinds of people. Through specific descriptors and categorizations, these linguistic forms construct and convey social identities, shaping how individuals see themselves and how they are seen by others. *Conviction* stories address whether a particular description of the world is true, uncertain, or false. These stories are linguistically represented through facticity patterns — linguistic features that express descriptions of the world as true, uncertain, or false. Such patterns are crucial in establishing the credibility and reliability of information, influencing how people assess the truthfulness of various claims. *Erasure* stories suggest that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration. Linguistically, this manifests through patterns that fail to represent a particular area of life

or that background or distort it. These patterns can marginalize or completely ignore certain aspects of life, leading to their social invisibility and diminishing their perceived importance. In contrast, *salience* stories imply that an area of life is important and worthy of attention. This is manifested in language through patterns that give prominence to an area of life. Such linguistic patterns highlight and draw attention to certain aspects, making them more noticeable and significant in social discourse.

Part of Stibbe's work is dedicated to the discussion around the practical implications of ecolinguistics across society — including its potential application in education. That is why, for our analysis of children's books proposed as learning material for PPETs, we wanted to draw the necessary analytic tools from critical discourse analysis as utilized within ecolinguistics, expanding their scope to our conceptualization of ELT pedagogy as Southern critical thinkers. In fact, the term "Global South" extends to contexts like Italy, a crossroad of migration flows, challenging traditional language understandings and fostering new models of linguistic and cultural interaction. By reading children's migration literature, PPETs can develop intercultural competence, recognize the role of language in acculturation, and understand how migrants influence culture in Italy and worldwide. This approach aims to dissolve stereotypes, foster inclusivity, and challenge traditional views on language, community, and citizenship, foregrounding relationality and developing ethics for negotiating meanings with all parties in the environment. Deviating from language purity, native speakerism, and language ownership, they help students develop critical thinking. Decolonization as pedagogy is at the core of any transformative politics. Not just multilingual students in ELT or PPETs classrooms, but everyone in society can learn how to communicate in more inclusive, diverse, and ethical ways.

Materials and Methods

Our methodology represents an attempt to build a complex bridge across ecolinguistics, migration, critical discourse analysis, and ELT pedagogy. Our aim was to implement a course for PPETs that would abandon the reified view of ELT, passed on without questioning its role in history and in the current state of the world that ultimately perpetuates its use as a tool for discrimination and oppression. With the increasing changes in classroom configurations, the urgency of re-thinking language teaching and environment becomes unescapable. In this sense, our research attempt is to make more evident and explicit the intersection between migration narratives/stories and ecolinguistics by analyzing language patterns in the texts selected to reveal the underlying stories-we-live-by.

In particular, our work is divided into two parts, the first concerning implementation of a syllabus mirroring our conception of decolonization as

pedagogy and the selection of texts to deliver a PPET ELT course based on the students' needs and familiarity with English, and the second being dedicated to the textual analysis of the books through an ecolinguistics and CDA framework.

Materials and Methods: The Course and the Texts

Our work was focused on the course “English Language Laboratory II” for PPETs at the University of Bari in the academic year 2022/2023, where Annarita Taronna was the main instructor and Dora Renna participated as a guest lecturer. Most of the course was dedicated to the reading and understanding of transethnic literature for children with the purpose of encouraging the use of narration as a pedagogical tool in the PPETs' future profession. Since the course was a laboratory, most of the time was dedicated to practical activities, which included both individual and group work. Rather than passive receptors of notions, the students were expected to be an active part of the learning process as future teachers. Each lesson (each lasting two hours), co-constructed with the students, included collective debates around issues relevant to the text presented, reading, and activities that ranged from comprehension questions to proposal and implementation of learning activities for primary school English students, which were then presented and discussed with the class.

The students in the course (about 125) were mainly (but not exclusively) women-identifying and, while many of them were in their early twenties and with no professional background, a considerable number of them already had some teaching background. Some were actually rather experienced teachers looking for a professional upgrade, and generally older than their colleagues. As for their language competence as determined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the landscape was rather varied, ranging from A2 to (less frequently) C1. According to the Degree Course guidelines, the expected achievement for students had to be at least a B1 competence in both comprehension and production. Despite the limited grammatical competence of many students, we noticed a widespread and remarkable (cross)cultural sensitivity and understanding, as well as a disposition to translanguage, all of which emerged clearly both in their enthusiastic reception of the course materials and in the insight revealed across the course activities.

As for the texts proposed, they were selected according to a set of evaluation criteria adapting the work of Lee Galda and Bernice Cullinan (2002), Wendy Kasten et al. (2005), Wilma Robles de Meléndez (2004):

- The story and the characters are free of any historical distortions, gender or ethnic stereotypes. Messages about the cultural group, including gender, race, and social class, are free of any bias.

- Characters are portrayed according to the time and setting. If set in contemporary times, characters reflect current lifestyles.
- Characters reflect a variety of physical diversities.
- The story presents people with disabilities in a positive, non-stereotypical way.
- Female and male characters are presented in a variety of roles that exemplify non-stereotypical tasks.
- Roles of females and males are equal and consistent with those in their cultural groups.
- Roles and the importance of families are reflective of views held by the cultural group.
- People from diverse groups are portrayed in positive and leadership roles.
- Illustrations depict the culture and people in culturally accurate ways.

While the proposed stories were quite numerous (15 in total), here only two of them were selected, in order to allow for a detailed analysis. The case study consists of: *The Day War Came* (2018), written by Nicola Davies and illustrated by Rebecca Cobb, winner of the 2019 Honor Book for Younger Children, and *The Journey* (2016) by Francesca “Frenzi” Sanna, winner of the 2017 Ezra Jack Keats New Author Honor and New Illustrator Honor Awards. Both books relate the stories of children who, alone or with their family, have their happy lives disrupted by war and are forced to flee their countries.

Materials and Methods: The Multimodal Analysis

Before exploring the methodology, it is important to note that children’s books have specific features that are intrinsic in their genre and must be taken into consideration when analyzing them. First, their limited length should not be mistaken for superficiality or simplicity. In fact, they are rather short forms of communication where verbal and non-verbal communication condense to shape messages that can be resonant and even ideological:

Picturebooks express the ideology of a society both verbally and visually. Ideology may be expressed as social ecology or habitus in such a way that it permeates visual and verbal discourses without becoming overt. Because ideology is not fixed, the function of stories both to make the world intelligible and to shape it in desirable forms must necessarily be fluid and flexible. (Stephens 2017: 137)

The role of images should not be underestimated, as they are an integral part of the narration, and they have a much more immediate impact on readers (especially younger ones), thanks to their ability to make a story relatable in terms of personal experiences but also of values shared across families

and communities (Mantei and Kerwin 2014). For these reasons, a satisfactory analysis of children's illustrated literature should be both multifaceted and multimodal.

As for the analysis, we devised a methodology that applies multimodal CDA qualitatively, so as to allow an in-depth reading of the case studies. The methodology draws from Stibbe's story forms (2015: 17), described in the theoretical section.

Given the dense content of these books and the importance of their non-verbal content, we looked for both verbal and non-verbal manifestations of all the story types simultaneously. In these books, images are rarely in stark contrast with their textual counterpart, as they mainly depict the text illustratively or expand on it. That is why an analysis based on intermodal relations (Renna 2021) would perhaps not be the most revealing, and we decided to treat verbal and non-verbal as equal contributors in the story construction. The resulting scheme of analysis that we proposed to our students added a small edit to Stibbe's (2015), in that we worked to find both verbal and non-verbal manifestations of the abovementioned stories-we-live-by and, overall, we expected to find some degree of positive discourses of inclusion and harmony. Here, the two short picture books are analyzed qualitatively page by page, focusing on both verbal and non-verbal, and identifying instances of any type of story we could find.

By applying Stibbe's framework to these stories, we encouraged a critical examination that could lead to a fair use of migration narratives in children's books within the context of ELT. Our final aim was to enhance language learning but, even more, to promote critical thinking, empathy, and a decolonial understanding of migration, preparing PPETs and their future pupils to be more inclusive and informed global citizens.

Results and Discussion

The Day War Came

As mentioned in the previous section, this book tells the story of a young girl who has to flee her war-torn country in search for a new home. The illustrations by Rebecca Cobb recall children's drawings, which could further convey the idea of a relatable story told in first person by a child like any other. The book cover already condenses some of the crucial elements of the story: the title contains the word "war" and separates the girl from her chair, pencils, and drawings, while she runs away in distress. Written in dark letters, the strong impact of the words in the title are magnified by the increasing size of the font as the words get closer to the girl. A first instance of visual negative *evaluation* of war can be seen here, as it is driving a little girl away from typical objects of a child's life. An aspect that must be noted immediately — and will be recurrent throughout

— is the use of the verbs used to describe the war, which enact a *framing* of the war as a living being, actively chasing the girl wherever she goes, e.g. come, bring, take, follow, take possession, etc.

The story then opens with the description of the day war broke out in her town (and life) which, as often happens, had started just like any other day of her life (Davies and Cobb 2018: 4-7).

Visually, the peaceful morning starts in a well-lit kitchen with bright «flowers on the window sill» (4-5) and other everyday elements like food on the table and laundry hanging right outside the window. The whole family is smiling as they share their morning routine. The presence of natural elements will return across the book, in some cases as symbols of peace, in some others accompanying war and escape. After the flowers, nature is again present in a positive light as the little girl is at school learning about volcanoes, frog life cycle, and birds, all of which are both mentioned in the text and portrayed in the illustration (6-7). School appears in the light of a clearly positive *evaluation*, as it is the place where she learns things that she still remembers (at the time of narration) and where she feels at ease. In fact, she is seen smiling in both scenes, and in both scenes her day is characterized by singing (her father at home, herself in class). Peace is in both cases symbolized by bright colors, but in the second scene the disruption can be seen looming behind the peaceful scene in the form of three little, black figures that look like war helicopters crossing the sky (6).

The following pages show the war outbreak (8-12). From a verbal perspective, war is, too, initially understood in natural terms that are familiar for the girl, i.e., hail and thunder, but soon after it is clear to her that war is nothing like she had seen before: «smoke and fire and noise *that I didn't understand*» (8). This lack of comprehension leads the protagonist to personify war as a living being that covers distances («came across the playground»), kills people all of a sudden («came into my teacher's face»), and purposely destroys the child's environment — thus disrupting nature, too (10). Visually, the war is not illustrated with clear images: in its place, a dark cloud of smoke and dust, a visual *metaphor* of the devastation brought about by it. In the first illustration representing the outbreak (8-9), a dense cloud looks like it is obliterating the previous, colorful tranquility: chairs, pencils, and drawings are swept away, while the girl tries to hide her face in her little desk, which also looks like a last, *metaphorical* handhold of what used to be. In the following illustration, the dark cloud has spread across the scene and has removed all color and life. When the dust settles, there is nothing left of what she used to know, and the reader can recognize the «blackened hole that had been my home» by the remainder of the flowers on her windowsill (12-13), now trampled on and similar to the flames in the background. The negative *evaluation* of war is here evident, as the helpless little girl cries before the devastation of her home, now gone along with her family — she states she is «all

alone» (13). Here, the dark cloud that replaced her home creates a non-verbal continuum with the columns of smoke scattered across the bombed town.

In such a landscape, the girl cannot do anything else but try and escape from war (14-15). The pages portraying the escape are divided horizontally into three parts, which represent various moments of the girl's journey, described in the text: nature is now hostile, as fields, mountains, cold, mud, and rain are obstacles to her escape. The recurrence of the verb "run", used three times in a few lines, triggers the *framing* of immigration as escape, a difficult and desperate race against time a person like any other is forced to join in order to leave war behind. This also expresses part of a migrant's *identity*, which is not that different from that of any other people, who by pure chance can enjoy a life of safety in their homes. Such framing and identity, which may seem obvious to some, go against common anti-immigration ideologies, like the recurring argument that sees migrants as people who come to a new land to commit crimes (Lopez 2024). The little red shoes that «lay empty in the sand» (15) strengthen the sense of tragedy, as they represent the people who lost their life during the crossing, emphasizing the high cost of migration in terms of human lives.

The following illustrations represent the arrival to the refugee camp, which is seen from above, in faint colors that alternate with darker shades of black and grey that remind of the previously seen dark clouds (16-17). The verbal description of the refugee camp features an explicit negative *evaluation* of its inhumane conditions: «a row of huts [...] a corner with a dirty blanket and a door that rattled in the wind» (16). In such precarious and lonely conditions, it is inevitable for the girl to be unable to start a new life, as it seems to her like war has followed her all the way there and is now inside her body and mind, «underneath my skin, behind my eyes, and in my dreams. It had taken possession of my heart» (17). While she is now away from the actual war, it has remained with her in the form of trauma haunting her dreams — its pervasive nature transcends material consequences and marks forever those who live it — which adds to its negative *evaluation* and gives it the further *framing* of a stain that does not easily come off.

However, the war is not just in the little girl's hometown and in her heart, as it continues in the place of arrival in unexpected ways. In fact, as depicted (18-19), as she keeps on escaping («walked and walked») from war both inside and outside of her, looking for «a place it hadn't reached», she notices a different manifestation of war, i.e., social stigma and exclusion («doors shut when I came [...] people didn't smile, and turned away»). This passage illustrated the crucial *framing* of exclusion as a form of war, as it reiterates and reinforces war trauma, and does not allow the little girl to rebuild some form of happiness. Following, she comes across a school (20-23), which back home used to be a safe and happy place for her. Here, she sees a classroom full of bright colors and pictures of birds and volcanoes, while she says that the kids are singing and drawing (just

like she used to do). School is once again *framed* as a safe haven, and its *salience* is evident in that it is the first time she finds something that can, at least in part, bring back her previous life — and it also stands out as the proper place for a child to spend her days. Another part of the *identity* of unaccompanied minor migrants emerges here both verbally and non-verbally: loneliness. In fact, the illustration shows the lonely girl looking «through the window» (20) from the outside and, when she walks in, she can hear the echo of her steps (23). Despite the courage she shows by entering the school by herself, she is faced once again with exclusion, as the teacher (wearing a dark sweater) does not let her in because «there is no chair» for her to sit on (23). The chair is then a powerful *metaphor* of inclusion, of finding a place in the country of arrival, and the fact that the girl is not given one leaves her alone with this new form of war, visually represented by the darkness covering the door and herself (22). Here, the teacher does not stand out as a memorable character, a brave activist fostering relational pedagogy — rather, she seems to blindly reiterate a harsh policy of exclusion based on material possessions or lack thereof. In this new, sly form, war has crossed the boundaries of the girl's town, as has now «taken all the world and all the people in it» (24), so that she can only go back to her squalid hut and hide under a blanket. The hope for this tormented little girl does not come from formal institutions (the camp, the teacher), but from fellow children, who do not follow the negative *ideology* of exclusion: they simply see an obstacle and find a solution.

A little boy comes to the girl's hut while she does not expect anyone, and «thought it was the wind» (27), and brings her a chair, *metaphorically* offering her the inclusion she was denied by the formal educational institution. Visually, the boy is wearing bright colors, and he is surrounded by a light that melts the darkness that engulfed the little girl (26), representing her hope to finally be able to «learn about volcanoes, sing and draw birds. And drive the war out of my heart» (27). It must be noted that the boy is not a lone hero, as he is part of a broader grassroots initiative of schoolchildren who decided to bring chairs to the camp so that the excluded kids «can come to school» (27). From an *ideological* point of view, it proposes a society in which each person can (and should) contribute to inclusion, another *salient* element for a peaceful existence. Thanks to the local children's openness, the refugee children are now able to use their agency and enter society, in spite of the institutionalized exclusion: the initial lonely run of the little girl is replaced by a confident, collective parade, as they all «walked together [...] pushing back the war with every step» (29). In the final illustrations, all children have their own chairs to sit and rebuild their lives (32-33).

In summary, this story contains a series of important features for fostering a pedagogy based on praxis. First, the negative *framing* of war in all its forms: actual war devastating lands and societies, war trauma in migrants (especially children), and exclusion in the land of arrival. From an *ideological* perspective,

the story proposes an inclusive society where the contribution of each person counts, even against relentless regulations. A crucial element is school, which assumes a *salient* role as agent of personal and social realization: a place where a child can learn about nature and life is a safe and desirable place. Overall, *The Day War Came* can be considered a positive discourse, as it encourages each person to be part of a better society. It can also be used to encourage PPETs to reflect about the teacher's negative behavior and to think of ways in which they could be agents of a decolonizing pedagogy. However, one may argue that the fact that the girl had to be 'saved' by a local boy can be seen as a deprivation of agency, and that this could be seen as an instance of «white saviour complex» (McCurdy 2016). Nonetheless, it was the girl's brave entrance in the school to start the whole process, and the story concludes with the refugee children who walk towards school together. This potential issue may stimulate critical thinking and trigger a discussion on the meaning of inclusion and participation, as well as on the roles each of us can have striving for a better society.

The Journey

In this story, too, the tranquility of a peaceful life is suddenly interrupted by the outbreak of war, which forces the protagonists to leave their home. The drawings by Sanna are 2D illustrations that remind of old fairytale storybooks, which could help visually *framing* this story of migration as a universal and timeless tale. *The Journey* also starts with a scene of a family's life before war but, rather than a specific episode, it refers to their summertime habits (Sanna 2016: 4-5). While in none of the analyzed books there is specific reference to a country, in this story we find clues that lead the readers to identify the protagonists as coming from the Global South. Verbally, the child's narrating voice says: «a city close to the sea [...] we used to spend many weekends at the beach» (4), while the opening illustration shows a landscape of bright, warm colors, with architectural hints suggesting a Middle Eastern country, along with the protagonists' phenotype: dark hair and fair complexion. The warmth of the landscape is interrupted by the sea, represented by a pitch-black spot at the right of the illustration (5) that seems to be pre-announcing the impending darkness of war and death. Just like with the looming helicopters in Cobb's illustration (Davies and Cobb 2018: 6), these dark omens in an otherwise serene landscape could be visually *ideologically* presenting peace as fragile, and war as something that could happen anywhere, at any point in time. In fact, the following scene turns the landscape upside down, as war has come to change the family's life forever.

From a verbal perspective, the following illustrations (6-11) are accompanied by brief but strong sentences, which condense a negative *evaluation* of war from the simple perspective of a child: «every day bad things started happening around us and soon there was nothing but chaos» (7). Then one day this chaos touches the family directly as the war, once again personified, kills her father

and disrupts their existence, making everything «become darker» (9) and weigh on the mother, who loses her inner peace. The visual aspects are here richer in detail compared to the text. The illustration showing the start of the war is a powerful subversion of the previous one, where the sea is replaced by long, supernatural dark hands that wreck the city, forcing the family to escape (6-7). Those hands, which visually personify the war, can be directly linked to the dark cloud of the previous story (Davies and Cobb 2018: 9), in that they are both visual *metaphors* of the devastation brought about by war. The following illustrations show that those dark hands reached her family: first, her father's death is visually represented by objects that belonged to him engulfed in darkness (8-9). Then, her father re-appears an image on an old and bright family portrait, but is no longer with them (11). From a visual stereotype perspective, the look of the father, who has a peaceful smile in all scenes and wears glasses may hint at the fact that, rather than dying while actively participating in combat, he may have been killed either because of his ideals or in a desperate attempt to protect his family. The red flowers next to the family portrait, just like the ones in *The Day War Came* (Davies and Cobb 2018: 4, 13), are a visual *metaphor* of the warm and peaceful past that is now only a memory. In fact, dark hands have entered through the window (11) and now surround the family, while the children are only protected by the hug of their mother. Here an important point of the narration emerges: the *salience* of family throughout the life of the protagonists, and in particular the crucial role of the mother. *Ideologically*, this presents a society where family bonds are pivotal. While in the previous story the girl is soon stripped of her family and therefore experiences loneliness and abandonment, in this case, after the loss of the father, the rest of the family remains close together. Such an *ideology* can be seen as opposite to that of the policy promoted by the previous US administration, by which «between 2017 and 2021, former President Donald Trump's administration separated at least 3,900 children — some only a few months old» (Halpert 2023: n.p.).

Apart from family, the role of community also appears *salient* in some important occasions. The first is when a friend tells the family about a possibility to leave war behind that many seem to be opting for (12-17). Both verbally and non-verbally, this possibility appears as a migration to the Global North, «a country far away with high mountains [...] strange cities, strange forests and strange animals» (13-15). The illustration shows a fantasy-like forest materializing in deep green and bright gold, with plants and animals that are common in northern mountains, e.g. deer, bears, wolves, barn owls, rabbits, weasels, and pine trees (15). The smallest child is seen trying to hold onto the family cat in both illustrations, even if the text does not mention explicitly that they must leave this familiar creature behind. As for *evaluation*, the Global North is seen under a positive light, as the friend verbalizes the *conviction* that it is «a safe place» where they will «not be frightened anymore» (15). On the other hand, going

there means to leave their old life behind potentially for good: there is no enthusiasm in a journey prompted by necessity, as the friend herself sighs as she tells the family about it. The following illustration (16) elaborates on the same themes, as the imaginary forest enters their home in the form of its animals, which seem to be waiting for the family as the mother packs their suitcase. In this story, too, nature has a certain visual *salience*: here, it is the detail that strikes the children the most about the new land, and they become the visual *metaphor* or, better, synecdoche of the Global North — later, it will be the scene of their escape. The children do not have positive feelings about leaving as the narrating voice says: «we don't want to leave» (17) and the smallest child cries holding the family cat. The enormous upheaval of their life and the sense of uprooting is condensed in the sentence «we put everything we have in suitcases and say goodbye to everyone we know» (17). Migration is *ideologically* considered as a necessity that still generates a deep suffering in those who leave. The mother, however, tries to boost the children's morale by telling them that the journey will be «a great adventure» (17) and, after that, the images assume increasingly fairytale-like shapes.

Like in *The Day War Came*, the journey to the frontier is represented by seeing the protagonists boarding onto different means of transportation and at different times of the day, but with some crucial differences. The girl in the previous story is alone in a mass of people in similar conditions, some alone and some in small groups (Davies and Cobb 2018: 14-15). She is occasionally helped by someone, but she mainly travels by herself, so that the sense of community is not as *salient* as the experience of loneliness as part of the girl's migrant *identity*, at least until she finds a new community in her peers. In this case, the family never separates and, after losing their car and most luggage, they are helped hide by local people who are not escaping (it is oil and fruit vendors; Sanna 2016: 19-20), and this reinforces the *salience* and *ideological* role of community even at difficult times. The mother always looks out for the children, and she guides them in the dark, using any means to bring them to safety. This sense of closeness across family and community is opposed to the following encounter with formal or informal authorities (22-31). This part, too, has minimal verbal descriptions and strongly relies on images. The family encounters two figures that represent respectively formal and informal power: a border police officer and a people smuggler. The first one is guarding «an enormous wall» (23) that the three are meant to cross, but the «angry guard» (24) shouts at them they need to go back. The guard, looming over the harmless family with his fear-inducing size and monster-like appearance (25), visually represents a negative *evaluation* of border patrol as an unjust authority pushing back people who have already lost their home, «have nowhere to go» (24), and cannot do anything but try and move forward. The family is then forced to hide in the forest (26-27), where the *salience* of the mother emerges again, this time showing her strength

in looking after her children, but also her fragility as a human who is going through unspeakable hardships. The first half of the illustration (26) features the mother once again protecting the scared children with her hug and helping them fall asleep by showing she is not scared, to the point that the narrating voice states that «mother is with us and she is never scared» (27). Nonetheless, when the children fall asleep in her arms, the forest becomes much darker and scarier, with dangerous red eyes staring at them and the hands of war emerging again among the leaves, a *metaphor* of the fears and trauma haunting the mother. In fact, she remains wide awake and cries in silence, her tears flowing endlessly.

Later, the children are woken up by the guards shouting and appearing among the trees like gigantic, monster-like creatures (28), so they have to «run and run» (30) to escape. In the following illustration (30-31) they are surrounded by darkness, where the leaves of the forest are barely visible, when another in-human figure takes shape as part of the forest itself: the people smuggler. This time, this informal power figure is silent, almost one with the environment and, while the children «have never seen him before» (30), the mother understands immediately, so she «gives him some money and he takes us over the border» (30). There is no specific positive or negative *evaluation* of this man who, just like the guard, is enormous, even larger than the officers, as he literally picks the family up with one hand to take them across the border. The size of both guards and smuggler shows their power, and they look like each other's complementary figures: as long as one exists, shouting and stopping people, the other will silently allow the passage. From an *ideological* point of view, this hints at the fact that a militarized border cannot stop people in search for peace and safety. The smuggler, however, is not depicted as a hero — he does the job for money and shows no feelings — but more as a direct consequence of his patrolling counterpart. However, as the mother says, «our journey is not over yet» (33), as the sea crossing awaits. In both stories, adults that represent institutions do not enjoy positive *evaluations*. The forest is now behind them, and the family can embark in the sea crossing (32-39). Once again, the family find more people trying to cross the sea just like them and, despite the limited space and the bad weather — «it rains every day» (35) — the crossers build a new community (whose *salience* emerges again here) by telling each other stories. The fact that the story contains stories could be seen as a meta-diegetic reflection on the power of narrations, or their *salience*, to find strength at difficult times and uniting people throughout their shared predicaments. The first stories represent an attempt at teaching the children to avoid sudden movements on the boat while making this dangerous journey sound like a fairytale adventure. In fact, they use the *metaphor* of «terrible and dangerous monsters» beneath the boat that are «ready to gobble us up if the boat capsizes» (34-35). As they approach the coast, the stories change, and they express the *conviction* that a happier life is waiting for them on

the other side, as the Global North is a land where «big green forests are filled with kind fairies that dance and give us magic spells to end the war» (36-37).

The last illustrations concluding the narration have an open ending, as the readers do not see what happens to them when they arrive, but are left with a reflection on the nature of migration (38-43). The *salience* of the family and its importance for migrants is condensed in the mother's statement that «we are lucky to still be together» (39), as none of them died at sea and they succeeded in some of the most dangerous parts of the journey. Her «tired smile» (38) is visually represented by her glance looking at the bright horizon, a visual *metaphor* of her hope to find a new life ahead. Birds cross the sky and are going in the same direction as the family. As they keep on travelling «for more days and nights, crossing many borders», the protagonist notices the birds that «seem to be following» them (41). They are migratory birds, whose migration appears, however, much easier than theirs, as «they don't have to cross any borders» (42). This manifests a negative *evaluation* of border patrolling and borders in general, and *frames* migration as a necessary and natural phenomenon for any species looking for a safe environment to thrive. Nature, which was initially the welcoming beach and then had become a scary forest and a dangerous sea, is now source of solace and hope. In fact, the orange train transporting the family followed by migrant birds visually transforms into a bird in the following illustration (43), so the family can fly along with the migrant birds and, just like them, head towards «a new home» (42).

Overall, the narration of the dangers faced by this united family during their crossing may elicit a sense of identification in the readers, who can recall a time when they were scared, and they were protected by their family or community. In fact, while this story makes no direct reference to school and education like the previous one, it offers important considerations about the *salience* of family and community for migrant children in particular, but in general for all children, as their role is to «guide their children so that, as they grow up, they learn to use their rights in the best way», as established by the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child⁵. The same text affirms that those minors «who move from their home country to another country as refugees (because it was not safe for them to stay there) should get help and protection and have the same rights as children born in that country», which is the *ideological* core of the story: children who flee their war-torn country (war receiving an extremely negative *evaluation*) have a right to help, protection, and equality. Another aspect that emerges here is the *salience* of stories in all aspects of life, from community building to trauma overcoming, which is perfect to trigger a reflection with both PPETs and their future pupils about the way stories can be used in the classroom and beyond.

5 The integral text can be found on the UNICEF website (UNICEF 1989).

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, it is essential to clarify that the conceptual framework provided in this study is not intended as a conclusive or prescriptive way to practice ELT in PPET education programs, nor does it present itself as universally optimal. There are no universal solutions, best practices, or teaching models that apply uniformly across different schools, communities, cultures, subjects, purposes, and home-school relationships. Our work aimed to contribute to the ongoing re-evaluation of readings and representations concerning the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, fostering a continuous process of reflection on the complex issues inherent in translingual and transcultural teaching practices.

One significant finding of this study is that training PPETs on children's migration-related content is an inherently challenging form of *praxis*-building. This work is deeply practical, embedded in the daily realities of classroom decisions and actions, including teachers' interactions with students and their families, selection of materials and texts, and use of formal and informal assessments. Thus, effective training involves developing a pedagogy that co-constructs knowledge and curricula with students and teachers, aiming to support children in becoming proactive citizens in a pluralistic society.

Given this context, it is crucial for PPET educators to continue their efforts in designing syllabi that emphasize a decolonial and culturally responsive pedagogy. Using refugee narratives, as explored in this study, encourages metalinguistic reflection on language and its use in building reality, helping PPETs and their pupils engage with stories that challenge dominant narratives and foster a pedagogy of becoming that embraces diversity. Additionally, a critical understanding of language that goes beyond mere representation promotes a decolonial awareness of English as a translingual practice. This approach views English as a repertoire transcending native speakerism, aimed at achieving communication and community building in more inclusive, diverse, and ethical ways. By asking young learners to draw on previous knowledge and experiences to interpret the verbal and non-verbal sequences of the picture book, PPETs can engage in dialogic, intertextual, and multisensory reading, enhancing the visual literacy skills of the learners. This exploratory journey into the visual semantics of picture books highlights the discursive power of illustrative criteria such as iconography, iconology, and intertextuality, which enhance the hermeneutic possibilities of a visual text, eliciting an affective-emotional response in the reader and constructing meaningful relationships.

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Chapter 7

Learning from the Paradigmatic South: Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* as a Parable of Environmental Resistance

Alessandro Vescovi

University of Milano, Italy.

alessandro.vescovi@unimi.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-5087-7896

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c410>

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's short story *The Living Mountain* is here seen as a parable appended to his previous *Nutmeg's Curse*. The essay discusses the literary genre to which the story belongs, whether fable, as the subtitle suggests, or myth, highlighting its relations with pop music, Western philosophy, and Hindu beliefs. Eventually, though much simpler in its structure, the short story may gesture towards a new way of perceiving the opposition North vs. South, as an opposition of epistemic paradigms rather than a territorial question.

Keywords

native knowledge; environmental humanities; global warming; Western philosophy; climate justice.

Introduction

In 2005 the British virtual rock group Gorillaz published its second album, *Demon Days*, that included a song entitled “Fire Coming Out of The Monkey’s Head” (Gorillaz 2005). It recounts the story of a community where a population called “Happyfolks” lives in harmony at the foot of a mountain, unbeknown to the rest of the world. One day “Strangefolks” with black spectacles that hide their true intentions arrive and occupy the higher regions of the Mountain, which was inhabited by the great souls of the community. They shoot many “Happyfolks” and find precious stones. So they start digging the Mountain till it turns out to be a volcano that erupts and destroys everything and everyone.

The album containing the song went six times platinum in the UK and double platinum in the US, so it is not unlikely that it found its way also into the playlists of an eclectic listener like Amitav Ghosh. The storyline adapts itself to many experiences of colonialism and exploitation, though the virtual band has never commented on the inspiration for the song.

The storyline of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Living Mountain* (2022; hereafter cited in the text as *LM*) is quite similar in its simplicity, and yet this narrative addresses a number of issues, which complicate its reception. The rich gamut of details Ghosh adds offers many insights and interpretive possibilities, not only foregrounding the ecological implications of the tale, but also challenging the reader to react. While in the Gorillaz’s case it is easy to pick a side and tell the goodies from the baddies, Ghosh makes it slightly more complex, as we shall see.

The Literary Genre

The first issue that I would like to address is what literary genre *LM* belongs to. Answering is more than a mere critical exercise because the response and the interpretation of a story depend on its genre. The author himself calls it in the subtitle “A Fable for Tomorrow”. However, rather than a declaration of poetics, this is just the first of the many instances of intertextuality that fill the story. “A Fable for Tomorrow” is the title of the first chapter of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), where the pioneer of eco-studies introduced her work on the damages of pesticides with a story in which a beautiful countryside was suddenly attacked by mysterious forces, which are initially thought of as an evil spell and eventually turn out to be side effects of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane).

LM, however, is not a fable in that it does not rely on any of the features that usually characterize the genre, particularly the happy ending. Ghosh’s story begins with a frame narrative in which an I-narrator introduces the second-degree narrator and her transcription of a dream, which forms the main story. Interpreters of this story never linger on the frame narrative, which takes place

in New York City and is written in a downright realistic manner. However, the dream is an important feature. Sigmund Freud did not distinguish between real and invented dreams, but rather between manifest and latent content. Thus, while here the manifest content is quite plain, the latent content has at least two levels. As the frame narrative is quite realistic, its characters can be investigated through the ordinary means of realistic fiction. What do the frame narrators think of the story? How do they see themselves in it? I shall argue that the dream is induced by the reading of *The Nutmeg's Curse* (Ghosh 2021b), but at a deeper level it hints at some controversies that are still unclear to the characters and possibly to the author himself.

Some scholars have suggested that the story should be considered a myth, mostly because of the notion of the profanation of the sacred mountain and its anger (Saha 2023; Karmakar and Chetty 2023). Besides, they argue that writing a myth would be a homage to the mythical knowledge that Ghosh wishes to uphold. They certainly have a point; however, myths usually do not have realistic frame narrators, and when they do, as in the case of Ulysses telling his adventures to Alcinous, they belong to the same world of the myth itself. Here Maansi does not belong to the world of her dream. There is, however, a further reason why this cannot be called a myth. Mythical writing tells truths that have never happened. A myth explains mysteries that cannot be explained otherwise, and serves as a foundation for a cult or for an ethical attitude. The myth of Bon Bibi, which Ghosh himself revisits in *Jungle Nama* (2021a), for instance, is the foundation of Bon Bibi's cult, provides a rationale for the aggressivity of the tigers, and an ethics for Sundarbans' people who work in the jungle. As with most myths, its value may well be universal, but it is firmly grounded within a given society (Strenski 1992). Moreover one of the themes of the *LM* is cultural appropriation and epistemicide (Karmakar and Chetty 2023); it would not make sense for a world writer like Ghosh with an anthropological background to invent a myth.

Jasmine Sharma (2022) inscribes the story within the category of speculative fiction. I tend to agree with her that the dream narrative has much in common with speculative fiction: Maansi reads a book on the Anthropocene and, mulling over this, falls asleep so that her intuitions on the subject are merged with her memories of Nepal and elaborated in the form of a nightmare, which she subsequently decides to write down. And yet, a necessary feature of speculative fiction is that it points at the future, projecting present trends into a dystopic world. Here the opposite happens: the story seems projected into the past, not future.

The oneiric part of *LM* falls best into the category of parable, a word that Ghosh subtly employed as a subtitle for his previous book, *The Nutmeg's Curse. Parables for a World in Crisis* (2021b). The literary genre of the parable does not work like the myth or the fable. Its primary aim is not to entertain but rather to

help the reader or listener grasp some truth, which, in the New Testament, is often counterintuitive or even paradoxical. Often parables are an embodiment of a spiritual or ethical insight. The word itself comes from Greek *παράβολή*, which means “comparison” or “illustration” (literally, to cast one thing next to another), and indeed parables are by necessity allegorical. A parable persistently points outside of itself to other truths. This is exactly what happens in Ghosh’s story: all characters and the events described in Maansi’s dream point to ideas, actors, and facts of the Anthropocene, and it culminates with an unexpected turn of events. Ghosh’s modern parable establishes a peculiar relationship with the world of ideas: the storyline recalls concepts that can be traced in Ghosh’s previous books or in the insights of other contemporary intellectuals.

The Nutmeg’s Curse begins with the history of the Banda Islands, in the Moluccas archipelago, which used to be the only place where nutmegs grew. The description of the mythical tree in *LM* recalls that of the nutmeg tree. Ghosh recounts that the islands live under the threat of a volcano called Gunung Api, which often erupts with devastating force.

Yet there is also something magical about these eruptions, something akin to the pain of childbirth. For the eruptions of Maluku’s volcanoes bring to the surface alchemical mixtures of materials which interact with the winds and weather of the region in such a way as to create forests that teem with wonders and rarities.

In the case of the Banda Islands the gift of Gunung Api is a botanical species that has flourished on this tiny archipelago like nowhere else: the tree that produces both nutmeg and mace. (2021b: 8)

In *LM* we read:

we knew in our hearts that our mountain was a living being that cared for us; we saw proof of this every day, all around us, in the form of a tree that grew along the streams that descended from its slopes. This tree, which grew only in our Valley and nowhere else, produced things that were so miraculous that we called it the Magic Tree. Its leaves kept insects away; its wood was impermeable to water; its roots nourished rare mushrooms; its flowers produced exquisitely scented honey; and its fruit was delicious to eat. But the most miraculous thing of all was the nut that lay within the fruit: its fragrance was incomparable, and it had so many medicinal uses that traders from the Lowlands would travel long distances in search for it. (*LM*, 7-8)

Besides the image of the tree and the mountain slopes, which appear in both texts, there is a stylistic continuity between the two. The former, which is not fiction, deploys metaphors that bring the text into the realm of legend. The reference to the pain of childbirth evokes the idea of the mountain as a Mother Goddess. In the subsequent lines, the substances coming from the Volcanic

eruptions are called “alchemical” rather than simply “chemical”, thus bringing them into a kind of pre-scientific past. Likewise, in *LM*, the mountain is a divinity that takes care of the Valley People, while the tree is “miraculous”.

This way of writing opposes the rationalistic prose of essayistic and realistic tradition to the non-secular knowledge of non-Western cultures, and universalizes the experience of the Valley People; they are, at the same time, a Himalayan tribe, the Moluccans, the Mahoris, the Aztecs, but also the Mondas or the Jarawas.

Ghosh is particularly fond of female divinities. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (Ghosh 1996) features two priestesses, one Mangala, who is worshipped by local subalterns, and one upper-class Theosophian called Countess Pongrácz, inspired by Madame Blavatsky. More recently, the novelist has published a version of Bon Bibi’s legend, *Jungle Nama*, and adapted the legend of Manasa Devi (the goddess of serpents) for his novel *Gun Island* (2019). It comes as a little surprise that, while the mountain has no gender attributes, its cult is kept alive by women shamans called Adepts. Interestingly, in *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, Ghosh mentions shamans with great respect, in particular with reference to the Amazon. However, it is in the Himalayan region that one finds women shamans, and mountains are held sacred. The Adepts dance themselves into a trance, which permits them to communicate with the mountain through the soles of their feet. As Arnab Panda and Anway Mukhopadhyay (2024) argue in their paper, this is not an invention, but a cult well documented in South Asian Shakti-Tantra, a form of performative devotion of Shakti, which is the feminine cosmic energy. The name Adept points to someone who has had an initiation and is the custodian of some sacred lore. It is no coincidence that Adepts are only women, who are kept in great esteem, and that the narrator is a woman herself. The last line of the story is also given to an adept.

In *The Nutmeg’s Curse* Ghosh explains that on the Banda islands, the Dutch perpetrated an omnicide, destroying humans and entire species alike, in order to ensure the monopoly of production and trade of nutmegs. This little-known historical event offers Ghosh the opportunity to expound on the mentality of Western colonization, arguing that European colonizers applied the same omnicidal behavior against other races as against the lands that they occupied. The behavior of the Dutch in the Moluccas is very close to that of other Europeans in America. The rise of capitalism and colonization obviously went together, but, he claims, it was colonization that fostered the idea of “terraforming”, namely changing whatever land they colonized into something as similar to Europe as possible — basically a New England, a New Scotland, a New Wales, etc. Likewise, colonizers would make the colonized as similar to the Europeans as possible; they wanted the subject to become as productive as the capitalist Europeans and consume as much as them. Indeed, they despised Native Americans and Indians because they were allegedly lazy and would live content

with what they had got instead of pursuing a loftier lifestyle. Ghosh goes so far as to argue that positivism and rationalism are a consequence of colonialism and not the other way around.

Yet this form of economic rationality was predicated on armed conquest, the elimination of natives, and the creation of a racialized social structure similar to that of European colonies in the Americas, with a dominant Euro-descended minority ruling over a majority of enslaved Asians. In no way can the role of unfree labour in the functioning of this otherwise rationalized economy be explained away as an archaism or a holdover from the past; not only was it a foundational aspect of the project — it was a sign, precisely, of its modernity. [...] its basic structure lasted for almost two and a half centuries, well into the modern era—that is to say, until 1868, when slavery was banned in the Dutch East Indies. (2021b: 117)

It goes without saying that the beliefs of inferior races are likewise inferior. Hence, every form of vitalism has been considered heathenish and irrational, ethically reprehensible, because it does not agree with the extractive and exploitative spirit of the colonizers. On the contrary — Ghosh argues at the onset of *The Great Derangement* (2016) — it makes no sense to consider nature as inert. It is becoming increasingly urgent to discard the destructive paradigm of Western rationalism to embrace alternative vitalistic paradigms that consider the world as a unity, as Gaia, or as a divinity for that matter — whatever commands respect. This last point is literally vital; indeed Ghosh notices in *The Nutmeg's Curse* that «These developments are making it ever more evident that many “savage” and “brutish” people understood something about landscapes and the Earth that their conquerors did not» (2021b: 84).

A Good Story

In the dream section, the narrator Maansi is a nondescript woman of the people, and chooses to speak in the first-person plural, as if hers was the voice of the community. They live in relative tranquility, keeping a distance from the sacred mountain called “Mahaparbat”, the great mountain — incidentally, this is the title given to most Indian translations of the story. Exactly as in the case of the Bandas, men from a foreign land invade the Valley and enslave local people. They call themselves “Anthropoi”. This name is polysemic, as it is the exact plural nominative of the Greek word ἄνθρωπος, meaning human. Obviously, the name refers to the etymology of Anthropocene, as the era of humans, but the Greek ending also reminds us that the European philosophy that underlies their deeds was born in Greece, and Western epistemology is an evolution of the Greek one. Thus, the Anthropoi are not only *conquistadores* but also bearers of a different outlook, a different epistemology, which will soon

become hegemonic, denigrating, and obliterating forms of local non-rationalistic knowledge.

The Anthropoi also give a name to the indigenous population, dubbing them “Varvaroi”. This is hard to explain as it is the modern Greek pronunciation of the ancient Greek βάρβαροι, from which the modern “barbarian” or “barbaric” are derived. The word was used to designate non-Greek foreigners, who were considered inferior. It remains unclear why Ghosh did not opt for the more common transcription “Barbaroi”. The third Greek word designates soldiers, and it is even more difficult, Kraani, which Maansi translates as «the helmeted ones» (*LM*, 16). In modern Greek the term means indeed “helm”, though the ending in -i is not to be found either in ancient or modern Greek, nor does the word refer to soldiers in either language. A possible rationale for this choice may be the notion that Spanish conquistadores in Mexico stood out for their iron helmets. The Spanish also invented a widely believed legend that Motecuhzoma deemed that the invaders were actually gods whose arrival had been predicted by an ancient prophecy (Hinz 2022: 405ff.), which resonates with Maansi’s dream (*LM*, 12-13).

The Anthropoi also bring along some “Savants”, as they base their strategy of conquest on violence and cultural denigration, brought about by the Kraani and Savants respectively. The Savants denigrate the Varvaroi, alleging that they are primitive and entertain ridiculous beliefs about the life and sacrality of the Mountain. The Anthropoi, on the contrary, consider themselves modern and clever and the Mountain simply a piece of rock. Where the primitive Varvaroi see a sacred mountain, they see a natural resource and riches to be extracted; so they start climbing higher and higher, obliging the Varvaroi to work for them and supply them with victual and other objects needed for their enterprise. The exact aim of their ascent is never really specified. It seems to be no other than climbing higher and higher, above all higher than the despised Varvaroi. As the native culture is crashed and forgotten, the leadership of the Varvaroi passes from women to “covetous men”, who admire the Anthropoi and aspire to become like them. They defy the Kraani, who eventually quit the Valley and join the ascenders.

Here the story shifts from allegory to symbolism, which is a distinctive feature of dreams. Climbing is no longer a means to an end but an end in itself. So, while it initially stood for colonialism, it now stands for capitalism or consumerism, and its relentless craving for more. Some former Varvaroi, inflamed by the desire to ascend the once sacred mountain, start climbing, obliging other countrymen less fortunate or less bellicose than themselves to stay back and provide the necessary supplies, as they had done for the Anthropoi.

At this point there is hardly any difference between Anthropoi and Varvaroi, except for their respective histories and the advantage the Anthropoi had accumulated.

Presently, it turns out that the combined pressure of Varvaroi and Anthropoi creates avalanches and landslides, and parts of the mountain collapse, killing many in the Valley. The two groups have some discussions in which the Anthropoi tell the Varvaroi that they were not supposed to ascend the Mountain, as their weight is too much for the soil. If they mean to ascend at all, they should at least learn the new ways of climbing that the Anthropoi have just invented, which are lighter. The Varvaroi realize that the Savants of the Anthropoi had lied all along when they said that their knowledge was universal and that the mountain was there for everyone to climb. Yet now they cannot afford to tread lightly because they have started too late and people down in the Valley count on them to climb as fast as possible. Even then, the pressure of the Anthropoi and Varvaroi on the slope of the Mountain is causing disasters down in the Valley. Eventually, when the Mountain is about to collapse, the Anthropoi recognize that the natives (they no longer call them Varvaroi), had been right all along and that climbing the Mountain had been a mistake from the start. Maybe the natives were right after all. They find an old woman who used to be an Adept and still knows the holy dance. They persuade her to perform in order to understand the Mountain. Thus, it seems that the two groups are understanding each other at last and recognize that the Mountain is alive and agentic. The woman consents to dance, and as she does, the mountain responds with vibrations. This is when the Savants recognize the power of the older ways that they had so long despised:

We were all amazed but none more so than the savants of the Anthropoi, who cried out: ‘You were right! The Mountain is alive! We can feel its heartbeat under our feet. This means we must look after the poor, dear Mountain; we must tend to it; we must care for it.’ (*LM*, 35)

If this tale was a fable, this recognition should mark its happy ending. Valley People and Anthropoi finally understand each other and will soon find a solution. But with the next paragraph the parable reveals its paradoxical nature. The only surviving Adept, far from being pleased at this recognition, infuriated retorts:

‘How dare you?’ she cried. ‘How dare you speak of the Mountain as though you were its masters, and it were your plaything, your child? Have you understood nothing of what it has been trying to teach you? Nothing at all?’ (*LM*, 35)

These are the last words of the story, which surprise the readers who actually expected a fable compelling them to understand why the Adept is furious and to imagine what these words meant in New York City to Maansi who had written them and to the I-narrator as they had just begun to comprehend the implications of the Anthropocene. After all, isn’t Maansi one who has left her

native Nepal for the glamour of the American metropolis? Is this a shock of recognition to her?

The Adept's reaction can be explained in two ways: from her viewpoint as a shaman, or from the viewpoint of Maansi as a dreamer/writer. Arguably, the Adept rages against the impiety of the Savant whose attitude towards the mountain is patronizing, as the attitude of the human species towards other species, which may be protected, but never worshipped. In spite of everything, he has not understood that the mountain is a sacred entity and not just another insensible "species" to tender and cultivate. The Savant recognizes that the mountain is more complex than he had hitherto believed, but is confident that his knowledge and technology will allow him to find a way to "care for the mountain" while continuing to extract its riches. He may recognize that the mountain is agentic, but he still does not recognize its sacredness.

The Adept's viewpoint has a counterpoint in Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*, where he discusses the concept of TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge). Ghosh writes that «the very name is suggestive of a fundamental misunderstanding: it assumes that Indigenous understandings are usable 'knowledge' rather than an awareness created and sustained by songs and stories» (2021b: 84). TEK is a commodification of indigenous cultures which does not make amend for the epistemicide perpetrated by colonialism. Ghosh concludes his discourse writing that «[t]he planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit a living Earth—Gaia» (*ibidem*).

Maansi's reaction to all this as a New Yorker of Nepali origin may be a recognition or even a sense of guilt for following the ways of the Anthropoi. If we consider her next act, that is writing down her epiphanic dream, we can conclude that she has chosen writing as a kind of activism. After all, Maansi is another name for the goddess Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and arts; the name itself means intellectual or spiritual endeavor. Not being a researcher or a philosopher, she translates what she has understood into a story, a fable. She endorses what Richard Powers writes in *The Overstory*, that «[t]he best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do it is a good story» (Powers 2018: 335, 487).

From Global to Paradigmatic South

One might argue that the short story does not add much to what Ghosh had already written in *The Nutmeg's Curse*. It is possible, but the function of allegory is to make an idea clear for anyone, not necessarily to offer new insights. That essay contains many pages in defense of a vitalistic approach to the Earth and a scathing critique of rationalism. However, readers of essays tend to agree with the viewpoint of the author without considering the implications. The final

reversal of the happy ending in the short story, on the contrary, challenges the reader to pick a side and pay its price.

Furthermore, there may be a point on which Ghosh is still reflecting, and possibly shaping a more complex opinion than he held before; I am referring to the debate on climate justice. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh's position was quite terse: he strongly criticized the Paris Agreements because they do not mention climate justice and make no provisions to help the historically disadvantaged countries, while they grant the countries that consume the most the right to do it. On the contrary, he showed appreciation for the encyclical letter *Laudato si* (Francis 2015) which openly relates poverty and environmental politics.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse* Ghosh quotes again the encyclical letter, but discusses climate justice at the level of social classes rather than nations (2021b, see in particular pages 156-157). He addresses the notion that justice might entail that those who are born in historically underdeveloped countries (it is debatable if China and India should still fall into this category) have a right to achieve the same wealth as the scions of former colonizers. Thus Ghosh:

Words like these came as no surprise to me; I have heard their like many times, not just in Indonesia, but also in India, China, and elsewhere. Across much of the global South these beliefs are held with a strength of conviction that belies the idea that the planetary crisis can be addressed merely by "fixing" capitalism. (2021b: 160)

The author of *The Nutmeg's Curse* sympathizes with those who lament a historical disadvantage, writing that these issues cannot «be wished away», but then admits that it may make the crisis even more «intractable» (*ibidem*). The solution that he envisages is an equal degrowth, in which the values of the rich align themselves with those of the poor:

"Until I have what the Other has, I am poor"; or "Not till I have what the Other has will justice be served." It follows then that this conception of wealth is founded on the Other's conception of the Good Life, as a standard to be aspired to. Hence, if the Other's conception of the Good Life were to change, then the resonances would be felt everywhere. (*ibidem*)

Thus, Ghosh prefers to speak of "urban" or "global elites" rather than global North. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, the global North, is a place where things happen, but global elites have the agency to make them happen.

LM does not discuss global elites, let alone urban ones, but focuses on the process whereby the natives are perverted into accepting a toxic epistemology that brings them to forsake their beliefs for capitalistic lifestyles. Since the Varvaroi are as good as the Anthropoi at climbing the mountain, it follows that,

in the end, their responsibility towards the mountain is no lesser. If possible, it may be even greater, as they had known the true nature of the mountain and forgotten it.

The short story withholds many details, but it dwells at length on the mimicry that follows the process of cultural denigration. It is true that the Anthropoi have converted the Valley People with the sword and the market, promoting their values and lifestyle, but it is also true that the Varvaroi are fascinated by the idea of climbing.

When it becomes clear that the Earth cannot afford that everyone climbs as high as the Anthropoi once did, the Varvaroi may well complain to the Anthropoi claiming the same right to exploit the Mahaparbati, but what does it mean to the Mountain itself? The Mountain does not distinguish between Anthropoi and Varvaroi, especially when the latter struggle to be so similar to the Anthropoi.

Moreover, the elites are now global as capitalism or ecological crisis. Hence justice must be achieved by drastically downsizing the Northern lifestyle, rather than upgrading the lifestyle of the South. It is undeniable that, historically, the global North has plundered the global South, if one casts a general look at statistics. But it is also true that elites in the global South live far better than the middle class in the global North. Even in the early twentieth century, the Down and Outs in Paris and London were at par with the Coolies in Calcutta or Bombay. On the contrary, the Tagores and the Jeebhoyes enjoyed the privileges of capitalism even when India was a colony.

Rather than reasoning according to the category of nations, or North and South, Ghosh seems to envisage a different distinction for the Anthropocene; on the one hand, the capitalistic, which also means rationalistic, colonial or neocolonial, and extractivist mindset; on the other hand the traditional, sober, sustainable one. Rather than opposing two hemispheres, he seems to oppose two paradigms. Instead of global North and South, we should talk about paradigmatic North and paradigmatic South.

Climate justice remains a priority, but it must be dealt with within a paradigm of general degrowth and alignment. Indeed, if we think in terms of species, it is difficult to maintain that humans as a whole have not plundered the ecosystems that were not only their own. *Sapiens* has been thriving and steadily multiplying beyond limit in the last hundred years. What is it to the ecosystem of the Sundarbans if Cortez invaded Mexico or Robert Clive fought and won at Plassey? The Sundarbans demand an immediate degrowth — following Maurizio Pallante and Serge Latouche — and a radical overhaul of the epistemological paradigm that has sustained rationalism and extractive capitalism since the early modern period. In other words, the paradigmatic North must start learning from the paradigmatic South, but it must do it without superimposing its epistemological paradigms, while the South cannot expect to follow

in the footsteps of the North. Indeed, Ghosh seems to say that the global elites must change their epistemological premises and start learning from traditional cultures. The flipside of the coin is that those who are in touch with traditional cultures have a historical duty towards modernity to stick to them and bring them to the knowledge of the wide world.

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Chapter 8

The Gaze of the Social Scientist: Scotland as South in Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*

Alessio Mattana

University of Torino, Italy.

alessio.mattana@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-7416-2844

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Abstract

This chapter examines Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) in terms of the concept of “global south”. In this epistolary novel, a group of five people gathered around Welsh Squire Matthew Bramble travels across the United Kingdom, making their way from London and its satellite bath towns to Edinburgh and Glasgow. It is argued that Smollett fashions the main character Matthew Bramble as an observer of the social and cultural manners of Britons, one whose views are informed by the Scottish Enlightenment concept of sympathy elaborated by Adam Smith and David Hume. In doing so, this chapter contends, Smollett seeks to offer a detached perspective on the advantages and disadvantages experienced by Scotland after the 1707 Act of Union. By having Bramble's views interact with the more radical ones held by characters like Scottish patriot Lismahago, Smollett is eventually able to convey a complex, multifaceted view of eighteenth-century Scotland as “global south”, meant as a society which stands in a subaltern position to the hegemonic “north” represented by London.

Keywords

Global South; eighteenth century; narrative; novel, social science.

Humphry Clinker and Scotland in the Eighteenth Century

In a batch of long letters to his physician Dr. Lewis, Matthew Bramble, the main character of Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* ([1771] 2015), embarks in an extended assessment of Scotland. Summarizing his stay in Edinburgh, he writes that he had met «with more kindness, hospitality, and rational entertainment, in a few weeks, than ever I received in any other country during the whole course of my life» (Smollett 2015: 238). Discussing the state of the Highland peasantry, who «are on a poor footing all over the kingdom», Bramble extols their poverty, which is full of dignity when compared that of the peasants of other countries like France (274). In yet another letter, he reports his discussion on the impact of the 1707 Act of Union with Obadiah Lismahago, a Scottish lieutenant who fought the Seven Years' War in America only to be made captive by an Indian tribe (280)¹.

Views like these led Horace Walpole to famously disparage *Humphry Clinker* as a «party novel, written by the profligate hireling Smollett, to vindicate the Scots» (Walpole 1970: VI, 218). The complex narrative mechanism of this work, however, means that some caution is needed when ascribing Bramble's views to Smollett in too straightforward a manner. *Humphry Clinker* is an epistolary novel that charts the vicissitudes of a family group traveling across Britain. On top of Bramble himself, who takes the lion's share of the epistles, the peregrinations of the family group are told through letters sent by four other characters: Bramble's niece, Lydia; her brother, Oxford University young spark Jerry; Bramble's unwed sister, Tabitha; and Tabitha's maid, Winifred Jenkins. The choice of having multiple narrators allows for a range of opinions which are only in partial agreement with each other, reflecting the many ways in which different people experience the same phenomenon.

As Walter Scott noted in a prefatory memoir for the 1821 edition of the novel, Smollett's goal was precisely to depict «the various effects produced upon different members of the same family by the same objects» (Blackwell 2011: 434). For instance, London is to Matthew the place where people are «actuated by the demons of profligacy and licentiousness», living «in one vile ferment of stupidity and corruption», with the result that «the whole nation seems to be running out of their wits» (Smollett 2015: 96). Lydia, by contrast, is struck with «the wonders of this vast metropolis», which leave her «in a maze of admiration»; whereas Winifred exalts in her peculiar prose the size of London — «[a]ll the towns that ever I beheld in my born-days, are no more than Welsh barrows and crumlecks to this wonderful sitty!» — while acknowledging that its pleasures are conducive to «vanity and vexation of spirit» (109-110).

1 On Lismahago's captivity overseas, see Charlotte Sussman (1994) and Tara Ghoshal Wallace (2005-2006).

The itinerary undertaken by the company leads them eastward to Bristol, Bath, and London first; then northward, via a few towns including York and Newcastle, to reach Edinburgh and Glasgow and eventually the beginning of the Scottish Highlands; from there, they eventually make their way back to Brambleton Hall in Wales after a short stay in Manchester. The direction is relevant, for the voyage anti-climactically leaves London and its satellite bath towns to explore the north of the country, effectively achieving two purposes: drawing implicit and explicit comparisons between north and south at a time of vibrant public debate around the role of Scotland within the Union, and undertaking the reverse route of specialized Scottish workers who left their country to go to London, an experience of which Smollett had first-hand knowledge. Like fellow Scottish writers James Thomson, Oliver Goldsmith, and James Boswell, Smollett also left Scotland for London in search of a better future (Trumpener 1997: 16). When he moved in 1739, he did so with the goal of starting a literary career — he wanted to have his tragedy *The Regicide* performed — but ended up working as a surgeon's mate on a ship bound to Jamaica, where he stayed for three years before settling in London a few years later and becoming a writer in earnest (Mitchell 2013: 48).

The London-bound migration experienced by Smollett was increasingly common for Scots in the eighteenth century. Scotland had been incorporated to England and Wales (annexed in the 1530s and 1540s) under the 1707 Act of Union, an event which gave rise to the political entity known as Great Britain and turned Scotland into what a scholar has called a “junior partner” of England (Kaul 2009: 17). The situation of Scottish trade and industry improved as a result, but the price paid in terms of independence and cultural identity was steep. As Evan Gottlieb notes, by the mid-eighteenth century London had become «an increasingly attractive destination for Scottish-born Britons looking to make their fortunes south of the Tweed» (Gottlieb 2005: 81). It is estimated that in 1750, London had approximately 60,000 Scots, roughly 6% of the city population (Wareing 1981: 373). Many of these Scots, notwithstanding their variegated occupational backgrounds, failed to find a job and were prosecuted as vagrants (Brown, Kennedy and Talbott 2019: 253). Those who were successful became resented, as evidenced by the amount of anti-Scottish satire in the 1760s and 1770s (two decades when Scottish politicians either acted as prime ministers or were very influential), which was, on the one hand, proof of the ability of Scottish qualified workers to assume relevance in the «power centres» of Britain after the Union, as David Armitage notes (2005: 242), but, on the other, a clear demonstration of the high degree of discrimination towards them (Whyte 1991).

Smollett's writing thematized the difficult times experienced by Scots who migrated to the south. The titular character of the novel *The Adventures of Roderick Random* ([1748] 2020), who opens the story by stating that «I was born in the

northern part of this united kingdom», is a learned but destitute Scotsman who moves to London to find work as a surgeon's mate in ships bound for overseas territories (Smollett 2020: 1). Roderick Random, as Alfred Lutz argues, is invested by Smollett with the task of responding to «anti-Scottish prejudice» (Lutz 2001: 4). Indeed, as the plot unravels, he and his fellow northerner Hugh Strap have to deal with various insults about their northern lineage. While staying in an alehouse, for instance, they get picked on by a person who «understanding, by our dialect, that we were from Scotland», came up to them to ask them, to general laughter, whether they carried in a backpack «oat-meal or brimstone» (Smollett 2020: 63) — oatmeal being a reference to the typical food eaten by Scottish peasants; brimstone a likely reference to John Knox's Presbyterian preaching. When Random applies for a position as a surgeon in the Royal Navy, he is told by the London officer that the application will likely be unsuccessful because of there being «such a swarm of Scotch surgeons at the Navy Office, in expectation of the next vacancy» (74). Upon Random's revelation that he himself was Scottish, another officer's rejoinder is that «we have scarce any other countrymen to examine here—you Scotchmen have overspread us of late as the locusts did Egypt» (86). His Scottishness gets him in all sorts of trouble, especially at the hands of sharpers who take advantage of his lack of knowledge about the ways of the world in London (Bunn 1981: 455).

As Jerry Beasley observes, Smollett's insistence on Random's misadventures was strategic, in that they emphasized his status «as an outsider in contemporary English society» (Beasley 1979: 212). The prejudices experienced by the main character were meant as a verisimilar chronicle of a Scot's life in the South; as Smollett writes in the preface, «[e]very intelligent reader will, at first sight, perceive I have not deviated from nature in the facts, which are all true in the main, although the circumstances are altered and disguised, to avoid personal satire» (Smollett 2020: xxxv). This was a major concern of Smollett's, who in his journal *The Briton* (1762-1763) would denounce the fact that in the English language the word "Scotchman" increasingly connoted «every thing that is vile and detestable» (Shields 2005: 175).

Scotland as "Global South" in Smollett's Works

The state of cultural subjugation of the Scots depicted in *Roderick Random* is exemplary of a phenomenon that Michael Hechter has called «internal colonialism», which stands for the situation wherein a peripheral territory's economic development is made «complementary to that of the metropolis» (Hechter 1999: 30). Smollett had knowledge of what internal colonialism amounted to, and voiced strong opinions about it. In the poem *The Tears of Scotland* (1746), written a few years prior to *Roderick Random*, he openly invited his countrymen to rebel against the cruelties meted out by the English in the aftermath of the

1746 Battle of Culloden (Shields 2005: 177). Smollett's tone was unmistakably vengeful:

While the warm blood bedews my veins,
And unimpair'd remembrance reigns;
Resentment of my country's fate
Within my filial breast shall beat;
And, spite of her insulting foe,
My sympathizing verse shall flow,
"Mourn, hapless Caledonia, mourn
Thy banish'd peace, thy laurels torn".
(Smollett 2015: 360)

In both *Roderick Random* and *The Tears of Scotland*, it clearly appears that the «homeland» issue was vital to Smollett as a writer (Beasley 1996: 17). *Humphry Clinker* is no exception, but, differently to these works, the Scotland question is tackled from different points of view, the most prominent of which is that of Bramble, who acts not as a Scottish patriot, but as a detached observer of the state of the Union.

This approach transpires from sundry remarks on cultural discrimination scattered across the novel. Upon entering Scotland, Bramble writes that:

[t]he first impressions which an Englishman receives in this country, will not contribute to the removal of his prejudices; because he refers every thing he sees to a comparison with the same articles in his own country; and this comparison is unfavourable to Scotland in all its exteriors. (238)

Language stereotypes further exacerbate anti-Scottish prejudice, with Bramble going as far as suggesting that the «Scots would do well, for their own sakes, to adopt the English idioms and pronunciation; those of them especially, who are resolved to push their fortunes in South-Britain». Such advice is based on the fact that «I know, by experience, how easily an Englishman is influenced by the ear» (*ibidem*).

The suggestion that Scottish people are subject to English prejudice is less noteworthy for its content than for Bramble's origins as a fellow citizen of the Union whose identity is also subaltern to English culture. As a Welshman, he is representative of a group of people from a «union long antedating that of 1707, one that is ancient, stable, and broadly accepted» (Keymer 2018: 113). Bramble's identity predates that political union, as he allegedly descends from Llewelyn, prince of Wales from 1258 until 1282 (Smollett 2015: 200), but his name evidently became anglicized over the centuries. Although this suggests his having been absorbed into English culture, Bramble cherishes the superiority of his Welsh identity, as evidenced by the fierce critique of the moral and social chaos which he experiences in London and the nearby bath towns. At Bath,

he complains about the dreaded «mob» (i.e., the crowd), a «monster I never could abide, either in its head, tail, midriff, or members; I detest the whole of it, as a mass of ignorance, presumption, malice and brutality» (44). Similarly, in London, he rails at those people of «birth, education, and fortune» putting themselves «on a level with the dregs of the people» (112). Such crowded environments allegedly beget infective diseases. Being «pent up in frowzy lodgings, where there is not room enough to swing a cat», Bramble is concerned with his having to «breathe the steams of endless putrefaction», which would «undoubtedly, produce a pestilence» (128). By contrast, Wales is portrayed in idyllic terms, both naturally and socially. In Brambleton Hall, his well-managed country property, Bramble breathes «a clear, elastic, salutary air», eats wholesome food entirely produced in his estate, and lives «in the midst of honest men, and trusty dependents, who, I flatter myself, have a disinterested attachment to my person» (*ibidem*).

This evidence shows that Bramble refuses the role of an anglicized observer; on the contrary, he wishes to retain his role as an outside observer, thus situating himself in a privileged distanced standpoint from which to evaluate the relationship between England and Scotland. His very interest in Scottish society is, in fact, surprising, for, as Jerry Melford remarks in a letter to fellow Oxonian student Sir Watkin Phillips, «the South Britons in general are woefully ignorant» of all things Scottish due to their prejudices: «[w]hat, between want of curiosity, and traditional sarcasms, the effect of ancient animosity, the people at the other end of the island know as little of Scotland as of Japan» (Smollett 2015: 221).

It is on this premise that we can interpret Bramble's attention to Scottish culture as part of a conflict between north and south. Significantly, the first strip of Scottish land just above the border town of Berwick is described by Bramble as an area which «nature seems to have intended as a barrier between two hostile nations» (Smollett 2015: 222). This division between north and south may be illuminated via the concept of “Global South” employed in present-day social sciences. Anne Garland Mahler understands the concept as «a deterritorialized geography of capitalism's externalities and means to account for subjugated peoples within the borders of wealthier countries» (Mahler 2017). In this sense, the concept of south overlaps with Hechter's definition of internal colonialism, but the element of novelty is provided by the adjective “global”, which is employed to «unhinge the South from a one-to-one relation to geography», which means that there are «economic Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South» (*ibidem*).

In this respect, eighteenth-century Scotland is best understood as a South, i.e., «an internal periphery and subaltern relational position» detached from its actual geographical position (Mahler 2017). This subalternity did not only translate in the loss of local Scottish culture — the clan system of the Scottish Highlands was progressively disbanded over the course of the eighteenth

century — but, subtly yet incisively, in a decrease in the cultural importance of Scotland compared to Southern England, and London specifically (Kaul 2009: 17). Borrowing the terms used by a scholar in the different context of American Souths in literature, London-centred culture in the eighteenth century was the north which operated as «center and norm», while places like Scotland were the south which stood as a «deviation, in need of intervention and reform from without» (Greeson 2010: 12). In other words, applying the concept of Global South to Scotland allows us to notice the subtle «realignment of power in which regional distinctions became markers of a provincial, and even backward, identity as English modes of behavior and standards of correctness became the currency of the nation» (Kaul 2009: 5).

North and South in *Humphry Clinker*

This distinction between North and South is at work in *Humphry Clinker*, a novel which problematizes the cultural hierarchy between London and Scotland by associating the former with disease and the latter with health. As he makes his way northward, finally crossing the border to Scotland, Bramble's health is fully restored. Complaints about his illnesses are all but absent, and nature and man appear both in the best light. Upon leaving the Highlands and planning his return to England, Bramble declares that «I have received so much advantage and satisfaction» that he will return to Scotland to complete his tour of the Highlands «if my health suffers no revolution in the winter» (Smollett 2015: 263).

Still, Bramble's views are not meant as a vindication of Scotland *per se*, but as part of a synthetic view of the Union as a political entity which must be balanced and harmonious in all its parts to function correctly. A case in point is Bramble's letter to Dr. Lewis written while in London and containing the account of a visit to the British Museum, which had opened in 1759. While praising this «noble collection», Bramble laments a lack of systematicity. He wished that «the whole of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms [was] completed», and that «a complete apparatus for a course of mathematics, mechanics, and experimental philosophy» was provided, complete with a position for an «able professor, who should give regular lectures on these subjects» (Smollett 2015: 109-110).

While Bramble's requests do not seemingly have much to do with politics, the opposite is true, as it appears by the fact that his proposed reformation of the British Museum is made with a view of «the honour of the nation» in mind, by which Bramble means the Union. The museum, Bramble explains, had been set up as a collection by a «private man» (109) — Hans Sloane, the former President of the Royal Society — rather than by a state-based enterprise, and this made the collection haphazard, and thus ill-suited to represent the interests of the nation as a whole. Upon Sloane's death in 1753, the Parliament acquired his collection of 71,000 natural specimens for the hefty sum of £20,000.

The British Museum Act passed by the Parliament in the same year reassured the public that the investment would return to the nation by mandating that the collection «be preserved and maintained not only for the Inspection and Entertainment of the learned and curious, but for the use and benefit of the Publick» (Yasaitis 2006: 452). But the right to public access was to be reconciled with Sloane's will, which stipulated that the artefacts in the collection could be made public only if they «remain together, and not be separated, and that chiefly in and about the City of London, where I have acquired most of my estate, and where they may by the great confluence of people be of most use» (Alexander 1983: 34).

A contradiction was thus in place. The British Museum was nominally a public collection for the benefit of the whole Union, but it had to stay in London, and it had to remain in the form chosen by a private citizen. In other words, what Bramble lamented was the risk of mistaking the private for the public, offering a distorting vision of Britain as an eminently London-centric entity. Bramble's choice of the British Museum as a topic to discuss nation-building dynamics was not haphazard. As Sheila Watson has persuasively argued, the British Museum was one of the sites in which «ideas about the kind of political nation Britain imagined itself to be were played out» (Watson 2019: 66). The objects included in the museum «helped create the synonymous identification of England with Britain», which in turn lessened the relevance of the Celtic legacy within the cultural heritage of the country (73). This is especially the case with a number of manuscripts like the Magna Carta, epistles from Augustine following the Christianization of Britain and a number of medieval codices on the Anglo-Saxon past of England, which were also part of the British Museum upon its foundation. These documents were crucial because, as James Hamilton explains, Britain was still «an entity in its infancy» and the institution of the British Museum worked to affirm

a commitment by the British state, through Parliament, to embrace a united future between England and Scotland by means of an organization whose task it is to preserve, present and study the roots and products that nurture and support it. (Hamilton 2018: 5)

The fact that Bramble's critique of the British Museum is introduced via a focus on the scientific necessities of the collection is also significant, since it shows a concern with the question of how to objectively assess the state of the nation without falling prey to prejudice. In an instance of what Michael Rosenblum calls Smollett's «conservative imagination», Bramble seeks to discover «analogies in the natural world for the organization of the good society» (Rosenblum 1975: 558). However, this yearning for objectivity, Bramble adds, is in contrast to «the temper of the times», which privileges partisanship, so much

so that it is already «a wonder to see any institution whatsoever established for the benefit of the Public» (Smollett 2015: 110). As an example of the selfishness of the times, Bramble takes the example of periodicals, whose slandering he condemns as unfairly damaging the reputation of a person or a whole societal group. Bramble argues that, given that authors in periodicals can easily conceal or disguise their private interests by writing anonymously, and that the pervasiveness of the periodical press allows unscrupulous writers to influence many readers at once, it follows that:

every rancorous knave—every desperate incendiary, that can afford to spend half a crown or three shillings, may skulk behind the press of a newsmonger, and have a stab at the first character in the kingdom, without running the least hazard of detection or punishment. (Smollett 2015: 110)

This take is clearly circumstantial. As he had done with his periodical *Briton*, Smollett is here using Bramble to rebuke the type of slander that had been levelled at the likes of Lord Bute, who in 1762-1763 was the first Scottish prime minister of Britain (Gassman 1963: 400). But Anti-Scots propaganda in a broader sense was certainly in Smollett's mind as well. Periodicals like the *North Briton*, which attacked Lord Bute's as a «Scottish administration», often purported to praise the Scots only to underline their lowly status and foster public ridicule against them (Dew 2009: 239).

As Robert Crawford observes, Smollett had been «[s]chooled in Scotophobia», and decided to write *Humphry Clinker* with the «theme of prejudice» explicitly in mind (Crawford 2000: 57). This is apparent from the portrayals of some of the characters in the novel. When the titular character Humphry Clinker first appears, he is so ragged that his buttocks show through his clothes, thus amusing and scandalizing the company. Jerry describes him as having a «a sickly yellow» complexion; «his looks denoted famine, and the rags that he wore could hardly conceal what decency requires to be covered» (Smollett 2015: 87). Jerry also reports Tabitha Bramble's description of Humphry Clinker as «a filthy tatterdemalion» and «such a beggarly rascal that he had ne'er a shirt to his back, and had the impudence to shock her sight by shewing his bare posteriors, for which act of indelicacy he deserved to be set in the stocks» (87). Although Humphry Clinker would turn out to be of English birth at the end of the novel, the descriptions made by Jerry and Tabitha resonate with the anti-Scots propaganda of the 1760s which made «bare buttocks, beggarliness, mange, and filth» typical accusations against the Scots (Rothstein 1982: 63).

Remarkably, Matthew Bramble immediately recognizes the subalternity of Humphry Clinker. With deft use of irony, he addresses the young man as «a most notorious offender» who stands «convicted of sickness, hunger, wretchedness, and want» (Smollett 2015: 88). Swayed by his servility, Matthew Bramble

decides to take Clinker into the family, even though his sister Tabitha refers to him as «a beggarly foundling taken from the dunghill» (93). Bramble's instinctive identification of Clinker as part of the family, long before the discovery that he was his own illegitimate son, works as a metaphor for the need to overcome the unjust prejudices against the "provincial other" within the Union. Plot maneuvers like this are instrumental to the achievement of what Robert Mayer calls "historical vision", that is, Bramble's extended reasoning about the future of Britain as a nation, which within the novel seems to be attainable only by «valorizing both union – harmonious, moral human society – and the Union in the process» (Mayer 1992: 250).

Scotland's Subalternity and Smollett's Use of Multiple Perspectives

Bramble's conversations with Lismahago on the topic of Scotland's status within the Union, as reported in another letter to Dr Lewis, are particularly illuminating in this regard. The former praises the «flourishing state» of Scotland, expressing his satisfaction «at the happy effects of the union, so conspicuous in the improvement of their agriculture, commerce, manufactures, and manners» (Smollett 2015: 280). Lismahago vehemently denies these advantages, arguing that Scotland improved naturally on its own, and that, if anything, it might have actually been hampered by the establishment of the Union. As he bluntly puts it,

I conceive the Scots were losers by the union.—They lost the independency of their state, the greatest prop of national spirit; they lost their parliament, and their courts of justice were subjected to the revision and supremacy of an English tribunal. (*ibidem*)

In Lismahago's opinion, it is thus erroneous to argue that the Scots gained an advantage from the Union. To the commonplace view that «the people lived better, had more trade, and a greater quantity of money circulating since the union, than before» expressed by Bramble, Lismahago retorts that:

[t]heir trade has been saddled with grievous impositions, and every article of living severely taxed, to pay the interest of enormous debts, contracted by the English, in support of measures and connections in which the Scots had no interest nor concern. (*ibidem*)

By the Act of Union, the Scots had «become English subjects to all intents and purposes, and are in a great measure lost to their mother-country» (*ibidem*).

Lismahago's patriotic viewpoints were variations of Smollett's interventions in the *Briton*, and in this sense one might reasonably claim that Lismahago, who endorses a form of Scottish nationalism which in the words of Katie

Trumpener «leads to a critique of imperial attitudes», is Smollett's mouthpiece, and that the novel ultimately carries a pro-Scottish message (Trumpener 1997: 263). Yet, it needs to be taken into account that Lismahago's ideas are always refracted by the voice of Bramble, who instead never goes as far as opposing the Union as a political entity because, for all the disparities between north and south, unity is to be privileged over division (Mitchell 2013: 80). As a result, Scotland's subaltern status is vindicated via a challenge to English prejudices, but, as in the portrayal of Clinker, this is done in such an indirect way that the reader cannot but be conveyed a feeling of distance.

The reason for this might well lie in the philosophical substratum of *Humphry Clinker*. Following Louis Martz's classic study on Smollett and the Enlightenment, Bramble's view of the Union may be called synthetical, in that it tries to find harmony between disparate phenomena. As Martz argues, Smollett lived in an «Age of Synthesis», i.e., a period characterized by the scientific urge to classify moral as well as social phenomena and find a common ground (Martz 1942: 1). To this «synthetizing urge» applied to the moral sciences the Scottish Enlightenment had given a remarkable contribution, especially via the notion of sympathy (Crawford 2000: 64). In terms of sentimentalism, the impact of the concept of sympathy devised by David Hume and Adam Smith on *Humphry Clinker* is quite noticeable. With every letter writer being «de facto a spectator of the other characters' actions», each of them «are often moved to comment upon their own sympathetic reactions» to other events, which prompts the reader to experience different sentiments (Dawson 2019: 301). This, as Deidre Dawson shrewdly notes, was an illustration of a central notion of Smith's theory of sympathy: «that we are not only concerned with the object of our sympathy; we are equally concerned with how others might judge our sympathy» (302). This «moral sentimentalism», meant as the «ability to feel as others do», central as it is to the different psychological types of *Humphry Clinker*, may also be linked to a broader group of novelists — which included Samuel Richardson, Sarah Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and Henry Mackenzie — who were interested in exploring the facets of feeling from a philosophical angle (Young 2024: 69; Frasca-Spada 1999: 218).

Politics-wise, however, the presence of multiple perspectives in *Humphry Clinker* poses a challenge to claims like that made by Evan Gottlieb that appreciating «the political ramifications of Enlightened sympathy» helps shed «new light on the nation-building work» of the novel (Gottlieb 2005: 82). The reason is a confusion between Matthew Bramble's view and that expressed in the novel as a whole. Like Matthew Bramble, Hume and Smith saw their concepts of sympathy as aimed at «fostering a sense of shared national identity between the English and the Scots» (*ibidem*), and we know that both Hume and Smith were firm believers in the benefits of the Union for Scotland (Manning 2002: 34; Ross 1975: 7). This is not necessarily the case for the rest of the characters in

Humphry Clinker. In spite of the fact that the novel ends with a number of marriages, which some commentators have taken as a harmonious union between individuals mirroring that between social groups and cultures, the synthesis offered in the novel is never fully accomplished². As Sebastian Mitchell best put it, in *Humphry Clinker* the synthesis between the «self» and the «national» does not «necessarily result in a sense of personal and national harmony», but, rather, in a «blend of the idiosyncratic and resigned» (Mitchell 2013: 48). The character of Lismahago is significant in this regard, for although he courts and then marries Bramble's sister Tabitha, he does not change his mind about Scotland, which is why Bramble complains of «the dogmata of my friend Lismahago» (Smollett 2015: 285).

In other words, what Gottlieb calls Smollett's «interest in how the Scots, far from being merely passive victims of Anglicization, in reality played a formative role in shaping the cultural contours of the new British nation» (Gottlieb 2005: 82), is not examined necessarily via sympathy, but by keeping the contrasts between different points of view alive. In this respect, one can say that Smollett's use of characters as counterpoints — Bramble as the detached social scientist of Humean and Smithian inspiration; Clinker as the destitute migrant who gratefully seeks to please his saviors; Lismahago as the Scottish nationalist patriot — work as different, irreconcilable identities. Fascinatingly, this view harks back once more to the concept of global south, which Alfred J. Lopez understands as «those moments where globalization as a hegemonic discourse stumbles, where the latter experiences a crisis or setback» (Lopez 2007: 3). The power of literature, as Smollett understood, is to embed in some characters like Lismahago «the resistant imaginary of a transnational political subject that results from a shared experience of subjugation under contemporary global capitalism», and, in others like Matthew Bramble, the possibility of overcoming divisions by keeping a more detached view of cultural allegiances (Mahler 2017). By conveying several disharmonious voices about the state of the Union, the epistolary novel, Smollett perceived, could indeed play a key role in portraying Scotland's resistance to Anglocentric forms of cultural hegemony from multiple perspectives.

2 On the value of the «matrimonial union» at the end of the novel, see Michael Murphy (1995).

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Chapter 9

Framing the Other in J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

Gabriel Serbu

University of Rijeka, Croatia.

floring.serbu@uniri.hr

ORCID: 0000-0003-3481-8639

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Abstract

One central theme running through the “western” tradition is the tension between *self* and *other*, or between *sameness* and *difference*. This tension seems to have intensified today under the pressure of a growing resistance to the homogenizing logic of globalization in its various manifestations. The urgency to enter in a different rapport with the other — whether human or non-human — has indeed become not only a political requirement but an ethical imperative. There is a dominant tendency in the language of contemporary literary criticism to respond to such challenge by praising literature’s vocation to radically disrupt and undermine the established forms of discourse. On this view, the literary is given a privileged role in representing alterity. While mainly drawing on the “post-critical turn” in literary studies, my aim in this essay is to draw attention to the limitations of such a view by reflecting on the literary fortune of one of J. M. Coetzee’s early novels, *Life and Times of Michael K*. By mimicking the very language of criticism that tends to frame the other according to a grandiose rhetoric of subversion, the novel seems to cast suspicion on the transformative potential of literature.

Keywords

postcritique; literary theory; representation; interpretation; otherness/alterity; novelistic discourse.

Our craft is all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities. [...] Only part of the truth, such a reading asserts, resides in what writing says of the hitherto unsaid; for the rest, its truth lies in what it dare not say for the sake of its own safety, or in what it does not know about itself: in its silences. It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn.

J. M. Coetzee (1988b: 81)

Introduction

Leading left-leaning intellectuals tend to agree that the underlying cause for today's crises is the rampant expansion of transnational capitalism. And there is little to do about it as long as we remain trapped within an "end-of-history" vision of the world supported by the supposedly objective laws of the global market and ideologically reinforced by "universal" liberal values¹. What seems to be at stake is not merely a question of better policy-making or sustainable development within the same paradigm, but rather a need to redefine the terms of the debate, which is fundamentally a philosophical problem and a matter of interpretation². Amid the unprecedented migration crisis and impending environmental collapse, one major issue in this debate is how "we" are supposed to define ourselves in relation to the human/non-human other. This points once again to a notorious impasse haunting the western tradition: that of *representing alterity*. The conventional take on the matter, at least in the academia, is that the task of thinking today is to find ways to break free from the interpretative paradigms underpinning a Eurocentric, hegemonic worldview.

1 McKenzie Wark (2016) draws a fitting description of the "current conjuncture": «The capitalist west no longer confronts *two* socialist camps, one sprung from the colonized world. Rather, I take the defining feature of the conjuncture to be a now-globally victorious regime of commodified production to be confronting the limits imposed by its own destabilizing of the metabolic processes of the planet itself». The urge to adapt at any cost to such a vision of the world is effectively illustrated by Barbara Stiegler in her *Il faut s'adapter* (2018). On the metaphysical paradigm legitimizing western democracies see also Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala (2011).

2 «Perhaps the time has come, after the deconstruction of metaphysics, to rephrase Marx's statement in order to emphasize how 'the philosophers have only described the world in various ways; the moment now has arrived to interpret it'» (Vattimo and Zabala 2011: 5).

Literature as Literature or the “Theological” Vein of Literature

In this context, literature occupies a privileged position, as it operates within the realm of language, where the “other” is encountered and where the possibilities and limits of interpretation are being tested³. But is literature powerful enough to interfere with the dominant discourse so as to have an impact on the dynamics of representation? And if so, does its strength reside in its commitment to a political program or, by contrast, in its radical disruption of any programmatic intent? Or is literature, perhaps, merely a reflection of the current ideology devoid of any emancipatory function?

These are important questions that exceed the scope and ambition of this chapter. However, it is worth stressing the sense of urgency these issues have acquired. Gisèle Sapiro, a sociologist of literature, has recently raised the problem of the function of literature in relation to the “old” impasse of representation, particularly in the context of the MeToo and Black Lives Matters movements. She observes that while literature is indeed linked to «different modes of social existence», it must be understood beyond the opposition between mere sociological reductionism and singular creative acts⁴. In a similar though more nuanced vein, Rita Felski, the proponent of the “post-critical turn” in literary theory, distinguishes between two styles of reading literature: the “ideological” and the “theological”. By “ideological”, Felski means that either is literature inescapably the product of the dominant ideology and thus forever blind to its own *raison d'être* or plays an important but merely auxiliary role in promoting some emancipatory ideology. Hence literature can either obscure or accentuate social antagonisms.

By “theological”, Felski refers to those critics who value “literature as literature”, focusing on literature’s enigmatic yet radical and transformative potential. On this view, the literary act is framed within a rhetoric of subversion, as a heroic incursion into the unknown, that may produce political effects but only at a deeper, more essential level (Felski 2008).

In this chapter, my aim is to examine what I consider to be an exemplary instance in “framing the other” in the language of contemporary literary criticism in connection with the two interdependent problematics outlined above: the ethical-political demand to rethink our relation with the other and the view of literature as a “privileged” medium of representing alterity in the realm of aesthetics. The author I have in mind is John Maxwell Coetzee, one of the most authoritative voices in contemporary world literature. His work is especially

3 On the historical limitations of linguistic creativity see Donatella Di Cesare’s introduction to Eugenio Coseriu (Di Cesare: 2010: 16).

4 See the preface and the introduction to *The Sociology of Literature* (Sapiro 2023).

relevant here, as it has long been regarded as a «strenuous enterprise in acknowledging alterity» (Attridge 2004: 12) that allows for «the discontinuities in the ethical and the epistemological and political fields [to be] tamed in the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction» (Spivak 2002: 18).

My purpose is to draw attention to a tendency towards a “theological style of reading” that seems to characterize, in various guises, much of Coetzee scholarship. To this purpose, I take *Life and Times of Michael K* ([1983] 2004; hereafter cited in text as *MK*) to be of particular interest, as it is the only novel where, through a play of focalization, Coetzee dramatizes the role of the critic/interpreter in his/her encounter with otherness (Chesney 2007: 317-318). I will suggest that this encounter can be read in terms of an operation of “framing”, in the Heideggerian sense of “im-position” or *Ge-Stell*⁵ — meaning that both Michael K (the main character in the book representing the figure of alterity) and *MK* (the novel itself representing the “literary” as the *other* of normal/dominant discourse) are obsessively mined for meaning. As I will try to show, the *de rigueur* reaction to this operation in the language of criticism has, paradoxically, been to frame the other as unframeable, or, as one influential critic put it, to contend that in *MK* «‘meaninglessness’ [...] itself bears meaning» (Poyner 2009: 72)⁶.

Before getting to the novel itself, let me briefly provide some context. While each of Coetzee’s novels displays a unique blend of innovative narrative style and profound theoretical awareness, there is one fundamental conflict being staged throughout his works: the (mis)encounter between the liberal conscience⁷ and a figure of otherness that radically disrupts the protagonist’s (and, supposedly, the reader/critic’s) interpretive framework. A straightforward reading would place this (mis)encounter within the tradition of a critique of the liberal humanist subject (i.e., typically the focalizing consciousness) and, by implication, of the liberal humanist discourse (i.e., the language of representation). If, however, one is to understand such critique in the double sense of the genitive

5 Heidegger refers to the “framed” existence of man within the era of technology and science, where everything is calculated and measured, controlled. What interests me here is the hermeneutic violence of the framing process, which Heidegger identified as the “essence” of western thinking (Heidegger 2003).

6 To be clear, my only purpose here is to identify a pattern in the readings of the novel that follow, and not to invalidate them.

7 A very accurate description of the “liberal humanist” that tends to be the focalizing consciousness in all Coetzee’s novels is provided by Teresa Dovey: «The sentiments and attitudes the Magistrate is made to express represent a traditional liberal humanist position, and may be summarised as: belief in the power and efficacy of the judiciary system; belief in ‘civilisation’ and the continual progress of humankind; an abhorrence of violence, accompanied by an attitude of tolerance and rationality; a capacity for fairly ruthless self-scrutiny and a sense of guilt that can be incapacitating; and, more significant than all of these, a belief in individual autonomy and freedom of choice. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, all of these attitudes are shown to be ineffectual in relation to the kind of power vested in the figure of Colonel Joll» (Dovey 1996: 142).

(where the discourse of critique also necessarily belongs to the “western” subject), it becomes apparent that such modes of critique, including the “literary”, are securely inscribed within the scope of the liberal humanist subjectivity and, by implication, its language of representation.

This impasse is further complicated by Coetzee’s peculiar role as a dissenting white intellectual living in South Africa during apartheid and its aftermath. As Teresa Dovey explains, Coetzee’s fiction is situated at the intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism — that is, between the necessity to undermine the colonial discourses that historically represented the other and the risk of creating yet another Western narrative that would appropriate marginalized voices⁸. It is this deep-rooted anxiety⁹ that has proved to be the most enduring source of inspiration for much of Coetzee scholarship. Needless to say, Coetzee himself encouraged this prevalent critical orientation, once remarking polemically that the literary must be in a relation of *rivalry*, rather than *supplementarity*, to History, in an early interview (Coetzee 1988a) — by which he meant, in so many words, that the writer’s responsibility is to his/her writing rather than to the (merely) political (Attwell 1990). Thus, paradoxically, the revolutionary gesture *par excellence* is essentially apolitical.

Framing the Unframeable: Reading *Michael K*/Michael K

In the context of *MK*’s reception at the time of its publication in 1983, this kind of somewhat disengaged “postmodern sensibility” did not sit well with the more politically engaged commentators¹⁰. The most famous of whom, Coetzee’s fellow South African novelist and Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer, in reviewing the book, deplored the fact that «Coetzee’s heroes are those who ignore history, not make it» (Gordimer 1984: 6). Gordimer’s remark encapsulates the central tension dividing *MK*’s critical reception¹¹ and, more broadly, the reception of Coetzee’s oeuvre during apartheid South Africa, the bone of contention being the nature of the novelist’s commitment under the pressure of oppressive historical forces. Yet, as many commentators have since observed (Attwell 1990), “political” criticisms such as Gordimer’s are anticipated and defused in *MK* through the complex use of narrative voice, which resists

8 Dovey (1996) associates postmodernism with a crisis of representation and postcolonialism with the interpretation of history.

9 According to Michael Marais, Coetzee’s literature is symptomatic of what he calls the “ontogenetic anxiety” of an intellectual who finds it almost impossible to negotiate between the obligation to protest against an unbearable historical legacy and the autonomy of artistic expression (Marais 2006: 83-98).

10 See, for example, Benita Parry (1996).

11 In simplified terms, the novel was either criticized for not addressing in a more direct way pressing political issues or praised for safeguarding the autonomy of the creative act, as itself a radical form of political engagement. I will further develop this point as I go along.

straightforward allegorical readings. This is most explicitly realized in the second section of the book where the sudden irruption of a first-person voice is meant to mimic “our” voice — that of the reader/interpreter, who is at once self-consciously implicated in and suspicious of allegorizing discourse, whether alluding to concrete historical events or leading to more abstract reflections on the human condition¹².

In the first and third sections of the book, we follow the journey of Michael K — the typically Coetzeean figure of otherness, this time in the guise of an unemployed gardener from Cape Town, a forty-year-old “colored male” with a speech impediment from a congenital cleft lip¹³ — through a fictitious civil war-stricken South Africa set in an unspecified future. In the second section, the third-person narrator disappears and we find ourselves immersed in first-person mode, inhabiting the voice of an unnamed medical officer who is in charge of the hospital ward in the rehabilitation camp where Michael K is both a patient and a prisoner.

In this section, we witness a sort of spiritual journey initiated by the medical officer’s encounter with the other. In a first phase, the medical officer asserts his allegiance to liberal values by prioritizing his moral autonomy over the authority of the totalitarian state, represented by major Noël: «His [Noël’s] responsibility is to his programme [...], mine to my patients» (*MK*, 131). During the interrogation scene, where Michael K is questioned about his suspected involvement with the insurgents (137-142), the medical officer insists that Michael K tell his own story so that he can be recognized as an autonomous *subject*, and not as an individual *subjected* to the coercive narrative of the state: «What is your stake in the future?», «Tell your story!», «Give yourself some substance, man!» (140).

However, the medical officer’s desperate attempts to make Michael K «yield» his truth (152) and «co-operate» (145) are invariably met with «a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears» (140). Moreover, Michael K’s unwillingness to engage in dialogue is accompanied by graphic descriptions of Michael K’s congenitally distorted mouth: «He moistened his lips with his lizard tongue»; «he licked at the lip cleft» and finally «he closed his mouth obstinately, the mouth that would never wholly shut» (139). Michael K’s distorted mouth is

12 See Attridge’s “Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*” (published as chap. 2 in Attridge 2004: 32-64).

13 These details are important because they set Coetzee’s character apart from Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, of whom we know almost nothing, neither his circumstances nor his physical appearance. It is precisely this featureless appearance, coupled with his unsettling “I prefer not to” formula, that truly makes *Bartleby* a “man without qualities”. A figure of alterity that lends itself so easily to grand allegorical readings. Think, for instance, of Gilles Deleuze’s *homo tantum* (1998), Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer* (1998), Slavoj Žižek’s *Bartleby* as a radical political figure (2006), or, finally, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s view of *Bartleby* as not political enough (2000). On the difference between Michael K and *Bartleby*, see Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens (2007: 167).

therefore not only the marker of his otherness but also the symbol of his resistance. His silence is disruptive without being explicitly oppositional.

In the context of a critique of the liberal conscience, this aspect is revealing (if only speculatively) given that, as is well known, the word Immanuel Kant uses to epitomize the peak of human emancipation he both incites and predicts is *Mündigkeit*, or maturity — note that, in German, *Mund* means “mouth”¹⁴. Now, if we follow the etymological trail of the German word, we will find an intimate connection between linguistic competence and the literal age of maturity, marking the time when a person is considered to be a responsible human being capable indeed to speak for herself — something Michael K fails to do. This reading gains further plausibility if we think that the *other* of the “citizen subject”¹⁵ is the *barbarian*, who by definition is either unable to speak or speaks unintelligibly¹⁶. And the same goes for another figure of immaturity, the *infant* — literally someone who is «not able to speak»¹⁷.

The point is straightforward: the encounter with the other is tacitly guided by a logic of agreement that is always goal-oriented and hence coercive — the goal being precisely to subdue the interlocutor into agreement. As the medical officer's “maieutic forceps”¹⁸ fails to extract the “truth” from Michael K's deformed mouth (or, to put it in a familiar jargon, fails to assimilate difference into sameness), his complicity with the oppressive system becomes obvious, as also suggested by his last attempt to convince Michael K to speak: «Where else in the world are you going to find two polite civilized gentlemen ready to listen to your story all day and all night, if need be, and take notes too?» (*MK*, 140). The «two polite civilized gentlemen» are of course major Noël and the medical officer himself, representing state power and the liberal humanist, respectively — essentially two sides of the same coin¹⁹. And one might even in-

14 The etymological evolution of *Mündigkeit* (maturity) is more complex, but the connection to *Mund* (mouth) is certainly implied, as Helen O'Sullivan demonstrates in her *Language Learner Narrative: An Exploration of Mündigkeit in Intercultural Literature*. See especially the section entitled “*Mündigkeit*, *Mund*, and the Voice of Reason” (2014: 118).

15 I borrow the phrase from Kenneth Surin (2005) who explicitly links the emergence of modern subjectivity to Kant rather than René Descartes.

16 «From PIE root **barbar-* echoic of unintelligible speech of foreigners (compare Sanskrit *barbara-* ‘stammering,’ also “non-Aryan,” Latin *balbus* “stammering,” Czech *blblati* ‘to stammer’)» (Harper, n.d.).

17 «From *in-* “not, opposite of” + *fans*, present participle of *fari* “to speak,” from PIE root **bha-* “to speak, tell, say”» (*Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.).

18 The phrase appears in a similar context in Coetzee's previous novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* ([1980] 1999: 56).

19 An almost identical dynamic between the two figures of power is suggested in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: «For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less» (Coetzee 1999: 180).

clude the figure of the literary critic as fitting quite neatly the above description. Additionally, the never-ending state of war suggested by the epigraphic quotation from Heraclitus²⁰ and reflected in the pervasiveness of power relations, turns, quite predictably, into a dystopian reversal of the liberal society dreamed by the eighteenth-century *philosophes*²¹.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the thematization of dialogue as a coercive practice — a theme deriving from Nietzsche's "discovery" of the will to power, one of the core concepts of continental philosophy and literary theory after the events of May '68²² — is key to understanding the crisis that the medical officer goes through. Shortly after Michael K's enigmatic escape from the camp, the medical officer's existential discomfort culminates in an imaginary encounter with Michael K in the form of a long monologue, filled with anguish and regret, which reveals a desperate, almost pathetic search for meaning. On a textual level, this mirrors the critic's/reader's self-defeating hermeneutic effort to decipher the text. As the "rhetoric of daring" fuelling the quest for freedom, autonomy, and justice so dear to the liberal imagination collapses into radical doubt²³, the medical officer seems indeed to fall into the same disheartened state of spirit that pervades the "postmodern" theorist: what Terry Eagleton wryly describes as a cultish reverence for «some ominous Other» accompanied by «guilty self-laceration» (1996, chap. 1).

But make no mistake: the disenchanted liberal has not completely lost faith. Instead, he conveniently redirects his conceptual weaponry to serve a "rhetoric of triumphant subversion". In a grotesque twist of fate, the other is converted into a redeeming figure of salvation, his power rooted not in agency but in inscrutable passivity. As the medical officer notes, Michael K «only eats the bread of freedom» (MK, 146). In fact, in order to disrupt the inevitable spin of the «wheels of history», «beyond the reach of the laws of nations», Michael K must indeed turn into a «universal soul», «untouched by doctrine», «above and beneath classification» (151-152). Indeed, who would recognize him as such if not the freedom craving eye of the medical officer, who ironically even mistakes Michael K's name for "Michaels": «Listen to me, Michaels [...] I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you» (151). So overwhelmed by this irruption of alterity is the medical officer

20 «War is the father of all and king of all. Some he shows as gods, others as men. Some he makes slaves, and others free».

21 On the ideological affinities between liberalism and totalitarianism, see Anthony Arblaster's *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (1984). On the propensity to war inherent in the liberal conscience, see Michael Howard's *War and the Liberal Conscience* (2008: 5-21).

22 See Vincent Descombes (1980: 131-135).

23 Stanley Rosen has deftly illustrated the link between the motto of the Enlightenment, *andē sapere*, and the rhetoric of postmodernism, which is refractory to the idea of progress and haunted by doubt (1987: 9-22).

that he concedes, «people like Michaels are in touch with things you [Noël] and I don't understand» (155).

Surprisingly (or not), the medical officer's framing of Michael K according to a rhetoric of "triumphant subversion" has seeped, under various and sometimes even contrasting guises, into the language of literary criticism. As soon as the early, more "engaged" political readings of the novel were discarded (and with good reason for being over-simplistic for a writer of Coetzee's sophistication), the critical efforts of the academia were funneled into an attempt to "rescue" Michael K from any reductive readings (often linked to the South African political context) and see him for the "original soul" he is. However, although alterity can be said in many ways, Michael K has been persistently framed through familiar theoretical paradigms that seem to follow a pattern of radicalization — that is, the more un-representable is Michael K represented the better. To illustrate this, I will trace Michael K's journey through some representative readings within literary theory.

It is in this spirit of radicalization that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, read Michael K as a symbolic representation of radical passivity engaging in silent withdrawal rather than overt opposition, thereby converting him into a grand allegorical figure of resistance to the new post-national order they call "Empire"²⁴. On this view, Michael K transcends the South African context in the 1980s, emerging as a broader "political representative" whose absolute refusal is understood as the necessary starting point for an emancipatory politics between Empire and Counter-Empire²⁵. Michael K is therefore the marginalized "Everyman" whose silence, while understated and unheroic, serves as a deliberate act of disobedience against the coercive discursive strategies operating within the neo-colonial world order — one that has perverted the old liberal democratic ideal of the "conversation of mankind" (Bohm 2000).

Things turn metaphysical, however, as critics come to realize, as does the medical officer, that there is more (or rather less) to Michael K's silence than a rebellious posturing against the establishment: Michael K is not merely political, but radically political. His silence cannot be limited to the "category of refusal", which is functional within the confines of the hegemonic order, but rather hints at the "gap" pure and simple around which any positive discourse is necessarily structured²⁶. It is precisely this elusive quality of Michael K that haunts the medical officer:

24 See the brief section in their classic, *Empire*, entitled "Refusal" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 203-204).

25 I am following here Armin Beverungen and Stephen Dunne's critique of Hardt and Negri's interpretation of Melville's *Bartleby* as a political figure (Beverungen and Dunne 2007). Note that the figures of Michael K and *Bartleby* are unjustifiably conflated by Hardt and Negri.

26 Compare Žižek's critique of Hardt and Negri's political interpretation of *Bartleby* in his *The Parallax View* (2006).

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory [...] of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? (*MK*, 166).

Well, critics have indeed noticed it, and it is this kind of metaphysical ruminations that have spurred a plethora of extravagant interpretations of Michael K, one more daring than the other, but which generally revolve around variations on the same theme: resistance to the will to power. Hence Michael K becomes the (anti)heroic figure of evasion, fulfilling a redemptive function in the liberal imaginary: the “uncategorizable” — either in the “negative” Derridean sense of deconstructing conceptual hierarchies²⁷ or the “positive” Deleuzian sense of creating disruptive concepts²⁸ — that holds the promise for the “new” to emerge. And literature, through the deployment of sophisticated narratological strategies, becomes the privileged medium for accomplishing such a task.

This radically disruptive quality of both Michael K (the character) and *MK* (the novel as an instance of the “literary” itself) leads Derek Attridge, one of Coetzee’s most insightful critics, to reject all allegory in the name of a sort of mystical participation in the “event of reading”. He argues that the reader who *truly* partakes in the literary event is put in touch with alterity through the defamiliarizing effects of the reading experience. The point, for Attridge, is to exceed the sphere of the “already known” and reach the “entirely other” (Attridge 2004: 63–64). To be provocative — without diminishing the depth of Attridge’s readings of Coetzee’s work — one might argue that any “defamiliarizing shock” we experience here is not so much a radical escape into the “entirely other”, but rather a “shock of recognition”, more akin to an altering of the already known²⁹.

Too Much Otherness?

Indeed, some critics have grown impatient with so much ethical rigor. In a review of Attridge’s *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), Brian May observes that by charging against any allegorical or even “naïve” readings of literary texts in general and Coetzee in particular, Attridge comes close to a «mode of critical anxiety that prevents much from being said» (May 2007: 638). In much the same vein, Lucy Graham stresses the role of allegorical readings in keeping the work in touch with its historical background and away from aestheticism (Graham 2006: 240), while Gerald Gaylard deplores the fact that

27 For a reading of *MK* in this sense, see Michael Marais (1989).

28 For a Deleuzian reading of Coetzee, see Grant Hamilton (2011).

29 I am alluding here to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s insistence on the importance of our “enabling prejudices” in the event of understanding (Gadamer 2004: 278–306).

«the Levinasian version of alterity that Attridge offers is in danger of becoming a hermeneutic orthodoxy» (Gaylard 2006: 156) killing any trace of *jouissance* we might derive from Coetzee's oeuvre. In a brilliant tongue-in-cheek essay from 2012, Hedley Twidle (2012) complains that J. M. Coetzee's «work lends itself easily, perhaps too easily, to academic explication». His novels seem to engage with theory in such a refined and self-conscious way that critics cannot help but let themselves lured along the carefully deployed hints and clues throughout the narrative. As one commentator aptly put it, at the end of the day «Coetzee is a specialist who writes for specialists» (Sévry 1991: 209). The problem, it seems, is that whoever writes from within the current critical practice is hardly allowed to stray from the dominant reading patterns, so that, ironically, there appears to be little room left for any irruption of otherness.

This metalinguistic skepticism — where literature is seen as a portal to “other-worldly” dimensions — lies at the heart of what Rita Felski (2008) terms “theological readings”. What I have been trying to suggest in this essay is that this tendency seems to have lost its radical edge and is rather securely inscribed within the institutionalized practice of literary criticism. As Amanda Anderson (2016) suggests, our readings seem to never really be able to move beyond the framework of a “bleak liberalism” that risks converting fiction such as Coetzee's into a harmless operation of a “literary humanitarianism”³⁰. I am relying here on Anderson's insightful description of the «double vision structure» inherent in the liberal imagination: an optimistic vision oriented towards a commitment to the «ideal of reflective enlightenment» that suggests a «mere investment in neutrality, principle, or critical distance» and pessimistic vision focused more on «the intractability of liberal vices, the limits of rational argument, the exacting demands of freedom amid value pluralism, the tragedy of history, and the corruptibility of procedure»³¹.

Threatened by this latent Manichean tension still upsetting the Western dreams of emancipation — the tension between an ideal of a harmonious cosmopolitanism and the inevitability of an Orwellian decline —, the liberal imagination abandons any programmatic intent and turns into a “politics of desire” motivated by a hope in a sort of mystical struggle for liberation (Duesterberg 2019). The shift from an “oppositional politics” to a “cultural struggle” against the constraining “cultural apparatus” is sealed: the creative act becomes the new dogma and literature is therefore institutionalized as the site of resistance *par excellence* (McCann and Szalay 2005), the safe space for the emergence of radical alterity. What I have tried to show is that much of the overwhelming body of scholarship built around Coetzee's purposively ambivalent oeuvre is no exception to this critical orientation, rather the rule.

30 See Lindsey Stonebridge (2020).

31 See Amanda Anderson's introduction to her *Bleak Liberalism* (2016).

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Chapter 10

Coetzee and Wittgenstein on Play the Law

Gaetano Albergo

Independent scholar

gaetanoalbergo@yahoo.it.

ORCID: 0009-0007-6555-6148

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Abstract

It is only because literature is probably the most appropriate means to express, without falsifying them, the indeterminacy and the complexity of moral life that it can teach us something essential in this domain. To take up Wittgenstein's phrase, it can help us to watch and to see many more things than what ordinary life would allow us to watch and to see. Coetzee's three 'Jesus' fictions are not realist novels, although he has not made up a new world. Here, his true South, with complex histories of colonization, is difficult to identify. Historical contingencies do not frame his ethical enquiries. At the core we find self-reflexive linguistic questions. Here I follow Pippin (2021) and Mulhall (2022) in investigating the trilogy's philosophical commitment, with particular attention to the way Coetzee manages to make literature a device for the human search for meaning and understanding, starting from the particular jurisdiction that it realizes in the very act of serving language.

Keywords

philosophy and literature; unknowingness; rule-following; Wittgenstein; ethics of ideas.

Literature and Moral Philosophy

Recently, John Maxwell Coetzee has shown an increasing disenchantment with the global hegemony of American and British culture, and has developed the desire to engage with what might be called “Literatures of the South”. The project should be conceived in terms other than the usual parameters adopted by the cultural gatekeepers of the metropolitan outpost of the North. A really interesting case concerns the final volume of the ‘Jesus’ trilogy. It was first published in Spanish translation, as *La Muerte de Jesús*, six months before the English original first appeared in Australia. According to Stephen Mulhall, Coetzee went to create the impression amongst those in the Anglo-American cultural world that the English edition was somehow a belated translation of the Spanish one, and in this way he would have placed the fundamental theme of being transported, or translated, at the center, as a typically philosophical and existential problem. Recently, Derek Attridge has asked «are the “Jesus” novels peculiarly Southern?» (Attridge 2019).

It seems that matters of great pertinence to the colonial history do not feature importantly, and the South has no particular claim on the issues thrown up by the narrative and dialogues of the Jesus’ novels. However, Coetzee has accustomed us to review our most faithful beliefs. So, the world in which the trilogy is set is a place where passion is lacking, sex has little value, taste is never an expression of subjectivity. In this way, our common understanding of the South turns out to be merely stereotypical, and the ‘regime of reason’ also turns out not to be definable or attributable in a culturally relevant way¹. The protagonist, the rational Simon, expresses an erotic urge, but it makes reflective sense to himself as an attraction to the beautiful, and passions should prompt a form of reflection. As a result, an erotic dimension is attached to reason. Following the works of Robert Pippin (2021) and Stephen Mulhall (2022) I think the ‘Jesus’ trilogy maintains Coetzee’s long-established interest in philosophy, and this interest finds expression in a double direction: the question of the relation between ideas and reality in philosophy and literature, and the way in which philosophy’s drive to apprehend the reality beneath or beyond appearances finds its literary counterpart (but not its competitor).

The Swedish Academy decided to bestow the Nobel Prize to a «scrupulous doubter, ruthless in his criticism of the cruel rationalism and cosmetic morality of western civilization» (Nobel prize 2003). We could ask if Coetzee’s critique of reason is subordinated to a moral concern. We could follow Martha

1 There seem to be some similarities to the way Milan Kundera, in his *Les testaments trahis*, attributes new impulses in the art of the novel to the novels from the South: its unbridled imagination, capable of breaking all the rules of verisimilitude. However, Kundera is more precise in agreeing with Fuentes on a more exuberant, more foolish baroque, as a characteristic of the novel below the thirty-fifth parallel.

Nussbaum when she says that the most difficult question is the Aristotelian one: How should one live? If we followed the traditional distinction introduced by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen we should distinguish between philosophy in literature and philosophy through literature. The former case is substantial, because it stresses the importance of literature and it is relative to the way in which an imaginative world artistically constructed contains philosophical insights. We have two domains, and they are not commensurable, because the literary working-out of the theme is different from the philosophical one. This way, philosophy is subordinated to the purpose of fiction, and the philosophical features become an integral part of the aesthetic value of the work, partially constitutive of it.

Let us give a look at the second hypothesis. In this case, philosophy through literature: the philosophical conception needs imaginative literary forms as devices of exposition in order to gain a more effective communication. The accent is now not on the features that make this work unique, as a fundamentally different literary version of a philosophical topic, but on the philosophical purpose and its value. The aesthetic value is only contingent. According to Lamarque and Olsen this is the way Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam consider those works of literature able to contribute to moral philosophy.

We meet a first problem. How can philosophy enter into the reader's appreciation of literature? We can formulate the problem in these terms: is it correct to say, as Lamarque and Olsen do, that Nussbaum and Putnam avoid the question whether the moral value of a novel is (in part) *constitutive* of its aesthetic value? I think the two questions are very similar, but not the same. We have a weak perspective, and a strong one. They say that some works are integral to moral philosophy, but Nussbaum and Putnam do not consider the opposite question, that is if the moral philosophy inside the work is constitutive of its aesthetic value. Lamarque and Olsen have a negative answer because according to them every reading has a perspective or purpose, so if it is philosophical it cannot be literary.

Another question: it seems we have a problem with the concept of 'truth'. If a work has a philosophical value, we are compromised with an evaluative view, and philosophical truth is not a standard for literary appreciation, even with literature labeled as 'realistic'. The reader could be involved in the application of general rules or facing a complex situation by discriminating between conflicting moral claims and balancing them against each other. He would always be concerned with 'getting it right'. However, we can appreciate a literary work without judging the truth of its content.

Coetzee's novels show how the problem of truth is offstage or suspended.

The thesis of the independence of literature is logically compatible with the moral value of literature. Coetzee's intention in the trilogy is to affirm a dimension for literature where there is no subordination, or, following Martin

Woessner we could say that what Coetzee's novels do not do is tell us how to live. But we should recognize that Coetzee's work proposes an embrace of a pre-reflective empathy that stands in opposition to Nussbaum's stripped-down Aristotelianism.

In order to be clear we can try to enumerate some positions in the field:

- Martha Nussbaum. She supports a larger perspective, not reducible to a Kantian one; she says:

we are made aware that if the events in which we, as readers, participate had been described to us by a Kantian character, they would not have had the literary form they now do, and would not have constituted a novel at all. (Nussbaum 1990: 26)

So, we need to follow an Aristotelian strategy, based on the imaginative description of the facts inside a situation given by a work of art.

- Cora Diamond. She supports Nussbaum pointing to the role of imagination and improvisation to elicit the possibilities implicit in a situation. Literature is important for moral philosophy because it goes beyond the categories of 'action and choice' so as to address an individual 'texture of being'.
- Martin Woessner. He refuses Nussbaum's Aristotelian stance because we should separate philosophy from literature.
- Alice Crary. She wants a larger perspective on rationality, not a restrictive one based on argument and preserving the truth.

It may still be argued that a literary work is dependent on a moral argument because what is represented is 'exemplary', it gives us 'a pattern of real life', etc. But, as Lamarque and Olsen recognize, when a situation is represented in a literary work something new is created, with the use of rhetorical and stylistic means typical of that artistic genre. Thus, they claim:

The situation presented by a literary work is *unrepeatable* [...] and this is not merely a contingent fact. A literary work is always a representation where the mode and means of presentation constitute the nature of the situation represented. (Lamarque and Olson 1994: 395)

So, if a real situation were presented identically to one the reader might find in a book then it would invite a literary response. This seems strange if we think of how the representation of a dialogue of Plato, for example the *Symposium*, could not elicit a response only in literary terms. From their point of view our appreciation of the representation should be only on the aesthetic value, as if the specific thematic content were something else.

Lamarque and Olsen defend the uniqueness of literature. Therefore, if we translate this feature in terms of exemplarity, we define the situation as

repeatable. But then it is in need of an interpretation. If we define a situation as 'paradigmatic', that means we have found in it an exemplar value. Can we speak, in this case, of an extended text, that is, literary work plus an ethical interpretation? This involves other related problems. If we elicit the ethical meaning of a novel, is our appreciation driven just by a philosophical interest? If so, it means that we have not discharged the 'getting it right' that Lamarque and Olsen wanted to abandon. This problem is not of secondary importance. Do we have incompatible standards of appreciation? Obviously, this is based on their idea that we have just one point of view when we read a novel, or...or, a sort of cognitive limitation similar to what happens in front of an ambiguous figure.

It seems we need a way to dispense with such rigid classifications. Lamarque and Olsen claim that both in the case of the philosophy in literature and of philosophy through literature the features that contribute to its moral appreciation are partly identical to its features as a work of art. Moreover, they claim that an imaginative working-out of a philosophical theme is incommensurable with philosophical deliberation, there is not transfer of insight. But, is this the case with Coetzee's trilogy? This question can only be addressed appropriately if we now move on to demonstrate that we cannot find dead ideas in these works.

Speaking of the first two novels of the trilogy, James Ley affirms:

More than any of his previous works, they have a contingent feel, as if the author is embellishing the sparse details of his fictional setting in an *ad hoc* manner. The conflicted and compromised author-figures that have been a feature of his novels are conspicuously absent. Neither the bureaucracy in *The Childhood of Jesus* nor the court in *The Schooldays of Jesus* have the kind of oppressive authority that Coetzee has so often and so effectively identified and dissected, in large part because they are placed [in] such an obviously arbitrary fable-like context replete with celestial imagery that, unlike the nowhere-in-particular setting of his early masterpiece *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), entertains the impossible escape fantasy of being 'washed clean' of the past. Rich and intriguing though these novels are, the potency of their philosophical arguments is, I think, somewhat diminished as a consequence. (Ley 2016)

The problem of ideas has been addressed by Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello*:

[R]ealism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things [...] ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world. (2003: 9)

With this in mind, we can try to answer by examining an important contribution coming from the American philosopher Robert Pippin. In his monograph dedicated to the trilogy, entitled *Metaphysical Exile*, he claims that «the three

Jesus volumes are filled with philosophy» (Pippin 2021: 6). He describes the setting of the trilogy as a world in which everyone is in exile, without memory of their homeland. The protagonist and focalizer, Simon, feels that there might be some appearance/reality distinction, that the experience of estrangement and homesickness might be mitigated or lessened by some experience, perhaps an aesthetic one. Pippin quotes Novalis: «Philosophy is really homesickness, an urge [Trieb] to be at home everywhere» (2021: 6). It is not a demand for explanation, it is rather a sort of experience. It is a search for a reconciliation with the world, an ideal fit that makes one feel the “meaning of Being”, by feeling how one should live and what the world, especially the social world, makes available to one. Homesickness is balanced in Simon by a sense of beauty, but, anyway, that would happen if something would be shown, not by something being demonstrated.

Such a theme resonates with other Coetzee’s novels. Even if the author is not able to give an answer to the question: ‘how one ought to live’, he tries to say what has gone wrong. There is a difference between an epistemological state, that we find in the skepticism of René Descartes or David Hume, and a state of being based on a sense of ‘unknowingness’. It could be manifested as a sense of not knowing what we need to know to live well, and a novel can show what it would be to fail to live well.

According to Pippin, there is a sort of existential irony if you feel at loss about issues of meaning, without knowing exactly what would be to know them. But this is not the case of the inhabitants of Novilla, because only Simon seems to have a *sense* of these desiderata. Pippin thinks that the strangeness of the historical situation we live in and the lack of consensus on many issues are what is evoked in the novel, and that is the natural condition of philosophy, always animated by wonder. Pippin proposes an allegorical setting: a premise the implications of which do not simply follow, that are not directly implied by such a premise. These implications are continually novel and unexpected in ways that demand philosophical reflection, not just a location in what is presumed to be the ‘real’ analogue of a philosophical idea. But how can we avoid Attridge’s worries about allegorical readings of Coetzee? The trilogy is an allegory in this sense, as an exploration of experiences. It is a version of our personal setting, but that does not resolve anything. There is no message, so there is no allegory. We should also avoid treating the setting as a ‘thought experiment’ in philosophy, an artificially constructed situation meant to highlight some universal principle behind one or another possible decision, and then to test our intuitions about how the case should be decided. The primary issues are meaning, mattering, significance, and achieving some clarity about these will not be a matter of discovering some universal discursive thesis that can be applied in all cases. That would be useless, as moral idealism is (it would be a lie, as Robert Musil calls moral idealism). A setting allows us to understand the

major questions that arise in the novels. The first question Simon must face is “How ought one live?”. Thus, Coetzee fits perfectly into the current intellectual ethical debate on cognitive virtues. Forgetfulness might just figure a lack of concern for either who we are, or who we have become. As Pippin claims «It is a figure for thoughtlessness, intellectual lassitude, an *unwillingness* “to remember”» (2021: 16).

These examples support a sort of independence of literature from philosophy. Coetzee made the point in 1988 in *The Novel Today*, saying that the fact that literature can have a bearing on issues also of importance to philosophy, especially questions of morality and politics, does not at all mean that it is a mere supplement to philosophy. It can have such a bearing even if it is in many respects a rival to philosophy. We can formulate this in terms of a special status of a literary work, its proper ‘misunderstanding’. This clearly emerges if we consider the thesis of moral knowledge of literature. We can find some limits for a full understanding of a moral problem. According to Alice Crary, a skeptical about the wider conception of rationality could allow that a reading of a work of literature may invite us sound moral thought through an emotional engagement, but he/she might not concede that actually it is inviting such thoughts, because it is not warranted and we may not be justified in representing it in this way. A variant of it is offered by Lamarque and Olsen. A supporter of a moral reading of literature, they say, may fail to make a distinction between recognizing a conception of a situation and adopting that conception. A literary work realizes a conception of reality based on a subjective experience, but a reader is not constrained to adopt it. We could run to enrichment of our concepts but this doesn’t mean we necessarily adopt that view. Reading does not require the reader to intend the work as requiring to modify his concepts. There is no demand to adopt the authorial perspective. In the case of Coetzee, he does not tell us how to live. The way of living is the way of love. Coetzee tries to transcend the ethical limitations of philosophy. As Derek Attridge says, Coetzee’s works demonstrate that

the impulses and acts that shape our lives as ethical beings – impulses and acts of respect, of love, of trust, of generosity – cannot be adequately represented in the discourses of philosophy, politics, or theology, but are in their natural element in literature. (Attridge 2004: xi)

Unfortunately, misunderstanding is always around the corner. It comes down that Crary is concerned just with a defense of a meliorative reading of the intentions behind Coetzee’s novels, losing the opportunity to see the accusatory intent of Coetzee versus the failure of western rationality. For example, looking for a wide rationality in the novel *Disgrace*, Crary claims that the novel invites us to engage with the protagonist, so it intends to produce insights in us. We can

so better understand what is lost on David, even if at the end of the novel he starts to discern something. Crary is here affirming her idea that the novel must make us understand the right route, what is the best according to the author. But I think this is a perfect way to misunderstand him. The same with the other examples that follow in her analysis. About the animals she says that we are encouraged to sympathize with the feeling of vulnerability that led David to identify with animals and at the same time to acknowledge these identifications as just and appropriate. We can concede that the novel makes us reach a better grasp than the protagonist, David, of situations and natural and political forces beyond his control, so we are equipped with an image clearer than David's. Crary quotes the passage in *Disgrace* where David and Lucy cannot talk rationally «because of who you are and who I am» (Coetzee 1999: 155), as Lucy says. Does this mean that David should abandon the rational side? Rationality and truth are cognate concepts, but in different places Coetzee seems to associate truth and coercion. Crary adds that «the novel as a whole positions us to recognise Lucy as in the right in this instance» (Crary 2010: 264). This is untenable, otherwise we should support the idea, as Crary does, that Lucy's decision to remain there and give birth to the fruit of a brutal rape is reasonable and justifiable. It emerges an obvious and strong ameliorative perspective. I believe moralism as idealism finds strong opponents both in Musil and in Coetzee.

Literature as Subversive Juridicity

In *The Childhood of Jesus* the child David has a problem with rules. A good reader could think this is a typical feature of great literature. Think, for instance, of the way Jacques Derrida considers Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Like the man from the country, literature stands before the law. It attempts to access it through a door that is wholly unique, ever hoping for a glimpse of its splendor. Literature always does something other to the law. Patrick Hayes says literature has the potential to make otherness felt by interrupting the law in the act of serving it — by saying 'not yet' to its decision upon the truth of the matter. Derrida uses the words *joue la loi*. With this we mean both 'playing at being the law' and 'deceiving the law'. He explains how literature brings about a state of subversive juridicity:

Under certain linguistic conditions, literature can exercise the legislative power of linguistic performativity to sidestep existing laws [...]. This is owing to the referential equivocation of certain linguistic structures. Under these conditions literature can *play the law*, repeating it while diverting or circumventing it. (Derrida 1992: 216)

I think literature adopts more than simple referential equivocation in order to play the rule². Literature is a normative concept, as Pascal Engel recognizes, but we need a sort of imaginative understanding in order to consider a number of beliefs, many of these may be true, with cognitive value. This work of linguistic juridicity, with the help of the work of imagination, can enhance our cognitive powers. This subject has been central in Kendal Walton's book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. In his words:

Imagining from the inside will be central. Such self-imaginings are crucial component of our imaginative experiences [...] It's when I imagine *myself* in another's shoes that my imagination helps me to understand *him*. Such imaginative understanding may be what has been called *Verstehen*. And when I imagine this I also learn about myself. (Walton 1990: 34)

And:

Promoting understanding is arguably the primary objective of many paradigmatic works of fiction, including ones in which no unusual efforts are made to get the particulars right. *Great* fiction may go for *Verstehen*, lesser though still paradigmatically fictional works may settle for imparting information. (94)

We can take an example. Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest*, as Nussbaum acknowledges in her *Upheavals of Thought*, is an example of a fatal mistake because it represents, as Nussbaum says, «what is wrong with bringing people up to live by rules alone rather than by a combination of rules with love and imagination» (Nussbaum 2001: 390). The young Effi is given in marriage to an older man, who is unable to conceive marriage in a different way from that of codes of conduct of the society in which they live. After she betrays him, without that excess of aspirations which characterize Emma Bovary, the husband will make amends with a duel. This is followed by the death of his opponent and the estrangement of his wife. In all this the author does not ask the readers to sympathize with the young woman and to perceive the limits of unconditional adherence to codes of honor and duty. As Jean-Baptiste Mathieu suggests (2007: 101), if the husband had accepted the perspective that the reader develops on Effi, sympathizing with her, thus avoiding making accidental adultery a fatal episode, then their love would take a more meaningful natural course.

Thus, emotion, imagination, and change of judgment are part of a perspective that naturally calls into question the concept of rule. With this we come inside the perspective developed by Coetzee in the trilogy. Here I follow the way Stephen Mulhall develops the concept of rule in Coetzee's works. In his book on the trilogy, *In Other Words*, Mulhall describes what is perhaps the most widely noted sequence in *The Childhood of Jesus*, where the young protagonist David

2 See Carola Barbero (2023).

shows himself to be a literary embodiment of Ludwig Wittgenstein's deviant pupil. Probably Coetzee is following this argument very closely.

David refuses Simon's idea of an endless sequence of rightly related numbers.

David: I know all the numbers. Do you want to hear them? I know 134 and I know 7 and I know...

Simon: Stop! That's not knowing the numbers, David. Knowing the numbers means being able to count. It means knowing the order of the numbers – which numbers come before and which come after [...] which of the two is bigger, 888 or 889?

David: 888.

Simon: Wrong. 889 is bigger because 889 comes after 888.

David: How do you know? You have never been there.

(Coetzee 2013: 145)

Wittgenstein's solution is that what makes a given step the right one to take is conformity to the way a community is inclined to go on. There is no standard of correctness external to our form of life, so we have just the way a community draws it, and this means that teaching is a matter of bringing the child into conformity with that communal practice. This is the argument against a private language. We know Wittgenstein refers to the concept of form of life:

How I am to follow a rule? If this is not a question about causes, then it's about the justification for my acting in this way in complying with the rule. Once I have exhausted the justification, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: This is simply what I do. (1953: 217)

We might find it strange that in *The Blue and Brown Books* Wittgenstein says: «If a child does not respond to the suggestive gesture [to the teacher's indications of how to go on], it is separated from the others and treated as a lunatic» (1958: 93). However, this might simply mean that if the child does not understand, we should enforce conformity. Maybe telling him 'you simply must do exactly what I am inclined to do'? This reading takes Wittgenstein's passage literally, failing to hear its Swiftian tones, its irony. There is not an order but something like 'this is what I do, this is the way I and my fellow grown-ups do things, will you take me as an example you are willing to follow?' But the teacher actually is limiting himself to show rather than tell, because his actions are embodiment of certain possibilities adopted by the community. Such a non-coercive pedagogy is an exemplification that explanation and justification may run out, and in these cases

teacher and pupils share a repertoire of natural reactions, the kind that makes our interaction possible. Put otherwise, the normative is embedded in, and so dependent on, the natural, human nature; so what we call 'deviance' is a manifestation of differences, something natural. This could reshape our authority as adults who care about bringing the youths into their form of life.

In *The Childhood of Jesus* these two models are embodied respectively by the schoolteacher, Señor Leon, who reacts sending the young David to exile to the remedial school. By contrast, Simon slowly has a sort of redemption, which involves a willingness to acknowledge the possibility that David's perspective embodies an alternative way of making sense of things. David feels an exceptional sensitivity to the sheer individuality of every particular thing he encounters. This is the reason why he refuses to consider singular numbers inside an indefinite sequence. Simon reveals the real question when speaking about numbers and cracks and David's fear to fall, and keeping falling forever, he says 'if getting from one to two is so hard, I asked myself, how shall I ever get from zero to one? From nowhere to somewhere?' The step does not require a miracle each time, but represents the step into the conceptual system of numbers, and a step into orientation by any conceptual system of thought.

This drives us to the private language argument. David is complaining about having to speak Spanish all the time, and declares that he wants to speak his own language, starting enunciating nonsense syllables. Then something interesting happens. Simon looks into the boy's eyes:

He sees something there. He has no name for it. *It is like* – that is what occurs to him in the moment. Like a fish that wriggles loose as you try to grasp it. But not like a fish – no, like *like a fish*. Or like *like like a fish*. On and on. (Coetzee 2013: 186)

The emphasis is not on the fish, the recursivity returns the emphasis to the idea of likeness as such rather than to any particular likeness. This suggests that meaning in general is a matter of relations of likeness, that word meaning is constructed from the perception of similarity rather than identity. Simon's image of the fish invites us to consider alternatives to the concept of grasping experience conceptually. However, prior is the idea of likeness that invites us to consider a non-grasping interpretation of experience, in this way we could save David's desire for individuality without having to sacrifice the idea of mutual intelligibility, in a sort of compromise à la Nietzsche. Their personal experience of moving close to the other's position makes us understand how deep and significant is the reframing of what mutual intelligibility really is like. Understanding another's words can be elusive but not ungraspable, it can be regarded as a kind of Keatsian negative capability: as a 'willingness to dwell in uncertainties', mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. So, we can recognize with Mulhall that Coetzee and Wittgenstein agree:

we should be careful about the real characteristics of human communication, but also about the ways in which fantasies of privacy and publicity shadow those characteristics. These fantasies sometimes allow us to outwit our individual responsibilities, by putting our unknownness to others and our knowiness by them beyond our control.

Mulhall's interpretation of Wittgenstein is mediated by Stanley Cavell's critique of Malcolm's one. Cavell refused to read Wittgenstein's thesis against a private language as a substantial perspective a priori avoiding any deviation from the rule. This led Cavell to suggest that our relations to 'other minds' are better understood not in terms of knowledge but of acknowledgement. To withhold the concept of acknowledgement is just to withhold the concept of interpersonal relationship, and hence to withhold the concept of a person, also as experiencing subject. Malcolm is refuting to imaginatively inhabit the skeptical interlocutor's perspective. He is lacking a willingness to see how his interlocutor might get himself into the grip of a conviction that there is an intelligible possibility here, when ultimately there is no such a thing. I think that Cavell is right in saying that we feel a sort of metaphysical finitude (very close to 'exile' in Pippin's words), a separateness. A philosopher should give expressions to such feelings. You can dismiss others because they refuse to give up giving sense to a shared world in a proper linguistic way. This is the way Cavell reads Malcolm's interpretation of the private language argument. Otherwise you can try to bestow on others a kind of unknowingness, and at the same time let your own one to have voice. Unknowingness is the key term. It gives form to the demand of openness that needs to be addressed when doing philosophy. Coetzee uses literature as an alternative, to take care of openness, as a condition to let otherness be a natural component of human life. Cavell highlights this aspect when he says that we recognize to poets the capacity to give sensible aspects to feelings and remote aspects of experience:

A natural fact underlying the philosophical problem of privacy is that the individual will take *certain* among his experiences to represent his *own* mind — certain particular sins or shames or surprises of joy — and then take his mind (his self) to be unknown so far as *those* experiences are unknown. There is a natural problem of *making* such experiences known, not merely because behaviour as a whole may seem irrelevant (or too dumb, or gross) at such times, but because one hasn't forms of words at one's command to release those feelings, and hasn't anyone else whose interest in helping to find the words one trusts (someone would have to *have* those feelings to know what I feel). Here is a source of our gratitude to poetry. (Cavell 1976: 253)

Can we address these regions of the mind's life using ordinary language and philosophical arguments? Is it possible to refer directly to the other's unknowingness in virtue of our experience? Here I think the image of Keats

is appropriate. Philosophy gives voice to uncertainty and keeps exploring the extension of intellectual lack. In order to put new dimensions of human mind under scrutiny, philosophy needs the imaginative explorations from literature. Before starting its conceptual work it needs to meet reality as it is experienced and shared by humans. The problem is not to look for a piece of evidence able to disconfirm a conceptual claim. That could be a hopeless enterprise (maybe for the same reason according to which the sceptic says that evidence is and is not support for a claim of knowledge). The worry is about which kind of ground, if any, can supply a sufficient solidity and reliability, in order to start up a conceptual work. When dealing with such topics as privacy, communality, other minds, etc., it could be reasonable to recur to a wide, but sufficiently determinate, concept of nature.

We started this section with a plea for a sort of empathetic imagination when reading literature. What we seek is not just information but meaning. Obviously, as Iris Murdoch teaches, simply gaining conceptual clarity is not enough. Above we saw that meaning is not a matter of identity and rule-following, but of likeness, similarity. There is a cognitivist tradition that downsizes the role of grammatical rules as a tool to respond to the request for meanings. According to Colin McGinn there is not creativity in a linguistic competence if:

One is thinking of linguistic understanding as some kind of syntactic symbol-crunching, a mere following of rules of grammatical construction [...]. So understanding is memory plus imagination — memory of what words conventionally mean, and imagination of what possibility the sentence represents. This second component will be constant across languages. We all have to perform the act of imagining the possibility that snow is black in understanding a sentence that means that snow is black, despite the variations in the way this is conventionally expressed. (McGinn 2004: 150)

When talking of *Verstehen* we should think about content, about meaning. Coetzee has accustomed us to a literature that requires reflection and a continuous work of the sympathetic imagination. Philosophy has often constructed representations of reality according to the order of reason or with the mediation of a possible natural mental equipment. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, to name only the most well-known, did not believe that reality could understand itself. Coetzee's literature continues, on a modal because imaginative level, this effort to construct human models of reality starting from human concerns and interests. As Pippin says:

It's a common non sequitur to think that because the world is intelligible only as imagined or represented that the world, the one we must content ourselves with, consists in imaginings and representings. Rather, it is the conception of a so-called reality from which these meaning-making efforts have been 'subtracted'

that is fictional, even delusional. It is also much more artificial and constructed a conception of the real, and not at all 'genuine'. (Pippin 2021: 61-62)

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Chapter 11

“Fossilized Presents”. The Photo-Textual Nostos in Sicily from Elio Vittorini to Giorgio Vasta

Lavinia Torti

University of Bologna, Italy.

lavinia.torti2@unibo.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-7490-5633

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c414>

Abstract

Analyzing Giorgio Vasta's *Spaesamento* (2010) and *Palermo. Un'autobiografia nella luce* (2022), alongside Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*, illustrated with photographs by Luigi Crocenzi (1953), this chapter explores the theme of *nostos*, or return, highlighting the contrast between the seemingly static nature of the South and the ostensibly dynamic character of the North. The analysis centers on two key concepts: the backward movement toward an insular space, in this case Sicily, and the complex relationship between human and non-human entities, illustrated, on one hand, by the reification of human figures and, on the other, by the “eloquence” of material bodies, both natural and artificial, such as animals and objects, namely *technofossils*. Examining not only thematic elements but also the formal strategies that represent them, particularly the use of photography and photo-textual composition, this study shows how both authors employ Southern Italy as a synecdoche, representing broader ecological, political, and cultural tensions. Through ecocritical and geocritical perspectives, Sicily emerges as both a representative part of Italy and of a Global South, challenging conventional North-South binaries and offering a redefinition of Southern identity.

Keywords

return; ecocriticism; geocriticism; photo-text; Global South.

The *Nostos* as a New Perspective on the South

In contemporary literary theory, it is becoming clear that it is impossible to consider a text without analyzing its geography: a work may be influenced by various spatial factors, such as where it is written, where it is set, or the author's place of origin. As a result, the geographical positioning of a text has proved to be fundamental for critical analysis, especially in recent decades with the rise of geocriticism¹. Alongside this development, the concept of "Global South" has emerged across various research fields. This term has gained preference over the previously dominant "Third World", as it more accurately reflects recent geopolitical shifts, especially those related to migration. Importantly, this term is not just geographical — it does not solely refer to countries located in the southern hemisphere — but encompasses broader social and political dimensions:

[...] the 'Global South' (like democracy, development, and many other concepts) is now the place of struggles between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of modernity and modernization together with the logic of coloniality and domination, and, on the other, the struggle for independent thought and decolonial freedom. From the perspective of the global north, the global south needs help. From the perspective of the inhabitants of those regions that are not aligned with the global north, the global south names the places where decolonial emancipations are taking place and where new horizons of life are emerging. (Levander and Mignolo 2011: 5)

In recent years, this not-only-geographical perspective has been complemented by the growing field of ecocriticism, which examines how the relationship between humans and their environment is portrayed in literature², thus aiming to map a *geography of ecology*. Ecocritical studies recognize the importance of understanding the divide between the global North and South, acknowledging that the environmental crisis disproportionately affects southern countries and societies due to factors that are not only geographical but also political, social, economic, and cultural. In a new postcolonial awareness, several scholars then ask:

How can nature be historicized without obscuring its ontological difference from human time? Moreover, what becomes of this need for a renewed sense of place when colonialism and globalization deny local land sovereignty, and

1 Geocriticism is a method of literary analysis and theory that integrates the study of geographic space, see the works of Bertrand Westphal (2007, 2011, 2016, 2019). For a survey of the main theoretical studies on geocriticism, see also Flavio Sorrentino (2010).

2 Cf. Robert T. Tally Jr. and Christine M. Battista (2016). About ecocriticism in Italy, cf. Caterina Salabè (2013), Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014), Ken Hiltner (2015), Serenella Iovino (2015b, 2016), Nicola Turi (2016), Niccolò Scaffai (2017), Serenella Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti, and Elena Past (2018), Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran (2019), and Marina Spunta and Silvia Ross (2022).

when pollution, desertification, deforestation, climate change, and other forms of global environmental degradation remind us so forcefully of the ecological interdependencies of any given space? (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 4)

It is the intention of postcolonial ecocriticism to answer these questions and to consider «the landscape (and seascape) as a participant in this historical process rather than a bystander to human experience», and to recuperate «the alterity of both history *and* nature, without reducing either to the other» (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 4). Works that emphasize local specificity, especially when shaped by the dominant culture of a symbolic global North, therefore fall within this critical framework. Consequently, it becomes essential to study south-centered stories that depict these environments from a natural and geographical, but also cultural and political viewpoints, and thus to see how nature and history concretely intersect.

In this regard, applying the concept of the Global South to Ecocritical Studies³ is especially relevant in a country like Italy, because

the concepts of southernness elaborated in the Italian context in relation to the peninsula's southern regions have had a substantial impact on the construction of Italian identity and on Italy's relationship to both Europe and countries located in the hemispheric south. (Polizzi 2022: 16)

In Italy, continues the scholar, we can see «both the *mezzogiorno* as the south of Italy and Italy as the south of Europe», without forgetting, though, that «both the *mezzogiorno* and Italy as a whole have historical and present links, through migration and colonialism, with the ‘Global South’» (Polizzi 2022: 15).

Since it is indisputable that the existence of a South implies the existence of a North — and vice versa — it becomes particularly interesting to analyze literary texts where both places, or more precisely, both concepts, are present. This includes narratives that depict not only journeys from south to north or north to south, but also return journeys, or *nostoi*. The narration of movement back towards the south of Italy — I will examine in this essay the emblematic Sicily — possesses specific characteristics such as themes, style, and rhetorical tropes. In her essay *Il moto immobile*, Marina Paino has already explored the theme of return in Sicilian literature:

Indeed, the *nostos* to the native place seems to be the only possible journey for Sicilians, a journey understood as a return and not as a departure, given that the logics of stillness variously tend to prevent any form of departure from the island. Like any movement à *rebours*, this one too is naturally charged with regressive instances, which are intertwined on the one hand with the mournful and

3 About the concept of Global South and the relationships between Southern studies and Ecocriticism, cf. Slovic, Rangarajan, and Sarveswaran (2015), and Zackary Vernon (2019).

mortifying ones of a present that is apathetically extraneous to life, and on the other with the memory of a lost past, regretted and happily distant from reality. (Paino 2014: 6; my translation)

As the title of Paino's essay reveals, the return to the homeland is a *motionless motion*, by which the subject always returns to the state of departure, which is, however, not only a geographical place but also a social, political, and cultural one:

the representation of immobility thus manifests itself as self-defence against a long succession of oppression and injustice and, at the same time, as a denunciation of it, metaphorically coloured by ideological values that are sometimes inseparable from existential ones. (Paino 2014: 5; my translation)

The *nostoi* analyzed by Paino (in the works of Elio Vittorini, Gesualdo Bufalino, Vincenzo Consolo, Leonardo Sciascia, and others) are all representative of an attempt at change that is never fulfilled, with the returnees constantly finding themselves back at their starting point, as if caught in a recursive and never-ending journey.

Given those theoretical foundations, this contribution aims to read two works by Sicilian writer Giorgio Vasta, namely *Spaesamento* (2010) and the phototext *Palermo. Un'autobiografia nella luce* (2022) featuring photographs by Ramak Fazel, alongside Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* in the edition illustrated by Luigi Crocenzi's photographs ([1953] 2007). This analysis will focus on two concepts: the movement backwards toward an insular space, in this case Sicily; the relationship between human and non-human entities, signified on the one hand by the reification of the human, and on the other hand, by the «eloquence» of material bodies, both natural and artificial (Iovino 2015a), such as animals and objects.

These works have in common not just the theme of *nostos*, but also a formal strategy to represent it, namely the integration of images. While *Spaesamento* is not a phototext, the two other works certainly are, and the layout, the content of representation, and the interplay between words and images profoundly affect the overall composition and the meaning conveyed, as I will demonstrate through an analysis of both text and images⁴.

The two intranational returns of Silvestro Ferrauto, the protagonist of *Conversazione in Sicilia*, and Giorgio Vasta — from Northern Italy (the former

4 Phototexts are considered a subset of the broader category known as iconotexts. The iconotext is «an artifact conceived as a non-illustrative, but dialogical, relationship between text(s) and image(s), where text(s) and image(s), while forming an indissoluble iconotextual unity, each retain their own identity and autonomy» (Nerlich 1990: 268). The bibliography on phototextual practices has now become increasingly extensive; below are the most recent references within the Italian context: Andrea Cortellessa (2011), Michele Vangi (2005), Michele Cometa (2016), Giuseppe Carrara (2020), and Lavinia Torti (2023).

from Milan, the latter from Turin) to Sicily — occur fifteen years after their respective departures, but result in a different perception, hence a different narrative, of the homeland. In Vittorini’s case, the return is bittersweet, a dreamlike reunion with rural Sicily, whereas Vasta, with *Spaesamento* and *Palermo*, feels an insurmountable distance and a sense of estrangement from his city. The interaction between Northern and Southern Italy unfolds through two apparent antinomies: the North is a place from which to start, the South is a place to which to land; the North is dynamic and in motion, while the South is static, fixed in time and space.

Palermo as a Synecdoche of Italy, or the Images of a Global Sicily

Moving backwards myself, I will begin by analyzing Vasta’s work before addressing Vittorini’s earlier one. In *Spaesamento* the Sicilian author recounts a three-day return to his hometown of Palermo and describes it with the detachment of a foreigner. Below is the incipit:

At first there is a piece of paper that I crumple between my fingers. I press it with my fingertips against my palm until I decide to get rid of it; the treadmill is still standing in the rumble of the airport and this green and white boarding pass with the flight, gate and seat numbers is no longer needed, while getting rid of it, as I do every time I arrive in Palermo, serves me to *accept the return*. (Vasta 2010: 3)⁵

Vasta’s *nostos* is quite unique since it is not really narrated: *Spaesamento* opens with the protagonist-author already in Palermo, the journey itself having been completed by plane, thus temporally zeroed. Paradoxically, this *nostos* begins with arrival, and it is only when the narrator begins to move through his hometown that spatial movement becomes explicit, pervasive, and exploratory. The character is thus a «human probe that goes around the city recording phenomena, gaping like a mouth that wants to devour beets of life» (Vasta 2010: 9). This description immediately juxtaposes the hyper-technical (in the word *probe*) with the hyper-physical (in the word *mouth*), ultimately culminating in the hyper-natural (life is consumed in *beets* bites). Vasta conceptualizes this experience as a process of “coring” (*carotaggio*), a term he himself employs:

[...] I think that if the condition of the core drilling is the randomness of the sample taken, then even here, now, *I can become a sampling machine*, a mobile drilling machine, and *extract from space and time those cores of reality* useful, perhaps, to get an idea of where I am, to describe the form of this disorientation. Because I have everything I need: a space — Palermo — and a time — these last three days of

5 All translations from Vasta’s books are mine.

holiday: normal reality, random reality, and the presumption and hope of being able to extend the study of the part to an understanding of the whole. (Vasta 2010: 9; italics mine)

If the island is often regarded as a fragment detached from the *continente*, then here Sicily becomes a synecdoche for the entire Italian country. While it is spatially, anthropologically, and socially distinct, for Vasta — an outsider in his own land — the insular space of Southern Italy functions as a piece for understanding the whole, it serves as a sample. As Vasta notes later in the text: «being the city of contingency, where history and project vanish, where past and future are not there, Palermo has turned out to be a reliable sample. Here Italy can be seen very well» (2010: 106). All the components of the city — humans, animals, plants, and objects — are subject to the coring process, are viewed as fragments of a greater whole. This is why Vasta seems to adopt a materialistic ecocritical perspective on his environment, one that aligns with

the study of the way in which material forms (natural and not) – bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemical agents, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, etc. – interact with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as “stories”. (Iovino 2015a: 104)

In Vasta’s works, what stands out most is the interplay — or more precisely, the contamination — between the natural and the non-natural for different reasons: humans are described and depicted with dehumanized features, while natural and mineral objects participate in the narrative as they are imbued with agency; human-made objects, instead, become part of nature, layering the earth’s surface as fossils of the contemporary world.

This dynamic is made explicit from the outset of *Spaesamento*, where men and women seen through Vasta’s gaze are described using dehumanizing and caricatured epithets that often liken them to natural objects. Vasta refers to characters as the «lake-lady», the «cosmetic woman», the «man with a Topinambur head» or simply «Topinambur» (Vasta 2010: 12, 15, 13). Through this synesthetic style, the author portrays these humans not as individuals with agency, spirit, or the capacity for action, but rather as objects observed from an external perspective, whose movements and changes are dictated by external forces (such as the sun and heat in this case). While elements in the text actively shape the surrounding environment and serve as narrative agents, humans, by contrast, are mere witnesses to the transformation and destruction of places, becoming themselves observed bodies and data samples. They serve as focal points for the *probe*-Vasta, who is consequently objectified, even by his own hand. The following passage illustrates this:

the cosmetic woman remains silent, observing — both nearby and from a distance — the bodies that move from one palm tree to another to strike and consume. The industrious life of destruction. This is matter, she adds in a clear whisper. This is how matter functions. (Vasta 2010: 110)

Here is another example: «One by one, catechumens of a religion of sand, other children — many with mycoses, several with erythema — kneel before a wire-frame, receiving the material and quietly focusing on their construction» (46).

Vasta often bases his descriptions on their material composition rather than their surface appearance:

I think about how much I liked, inside, to perceive the materials and recognize them: there was the zinc of the counter — the zinc that is also in human blood; there was the wood of the chairs and stools, the mad metal of the cutlery, the grit of the floor, the sandy mortar of the plaster of the walls and the glass of the glasses; I stood in the middle of the room [...] and I felt the extraction of minerals, the steel industry, the cast iron of the ironworks, the matter broken down and recomposed to make forms and artefacts. (Vasta 2010: 29-30)

This persistent reference to matter is significant, as it is interpreted as an explicit homogenization of all elements that constitute the perceived world, encompassing both living beings and inanimate objects. While the descriptions in *Spaesamento* give tangible, material form to things, this is partially replaced and enhanced by the presence of photographs in the more recent phototext *Palermo*. The book is divided into two sections: the first, titled *Un'autobiografia nella luce* (An Autobiography in the Light), is written by Giorgio Vasta; the second, *City of Phantoms* (originally in English), features 77 photographs taken by Ramak Fazel, who had previously collaborated with the Sicilian author on the phototext *Absolutely Nothing. Storie di sparizione nei deserti americani* (2016)⁶.

Photography, which ontologically freezes time, immobilizes it, capturing what no longer exists (among others, see Barthes 1980), serves here as a metaphor for the structural immobility of the landscape. This is why Vasta, for example, chose not to date the photographs. Fazel's images, says the writer, «do not identify a specific historical time, but a recurring, repetitive time, always the same» (Scarafia 2022). The time captured by Fazel in *Un'autobiografia nella luce* is therefore a «fossilized present» (Vasta 2010: 113): Vasta uses this definition in *Spaesamento* to describe something not merely antithetical but rather a substitute for a past that, in Sicily — at least the one he experienced and writes about — changed only superficially. It is a past that, in essence, does not exist. As the narrator notes:

6 Cf. Maria Rizzarelli (2017), Giuliana Benvenuti (2020), and Corinne Pontillo (2021).

the persuasion that there is no escape, never — the consciousness of living in a world already decided and recursive, and therefore the certainty of being, as soon as they are born, veterans — is so deeply rooted in Palermo as to be *ahistorical and biological*. Here, there is no history, the diachronic perspective is a waste of time. There are only *immemorial bodies*, the way experience is born each time virgin and radically devoid of memory. (Vasta 2010: 61)

While in *Spaesamento* humans are portrayed as immemorial bodies, living passively an ahistorical time, in *Palermo* Fazel's photographs depict dehumanized human beings, often in pieces. Faceless heads, limbs, and body parts are detached from their corporeal wholes: an arm is seen reaching for books on a shelf, another touches a cat in a domestic setting (identified in the text as the author's home at Via Sciuti 130 in Palermo⁷); a hand tries to catch a fish, while two others break a wire; finally, two hands exchange money for the purchase of the traditional *pane ca' meusa* (sandwich with spleen), unintentionally mimicking Michelangelo's famous *Creation of Adam*. Alongside these objectified and fragmented human figures, Fazel's landscapes are dominated by human-made artifacts — cars, buildings, flags, foosball tables, and bars — which reflect historical imprints even in the absence of people. Yet, when humans do appear in their entirety, they are engaged in collective, ritualistic, and repetitive actions — playing cards, dancing, eating, or driving — in which individual agency and identity dissolve. Thus, humans become components of a still life (*natura morta*), with the human figure transformed into a natural object embedded in the landscape. Collective rituals, in turn, evoke a sense of premodernity and ahistorical time, much like that seen in *Spaesamento*, where actions endlessly repeat in a circular, natural, *biological* rhythm.

In fact, in both photographs and text, nature and culture are intertwined, often tensely. A particularly emblematic photograph illustrating this tension between natural and non-natural elements, and between movement and stasis, is the penultimate image in the *City of Phantoms* section: a dinosaur, whose enlarged detail — a synecdoche — also appears on the removal band of the book's cover (a drawing of a dinosaur appears on *Spaesamento's* cover as well). The dinosaur serves a dual role: it is both an animal — an extinct and no more existent one — and a human-made object, the relic of an abandoned amusement park. It is a metaphor for the inherent antiquity, abandonment, and fossilization to which the island of Sicily has been subjected. As a result, it is a metaphor for the negative outcome of the cultural evolution of the world, and at the same time it explicitly refers to an archaeology of human production: in fact, it is not an actual fossil but a gigantic toy, an artifact that, abandoned, has become part of the landscape, perhaps destined to remain embedded in the earth, absorbed into the lithosphere.

7 About the presence of *autofiction* in this contemporary iconotext and other ones, see Lorenzo Marchese (2024).



Fig. 11.1 – *City of Phantoms* (Vasta and Fazel 2022), © 2017-18 Ramak Fazel - by kind permission of Humboldt Books

This dinosaur is, in essence, a *technofossil*, a product of human civilization that could one day form part of Earth’s geological record (Zalasiewicz et al. 2014). It is not merely a fossil of technological progress but also a *fossil of culture*, a specific one, Western culture (or the Northern one, in other words: capitalist culture). In this regard, the photograph adjacent to the dinosaur image depicts two flags: one of the United States and the other of Palermo’s football team. The availability of the U.S. flag for purchase in Palermo, alongside the distinctly local flag of the football team, highlights the pervasive influence and cultural penetration of Western, particularly American, culture into even the most localized contexts. This juxtaposition underscores the blending, or contamination, of global and local identities within the city’s cultural fabric. In her analysis of obsolete objects in post-apocalyptic literature, Valentina Sturli notes that in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), when the protagonist offers his son a can

of Coca-Cola, the beverage becomes a totem of the late-capitalist, pre-apocalyptic world, and simultaneously, a fossil of an “archaic” culture: «the gesture of the child drinking a Coke, perhaps one of the most emblematic images of globalization, is transformed by the father’s officiation into a ritual of memory» (Sturli 2022). Similarly, Fazel’s photograph of the dinosaur stands as a fossil from a bygone era, but that, paradoxically, continues to exist in the present, once again, in a «fossilized present» (Vasta 2010: 113). The dinosaur, doubly immobilized — first as an objectified toy and second as a static photograph — epitomizes the tension between movement (the journey of the traveler who has returned after years of absence) and the immobility of abandoned objects and spaces. As a massive symbol of waste, it encapsulates the concept of *rifiuto*, a term Vasta repeatedly invokes, describing the *waste* and *refusal* (both *rifiuto* in Italian) that envelop the so-called progress of the South⁸. This theme surfaces again when the writer, in the textual section of *Palermo*, recounts a vision that Fazel later captures photographically in the second part of the book:

An old man with a bald head sat reading the *Giornale di Sicilia* [...]: the headline read *Rifiuti* (*Waste*), but that word transcended the local news, *rifiuti* did not refer to the refuse piling up in the streets, it did not concern the surface, but rather the deep core of the city: its intimate, emotional structure, that which endures over time: to refuse, to reject (*rifiutarsi, rifiutare*). (2022: 30; the picture is at p. 84)

The photograph and the passage above underscore one of the central southern issues, as places, objects, and people left behind become waste, remnants, the result of a modernization process that is only superficial. As Derobertis notes, «the pursuit of modernity in the South has predominantly produced waste and has not addressed any supposed *delay* in modernization compared to any North» (Derobertis 2009: xviii). Waste, therefore, emerges as a byproduct of movement and progress, rather than a consequence of presumed stagnation of the South. In this light, it seems fitting that in *Spaesamento*, much like *Palermo*’s dinosaur, Vasta does not truly move (nor progress) within the city; rather, he «stand[s] and absorb[s]» (Vasta 2010: 31), reflecting upon the reality that the Sicily he portrays has, in fact, changed, but only on a superficial level.

When the author notices the many bars that have been closed and replaced by shoe and bag shops, his attention is drawn «precisely to the *converted spaces*» and to the «transformation of the city into a realm, of the real into a realm, [to] Palermo’s capacity to have powerfully introjected the *cosmetic work* underway in urban spaces throughout Italy» (Vasta 2010: 28, *italics mine*). In another instance, he describes a bar:

8 For a study of waste in contemporary literature, see Francesca Valdinoci (2019).

More than history, I think. This is the bar of the present. A place, that is, in which the bulldozer of simplification has managed to flatten and lacquer everything. [...] I have experienced this idea of furnishing in Turin, Rome, and Milan, and it is the concretization of the Italian furnishing mono-intuition of the last fifteen years, the abrogation of local signs to the advantage of a theoretical national taste in which *the present* dominates everything. (2010: 30)

This denial of the past — of premodern specificity — and the erasure of local identity in Palermo stem from a superficial, *fake*, adaptation — it is a cosmetic, it is a trick — to national dominance, which is primarily the dominance of the north. Like in Fazel’s photographs, Palermo is not represented as an icon of local specificity, it is instead never really showed, becomes indistinguishable, with no recognizable glimpse of it provided. Precisely because Palermo — as said — is everywhere, it serves as a synecdoche for Italy. Even though we cannot dwell on this point, similarly, Silvio Berlusconi, the political figure to whom the entire second part of *Spaesamento* is dedicated, also functions as a synecdoche for the North, and therefore for Italy as a whole: «Berlusconi is a zone» (Vasta 2010: 110).

Silvestro Ferrauto, the Stranger from within and the Yet-Unwronged World

Elio Vittorini’s work presents a different case due to technical and historiographical factors; however, both authors share a common tension between the movement of the returnee and the perceived immobility of the South, and they both conceptualize Southern Italy as a synecdoche, representing Italy as a whole on one hand, and the broader notion of all Souths (a Global South, indeed) on the other. In a note of 1940, Vittorini explicitly states that *Conversazione in Sicilia* is not autobiographical, and that «the Sicily in which his story takes place is Sicily only by chance, I like the sound of the word “Sicily” better than “Persia” or “Venezuela”. As for the rest, I imagine all manuscripts are found in a bottle» (Vittorini 2000: XVII). Despite his claim, it is no coincidence that Sicily is the chosen setting, nor that the alternatives Vittorini provides, Persia and Venezuela, are both regions generally recognizable as belonging to a global South. And although the Sicily depicted in this *nostos* serves as a metaphor for universal reality, conveyed through a lyrical and mythical, ahistorical realism, the novel’s strong autobiographical dimension remains undeniable. In fact, when *Conversazione* was written, the world in which Vittorini lived and wrote was oppressed by fascism and the Spanish Civil War (Vittorini serialized the book in the journal «Letteratura» between 1938 and 1939, before publishing it with Bompiani in 1941). The novel presents a pointed critique of both Francisco Franco’s regime in Spain and Benito Mussolini’s fascist rule in

Italy. Vittorini himself, formerly a committed leftist fascist, chose to join the Spanish Republicans against Franco when the Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936, a conflict that caused him profound personal grief for the death of his brother. He publicly called for Italian fascists to support the Republicans, but, as expected, this plea received no backing.

In contrast to Vasta's work, the return journey of Silvestro Ferrauto in Vittorini's novel is recounted from the very outset, even before his departure. The protagonist is confronted with a crossroads — both spatial and socio-historical — between north and south, hesitating over whether to embark on the journey at all:

I found myself then facing two paths for a moment — one turning back home, into the abstraction of those massacred crowds, into the same calm, the same hopelessness; the other turning back to Sicily, to the mountains, into the lament of the fife that was playing inside me; into something which might not be as dark a calm and as deaf a hopelessness. To me it was still all the same whether I took one path or the other, humanity was doomed either way, and I found out there was a train leaving for the South in ten minutes, at seven o'clock. (Vittorini 2000: 10)

Silvestro's journey begins in Milan and is concretely marked by stages and encounters, and composed of pieces of places, from Syracuse «as far as Scicli, then going up, via Ragusa and Gela, to Enna, Nicosia, Sperlinga, Petralia, and descending again to Caltanissetta so as to return to Syracuse via Caltagirone and Vizzini» (Vittorini 2006: 368). His journey unfolds among the «long green slopes of orange trees and malaria» (Vittorini 2000: 34), where memories of his childhood in Sicily surface with a dreamlike quality, a memory filled with «Sicily, prickly pears, sulphur, Macbeth, in the mountains» (9). Here, the blending of cultural and natural elements is notable, as seen in the intrusion of William Shakespeare's character; this interplay is seen through the many descriptions of the natural landscapes and of Sicilian men and women, often depicted with hybrid lexical constructions, combining animalistic and dehumanizing traits, although they appear less monstrous than Vasta's creatures. For instance, Silvestro's mother is described as «mother-bird, mother-bee» (85).

In both Vittorini's and Vasta's works, the relationship between humans and their environment is shaped by the antithetical nature of the subject, who, though returning to his homeland, is also a stranger to it. Silvestro, for example, is referred to as a «stranger» (137, 141) by a knife grinder and is questioned by a Sicilian boy on a ferry, «Are you Sicilian?» (13). Silvestro returns to the South with a sense of nostalgia because he has witnessed the «wronged world» (146) and now comes back to a place that seems to remain untouched. The knife grinder reassures him, «the world has been wronged, but not yet here, inside» (Vittorini 2000: 146). Yet, despite the loss of humanity — rooted in both existential and historical suffering — Vittorini seems to confer upon the people of

the South a kind of natural, paleo-industrial ritual that shields them from harm inflicted by a symbolic cultural North.

Even in the 1953 phototextual edition, featuring Luigi Crocenzi's photographs and published long after the war, there is a palpable sense that nothing has changed. As Vittorini himself says:

Between the distant years of 1937 and 1938, when I wrote the book, and the year 1950, when the photographs illustrating the seventh edition were taken, there has been the war, the fall of fascism, the liberation, and five years of peasant struggles against the medieval power of the landowners and their supporters, whether neo-fascists or monarchists. Yet, despite all this, the Sicilian farm laborer or miner still lives, in the essence of daily life, almost as I remembered seeing him live during my childhood in 1937 and 1938. (Vittorini 2006: 370; my translation)

Given this, the landscape of Sicily, as recounted by Vittorini and photographed by Crocenzi, is, as Maria Rizzarelli notes in the afterword to the 2007 anastatic reprint, a «landscape that seems to remain immune to the transformations of history» (Vittorini 2007: viii), which mirrors, as we have seen, the apparent yet superficial transformation of Palermo depicted by Vasta. It is not Silvestro who halts his journey, but Sicily itself, that paradoxically has «become motionless» (Vittorini 2000: 185), as if the island were the one needing to make a symbolic journey toward the future, toward progress and modernity; a journey toward the North, which remains impossible, as Sicily is situated in the South and is metaphorically still. Yet, because of this immutability and metonymic nature, Sicily, despite its seeming timelessness, becomes an ideal vantage point from which to observe historical and social change, or as Rizzarelli puts it, «in its 'spiritual variants,' Sicily presents itself as the best observatory of historical and social change» (Rizzarelli in Vittorini 2007: viii). The use of the word *spiritual* is not insignificant in this context: in fact, *Conversazione* shares with Fazel's *City of Phantoms* and Vasta's *Spaesamento* the deliberate abstraction and ethereal treatment of human and non-human bodies. Just as Fazel's faceless, voiceless, and tattered figures are defined by light and shadow, many of Crocenzi's photographs also emphasize these elements, highlighting the interplay of presence and absence, movement and stasis. On one hand, the photographs portray men and women rooted in the places they inhabit, though the close-up shots often decontextualize their faces. On the other hand, these individuals are depicted as shadowy figures resting on the ground or buildings with dark silhouettes, like ghosts. Additionally, many of the images feature people wearing traditional Sicilian headgear, and, much like in Fazel's work, they are often captured in collective rituals where individuality is nearly absent. The deliberately blurred photographs visually emphasize the text's atmosphere of rarefaction and its «larval physiognomy», as Rizzarelli defines it (2007: xvii). Furthermore, Vittorini's text is suffused with allusions to spectral figures and ghostly presences. For instance,

Silvestro's father, who has abandoned his mother, is an absent presence, embodying the concept of a *larva* in its dual sense, both *ghost* and *mask*: his occupation as an actor reinforces this duality, blurring the lines between appearance and absence. This allusion to a spiritual and ghostly component is also present when Silvestro speaks of the people he encounters: «those who suffered personal misfortune and those who suffered the pain of the wronged world were together in the nude tomb of wine, and could be like *spirits*, finally parted from this world of suffering and wrongs» (Vittorini 2000: 163; italics mine). Human actions, though not material like fossils, take on an eerie permanence as ghosts, whose intangible nature paradoxically makes them even more enduring, forever haunting the earth. Silvestro himself refers to these spectral remnants as «phantoms of human action, the wrongs against the world and against humanity risen out of the past. They weren't really the dead but phantoms; they didn't belong to the earthly world» (171)⁹.

Thus, the Sicily of *nostos* becomes a space that, while seemingly untouched by war — ironically, the most prominent feature of modern civilization — also serves as a vantage point from which to observe contamination precisely because it remains unscathed by it. At one point, upon entering a shop, Silvestro reflects on this paradoxical position, revealing Sicily as both untouched and yet intrinsically tied to the world's suffering and wrongs:

The smell was good, in this heart of ours, among the invisible ropes and strips of leather; a smell of new dust, of earth not yet contaminated by the world's wrongs, the wrongs that take place on the earth. Ah, I thought, if I really believed in this ... And it was not like going underground, it was like following the trajectory of the kite, having the kite before my eyes and nothing else, only darkness, and having a child's heart, Sicilian and all the world's. (145)

As we can see from the last sentence («Sicilian and all the world's»), what emerges also from this case study is a form of *Southern synecdoche*, a *clipping effect* created specifically by the gaze of the returnee. In these instances, *nostos* is no longer a movement from the continent to the island characterized by a series of vicissitudes, as traditionally understood from the *Odyssey* onward. Instead, the journey begins with arrival, and it is not always the person who physically moves, but rather the gaze that returns, focusing on both the apparently old — symbolized by the South and the self from fifteen years earlier — and the seemingly new, represented by the North, superficially advanced yet deeply enmeshed in cultural and technological failures. This return from the Continent to the island thus transforms itself from a re-encounter with insularity and the South into a cognitive tool for perceiving the whole, not only the global South

9 For the presence of *spectral remnants* and phantoms in phototexts, see Ezio Puglia (2018), and Giuseppe Carrara (2024).

but also the global North, seen from the perspective of those who have experienced both and who exist in a liminal, in-between space.

In this regard, Franco Cassano’s concept of *meridian thought* becomes relevant as it transcends the notion of the South’s temporal backwardness, instead viewing the South «as an autonomous point of view, not as a non-North» (Cassano 1996: 11). Polizzi elaborates on this idea, stating: «in establishing connections among many different ‘Souths’, Cassano finds a strategy for developing a kind of thought that is simultaneously global and local and does not constitute an indulgent apology of the South» (2022: 29).

While Vittorini viewed the South as *not yet* North — exempt from both cultural and technological developments and the subsequent horrors — Vasta’s texts align more closely with Cassano’s thought:

this autonomous form of thought necessarily starts by taking to task what national modernity has meant for the Italian South where, according to Cassano, the project of development has produced more problems than it has solved. (Polizzi 2022: 29)

Vasta’s work suggests not that Southern Italy is entirely emancipated, autonomous, or not backward in relation to the North, but rather that the horrors of modernity, manifesting as superficial or *cosmetic*, have affected all spaces and identities, dissolving the distinction between North and South. In this sense, once again, the South becomes merely a part of the whole, a synecdoche for the entire country. This aligns with Ulrich Beck’s observations:

The circularity of this social endangering can be generalized: under the roof of modernization risks, *perpetrator and victim* sooner or later become *identical*. [...] Here it becomes clear that the Earth has become an ejector seat that no longer recognizes any distinctions between rich and poor, black and white, north and south or east and west. (Beck 1992: 38)

This creates a form of negative hybridization, a cycle of displacements and returns, where the human experience of progress, marked by cruelty, intersects with nature’s devastation, blurring the boundaries between the two. Neither is merely a spectator of the other’s catastrophic ordeal, as both are subjected to the same apocalyptic forces. As noted in the introduction, human and environmental destruction are inseparable.

In this sense, both Vasta and Silvestro, as returnees from the North to the South, occupy a liminal space, part of an intermediate civilization between the past and the present. They have witnessed the pre-modern world now lost, as well as the destructive or superficial realities of the modern world. When they gaze upon their native island, they see an older world that no longer exists, yet paradoxically persists precisely because of its apparent absence. The landscape,

objects, and people — suspended like ghosts between the present and the after-life — symbolize this civilization caught between the archaic and the modern, between a world rooted in nature and one that continually rejects it.

In short, the contamination of places is inseparable from the contamination of humans, and vice versa. The distinction between humanity and nature collapses, as both have undergone a shared, negative metamorphosis. If humanity is part of nature, it is because both have been equally transformed by the destructive forces of progress.

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PART 2

IMAGES, REPRESENTATIONS, AND VISUAL CULTURES

Chapter 12

Photography, Image Agency, and Visual Ecocriticism

Henri Cartier-Bresson's Lucania

Alberto Baracco

University of Basilicata, Italy.

alberto.baracco@unibas.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-5276-4999

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c415>

Abstract

During the post-war years, within the reflection on the Southern question, Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945) crystallized Lucania into a form of eternal damnation, permeated by misery and disease, as the symbolic negative pole of a rigidly divided Italy where the north was instead idealized as the healthy, strong, and productive part of the country. Against this backdrop, Cartier-Bresson's photography reveals a more open and receptive perspective, free from ideological and symbolic constraints. The authenticity and intense vitality of the French photographer's work still resonates today, making it capable of signifying and acting in contemporaneity. This chapter takes its cue from the Cartier-Bresson collection held at the Rocco Scotellaro Documentation Center in Tricarico (Matera), which houses the photographs taken by the French photographer during his two reportages in Lucania, in 1951-1952 and in 1972-1973 respectively. Analyzing Cartier-Bresson's work and those of other photographers who centered their works on Basilicata during those years (such as David Seymour, Arturo Zavattini, and Franco Pinna), the chapter focuses on the question of image agency (Mitchell 2005; Bredekamp 2010) in relation to the environmental issue and visual ecocriticism.

Keywords

image act; seeing-as; Carlo Levi; southern question; Basilicata.

A photograph is not taken or seized
by force. It offers itself; it is the pho-
tograph that takes you.

Cartier-Bresson (1964)

Carlo Levi's Lucania

Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* is a complex work, not only for the relevance of the issues it addresses but also because of its multifaceted form. Actually, it is simultaneously a novel, a political essay, a poetic narrative, and even a book of memoirs, a diary. Many scholars have focused their attention on the context in which the book was written (Sarfatti 2000; Coccia 2018), as Levi penned it between December 1943 and July 1944 in occupied Florence, hiding under false identity in Anna Maria Ichino's house¹. The condition of clandestinity evoked in Levi the memory of a preceding period, that of his confinement in Lucania he had lived ten years prior. In the opening lines of the book, Levi wrote:

Buffeted here and there at random I have not been able to return to my peasants as I promised when I left them, and I do not know when, if ever, I can keep my promise. But closed in one room, in a world apart, I am glad to travel in my memory to that other world. (Levi 1947: 1)

Some stark contrasts are already expressed in these opening lines. Levi juxtaposes his world against the "other world", that of Lucania, and two distinct forms of time emerge: on the one hand, the time of the Lucanian peasants, rooted in a state of permanent stagnation; on the other hand, the time of progress and history. The confinement in Aliano, which spanned from August 1935 to May 1936, thus brought Levi into contact with a world vastly different from his own. As an intellectual from the north hailing from an urban and industrial context, Levi found himself confined in a world dominated by rural culture and poverty, suspended between magic and superstition. He found himself there by coercion, but ultimately became intimately attached to that world — my land, he will write — and found himself sharing his days with those he will later call my peasants. However, the context of clandestinity in which Levi composed

1 Regarding the relationship between Levi and Ichino, as documented by Filippo Benfante in an essay dedicated to the subject, in October 1945, when a portion of the book's initial print run had already been bound, the publisher inserted a final comment at Levi's request, as a note of gratitude to Ichino: «This book was written in 1944, during the German occupation of Florence. Anna Maria Ichino's courageous, humane solidarity made it possible for me to work, despite the difficulties of that clandestine period». As noted by Benfante, Ichino did not appreciate the praise and, a few months later, sent a lapidary message to Levi: «You had no right to commit that final affront to me. You should have sought my permission to cite me in that manner. You knew I did not approve» (Benfante 2023: 10; translation mine).

the book gives a strongly ideological imprint to his narrative, with the opposition of places and civilizations. From such a perspective, despite his sincere, emotional participation, Levi's point of view remains external to the Lucanian world. Lucania is idealized as a symbolic space, bounded by emblematic rather than geographical borders. Indeed, Christ stopped at Eboli: right from the title, Levi's geography is symbolic and Eboli identifies the border that separates the archaic Lucanian world from the world of progress and history. Levi's narrative is infused with symbolism from the first pages: «Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason nor history» (2). His writing is characterized by strong opposites and explicit dichotomies: the rural and archaic Lucanian civilization, on the one hand, and the urban and industrial civilization of the north, on the other hand; the pre-Christian naturalistic world versus the Christian civilized world; superstition versus rationality, immobility versus progress, and ultimately, the well-known opposition between nature, on the one hand, and culture and science, on the other hand. This dialectic of oppositions offered a representation of Lucania that, isolated from the rest of Italy, was forced into a symbolic-ideological structure and defined by subtraction compared to the more developed areas of the country.

In the aftermath of publication, for the resonance the book received, both Communist Party Secretary Palmiro Togliatti and Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi visited Lucania. These official visits ultimately led to the government's issuance of a plan for the evacuation of the Sassi of Matera, a true «national shame» as Togliatti had described it². However, especially in left-wing circles, Levi's book was partially criticized for providing a representation of the southern question largely based on personal, emotional elements rather than a purely political perspective. Levi's work allowed literary suggestions and a

2 At the rally he held in Matera on April 1, 1948, condemning the deplorable sanitary conditions of the Sassi as a national shame and urging the government to take action, Togliatti declared: «From this city arises a terrible indictment against the ruling classes of our country, social groups, capitalists, landowners, and privileged individuals, who are responsible for the fact that in Italy there is still a city where thousands of men and women live in such conditions» (Mirizzi 2005: 223; translation mine). Two years later, the Prime Minister De Gasperi visited Basilicata, and on July 23, 1950, after witnessing the Sassi, he declared: «There are no words to comment on what I have seen. The poor people of the Sassi cannot continue to live like beasts. If no one has taken an interest in these people until now, it is time to do something in their favor to free them from a most pitiful condition» (Selvaggi 2011; translation mine). In the subsequent weeks, De Gasperi appointed a commission, presided over by Emilio Colombo, to study a bill aimed at restoring the Sassi. On May 17, 1952, the special law no. 619 (Law for the restoration of the Sassi), was definitively and unanimously approved. The law essentially provided for the forced transfer of most residents from the Sassi to new quarters in La Martella, Serra Venerdi, Lanera, and Venusio. De Gasperi returned to Matera on May 17, 1953 to inaugurate and hand over the first homes to the inhabitants of Villaggio La Martella.

certain primitivist taste to emerge, which were subject to discussion and criticism. The criticism was particularly harsh from communist intellectual and deputy Mario Alicata, who argued that the liberation of southern peasants could only be achieved through an alliance with the working class, to which the leadership role belonged. A 1954 article by Alicata was aptly titled *Il meridionalismo non si può fermare a Eboli* (The southernism cannot be stopped at Eboli)³, echoing the title of Michele Gandin's 1952 documentary *Cristo non si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ did not stop at Eboli), works that exemplify how Levi's book was regarded in the discussion of the southern question during that period.

Levi's narrative portrayed Lucania as a paradigmatic representation of an archaic, agrarian culture, a world diametrically opposed to northern Italy as sphere of progress and development. However, this primitiveness also awakened an interest in relation to its character of authenticity and anti-hegemonic resistance. Gramsci's notion of popular culture, correlated with the concept of folklore, was defined not as a useless repository of picturesque ancient reminiscences, but rather as the genuine expression of elements deemed useful and positive in their opposition to prevailing conceptions. Popular culture revealed itself as an irreducible, authentic alterity against the hegemonic forces. With regard to its authenticity, Gramsci and De Martino began to speak of «progressive folklore» from the years of the Resistance onwards. De Martino, describing the aims of his expeditions in Lucania in a 1951 article, identified progressive folklore as «a conscious proposal by the people against their subaltern social condition, or that which comments on, expresses in cultural terms, struggles to emancipate themselves» (1951: 3; translation mine)⁴. As the perspective shifted, it was no longer moving between the dialectic of archaism and modernity, between poverty and progress, to that on the authenticity of popular culture and its irreducibility to dominant forces. Such a perspective was so pervasive that it drew numerous foreign intellectuals and artists to southern Italy in those years, as if they were magnetically attracted by its vibrant essence

3 In the article, Alicata argued: «In truth, even disregarding the programmatic theses that are openly enunciated, as has been seen, in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, and considering the representation it provides of the southern Italian countryside solely as a “poetic” one, it cannot be denied that, artistically speaking, such a representation is ambiguous and lends itself to misinterpretation, precisely because it is not realistic, precisely because it arbitrarily severs the connections between southern Italy and the rest of the world in terms of both time and space, and arbitrarily erases the deep-seated contradictions and intimate developmental processes that have occurred and continue to occur within southern Italian society» (Alicata 1954: 595; translation mine).

4 In the same article, to conclude his analysis on the relevance of progressive folklore, De Martino wrote: «for broad popular strata, and above all for southern rural society, it represents a highly effective means of cultural education. Where the “popular book” is unable to exert any practical influence due to illiteracy or semi-illiteracy, and where party ideological education is necessarily limited to narrow parameters, progressive folklore constitutes a genuine cultural advancement for the popular masses, the actual birth of a progressively oriented popular culture» (*ibidem*).

Photographers in Lucania

The pardon granted to political prisoners to celebrate the “success” of the fascist colonial campaign in Ethiopia allowed Levi to leave Lucania and travel to France, where, from 1936 to 1942, he frequented Parisian cultural circles and came into contact with David “Chim” Seymour and Henri Cartier-Bresson. The two photographers, founders of the Magnum Photos agency along with Robert Capa and George Rodger, fit into the tradition of modernist photography initiated by Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, and Edward Weston, who had definitively legitimized photography as an autonomous art form and imbued it with a strong realist style. Seymour and Cartier-Bresson, drawn by an intellectual, visual fascination with southern Italy, which was certainly also inspired by Levi’s book, arrived in Italy between the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1948, in Puglia and Basilicata, Seymour collected a series of photographs that represented that ancient, semi-unknown world through the gaze of children. The collection of Seymour’s photographs, which was eloquently titled *A Troglodyte Village*⁵, basically recalled the same dialectical symbolism of Levi’s work. While Seymour’s journey to Southern Italy was also sparked by his acquaintance with Levi in Paris, Cartier-Bresson traveled to Lucania at the request of UNRRA-Casas⁶ and on the invitation of another Piedmontese, entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti, who presided over the National Institute of Urban Planning and had established the commission for the study of Matera. The commission prepared an analysis of the Lucanian city in anticipation of urban planning interventions to be implemented for the evacuation of the Sassi. Cartier-Bresson provided with his photos a visual documentation of life in the Sassi, which was annexed to the report drafted by the commission. With this assignment, between the end of 1951 and the beginning of 1952, Cartier-Bresson photographed not only Matera, but also several towns in the region, including Aliano, where Levi had been confined, Craco, Ferrandina, Pisticci, Rionero, Metaponto, Scanzano, and Stigliano, producing a photographic corpus now preserved at the Tricarico documentation center⁷. For this first photographic reportage in Lucania, later included in the 1955 volume *Les Européens*, Cartier-Bresson gathered a series of

5 As stated in the Magnum Photos website, in his journey through Basilicata, Seymour photographed «the troglodyte village of Matera shooting pictures of families that lived together with their animals in dark limestone cave dwellings» (Magnum Photos, n.d.). Among those shots, there is the renowned photograph depicting a young laughing girl who leads her family’s horse back home from the fields (Seymour 1948).

6 The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the Comitato amministrativo soccorsi ai senzatetto (Committee for the assistance to the homeless), an institute for post-war reconstruction that was established in 1946 in Italy under the ministry of public works, was responsible for the building of a large number of villages in many areas of the country.

7 The Rocco Scotellaro documentation center in Tricarico (Matera) is located in the former convent of Saint Francis of Assisi. It includes an archive of documents related to the figure of Scotellaro, the Italian writer, poet, and politician who served as the mayor of Tricarico from 1946 to 1950, and an important photographic archive with images not only by Henri

shots that captured the essence of those places and people on the cusp of an imminent, profound transformation that would forever alter their way of life. In these Cartier-Bresson's photographs, the natural element often prevails, highlighting forms and daily practices of a rural culture characterized by coexistence and sharing between humans and non-humans (Cartier-Bresson 1951a). In the photographs of the Sassi, the anthropic component appears to arrange and align itself in a coherent continuum with the natural element (Cartier-Bresson 1951b). These images reveal an intimate, original connection between human and nature, where simple, everyday gestures ascend to symbolic elements of a culture of environmental respect and care.

These aspects can also be discerned in the shots taken by some Italian photographers in Basilicata during the same years. One of them, Arturo Zavattini, son of the director and screenwriter Cesare, participated in De Martino's first expedition to Lucania, in Tricarico, in 1952. Zavattini provided photographic coverage for this first Demartinian inquiry, which was later disseminated through the biweekly magazine of the Italian Communist Party *Vie Nuove*. The experience in Tricarico marked the beginning of a methodological approach that continued over the years and became the hallmark of Demartino's scientific research. Zavattini's shots inaugurated the era of ethnographic photography in Italy, with images firmly rooted in neorealist style. In the subsequent Demartinian expeditions, from 1952 to 1959, Franco Pinna took over from Zavattini (except for a single occasion, in 1957, when Ando Gilardi replaced him). As a prominent representative of what is known as the "Roman school" of photography, Pinna followed in the footsteps of Italian neorealism. The rich photographic material collected by Pinna was extensively utilized by De Martino in his works, both in books — such as *Morte e pianto rituale* (Death and ritual mourning; 1958), in which is included the *Atlante figurato del pianto* (Figurative atlas of mourning), and *Sud e magia* (*Magic: A Theory from the South*; 1959) — and in articles published for a popular audience in magazines, such as *Radiocorriere TV*⁸ and *L'Espresso Mese*⁹. The aforementioned atlas contains among others the

Cartier-Bresson, but also by Arturo Zavattini, Mario Carbone, Mario Cresci, and Antonio Pagnotta.

- 8 In 1954, in conjunction with the launch (on the third program of Rai) of a radio series directed by De Martino and dedicated to twenty-six ethnographic and folkloric landscapes, on the magazine *Radiocorriere TV* he wrote: «The series aims to satisfy as far as possible a strictly cognitive need, by acquainting the non-specialized public with the most striking and accessible aspects of primitive and popular cultural life [...] the series could not be reduced to a simple ethno-phonetic panorama, lacking adequate ideological and more specifically ethnographic and cultural commentary [...] it was felt that it would be necessary not to neglect national folklore, on which there certainly exists a vast literature, but which the broad non-specialized public continues to ignore or evaluate through the distortions of the picturesque, the romantic, or even the touristy» (De Martino 1954: 16; translation mine).
- 9 In May 1960, De Martino's essay *La taranta. Si liberano dal cattivo passato* (The tarantula. They free themselves from the bad past), accompanied by Pinna's photographs, inaugurated the

famous Pinna's photograph *La lamentatrice di Pisticci* (The mourner of Pisticci) that, with its high chromatic contrast and through its realistic matrix and deliberate sense of movement, rekindles the intensity and strong symbolism of the ritual (Pinna 1952).

The third name that deserves to be mentioned in this context is that of Mario Carbone. As another prominent figure of Italian neorealist photography, Carbone was a close friend of Levi, whom he accompanied to Basilicata in the early 1960s to capture with his lens the landscapes and people of the region, which were used as the basis for Levi's creation of a large-scale tapestry (18 m by 3 m) intended to adorn one of the pavilions at the Torino exhibition *Italia '61*. Adopting a purely documentary style, Carbone took over 400 photographs in which Levi is often included appearing as a very different character compared to Lucanian people, marking, even visually, the symbolic contrast already expressed in his book. A stylistic continuity between Cartier-Bresson's photographs of Lucania and those by Zavattini, Pinna, and Carbone is discernible, yet certain differences also emerge, particularly for the ironic, playful character that is consistently present in Cartier-Bresson's work but absent in the Italian photographers. After the 1951-1952 journey to Basilicata, Cartier-Bresson returned to the region twenty years later, in 1972-1973, finding himself amidst a deeply transformed social and economic reality. Cartier-Bresson photographed the new industrial settlements, viaducts, dams, and bridges — as exemplified by the iconic photograph of the Musmeci bridge, the viaduct over the Basento river in Potenza (Cartier-Bresson 1973a). In this second reportage, which is primarily focused on the conflict between old and new, Cartier-Bresson's black-and-white photographs highlight the contrast between ancient customs and modern symbols, juxtaposing memories of the past with new icons, ancient tools with new machinery, donkeys and plows with tractors and cars (Cartier-Bresson 1973b).

With a passion for painting and a training honed in the André Lhote's atelier, Cartier-Bresson has consistently demonstrated, from a stylistic perspective, particular attention to composition and form. In a 1964 television documentary, Cartier-Bresson said of himself: «I am the heir to a certain photographic and painterly tradition, especially painterly. I have a genuine passion for painting» (Cartier-Bresson 1964; translation mine), and acknowledged his debt to famous painters, such as Cézanne, Degas, and Manet. Notably, his famous photograph

ethno-anthropologist's collaboration with the magazine *L'Espresso Mese* (De Martino 1960a). The purpose of the collaboration, as specified in the editorial, was: «the discovery of an ancient Italy, coexisting with the modern Italy and so well-documented by newspapers and books, an Italy where myths operate, a hint of a past that refuses to disappear» (5; translation mine). Later that year, between July and November, other contributions by De Martino were published in the same magazine, including *Il gioco della falce. Ogni estate in Lucania la passione del grano* (The game of the scythe. Each summer in Lucania, the passion of grain), dedicated to an ancient Lucanian rite connected to the harvest (De Martino 1960b: 57-65).

Dimanche sur le bords de Marne (Sunday on the banks of the Marne; 1938) exemplifies this influence through its artistic composition and precise volumetric balance. Yet, as is well-known, Cartier-Bresson is also the photographer of the decisive moment, of capturing images *à la sauvette* (on the run)¹⁰. The decisive moment is for Cartier-Bresson «the instant when chance meets necessity» (Cartier-Bresson 1964). In 1963, in another television interview, reflecting on his profession as a photographer, Cartier-Bresson observed:

the photographer's task is to be a witness to his own time, without pretension or expressing judgments. Our work is not didactic. We freeze an immediate sensation that has struck us, with an instantaneous contact that few other means of expression could establish. (Cartier-Bresson 1963; translation mine)

Cartier-Bresson and the Image Agency

About a decade ago, at the 2015 Milanesiana festival, in occasion of the inauguration of an exhibition dedicated to Cartier-Bresson's Lucania, art critic Vittorio Sgarbi highlighted how the French photographer succeeded in conveying the essential truth of the Italian region, capturing it in its purity and dignified integrity. According to Sgarbi, Cartier-Bresson, unlike Levi, was able to adopt an open, receptive perspective, free from ideological and political frameworks. Sgarbi observed:

The internationally renowned photographer, who arrived there with little knowledge of Basilicata and its culture, was nonetheless able to gaze upon that world with an open and liberated eye. While Levi, who lived and breathed there, had interpreted that poverty as an endless damnation, in Cartier-Bresson's work, there was instead the idea of human integrity, the poetry of small things. (Sgarbi 2015; translation mine)

The image of a poor, indolent south, superstitious and backward, always lacking and irreconcilably deficient compared to the north, an image that has also been partly suggested by Levi's narrative, appears forced and stereotypical, in contrast to the more authentic reality that the photographic images by Cartier-Bresson reveal. His shots show an authenticity and existential integrity that still strikes the contemporary observer's eye, and which makes them capable of signifying and acting, suggesting to ecocritical analysis a reflection on the relationship between image and reality, between human and non-human, between nature, culture, and progress. However, there is the evident risk of falling into a contradiction. Namely, in criticizing from one side an ideological

¹⁰ In this regard, particularly illustrative is the famous photograph taken by Cartier-Bresson behind the St. Lazare station in Paris (Cartier-Bresson 1932b).

approach marked by a strong opposition, only to fall back into another equally forced and schematic idealization that contrasts an unsustainable, destructive modernity with the pure, genuine integrity of ancient rural culture. To resolve the ambiguity, it may be helpful to recall some observations made by Cartier-Bresson himself in the already cited 1964 documentary. «There are», Cartier-Bresson argued, «two types of photography: documentary photography, which doesn't interest me at all [...] and photography that evokes». «A photograph», Cartier-Bresson concluded, «is not taken or seized by force. It offers itself. It is the photograph that takes you» (Cartier-Bresson 1964; translation mine).

These observations help us to open a brief reflection on the notion of image agency. With regard to a complex theoretical discussion that has developed over the years and has produced numerous works in the field of visual studies, and within the scope of this chapter, I confine myself to examining only a few issues that seem relevant to me in relation to a methodology and practice of visual ecocriticism. The temporal dimension is pivotal in the concept of image agency. Agency refers in fact to the ability of an image to act as a dynamic source that produces effects over time. In his 2010 book *Theorie des Bildakts*, Horst Bredekamp argues that images possess a unique visual agency that goes beyond mere representation and enables them to act autonomously and independently of their creator's intentions. In other words, images produce effects and meanings that burst forth and transcend their original context of production. The image's power, identified by Bredekamp as "image act", «finds its starting point in the latent capacity of the image to move the viewer» (Bredekamp 2018: 33) and to leap from a state of latency to efficacy within the realm of perception, thought, and behavior. The image act arises from both the power of the image itself and the reaction of the viewer who gazes upon it.

In the face of this exorbitance of the image, which is compounded by an excess of images, W.J. Thomas Mitchell, another widely discussed author in visual studies, used the concept of "pictorial turn" to identify the characteristic visual orientation of contemporary culture. Confronted with this turn, Mitchell believes it necessary to shift the debate from the issue of image power to that of what images want. From this perspective, Mitchell remarks, we should «scale down the rhetoric of the "power of images"». He argues:

Images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think. The problem is to refine and complicate our estimate of their power and the way it works. That is why I shift the question from what pictures do to what they *want*, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak. If the power of images is like the power of the weak, that may be why their desire is correspondingly strong, to make up for their actual impotence. We as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them. (Mitchell 1996: 74)

What Mitchell proposes is a shift in focus away from the interpretation of the image, which is suggested by a double recognition. On the one hand, the identification of images as «“animated” beings, quasi-agents, mock-persons» (81); and on the other hand, the identification of images «not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits, but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference and who function both as “go-betweens” and scapegoats in the social field of human visibility» (*ibidem*). Above all, Mitchell observed, what images seem to want is a kind of effect on those who observe them. The spectatorship is a relevant part of Mitchell’s theoretical framework, and it is, in relation to the image, as important as the interpretation of the image itself. The study of spectatorship concerns what Mitchell identifies as «showing seeing», that is, showing one’s gaze, which is considered a crucial aspect of visual culture and its connotations.

Cartier-Bresson and the Showing Seeing

The issue of the showing seeing highlighted by Mitchell interestingly intersects with Cartier-Bresson’s photographic work. In 1973, during his second journey to Basilicata, Cartier-Bresson was asked to select from his extensive photographic corpus the shots he deemed most representative (ultimately, 385 photographs), in order to outline a synthesis of his artistic experience. This selection resulted in a *master collection* now preserved at six cultural institutions, including the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation in Paris. In 2020, the collection was exhibited at Palazzo Grassi, in Venezia, under the title *Le Grand Jeu*. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of a catalog, edited by Marsilio, which consisted of the reinterpretation of the master collection by five contemporary cultural figures, including the film director Wim Wenders. The editorial project entailed each of them selecting fifty images from the Cartier-Bresson’s collection to look at it through the eyes of “others”, thereby focusing not on the French photographer but on those who observe his photographs. Wenders’ approach highlighted the “showing of seeing” as a fundamental aspect of Cartier-Bresson’s work. Commenting on the famous shot taken by the photographer in Brussels (Cartier-Bresson 1932a), Wenders observes: «What is this image if not a complete and utterly complex revelation of photography itself, of men sharing the act of seeing, among themselves first and then with a photographer behind them, and then with you and me...» (Wenders 2020: 153). And further on, Wenders notes: «Cartier-Bresson shows “viewers” and the act of seeing [...] we are made to identify with their longing [...] Our act of seeing becomes one with theirs» (154).

The act of seeing is a practice that requires to be interpreted alongside the image, having central importance in our relationship with the visual. In this regard, it may be useful to reconsider the well-known duck-rabbit figure proposed

by psychologist Joseph Jastrow at the end of the 19th century (Jastrow 1899: 312), which clearly reveals the presence of aspects of use in the selection and interpretation of the visual (fig. 12.1). In his *Philosophical Investigations*, reflecting on this image, Ludwig Wittgenstein invites us to distinguish seeing from “seeing-as” (*Sehen als*), drawing attention to the perceptual phenomenon of flashing of aspects.

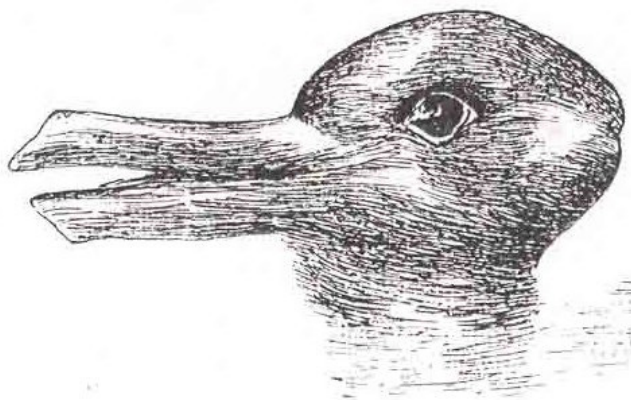


Fig. 12.1 – Duck-rabbit illusion, Jastrow (1899) «Popular Science Monthly» (volume 54, January 1899), public domain

Wittgenstein writes: «The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged» (Wittgenstein 1958: 196). In the aspect change, seeing-as reveals itself as a practice linked to some form of perceptual habit. Wittgenstein considers the meaning of the image as if it were connected to a certain habit of use based on relations that link an image to its interpretation. The seeing-as is connected to a representation that, based on a relation, is projected onto the image and the perceptual situation. According to Wittgenstein, the perception of an image can be explained, on the one hand, as the sum of sensory properties that strike the organ of sight, and on the other hand, as alluding to some relation of similarity that connects what we see to a possible paradigmatic interpretation. Seeing-as is not simply seeing, but seeing according to relations; it is seeing according to thought. An interpretation does not merely superimpose itself upon the perceptual material, but is rather the echo of thought within the perception itself, which animates and determines its resonance. Wittgenstein wrote: «the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought» (197). The flashing of aspects is a seeing that echoes thought. If it is possible to see the

duck-rabbit image as it is occasionally suggested, it is because it makes sense to ask that one attempt to see the image in light of a certain relation. Seeing-as is therefore in part subordinate to the will. We can try to see-as we are suggested, because we can assume and understand things according to the relation that is indicated to us.

From these considerations, it might seem that some form of relativism would emerge, since under the light of a relation and a usage rule we could interpret an image in any manner whatsoever. However, for Wittgenstein, «what the picture tells me is itself» (142), and the possibility of grasping it under a certain relation always depends on what the image is, that is, its form and features. Only starting from the image itself is it possible to see it under a certain interpretive paradigm. Therefore, every interpretation ultimately rests on the sensible determination of what is being interpreted. Interpretation can only take hold of perception by identifying in what is perceptively given a different relevance. We cannot therefore see-as we wish, even if it is possible to reorder what is perceptually given in a different perspective.

Our attention should therefore be directed towards the character of familiarity that defines our world, as perception presents it to us. Reflecting on the phenomenon of seeing-as and the flashing of aspects, we are prompted to recall that our interpretations are woven into the fabric of perception as well as the history of our previous perceptual experiences. We have learned to assign significance to certain traits of the image that enable us to grasp a particular relevance, dictated by a shared paradigm. It is from these considerations that Wittgenstein poses a strange condition, imagining a “blindness to aspects”. Wittgenstein wrote:

Could there be human beings lacking in the capacity to see something *as something*—and what would that be like? What sort of consequences would it have?—Would this defect be comparable to colour-blindness or to not having absolute pitch?—We will call it “aspect-blindness”. (213)

If we were blind to aspects, according to Wittgenstein, we would not know what we might even intend to see. Wittgenstein concluded, «The “aspect-blind” will have an altogether different relationship to pictures from ours» (214). Thus, if we can see as we do, it is because we have a certain disposition towards images and we are inclined to grant them a prominent place in our world. In images, we seek something, and it is precisely because of this inquiry towards them that a response becomes possible.

What does the seeing-as and the flashing of aspects mean in relation to Cartier-Bresson’s photographs of Lucania? Do those photos taken by the French photographer perhaps flash the aspects of a natural world that, in the name of progress and economic growth, appears irreparably lost today? Can

those images of poverty and misery, lived with simplicity and dignity, be seen-as an expression of an authentic and genuine existential essentiality? Can we grasp the recurring co-presence in those photos of human and non-human and view it as a manifestation of a practical ethics of coexistence and sharing? As Georges Didi-Huberman posited a few years ago in an essay titled *La condition des images*, «Confronted with an image, we should not only ask which history it documents and to which history it is contemporary, but also of which memory it is the return» (Didi-Huberman 2011: 95, as quoted in Saliot 2015: 49).

The paradox of images lies in the fact that they are, at the same time, alive and dead, powerful and weak, significant and insignificant. In the face of this paradox, Mitchell's first step is to cease considering media as mere structures or systems, but rather to reevaluate them as environments in which images thrive and we ourselves are a part. Mitchell presents a total interpenetration between world and images, in a perpetual, reversible crossing of horizons and perspectives, between perceptions and manifestations, where seeing and seeing-as, thinking and interpreting are centered on the inseparable chiasmus of human being and image. According to Bredekamp,

Images do not derive from reality. They are, rather, a form of its condition. Images, through their own potency, empower those enlightened observers who fully recognise this quality. Images are not passive. They are begetters of every sort of experience and action related to perception. (Bredekamp 2018: 283)

An ecocriticism of the visual should therefore begin with the identification of images as quasi-agents, as suggested by Mitchell. And if a visual ecocriticism is tasked with explaining how one should see a particular image, that is, the seeing-as, in relation to the environmental question, our entire effort as scholars will consist in drawing attention to certain particulars, in order to orient what is perceptually given towards a specific direction and facilitate the flashing of aspects. As previously stated, Wittgenstein's purpose is not at all to support the relativity of perception, but rather to bring to light the conditions upon which agreement within an interpretive paradigm can be based. The task of a visual ecocriticism is therefore that of facilitating agreement on a paradigmatic interpretation useful for the environmental cause.

Since the medium is a complex environment that envelops us and includes within it customs and practices, habits and techniques, the methodology to follow for a visual ecocriticism is the one proposed by Mitchell himself – that is, a kind of defamiliarization with the visual, questioning some of the assumptions and customs connected to the discipline of study. According to Mitchell, we must position ourselves in a state of “in-discipline”, in order to foster a moment of rupture and crisis. According to Mitchell,

If a discipline is a way of ensuring the continuity of a set of collective practices (technical, social, professional, etc.), “indiscipline” is a moment of breakage or rupture when the continuity is broken and the practice comes into question. (Mitchell 1995: 541)

Visual ecocriticism should “indisciplinedly” facilitate the affirmation of interpretive practices within which the image can activate itself as a real agent of change.

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Chapter 13

Troubling Progress: *In viaggio con Cecilia's* Journeys of Return

Emily Antenucci

Vassar College, New York.

emily.antenucci@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-8133-2888

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Abstract

The chapter investigates how the reuse of Cecilia Mangini's documentary films from the 1960s in 2013's *In Viaggio con Cecilia* seeks to reconcile and reinvigorate twentieth century ideals of progress with the increasingly apparent impossibility of a future of unlimited industrial growth presupposed by the kind of modernity envisioned by industrial development in the late 1950s and sixties. I argue that the juxtaposition of the older films alongside contemporary interviews, and the foregrounding of the act of watching cinema itself suggests that an ethos of reflection and return is necessary for environmental and social remediation, and fosters a conception of progress that does not view modernity as a race to either wealth or death. *In viaggio con Cecilia's* use of montage figures looking back, going slowly, and reconnecting to people and place as a vital part of looking forward. It presents the struggle to reconcile the still-unrealized twentieth century desire for social and economic well-being with the twenty-first century realization of the impossibility of "green" growth.

Keywords

documentary; ecocinema; industrial film; found footage; montage.

Introduction

A belatedly celebrated pioneer of documentary and found footage film, Cecilia Mangini was politically and artistically both counterhegemonic and staunchly consistent with post-war Leftist conceptions of Italian modernity. Her documentaries were a sharp counterpoint to those of the industrial film boom in the 1950s and 1960s that valorized Italian industry and its corporate godparents; her militant politics modeled the Communist Party's defense of working-class demands and its critique of capitalist excess¹. As the first female Italian documentary filmmaker, Mangini was also a model for subsequent generations of female directors such as Mariangela Barbanente, whose documentaries would continue to advance topics like labor advocacy and the persistence of the Southern Question. In 2013, the two collaborated on the film *In viaggio con Cecilia* as directors and as protagonists, embarking on a journey of return that was both personal and professional. Both originally from Puglia, they revisit familiar geographic, artistic, and political terrain to confront the environmental and economic devastation wrought by decades of industrial pollution and neglect in Taranto and Brindisi. The documentary consists largely of interviews and conversations between the filmmakers and with workers and community members, but it also incorporates footage from several of Mangini's earlier documentaries exploring the social transformations of the rapidly industrializing South in the 1960s: *Stendali: suonano ancora* (1960), *Essere donne* (1964), *Brindisi '65* (1966), *Tommaso* (1966), and *Comizi d'amore '80* (1982). The earlier films are strategically juxtaposed with contemporary footage to add historical context, narrative structure, and to occasion reflection and critique from the filmmakers, audiences, and from the subjects of the films themselves. In this way, the present-day disaster is figured as a long-term ramification of the economic boom of the 1950s and early 1960s, and prompts a reevaluation of its historical and contemporary imagining. The two narrative layers parallel the cross-generational dialogue that occurs between Barbanente and the then-85-year-old Mangini and proposes a kind of militant cinema that is both focused on change and engaged in mindful reflection on its consequences.

In viaggio con Cecilia posits a message of working-class solidarity through and with the galvanizing affective power of film, ultimately suggesting that political inertia can be overcome and grave harm rectified through commitment to unity and shared goals. Eleven years after its release, this message remains potent even as the continuing dire health and environmental conditions in Puglia demonstrates its limitations, and the accelerating climate crisis begs for new solutions to the disasters sown in the prosperous postwar decades. In the following, I investigate how the reuse of Mangini's earlier documentary

1 On industrial cinema, see in particular Pierpaolo Antonello (2019). On Mangini as counterhegemonic, see Missero (2016).

films in *In viaggio con Cecilia* seeks to reconcile and reinvigorate Mangini's (and Barbanente's) ideals of progress with the increasingly apparent impossibility of a future of unlimited industrial growth, the presupposition of the kind of modernity envisioned by industrial development in the late 1950s and sixties. I argue that the use of the older films suggests through formal experimentation and affect-driven viewership that an ethos of reflection and return is necessary for environmental and social remediation, and fosters a conception of progress that does not view modernity as a race to either wealth or death. This approach to montage figures looking back, going slowly, and reconnecting to people and place as a vital part of looking forward, and presents the struggle to reconcile the still-unrealized twentieth century desire for social and economic well-being with the twenty-first century realization of the impossibility of "green" growth.

Revisiting Puglia on the Ground and on Screen

The film begins, as the title suggests, with a journey. The camera bobs in the backseat of a car as we gaze over the shoulders of Mangini and Barbanente, listening in on their conversation as they traverse a rainy countryside in Puglia. The car, symbol of twentieth century Italian progress, industry, and economic aspiration, suggests a kind of modernity that situates Italy's South and the Global South more broadly as a periphery to either be exploited for resources, land, and labor, or exhorted to "catch up" to the imagined center by establishing industry that has the capacity to exploit resources, land, and labor. Wind turbines, a literal and figurative representation of the triumph of dynamism over immobility, dot the conspicuously empty countryside, a stark contrast to stereotypes of Southern Italy as backward and frozen in time, or idyllic and unchanging. Mangini's first comments emphasize this contrast and make clear her own views on change: «I have to say, the landscape seems much more beautiful to me with the wind turbines»². This is a return home, and an enthusiastic one, but there is no gauzy nostalgia or a homesick longing for time gone by. Mangini's affective connection to this place is compatible with its transformation: «I like the sense that time is passing»³ — perhaps an unexpected sentiment from a woman in her eighties. This first sequence affirms a political and artistic gaze that is both forward looking and deeply engaged with memory: Mangini lovingly recalls her late husband and collaborator, Lino Del Fra, and her childhood in this same countryside. The conversation affirms the coexistence of and positive association between change and contemplative reflection, and conjures a nascent connection between development and return.

2 «Devo dire che il paesaggio mi sembra molto più bello con le pale eoliche». All translations from Italian are my own.

3 «A me piace l'avvertire che il tempo passa».

Mangini's apparent pleasure at seeing the wind turbines also indicates a continued attachment to a onetime dream of industrialization, a dream now «completely shattered in the face of other problems»⁴, as Barbanente comments in the film. «But it was my dream. It was my... a long-awaited thing that finally happened. Industrialization in this country»⁵. Mangini's dream implies a vision of progress that became dominant in the 1950s in which economic growth «became the key ideology of capitalist and actually existing socialist societies» (Schmelzer, Vansintjan, and Vetter 2022: 43). While the realization of her dream lifted many out of poverty and established a working class in a community that had previously been comprised of, according to one former factory worker, «fishermen, artisans, merchants from the provinces, farmers»⁶, *In viaggio con Cecilia* demonstrates how industrialization transformed but did not eliminate the neglect and marginalization of Southern Italy: Taranto and Brindisi, sites of the largest steel producing plant in Europe and what was once the largest petrochemical plant in Italy, respectively, face levels of pollution and abnormally high rates of mortality, child mortality, and cancer for which there has been a broad lack of accountability and reparation even at the time of writing. Viewed in this light, the wind turbines reveal themselves as a loaded example: they are a cleaner alternative to petroleum-based energy sources, but they transform the landscape (according to some, for the worse), they risk harm to wildlife, and their construction requires mining and exploitation of the environment, particularly in areas of the Global South. They represent the bitter contradictions of sustainable development, and, I argue, the central challenge with which *In viaggio con Cecilia* must reckon.

This hesitantly hopeful prologue culminates in the arrival at a bridge, an apparatus representing both progress and return: for the filmmakers (and for the film) it is a literalization of the cliché “a bridge to the past”. Barbanente and Mangini step out of the car and proceed on foot — a deliberate change of pace that evokes Franco Cassano's philosophy of slowness as an antidote to the intensity of speed, production, and waste of the modern world. Going on foot, Cassano writes, gives us time to «love the pauses that enable us to see the road we have covered» (Cassano 2012: 9)⁷. Mangini pauses to reflect on the road covered in both senses, describing the bridge as «the entrance to the Puglia of my childhood», «then many years later, it was a way of talking about Puglia in my documentaries, and then it was the Puglia that reminds me of my father»⁸.

4 «Completamente frantumato di fronte ad altri problemi».

5 «Ma era il mio sogno. Era la mia... un'attesa che finalmente si verificava. Industrializzazione in questo paese».

6 «Pescatori, artigiani, commercianti dalla provincia, contadini».

7 «Amare le soste per guardare il cammino fatto».

8 «L'ingresso alla Puglia della mia infanzia», «che poi è stato la possibilità di raccontare la Puglia nei miei documentari tanti anni dopo, e poi è stata la Puglia che mi ricorda mio padre».

The action slows and becomes more reflective, heralded by Mangini's spontaneous acknowledgement of her own embodied situatedness as an octogenarian returning to her birthplace. The synchronicity of pace and place seems to, as Cassano writes, «elicit involuntary rather than planned thought, the result not of goals or our will, but a necessary thought, the kind that emerges on its own, from an agreement between mind and world» (Cassano 2012: 9)⁹. Puglia as a geographic and symbolic space is realized as a repository of associations and memories that have shaped Mangini's career and, in the forthcoming film, will outline how to reconnect with the past — emotionally, physically, cinematically — in order to chart a path forward. «So the journey has begun, starting from memories»¹⁰, Barbanente tells us via voiceover. «But it's not the past that I want to talk to Cecilia about»¹¹. In fact, referencing the past and using past films to elicit memory, emotion, and potentially action, is precisely the way the two of them access the key issues at stake in contemporary Puglia.

The first filmic journey of return is to Mangini's landmark 1964 documentary *Essere donne*, a controversial and stylistically innovative account of the conditions of the female members of the working class during the years of the economic boom. The film was produced for the electoral campaign of the Communist Party in 1964, but Mangini was granted ample artistic liberty and financial support for the project (Cinquegrani 2023: 103). Its experimental use of music and montage incorporates vivid juxtapositions of Brechtian song and contemporary print ads alongside careful rhymes and repetitions of parallel images, shots, and themes¹². Although widely praised abroad, it was deemed lacking in sufficient technical, artistic, and cultural merit by the ministerial committee of the *Direzione generale dello spettacolo* (General Management of Performance) and was thus not widely screened alongside commercial films, as was typical for short documentaries at the time. Its commercial release aborted by a government that, according to Mattia Cinquegrani, was uneasy with its stark presentation of the enduring economic, social, and personal hardships of women in a supposedly modern and industrial Italy, *Essere donne* was for years only shown at screenings organized by the Communist Party or at the occasional film festival (103-105).

The initial cut from Mangini and Barbanente to *Essere donne* shifts time but not place: we are still in Puglia, but the landscape is now olive trees and farmers instead of wind turbines or factory chimneys. A group of women are hunched

9 «Suscitare un pensiero involontario e non progettante, non il risultato dello scopo e della volontà, ma il pensiero necessario, quello che viene su da solo, da un accordo tra mente e mondo».

10 «Ecco, il viaggio è iniziato partendo dai ricordi».

11 «Ma non è del passato che voglio parlare con Cecilia».

12 See Steimatsky (2019) for Mangini's use of montage and sound, including Brecht and Weil's "Alabama song" in *Essere donne*.

over the dirt gathering olives, as the voiceover tells us that «today industry has appeared even among the olive groves of Southern Italy, but the industrial development of the South is slow»¹³, noting that, apropos of Mangini's dream, «The women gathering olives know that the factory is a necessary transition from backwards working conditions, from the patriarchal relationship with the family and with men»¹⁴. Tense music underscores a shot of one worker's squinting gaze upwards towards a water tower framed by olive trees; the ominous proximity of industry suggests as much ambivalence as optimism¹⁵. Viewed alongside Barbanante and Mangini's contemporary journey, the woman's furrowed brow feels vaguely critical or prescient. What will this "necessary transition" offer to her, and what will it withhold? How might it punish? As *Essere donne* goes on to demonstrate, and as twenty-first century viewers know well, wage labor at a factory hardly ended the kinds of patriarchal relationships that made (indeed, that make) many working women's lives harder.

The juxtaposition between contemporary and 1960s Puglia reveals place as palimpsest: between 1960 and 1965, hundreds of olive trees were be ripped up to make way for the Ilva steel plant, then called Italsider, in Taranto. This violent upheaval is depicted in the 1962 documentary *Il pianeta acciaio*, directed by Emilio Marsilio and written by Dino Buzzati. *Il pianeta acciaio*'s narrative of industrial progress as intimidating but ultimately edifying was more typical of films of the time than Mangini's work. It declares the South «a classical landscape, the sea, the deserted shore, the olive trees, the sun, the cicadas, the peace, the sleepiness. Everything has remained intact and immobile since the times of Magna Grecia»¹⁶. As bulldozers tear up ancient trees by their roots, the voiceover describes and assuages any potential misgivings:

Why? Because the olive trees, the sun, the cicadas, signify sleep, abandonment, resignation, and poverty, and now instead here men have built an immense metal and glass cathedral to unleash inside of it the flaming monster called steel, that signifies life.¹⁷

Unlike their counterparts at the time, Mangini's films do not glorify the factory or its product but rather center the voices, bodies, and lives of workers. This

13 «Oggi l'industria si è affacciata anche tra gli uliveti del mezzogiorno, ma lo sviluppo industriale del Sud è lento».

14 «Le raccoglitrice di olive sanno che la fabbrica è un passaggio obbligato per sottrarsi alle condizioni di lavoro arretrate, al rapporto di patriarcato con la famiglia e con l'uomo».

15 See Steimatsky (2019) for additional analysis of this sequence.

16 «Un paesaggio classico, il mare, la riva deserta, gli ulivi, il sole, le cicale, la pace, la sonnolenza. Tutto è rimasto immobile e intatto dai tempi della Magna Grecia».

17 «Perché? Perché gli ulivi, il sole, le cicale, significavano sonno, abbandono, rassegnazione, e miseria, e ora qui invece gli uomini hanno costruito una cattedrale immensa di metallo e di vetro per scatenarvi dentro il mostro infuocato che si chiama acciaio e che significa vita».

perspective endures in *In viaggio con Cecilia*, in which interviews and personal narratives predominate.

From this cinematic shift backwards in time, the narrative returns to a contemporary highway to Taranto, now «a city in turmoil»¹⁸. In 2012, the plant's most polluting furnaces were temporarily shut down and the owners put under house arrest for willfully ignoring environmental and health issues caused by the emission of minerals, metals, and carcinogenic dioxins. Labor unions, alarmed by the potential factory closure and risk to their jobs, went on strike, demanding that the factory be modernized to minimize the dangers of pollution without risk to the 20,000 jobs the site sustained (Kington 2012; *La Repubblica* 2012). Since then, the factory has been taken over by the Italian government and sold to a different steel producer for cleanup, transferred back to the government, and is currently embroiled in legal battles over ownership and responsibility (*Reuters* 2024). Some efforts at cleanup and prevention of further pollution have been made, but the pollution and its effects have not disappeared and the site remains a subject of the contentious struggle to achieve, as a 2023 World Health Organization report put it, «a fair balance between the right to health and the protection of the environment, on the one hand, and the right to work and secure an income on the other» (Who 2023: 5). Mangini and Barbanente arrived in the summer of 2012, when the percolating unease and anger of the community bubbled over into strikes and road closures. True to her Marxist bona fides, Mangini positions herself alongside the workers literally and symbolically, but the film makes clear that the voices of striking workers overlap not infrequently with those who mourn, agitate against, and study the fallout of the environmental damage and human suffering. These are not two sides in opposition, but an ambivalently implicated community with a long history of being sidelined and instrumentalized by the supposed exigencies and opaque promises of progress.

At the Factory Gates: Cross-Generational Conflict and Connection

In Taranto, as at the bridge in the prologue, geographic space links memory with subjectivity and prompts forward-looking reflection. The film's next return is to the Ilva steel plant, where Mangini interviews three former workers she first met thirty years prior in front of the same factory while filming the documentary *Comizi d'amore '80* with Del Fra. What did it mean to them, she asks, to be part of this emerging working class, to enter the factory and participate in this «great movement of industrialization in the South?»¹⁹.

18 «Una città in fermento».

19 «Grande passo dell'industrializzazione del mezzogiorno».

As Mangini pronounces these words the camera passes over memorial notices on the factory walls, hinting at the alarming rate of cancer deaths in the local community — 15% above the national average, or 400 people in 13 years (Kington 2012). “Industrialization” is linked visually with these death notices, which workers casually pass on their way into the factory. In response to Mangini’s question, the three former workers describe an «awareness of belonging»²⁰ that suggests the optimism behind Mangini’s dream of industrialization; a vision of industrial progress and modernity that is strengthened by working class solidarity, and vice versa. They speak about the environmental crisis as something that can and must be rectified through sound organizing and political will: «the plants can be made safe. It’s an issue of the will of the businessman and also an issue of everyone’s role»²¹. Then as now, one former worker says «what’s needed, what was needed then and is needed even more now, are institutions, and policies, that we have to mobilize, that shouldn’t settle for compromises»²². These workers advocate, it seems, for an ecological modernization of capitalism, in which workers are powerful agents but nonetheless subject to the constraints of a vision of progress based on the growth of profit.

Mangini then turns to the current generation of workers now milling about the factory gates: «Do you agree with what a former Italsider worker is saying? You don’t have anything to say? Nothing? Not even a criticism? A dissent, an approval? A declaration of protest?»²³. Her embodied and historically situated subjectivity is on prominent display here; her hands, face, and voice evidence the passage of time and its effects as she energetically chastises the younger men around her. She thinks and speaks as a nomad, as Rosi Braidotti writes, «[stressing] the idea of embodied and embedded material structure of what we commonly call thinking» (2011: 16). Mangini brings with her an embodied perspective shaped by age, political history, and her filmmaking career, granting her a unique position among the numerous artists who have sought to make sense of this disaster in recent years²⁴. Although she no longer lived in Puglia at the time of filming, as a filmmaker she is familiar with the deep roots of this crisis, and as a longtime Marxist politically shaped by the struggle against Fascism, she is firmly committed to effecting change through collective action in the face of injustice. She harnesses the “embodied material structure” (Braidotti 2011) of thinking to insist here on a cross-generational dialogue, urging the present

20 «Coscienza di appartenenza».

21 «Gli impianti possono essere messi in sicurezza. È un problema di volontà dell’imprenditore e un problema anche di ruolo di tutti quanti».

22 «Quello che ci vuole, ci voleva allora e ci vuole ancora di più oggi, sono le istituzioni, e la politica, che si deve mobilitare, che non deve scendere a compromessi».

23 «Siete d’accordo con quello che dice un ex-operaio dell’Italsider? Non avete nulla da dire? Nulla? Neanche una critica? Un dissenso, un apprezzamento? Una dichiarazione di contrarietà?».

24 See Monica Seger (2018) for a longer discussion of the recent work on this topic.

workers to make some use of the reflections proffered by their older counterparts. The film thus encourages viewers to listen to but not accept uncritically the presumptions that might have solved the problems of earlier decades.

This scene of uncomfortable silence then cuts to a parallel scene from Mangini's short documentary *Brindisi '65*, in which a group of workers taking a course for foremen (*capo operai*) sits silently at their desks when asked if they would like to critique, question, or make suggestions to the management at the Monteshell petrochemical plant. The off-screen voice mimics Mangini's exhortations in rhetoric and intonation: «Do you have any criticisms to make to the management of Monteshell? Of their business politics, their technical and labor systems? [...] You don't have anything to say?»²⁵. Unwilling to risk their slightly elevated position, the workers are silent. The film creates an echo in reverse, a delayed resounding across decades: Mangini seems to be evoking her earlier film when she speaks to the workers (crucially, allowing herself to be visible to the camera in *In viaggio con Cecilia*), but the echo is clear only upon cutting back to *Brindisi '65*. Mangini and Barbanente use the earlier film to demonstrate and press against what is framed as enduring resignation, an unwillingness to learn from the errors (or, if we are to believe the proud retired Ilva workers, the triumphs) of the past. Parallel scenes of perceived apathetic or intimidated behavior are repurposed, and through their juxtaposition function as a subtle but forceful indictment; a spur to action and renewed solidarity among workers across generations.

The clip from *Brindisi '65* includes a brief cut to a puppet show, adding another mediatic layer that reminds us of Mangini's long standing proclivity for experimentation and use of layered montage to build critique. In close up, we see a papier-mâché face trembling anxiously behind a set piece, mirroring the stony faces of the workers fidgeting behind their desks when prompted to speak out. The full scene in *Brindisi '65* provides context: workers watch a puppet show about an aborted romance, in which a young worker cowers and shakes behind a tree at the recriminations of his beloved's father, who refuses to let his daughter marry a factory worker. The three nested scenes feature workers shirking authority, unable to recognize the parallels now made evident for viewers of *In viaggio con Cecilia*. The sequence in front of the Ilva plant concludes with the words of two of the older workers reflecting on the struggles of the younger generation, and on their fear at speaking out. «They're afraid. And it's not right. These are people who work, who provide for their families, provide... provide wealth for the country. Steel is wealth»²⁶. The echoes of *Il pianeta acciaio* and films like it are clear: in it, steel is named as a symbol of work and prosperity;

25 «Avete delle critiche da fare alla direzione della Monteshell? Alla sua politica aziendale, ai suoi sistemi tecnici e di lavoro? [...] Non avete nulla da dichiarare?».

26 «Hanno paura. E non è giusto. È gente che lavora, porta il pane a casa, dà...dà ricchezza al paese. L'acciaio è ricchezza».

«producing a lot of steel means that a country is doing well»²⁷. At Ilva, another worker insists that the Riva family — the former owners recently placed under house arrest — «are not “businessmen” but rather “bosses”»²⁸. The difference, he explains, is that the businessman has «an economic, a social logic, that — if its in a certain way — is really useful [...] but bosses don’t»²⁹. In the full version of *Brindisi ’65* (notably not included in *In viaggio con Cecilia*) the sequence continues with the monologue of another worker, his face in shadow, declaring that the workers who do not speak out are afraid to lose the marginal economic privilege they have as foremen and therefore do not see themselves as on the same side of the other workers. This generation seems to have accepted the notion that “businessmen” should continue to enrich themselves at the expense of others, provided the working conditions are fair enough. The apparent contradiction parallels the kinds of contradictions encountered by the Communist Party in the postwar period as they sought to balance critiques of consumerism and mass culture with the practical advantages offered by economic growth (Gundle 2000). The camera pans across the faces of the young workers as the older worker insists that «to get past this, you need unity. Fear won’t get you anywhere»³⁰. The panning shot echoes that of the earlier film; the workers stare intently listening to the older man, inversely echoing the vacant spectatorship of the earlier generation. Despite their encouraging words to the other workers to renounce fear and work together for better regulation, the two older workers betray a faith in industry as a social good that the interceding years have, along with Mangini’s dream «completely shattered in the face of other problems»³¹.

The film then reverts to a different era, still in front of these factory gates, with a cut to a clip from *Comizi d’amore ’80*, of a bustling market with heaps of freshly harvested mussels on display, odds and ends for purchase, and workers going about their lives. Here, underscored by the thrum of rock music, the factory entrance pulsates with the energy of change and possibility, perhaps uneasy but not unoptimistic. The same three workers appear, thirty years younger, chatting casually with the filmmakers about changing sexual mores, stereotypes of Southern jealousy and revenge, and the recent advent of pornographic magazines. *In viaggio con Cecilia* then reveals that we are watching alongside these same workers. They sit facing the camera, while the film plays on a small screen, the back of which is partly in view. Wordlessly, smiling slightly, they watch and listen to their younger selves. One points out to his companions that this film features an older method of production that was eventually transformed and replaced:

27 «Se si produce molto acciaio vuol dire che un paese sta bene».

28 «Non sono imprenditori ma padroni».

29 «Una logica economica, sociale che — se è in un certo modo — è utilissima [...] ma i padroni no».

30 «Per riuscire a superare, ci vuole l’unità. La paura vi porta comunque a niente».

31 «Completamente distrutto di fronte ad altri problemi».

we had hundreds of discussions in the union to reorganize work around this new technology. And we always set up this — no? This inseparable connection between work systems, security, environment, and productivity!³²

Prompted by an emotional connection to their past selves, they return to that era for a possible solution.

Mangini may have longed for industrialization in Italy, but her early films are clear-eyed about what such a thing could and could not accomplish, and about the perils of foregrounding industry and obscuring workers. The next clip in *In viaggio con Cecilia* is from *Tommaso* (1966), a short documentary about a young man in Brindisi who longs to work in the newly opened petrochemical factory so he can buy a motorcycle. A bus slowly drives through the open factory gates in *Tommaso*, as the older film's voiceover counters the optimism of the three workers from the earlier scene: «Contrary to appearances, he won't be the one who chooses. The priority of choice is up to the monopoly, which is counting on him and thousands like him, defenseless, underemployed, laborers»³³. The cognitive dissonance produced by cinematically setting this narration alongside and against the idea of the entrepreneur as a social good is jarring, and sets up the film to further counter zealous optimism around the intentions of industry. The same narration carries on under contemporary footage of workers boarding a modern bus to a factory. Outside of the factory gates, it says, lies «the same old subordination. And this is not a choice»³⁴. The parallel scenes of bussed workers and the overlapping voiceover link the struggles of the two eras through what Noa Steimatsky has elsewhere called Mangini's characteristic «intricate lacing of details through visual alliterations and rhymes» (2019: 110). Then as now, the choice is often between the subordination of un- or under-employment, and work in an industry that produces wealth but not equality.

Emotional Encounters Through and With Film

The incorporation of the earlier documentaries stitches together time and place, insisting on the enduring presence of history and on film's countercultural agency as an archival object. The other primary means by which *In viaggio con Cecilia* uses the reproduction of the older films is through engaging the emotional power of viewership and memory. This affective agency of films is first alluded to in the opening sequence, in which Barbanente asks Mangini

32 «Abbiamo avuto centinaia di confronti sindacali per riorganizzare il lavoro su questa nuova tecnologia. E noi abbiamo posto sempre questo, no? Questo nesso inscindibile tra organizzazione di lavoro, sicurezza, ambiente e produttività».

33 «Contrariamente alle apparenze, non sarà lui ad aver scelto. La priorità di scelta spetta al monopolio, che conta su di lui e sui migliaia di suoi simili, indifesi, sottoccupati, braccianti».

34 «La vecchia subordinazione. E questa non è una scelta».

about the last film she made, *La briglia sul collo* in 1974. Mangini says she is «very attached»³⁵ to the film, particularly because whenever it is screened she can hear the voice of her late husband: «every time it's projected and I hear his voice and it's so — a moment... a moment»³⁶, she says, unable to fully capture the feeling in words — it is most or perhaps only accessible through recorded sound. When the former workers watch their younger selves and the “old technology”, the material embeddedness of the film watching experience suggests to them a way to recontextualize the past and reimagine the future. The workers' discussion of the development of new technology and their union's subsequent successful efforts to balance “work, security, environment, and productivity” seems to heartily endorse the possibility that new technology and institutional will can have a similar impact on the environmental futures of Taranto, an optimistic perspective that, I suggest, is countered by the challenges of the years since *In viaggio con Cecilia* was filmed (Giuffrida 2024).

Mangini's emotional reaction to hearing her husband's voice on film foreshadows a subsequent scene in which Mangini recognizes on the street one of the subjects of *Tommaso*. Prior to this encounter, we see the clip from *Tommaso* to which she will subsequently refer in. Rather than echoing a scene from the present after the fact, as in previous sequences, now Barbanente and Mangini offer clear chronological contiguity, inviting us into an experience of memory that has thus far been unavailable. A young man speaks directly to the camera as he repairs a radio, first introducing himself by name as «Corvetto, Antonio», then describing his qualifications and his difficulty finding work both locally and elsewhere in the country. Back on a street in present-day Puglia, the camera follows an older man from behind, and as Mangini becomes visible in the frame and turns to face the camera she is clearly moved. When he introduces himself exactly as he does in the film, Mangini completes his sentence and recites from memory the remainder of his monologue. She greets him warmly, embracing and kissing him on both cheeks, saying «you're young for all time, you're eternal»³⁷. Every time she re-watches this film at public screenings, she says, one hand on his shoulder, gazing wistfully at the screen in her mind's eye, «when you arrive — and you'll see now — you're the first sign of something that in this expectation of Southern redemption that gives a sense that not everything is going to go well»³⁸. Mangini's experience of re-watching does not bring about the sense of renewed possibility hinted at by the former Italsider workers, but what seems to be a welcome premonition, or a provocation: “A sense that not everything is going to go well”. Without this, the film implies, one

35 «Molto affezionata».

36 «Tutte le volte che lo si proietta sento la sua voce ed è così... un momento, un momento...».

37 «Sei giovane di tutti i tempi, sei eterno».

38 «Quando arrivi tu — e lo vedrai adesso — sei il primo segno, così, di qualcosa che in questa aspettativa di riscatto di mezzogiorno dà un senso che non tutte le cose andranno per bene».

might read the industrial march forward in too uncomplicated a light, with too little attention on those marginalized by its promise or most susceptible to its abuses. As Corvetto recounts his work experiences since they last met, Mangini compliments his persistence, remarking that he is an example of how «you must never give up»³⁹ — which she notes is already evident in his presence in the film. «Now we'll see together»⁴⁰, she says, taking him by the arm as they enter a theater to re-watch *Tommaso*. We are privy to his and the audience's reactions, as well as several frames of the film itself, it is an invitation to solidarity with their experience of viewing and with the subjects on the screen. Mangini's emotional encounter on and in front of the screen signifies that, as Valeria Castelli has written, her and Barbanente's solidarity, their «being in the street» with their subjects «has a collective value, rather than a narcissistic or selfish one», and that «the display of Mangini's and Barbanente's emotions by means of their performances on screen has this same function» (Castelli 2018: 239).

The titular character in *Tommaso* reappears in *In viaggio con Cecilia* only via archival footage from the film, careening through dusty courtyards and wind-swept laundry lines on a borrowed motorcycle. Tommaso Lo Russo wants only to go fast; he longs to work at the Monteshell petrochemical factory so he can buy his own motorcycle that «goes as fast as I say»⁴¹. His onscreen presence in *In viaggio con Cecilia* is another echo in reverse of an earlier scene, in which a woman mourning the loss of her father holds up a black and white photograph of a similar young man on a scooter — her father, who has died from an illness caused by his exposure to chemicals at the plant. «We children are the indirect victims of the petrochemical reality»⁴², she says, acknowledging the connection across generations and her sense of obligation to continue a fight for accountability that many have deemed hopeless. «I have to continue in his place, to ask for the truth because so many dads can't»⁴³. In the original film, Tommaso's proclaimed desire for speed is juxtaposed with images of rural poverty and the threatening monotony of factory workers being bussed to and from work, at the mercy of their employers and hazardous conditions, as well as a memorial for a worker killed on the job, a harrowing echo of the notices on the factory gates at Ilva. Tommaso wants only to go fast: positioned in the latter half of *In viaggio con Cecilia*, his character becomes emblematic of an urgency for progress that does not account for danger or allow for reflection. Such reflection reveals unexpected and uncomfortable continuities with the past — the need to work and the desire to acquire, the neglect of communities in the South — and invites a closer re-viewing of films that were once relegated to archives.

39 «Non bisogna mai arrendersi».

40 «Adesso lo vediamo insieme».

41 «Va forte come dico io».

42 «Noi figli siamo le vittime trasversali della realtà petrolchimica».

43 «Devo continuare io al posto suo, a chiedere la verità, perché tanti papà non possono».

As Laura Di Bianco has written, «retrieving Mangini's work [...] to give it visibility and to make it signify again» (2023: 20). Mangini's films were once difficult to access outside of festivals or archives, but the past several years have seen growing interest in her work. Many of her documentaries are now available on YouTube, a development likely connected to the expansion of streaming and the attendant response of archival organizations like *Archivio Luce Cinecittà* and *Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico*. It also seems probable that the increasing awareness of the urgency of environmental crises like those in Puglia and the tragic consequences of fossil-fuel driven climate change makes Mangini's prescient early films newly relevant and her present-day determination inspiring.

The situation in Taranto — collective action and mobilization, as well as some level of accountability — seems to be presented as a positive example of the power of organized labor and judicial intervention compared to the circumstances in Brindisi, another troubling example of post-industrial reality. From the early 1960s until the late 1990s, Brindisi had a thriving working class employed by the Monteshell petrochemical plant. Since cleanup operations began in the 1990s, there are now a fraction of the number of workers, and no legal or judicial accountability for the workers who became ill and died as a result of their employment. According to the adult son of one such worker, the gradual closure of the plant and the lack of any state intervention to remedy, substitute, or compensate for employment has crippled the town economically and socially. Attempted cleanup has resolved little; he laments that the promises never materialized into action⁴⁴, and the effort has eviscerated the working class rather than empowered and cared for it. Cleanup «was anti-economical, obviously it's more convenient to produce in Bhopal than here»⁴⁵, he says with a bitter chuckle, hinting at the grim reality of capitalist expansion — green or otherwise — that must find new peripheries to exploit by way of industrial development. In their interview, Mangini expresses the great sense of loss she feels that so much built after the Second World War seems to have been tossed out by the ruling classes. Her sense of indignation, however, is not resigned or retrograde, but rather doggedly focused on the future: «We have to learn how to say no, we have to learn how to express dissent, we have to learn to... to be openly against everything that's happening, and say it, and never get tired of saying it»⁴⁶.

The film concludes by directing its gaze upward and, in a sense, back to a generation prior to Mangini's. The filmmakers look upwards and the camera

44 The speaker comments that the cleanup projects have not taken place as of filming. As of July 2024, Eni's current site includes a lengthy description of ongoing efforts in Brindisi (Eni n.d.).

45 «Era anti-economico, conviene ovviamente di più produrre a Bhopal che qui».

46 «Bisogna imparare a dire di no, bisogna imparare a esprimere dissenso, bisogna imparare a... a essere francamente contrario a tutto quello che succede, e dirlo, non stancarsi mai dirlo».

follows, around a gnarled but verdant tree in a sunny piazza, as text appears on the screen for the first time: «All of the seeds have failed except one, I don't know what it is but it's probably a flower and not a weed» Gramsci 1965: 164)⁴⁷. The quote is by Antonio Gramsci, from a letter he wrote to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, from while in prison. In that dire situation, we imagine, he understood that there were still seeds of hope and possibility, even if the shape of their eventual fruition was not yet clear. The reference to Gramsci is also a reminder of the political tradition of which Mangini, and to some extent Barbanente have been a part, in which industry, development, and a robust working class in the South represented great possibility and promise. However, the decades since the Second World War and the accelerating climate catastrophe have taught progressive thinkers to creatively revisit what a post-capitalist world might look like. In the anthropocene, as Kohei Sato has written, «if there is a slight hope of a revival of Marxism in this historical conjuncture, its essential precondition is the radical reformulation of its infamous grand scheme of 'historical materialism'» (2023: 2). While obliquely acknowledging “old” materialisms, so to speak, for which humans were the unquestioned center around which all political energy churned, the film's last image asks us to think about a new materialism, in which the old binarisms are less useful than recognizing interdependency between public and private, and between human and non-human. Environmental justice demands urgent revision of the notion of solidarity as restricted to the human, and the philosophy and politics of degrowth encourage us to reimagine entirely the absolute necessity of industry as we know it. *In viaggio con Cecilia* invites debate on how new materialisms and reimagined engagement with non-human elements, in particular film itself, can draw from the political struggles of the past to creatively address problems in the present and future. This final shot, across and upwards as the sunshine filters through the leaves, offers tentative hope from the past layered onto an unexpected perspective towards the future, and an unusual moment of dwelling on and in nature. It recalls the olive trees in *Essere donne*, torn up in what was seen as a necessary step in the great industrial transition, and the women below gazing upward at an uncertain future. Now the women gazing upward have, however, earnestly engaged with remnants of the past and used them to foster reflection and possibility, if not easy solutions. Harnessing the networks of affective relationships between filmmakers, film, filmed subjects, audiences, and geographical space, *In viaggio con Cecilia* makes use of interactions between humans and their non-human counterparts — film itself, the natural and built environments, and the pollution and disease that have emerged from their contact — to generate new political energy towards contemporary crises.

47 «Tutti i semi sono falliti eccettuato uno che non so cosa sia, ma che probabilmente è un fiore e non un'erbaccia». Originally cited in Valeria Castelli (2018).

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Chapter 14

The Inversion of Europa: Reconfiguring the Utopia through the Gaze of the *Femminiello* in *Mater Natura* (Andrei, 2005)

Victor Martín García

Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain.

vmartingmarin@hotmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0008-7811-4119

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Abstract

This chapter analyzes the *femminiello* Europa, a character in the film *Mater Natura* (Andrei, 2005). Due to the main task of Europa, who proposes to escape from the metropolitan context together with the rest of the collective to materialize their utopia on the slope of Vesuvius, the research hypothesis is based on clarifying the symbolic function of both the identity conditions of the character and the utopian project itself. In order to achieve the objectives, a contextualization of this case of non-normative gender and its link to the Neapolitan cultural environment and its representation in the cinematographic discourse is carried out. In this way, the aim is to identify some of the representative signs of its intersectionality of identity and, subsequently, to examine how they are recoded through the character in order to devise its utopian proposal.

Keywords

New Neapolitan Cinema; non-binary gender; community; resemantization; territory.

Introduction

Mater Natura (Andreì, 2005), a choral film framed between comedy and melodrama¹, focuses on the vicissitudes of a group of transgender people living in Naples. Desiderio (Maria Pia Calzone), Massimino (Vladimir Luxuria) and Europa (Enzo Moscato) are part of a close-knit community where each of them lives their gender dissidence in a different way. As for Europa, the character embodies the figure of the *femminiello*, a notion that defines this case of non-normative gender identity and its traditional presence in the sociocultural context of the Campania region². Their participation in the plot is based on the proposal they make to the rest of the companions with the intention of putting an end to the common social, political, and economic marginalization experienced by each of the characters from different circumstances. The idea they intend to carry out has a marked utopian character: to open an «agro-futurism» in the vicinity of Vesuvius, thus distancing their self from the metropolitan environment and «inventing a paradise without sin». For the realization of the project, Europa finds in an old abandoned farmhouse the perfect place for its new location. It will bear the name «*Consulenze esistenziali trans all'ombra del Vesuvio*» (Mater Natura Trans Vesuvian Counseling)³. The community progressively renounces its life in the city of Naples to move to the idyllic location organized by Europa.

In this way, the proposal of the *femminiello* Europa evidences in turn a marked strategic value that generates new ways of linking with the space and inhabiting the territory within the cinematographic fiction. Such strategies structure the utopian sense of their project which, on the other hand, arises as a response to the character's own evolution, conditioned by their intersectionality of identity. Factors such as gender dissidence, belonging to the Neapolitan cultural context, as well as the economic precariousness in which they live, make up the critical positioning that underlies the decision led by Europa to leave the city. Lewis Mumford considered how the creation of these narratives based on imagining possible alternatives beyond their degree of feasibility, were themselves «an

1 These two film genres are considered to categorize *Mater Natura* following the studies conducted by Alex Marlow-Mann and Giuseppe Borrone since, while Borrone defines it as melodrama (2020: 32), for Marlow-Mann however it is a comedy (2011: 137). It is significant that, as Marlow-Mann in turn develops, both comedy and melodrama are the two genres par excellence of traditional Neapolitan cinema (2011: 41).

2 The term *femminiello/femminielli* is masculine singular and plural respectively. There are also other versions of the same in feminine: *femmenella/femmenelle*. Given the complexity of this case of non-normative gender, where the modes of naming flow from feminine to masculine, it is opted to use the term in masculine, more linked to the academic context (Mauriello 2021: 47); however, as far as pronouns are concerned, it is chosen to employ those of gender that refer to the non-binary character of such identity. Regarding the term *femminiello*, see, for example, Marzia Mauriello's study on the subject (2021).

3 All the translations from Italian are my own.

implicit critique of the civilization that serves as its background» (2013: 11). Consequently, Europa, «an emblematic figure, capable of condensing the whole imaginary about the *femminielli* and of erecting a symbol that transcends regional confines» (Vesce 2020: 71), materializes through their utopia a relevant contesting position determined by their own subjectivity, and that has repercussions especially on the symbolic plane according to the elements that compose the character.

Following such premises, this chapter examines how the symbolic formalization of the *femminiello* Europa within the plot of the film *Mater Natura* fosters a critical positioning and grants a series of strategies that reconfigure, on the one hand, the social relationship with the territory in the diegesis of the film, while, on the other hand, it acts as an interpellation to the very conformation of our imaginary. In this way, the symbolic value of the project of Europa transcends the alternative social organization present in the cinematic fable to directly interpellate the spectators through the character's own capacity to devise utopia as a result of their subjective experience: the insurrection of Europa is thus a rebellion grounded in the very act of imagining. The philosopher Paul B. Preciado considered that «to imagine is already to act: to claim imagination as outside of political transformation is already to begin to mutate» (2022: 56). Thus, how does Europa use their identity intersectionality to devise other possible worlds? In what way do they apply the experience gained from their gender dissidence as a «revolutionary platform» (Preciado 2022: 530)? What role do the signs that evidence their link to the Neapolitan cultural milieu play and how are they resemanticized at the basis of their utopian project?

In order to answer these questions, the signs that shape the character and that link Europa both to the cultural context of origin, as well as to the queer theory developed at international level are analyzed. For this reason, the parameters of semiology or, rather, of the «semiological guerrilla» are applied as a methodology, according to the notion coined by Umberto Eco and picked up by Preciado (2022: 409), to emphasize the importance of the *detournement* around the processes of symbolization (2022: 74). In turn, this chapter is structured in two parts. In the first section, some of the key aspects of the *femminiello* and its link to the Neapolitan socio-urban context are presented, especially those particularities that have an impact on the shaping of the character. Subsequently, a cinematographic cartography is made around the representation of this *transgender* manifestation under the objectives of framing *Mater Natura* in relation to these other productions and identifying the critical positionings in which such representation participates until concluding in Europa. In the second section, an analysis of the character and its utopian proposal is developed, with special emphasis on the signs of their intersectional identity and how they are re-signified to question our own imaginaries.

Contextualization of the *Femminiello*: Aspects of Its Social Sphere and Cinematographic Representation

The case of the *femminiello* as a dissident gender identity determined by its close cultural link to the Campanian sphere, testified since the sixteenth century (Mauriello 2021: 47), has been analyzed in the academic context in an interdisciplinary manner by sociology, ethnography, anthropology, and psychology, and taking into special consideration the cultural representations in literary or filmic texts of this case of transgender identity. Authors such as the aforementioned Maria Carolina Vesce, along with other scholars such as Marzia Mauriello, Eugenio Zito or Paolo Valerio, have delved into the conditions and circumstances around *femminiello* which, concisely, entails «a way of being and an experience of the self linked not so much to sexuality (i.e., sexual orientation) as to gender identity» (Mauriello 2017: 208). Consequently, and following the considerations made by Mauriello, the historical characteristics of this «fluctuating gender identity» (Mauriello 2018: 306) and its legacy to the present day as a referent of gender dissidence, does not lie in a

transformation of the body, but in the “performance of the feminine”, in its staging, both in the sense of reproduction of certain roles and practices associated with women, and in the literal sense of a true spectacularization of those elements. (2017: 209)

One of the peculiarities of the phenomenon lies in its traditional acceptance in the social fabric and is particularly linked to the city of Naples, finding its «ecological niche» in «popular neighborhoods, where they have always been accepted as a recognized social reality» (Zito 2017: 420). In turn, it should be noted that such inclusion is due to the prominence of this group in certain folkloric rites of the region⁴. The study around the idiosyncrasy of this type of rituals has evidenced the semiological persistence of certain signs coming from the pagan past of the area, giving the *femminiello* its borderline character between «archaism and postmodernity» (Zito and Valerio 2019: 19). In this way, and through this «liminal identity» (*ibidem*), the survival of certain mythologies around fertility cults in agricultural matriarchal societies developed on the shores of the Mediterranean is legitimized in the present (Zito 2017: 429-430). Consequently, the figure of the *femminiello* manifests a deep and stratified connection with the Neapolitan social fabric, and through this transgender phenomenon it is possible to observe, as Vesce notes, a «dualistic and oppositional reposition between concepts and experiences such as modernity/tradition, present/past, virile/effeminate, rich/poor, bourgeois/popular, etc.» (2020: 70).

4 Regarding the inclusion of the *femminiello* through the different rites, as well as a deepening of the same, see for example Mauriello's study (2021).

However, the social status traditionally held by the *femminiello* in the Neapolitan context was markedly altered since the last decades of the twentieth century. Due to a multiplicity of factors linked also to the city of Naples itself, a series of structural variations originated around the cultural conditioning factors where this case of non-conforming gender was sustained. The urban reforms, the progressive touristification of the historical center of the city, added to the repercussion of other types of transgender manifestations associated with the «biomedical culture», are some of the aspects that according to Zito motivated a process of transformation — defined even as disappearance by authors such as Zito himself — of the *femminiello* in the Neapolitan environment (2017: 423). Nevertheless, such circumstances paradoxically coincide with a revitalization of artistic creation where a «historical and cultural rediscovery of the southern identity» (Conelli 2022: 10) is manifested and in which, on the other hand, the figure of the *femminiello* emerges recurrently from a symbolic function. For this reason, this case of Neapolitan dissident gender and the historical circumstances to which this phenomenon is subjected, acquire a great metaphorical relevance in the artistic discourses to argue about the already mentioned urban and social transformations and how these have repercussions on the Neapolitan identity itself. In this way, it has been analyzed in the field of the *Nuovo teatro napoletano* (New Neapolitan theater), given its significant manifestation in the works of authors such as Annibale Ruccello or Enzo Moscato (Libero et al. 1988), the latter studied in a particular way by authors such as Mariano D'Amora (2019). The theatrical productions of both playwrights evidence a revealing use of characters characterized by their non-normative sexualities or dissident genders as «cardinal point of a metaphor of mutation, difference, alteration (of the mind, as well as of the body)» becoming a «most potent and frequent sign» (Pizzo 2001: 81). For her part, Mauriello pointed out how the stories of these two authors, «in which hybrid figures and alternative genders abound, are stories of marginality, marginalization, violence, and death», and are based, on the other hand, on a theatrical strategy «to bring gender ambiguity to the stage», embedded in «the theatre game, which is not one of identity but a continuous *un-identity game*» (2021: 59-60).

For such reasons, if the symbolic function of *femminiello* and other manifestations of gender and non-normative sexualities within dramaturgy are employed «by the authors as a key to the opening of hells to the Neapolitan subculture» (Pizzo 2001: 82), due to their ability to «elevate to the maximum the symbiotic relationship between city and theater» (D'Amora 2019: 205), in the same way it happens in the cinematographic narratives and specifically in the *Nuovo cinema napoletano* (New Neapolitan cinema). For their part, filmic discourses assumed both local and international aesthetic parameters, in what was a revisiting of certain identity aspects around the crisis of *napoletanità* (Marlow-Mann 2011). As Borrone considers in turn in his study on the *Nuovo cinema napoletano*, the

nomenclature does not only designate a group of filmmakers with the same territorial origin, but especially manifests a common «awareness of being at the center of a profound process of renewal» (2020: 13), and where the *femminiello* is again involved from its metaphorical value to describe the mutation and transformation process of the same socio-urban context.

Making a brief cartography around the persistent appearance of this fluctuating genre in the cinematographic discourse, it is appreciable how since the beginning of the 1980s, period of transition to the *Nuovo cinema napoletano* (Marlow-Mann 2011), we find films that metaphorically employ the figure of the *femminiello* and its particular circumstances as an emblematic element of the Neapolitan cultural context. Productions such as *La pelle* (Cavani, 1981), *Un complicato intrigo di donne, vicoli e delitti* (Wertmüller, 1986) or *Le occasioni di Rosa* (Piscicelli, 1981) show the complexity of the case and its social and historical circumstances in an episodic way, inserted in turn in the main plot. As for *La pelle*, the film is an adaptation of the novel of the same name written by Curzio Malaparte. Set in Naples during the Allied military forces' campaign in the area, Vesce's analysis affirms how the literary text evidences a significant testimonial character about the social circumstances in the early post-war period (2020: 64). Within this prolix description, one of the passages is dedicated to the rite of the *figliata* (litter) of the *femminielli*, with a «meticulous description of the rite» (Vesce 2020: 64). In its film adaptation, the elements described in the novel are staged in detail, reaffirming the performative character of this tradition where the young *femminiello* stages the birth of a phallic figure. In contrast, the film directed by Lina Wertmüller, *Un complicato intrigo di donne, vicoli e delitti*, which revolves around the rebellion of a group of mothers to safeguard their children from drugs in Neapolitan neighborhoods during the 1980s, features fluid gender representations as a reinforcing element of the cultural context and confirming in turn, according to Annalisa Di Nuzzo,

the significant role that the city assigns to the liminal ambiguity constituted by a polymorphous sexuality such as that of the transvestite-femminiello [...], which enters into relationship, not only with other marginal cultural aspects, but with the whole reality. (2019: 172)

But while in the case of *La pelle* and *Un complicato intrigo di donne, vicoli e delitti*, the appearance of the typically local transgender collective is materialized according to classical narrative codes that reinforce the sense of *mise en scène*, as far as Salvatore Piscicelli's *Le occasioni di Rosa* is concerned, the formal approach denotes a significant inheritance of neorealist aesthetic parameters. Thus, the filmmaker opts for non-professional actors for certain roles, as in the case of the *femminielli*. In this portrait of the city through the personal circumstances of its young protagonist, Rosa (Marina Suma), who chooses prostitution over

her job at the factory, according to our object of study, the sequence in which a group of *femminielli* share a dinner during the night stands out in particular. The scene has a markedly documentary character, bearing witness to the everyday life of these people chatting in a relaxed manner. Moreover, it is in itself a document of transgender society in the early 1980s.

On the other hand, at the end of this same decade, the film adaptation of the theatrical text by Annibale Ruccello, *Le cinque rose di Jennifer* (1989), stands out. Directed by Tomaso Sherman, the film is, in the words of Borrone, a precedent to «the thematic and linguistic revolution that was soon to hit the world of Neapolitan cinema» (2020: 307). The film, following Ruccello's text, has as its main plot the desperation of Jennifer (Francesco Silvestri), a young Neapolitan transvestite who, from her new residence on the outskirts of the city, awaits the call of her lover Franco. Thus, the film version takes up the change made by the playwright in the rewriting of the theatrical text in 1986, when the location of the plot moves from Quartieri Spagnoli to the outskirts of the city, and that in the film will materialize in the residential complex of Le Vele in Scampia⁵. On the other hand, according to Mauriello, it is revealing that the main character is not a *femminiello*, but identifies with a more internationally recognized notion such as the transvestite, since in this way he symbolically responds to the changes that have occurred in the cultural context. Thus, the scholar indicates that coinciding with the transformation of the conditions that fostered social inclusion, Jennifer manifests a significant desire to become «a pseudo-bourgeois housewife, by virtue of the advantages that belonging to this social group assures her» (Mauriello 2017: 220).

However, it will be from the 1990s and the consolidation of the *Nuovo cinema napoletano* when the profusion of new perspectives according to the diversity of new authors, as advocated by Borrone from the film adaptation of *Le cinque rose di Jennifer*, queer themes acquire greater relevance. Although it should be pointed out that this situation is especially due to the irruption of the filmmaker Pappi Corsicato within this movement, following the premises of the object of study, I highlight some cases where the valorization of this theme is related to the cinematographic participation as an actor of the playwright Moscato, who played Europa in *Mater Natura* and, above all, a fundamental referent for his authorial work on the theatrical stage. As he himself declared, his entry into the cinematographic field is produced by Mario Martone to represent the *femminiello* in the film *Morte di un matematico napoletano* (Martone, 1992) (Addonizio et al. 1997: 107). It is a small participation, in the same way as in his appearance in *Libera* (Corsicato, 1993). However, it will be in the episodic film *I vesuviani* (Corsicato

5 Mauriello points out how this change is due to the consequences of the earthquake of 1980, the year of the premiere of the first version of *Le cinque rose di Jennifer*. For this reason, the scholar considers how there are two versions of the theatrical piece, one before and one after the earthquake (2021: 60).

et al., 1997) where he develops a more complex role in the episode *Maruzella*, directed by Antonietta de Lillo. In this case, the character of fluctuating gender played by Moscato, enjoys a practically phantasmagorical existence among the images of an erotic movie theater where she works. The proposal has an impact on the marginality of the *femminiello*, a key aspect that in *Mater Natura* will be one of the main characteristics of the character.

Consequently, beyond the film version of *Le cinque rose di Jennifer* and the episode directed by De Lillo, *Maruzella*, the figure of the *femminiello* in the rest of the analyzed productions generally holds a secondary character that evidences however the process of patrimonialization of this *transgender* phenomenon as a symbolic manifestation capable of encompassing in its own identity certain aspects of Neapolitan culture (Vesce 2020). In fact, these same dynamics are identifiable in more recent productions, as is the case in *Napoli velata* (Ozpetek, 2011) or the Netflix adaptation of Elena Ferrante's novel *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (De Angelis, 2023), where the introduction of the *femminiello* in cinematic fiction relapses into the allegorization of issues such as the pagan mythical heritage and its contemporary persistence, the liminality characteristic of its identity or its metaphorical function to expose the sociohistorical transformation of the city. However, within this filmic cartography around the representation of the *femminiello*, in what way is *Mater Natura* inserted in relation to what has been exposed so far? The film, included within the *Nuovo cinema napoletano* by authors such as Borrone (2020) or Marlow-Mann (2011), presents a series of characteristics that evidence its relevance in the representation of the *femminiello*: the leading role it manifests throughout the film; the symbolic construction of the character from cultural elements that give it an emblematic nature following Vesce's estimates (2020: 71); Europa's relevant participation in the plot through the character's ability to generate alternative ways of inhabiting and relating as a consequence of her own subjective experience; and, even from an aesthetic point of view as Borrone considers, the formal assumption by the director of certain local and international queer-themed discursivities (2020: 32). All these factors individuate Andrei's film in the representation of the *femminiello*.

Shaping of the *Femminiello* Europa and Symbolic Valorization of the Character

With a screenplay by Massimo Andrei in co-authorship with Silvia Ranfagni, Andrei's film proposal consists of a «pop melodrama, colorful and musical» (Borrone 2020: 32) in which the marginal situation of a group of transgender people in Naples and their response to such circumstances are witnessed through cinematographic fiction. The film *Mater Natura*, winner of the Audience Award at the 62nd Mostra del Cinema di Venezia, is not the only occasion in

which Andrei works on the theme of *femminiello* through the medium of film. As Vesce's study reports, in the documentary short film *Cerasella: ovvero l'estinzione della femminella* (2007) the filmmaker repeats the idea of the disappearance of the phenomenon linked to the Neapolitan cultural context that he developed through the character of Europa (2020: 71).

The creation of the character of Europa, where some of the elements mentioned above materialize as well as the weight of their project in the diegesis of the film, is structured in parallel to the other two plot lines that structure the entire film text. These plot lines, linked to their own main characters, show a convergent progression that ends up converging with Europa's proposal. On the one hand, the plot of Desiderio, with a greater protagonist depth, provides a markedly melodramatic tone. His narrative arc focuses on his sentimental relationship with Andrea (Valerio Foglia Manzillo) and the consequences of their falling out after realizing that the young man is about to marry a cis woman. On the other, there is Massimino, who alternates his work as a theater director with attending the election campaign of lawyer Stefano Sacco (Luca Ward). The harassment that prevents him from premiering the play is compounded by the politician's betrayal. Massimino feels used when he realizes that the demands that defended the rights of the group have been ignored in order to safeguard the normative family. After the disenchantment suffered, both join the utopia led by Europa on the slope of Vesuvius.

As far as Europa is concerned, we can divide the character's evolutionary journey into three key moments. Firstly, there are the sequences where the character is introduced and the conformation of the character is exposed. Europa is an elderly *femminiello*, in charge of taking care of the children in their neighborhood. As part of the education they impart to the little ones, it is evident from the first moments the way in which their own experience as a non-normative gender determines their relationship with the world, emphasizing the importance of language and its performative function, following the notions developed in Judith Butler's thought (2007). On the one hand, they invite children to choose their own names: «everyone has the name they want and that the world and people who know why have never given them. Either it is the name we want or the name of our favorite heroes». On the other hand, this function is developed to intervene in the perception of the environment. This is evident when, on their excursion with the neighborhood children to a beach in Naples, they describe the environment as if it were a distant and exotic place, which above all has to be respected ecologically, or describing Andrea's lover who bursts into the sequence as if he were the Homeric hero Ulysses himself.

However, Europa does not get any financial return from their work in the care and education of the neighborhood's children. Europa lives in a marked precariousness, materialized especially in the fact that they do not even have electricity in their house. According to the character's own comments, they are

aware that their situation is due to the freedom they self have chosen, which leads to the words that represent Europa's *leitmotif*: «We existed before electricity, and regardless of electricity, we will continue to exist and will still exist». Despite such statements and their desire for «a romantic life» as «the Maria Montessori of all the children in the neighborhood», to counteract the lack of money they ask for help from one of her companions and tries to become a prostitute, this being the second decisive moment in the character's narrative arc. But Europa, in the opinion of their friend, does not meet the parameters of an «erotic woman» according to the tastes of the clientele: they are neither operated nor hormonal and have even lost their stereotypically feminine voice. Despite their attempts, and after a disagreement with a regular client (according to their own words, the client is not clear about who plays the feminine role in the relationship), Europa ends up rebelling and instigates the rest of their companions to do the same, inciting them to claim their own subjectivities in the face of the objectualization and fetishization they constantly suffer.

After Europa's insurrection, the third key moment in the plot is reached, where their main task is developed: to create a new space for the community far from the city and the circumstances in which they live. The «agro-futurism Mater Natura Trans Vesuvian Counseling» which, for its part, again evidences the importance of language from its performative function, is the new and dreamed-of location on the slope of the volcano, described by Europa as follows:

We could not have chosen a better place to be reborn. The mountain that breaks and gives birth to tongues of flame. The female that captures and frightens. And down there, the sea, a calm and irascible god, a strong and tenacious male. And between these two extremes, which if they get angry scare everyone, we include ourselves, between the male and the female, the yin and the yang. Because we are particular creatures, not common, not like the others. We are typical products of this land. Geography also has its importance. We are properly typical and local products of this land, of this area.

Europa continues their reflection, concluding with a definition for the case of this properly local gender identity that falls back on the evocation of the Mediterranean mythological past: they are «chthonic creatures», between two realities, a veiled evocation of the mermaid Parthenope herself, the myth of the foundation of the city of Naples. In this new location they manage to realize what had been unfeasible in the urban context. Desiderio and Massimino go to live in «Mater Natura», where the latter continues with his play, which he performs for his companions and for the rest of the inhabitants of the area. But, above all, Europa manages to carry out their desire to sublimate what they have learned through their own personal experience into the development of some kind of instructive work for the rest of society. Together with the rest of the

other members of the collective, psychological consultations are provided to people in need, as is the case of «criptochece» and other individuals confused in the laws of desire. The final sequence, which takes place while the character played by Moscato is in one of these therapeutic sessions, closes with a plea based on the aforementioned *leitmotif*, questioning the viewer with a direct look at the camera while pronouncing the following words: «We existed before loneliness, and regardless of loneliness, we will continue to exist and we will still exist».

Consequently, during the film's diegesis, the utopia of the *femminiello* Europa redefines both the internal social relations of the collective and the external links with the rest of the population groups in the area. However, their decision, based on leaving the metropolitan context and «being reborn» in an isolated place between the sea and the volcano, shows an escapist character that has been considered by some authors as evasive of the political reality, especially in relation to the plot starring Massimino. This is found in the reflection made by Marlow-Mann, who puts it as follows:

this resolution necessitates a withdrawal from the society that marginalised her to the slopes of Vesuvius, and this constitutes not a political act but a renouncing of politics, something that is rendered explicit by Massimino's rejection of the MP, when he reneges on the promises he made to the transgender community. (2011: 138)

It is clear that the utopia devised by Europa, as Marlow-Mann claims, has an elusive sense and a priori appears to be a decision that renounces the political act. However, such political implications of the project rather underlie how utopia acts from the symbolic realm. That is, it is not so much a question of how the cinematic fable reflects reality or a given ideology, even if the utopia is viable or not, but rather how the fictional narrative draws from that same reality or ideology to participate in the process of symbolization and reconfigure the collective imaginary itself.

Therefore, Europa's political rebellion is fought in the field of the shaping of that same imaginary, because taking into consideration Butler's reflections on the importance of that capacity, «the crucial promise of fantasy, where and when it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be designated as reality» (Butler 2007: 51). In this way, and assuming Butler's thought along with other references within queer theory, Wibke Straube delves into the importance of such narratives in her monograph *Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes* and considers that the narratives about other possible worlds for the transgender collective from this very character of evasion, actually generates a process of reflection through the qualities of the filmic device that activates certain sensibilities to relate to the world in different ways, as these «exit scapes» are, in her own words:

they are the elsewhere and elsewhens and the “away-from-from-froms” for a heteropatriarchal, cisgender paradigm. For the characters, they allow the experience of feelings of, for example, reassurance, comfort or belonging, that for a short duration stop reproducing the continuous flow of danger and constraint. Hence, for the entrants, these scapes work not only as a coping strategy towards the otherwise violent elements of these films but also, and most importantly, as a space as well as time within the film that allows them to relax, to gain strength, a short moment of cinematic enjoyment without fear of discovery, violence or threat; a moment that enables the envisioning of the world otherwise. (Straube 2014: 57)

Consequently, the utopia of Europa responds to the criteria that Straube estimates in terms of its function in the processes of symbolization, being in the very escapist sense where its potentiality to generate a critical positioning lies. In turn, such potentiality is determined by the character’s own characteristics. The ideation of utopia, therefore, is a consequence of their own experience as a non-normative gender, considering the way in which, from the intersectionality of their identity, they resemanticize a series of signs that make up their own subjectivity. Thus, as the first instance where the character’s capacities to imagine other possible worlds are located is the strategic importance of language. Specifically, such instance is recognized in the value of the choice of one’s own name, since «to be called by a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language» (Butler 2009: 17). Therefore, one of the elements of the character that implies a resemanticization of the signs that make up their subjectivity, capable of encompassing in turn the rest of such identity signs, lies in the name chosen to be named by the rest of society and that, in addition, interpellates the imaginary of the spectator themselves.

According to Roland Barthes the proper name is «to a certain extent the linguistic form of reminiscence», based on three properties:

the power of essentialization (since it only designates a single referent), the power of quotation (since it is possible to invoke at will all the essence enclosed in the name, to utter it), the power of exploration (since we “deploy” a proper name exactly as we do with a memory). (2022: 24)

The choice of Europa as a proper name suggests a series of reminiscences that determine the symbolic function of the *femminiello*’s own character. On the one hand, it implies a direct reference to the myth of orientalist nature about the Phoenician princess abducted by Zeus from the coasts of Sidon or Tyre (Grimal 1989: 188) and that gives name to the continent. On the other hand, it underlines the fluid and liminal nature of the character alluding to the complexity of the very idea of Europe. According to the estimations of authors who have dealt with the subject such as Eric Hobsbawm or Anthony Pagden, European identity does not respond either to the confines of a geographical space or to a

specific human collective, since it is rather «a process» (Hobsbawm 1998: 227), that is, an «uncertain and imprecise» entity shaped as a «palimpsest of stories, images, resonances and collective memories» (Pagden 2002: 33). Likewise, one of these layers that make up such an identity palimpsest is located in the narratives around the city of Naples and its persistent legacy of antiquity. In this way, the case of philosophers such as Walter Benjamin stands out, who take as reference the Parthenopean city itself to «locate the Mediterranean origins, the childhood wrapped in the myth of western civilization» (Buck-Morss 1995: 43). Benjamin together with Asja Lacis coined the concept of «porous» from the material characteristics of the volcanic rock predominant in the architecture of the city. This notion, which in turn alludes to the fluidity of daily life in Naples, avoids «the definitive, the formed. No situation appears as it is, thought forever, no form declares its “thus and not otherwise”» (Benjamin 2007: 6), comes revalued in the 1990s as a mythical identity narrative of one’s own *napoletanità* (Di Costanzo 2015: 37). Thus, in the Neapolitan context Benjamin estimates through the notion of “porosity”: «[...] that the organizing boundaries of modern capitalism-between public and private, between work and leisure, between personal and communal-have not yet been established» (Buck-Morss 1995: 44).

In conclusion, the reminiscences and evocations that the name chosen by the *femminiello* entails are articulated with the very identity elements that make up the character, evidencing both its emblematic nature that transcends regional limits, as Vesce considered, and a resemantization of such elements through the symbolic value within the cinematographic fiction. The «agro-futurism» of the name «Mater Natura» implies a return to the origins in order to transcend a heteropatriarchal order from the recoding of the matriarchal mythical past that this case of transgender identity shows as the foundation of its own subjectivity. Moreover, if, as Zito considers, «the archaic character of this figure, for its part, lies in the preservation of a certain “primitivism” linked to the survival instinct, which translates into the *art of getting by* (Belmonte, 1997) on a social and especially psychic level» (Zito and Valerio 2019: 274), Europa responds to such premises when, on the one hand, through the *leitmotif* that they repeat on two occasions alludes to their capacity for resistance, on the other, such an attitude leads them to devise an alternative not only for themselves but also for the rest of their companions. Authors like Zito or the director Andrei himself estimated a process of disappearance of the *femminiello* in the socio-urban context of Naples. Di Nuzzo, in her appraisal of the film, indicated how it did indeed suppose the attainment of the traditional *femminiello* model (2019: 171). However, it is the character of Europa them self with their final statement, who underlines the very persistence of this case of non-normative gender. Fluidity, change and transformation, traditional elements of their own identity are likewise her tool to legitimize her persistence both in the Neapolitan sphere and beyond regional confines. Both the utopian proposal of Europa and the conformation of the

character have evidenced after the analysis of the constituent signs of their own subjectivity a series of strategies that interpellate the processes of symbolization by the spectator. On the one hand, taking into consideration Straube's theory, in the escapist project of Europa underlies the political function that ideas are other ways of inhabiting and relating to the environment. Through the cinematic fable, a time is generated for relaxation, but also to perceive and critically question our being in the world. On the other hand, it encourages the viewer's own imagination and its performativity through language, which, from the processes of resignification, is the real strategy to reconfigure our own collective imaginary.

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Chapter 15

Distopie all'italiana: Dystopian Depiction of the Souths of Italy through the Screens (Anna by N. Ammaniti and Mondocane by A. Celli, 2021)

Fabien Landron

University of Corsica, France (UMR CNRS 6240 LISA).

landron_f@univ-corse.fr

ORCID: 0009-0002-2997-0601

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Abstract

This chapter looks at how contemporary Italian audiovisual productions, such as Niccolò Ammaniti's mini-series *Anna* and Alessandro Celli's film *Mondocane*, reinvent a dystopia "all'italiana", based on different models and current concerns. These works depict bleak futures through post-apocalyptic tales set in southern Italy: *Anna* takes place in Sicily, where a deadly virus has wiped out the adults, leaving the children to survive on their own; *Mondocane* is set in Taranto, a polluted and abandoned city where orphaned children struggle to survive. Both works use the dystopian setting to criticize the excesses of modernity and draw attention to pressing environmental and societal issues, while establishing a link between reality and fiction. Ultimately, these dystopian tales serve as mirrors for society's current crises and highlight the need for change, aimed at different communities of audiences.

Keywords

dystopia; tv series; Italian cinema; post-apocalyptic representation; crises.

Introduction

“Framing Souths” through contemporary artistic, literary, and audiovisual expression may seem an arduous task, considering how much the imaginary world associated with these territories has been nurtured by the many models that have inhabited creation and educated minds, sometimes sustaining the idea of a common, diffuse folklore where, in fact, the diversity of cultures, identities, and landscapes should be a source of richness. However, a number of recent works featuring a South — or Souths — seem to be moving away from stereotypes, taking their inspiration from unexpected models and/or projections linked to the present day and its societal issues. To illustrate this trend, I have chosen to explore the concept of dystopia through two recent productions from the contemporary Italian audiovisual panorama. Or, better still, a dystopia “*all’italiana*”, characterizing a genre — in this case serial and cinematic — by associating it with a territory, an era, and specific characteristics, as was the case, more famously, for the “*commedia all’italiana*” (or Italian-style comedy) of the 1960s and 1970s in Italy, a comic-satirical genre with a bittersweet note that took the genre beyond Italy’s borders and remains a solid reference point for foreign audiences to this day. The term is used here without any ironic connotations: by applying to dystopian stories produced in Italy and representing the south of the country, it characterizes a movement (it is still early to talk about a trend) or even a model for future productions. This may sound ambitious, but we cannot ignore the fact that, in the space of a few years, Italy, through different authors and with different types of production (literary, televisual, cinematographic), has given birth to a number of dystopian narratives that echo pressing societal and current concerns.

A Question of Definitions

Before discussing these works, we need to consider the very definition of dystopia, which seems (already!) to be problematic. Indeed, while common dictionaries, such as that of the encyclopedia Treccani, offer a perfectly acceptable definition¹, it should be noted that the French reference site CNRTL makes no mention of the term «dystopia» and suggests «reality» as the antonym of utopia (commonly cited as the antithesis of the original term)². This raises the question of the difficulty of defining the concept. Cécile Leconte and Cédric Passard

1 «Prediction, description or representation of a future state of affairs, with which, contrary to utopia and mostly in open polemic with trends perceived in the present, highly negative situations, developments, political-social and technological arrangements are foreshadowed (thus equivalent to *negative utopia*)» (Treccani 2022, s.v. “distopia”). All the translations of Italian and French texts are my own.

2 CNRTL (National Textual and Lexical Resources Centre; 2012, s.v. “utopie”).

refer to «the current trend for dystopias, whose very word, long considered an Anglicism, has become commonplace in the French language», because it is «in fact an omnipresent cultural form in literature (particularly, but not only, science fiction), cinema, television, videogames, manga and comic strips, and even music» (2020-2021: 9). Seen as a copy, in other languages, of the English word dystopia, etymology tells us that it is a combination of the Greek words *dys* (negation, malformation) and *topos* (place). Dystopia would therefore indicate a *harmful place*, a *bad place*. Above all, it is a vision of the world, in a more or less near future, produced by an author, through an imaginary or anticipatory narrative. The issues raised by Leconte and Passard are probably a bit strong:

Is dystopia simply the expression of a “disenchantment with the world”, a loss of faith in old ideals and growing anxiety in the face of rising risks and uncertainties, particularly those linked to the collapse of societies and the very self-destruction of the human species? (*ibidem*)

This is a way of linking the narrative (the imaginary) with considerations relating to the society that produced these same narratives. Dystopia is a term that has become very popular on a global scale. It should be seen here as a trend, more than a genre — because drama, fantasy, and other genres can be vehicles for this desire to describe a dystopian future. At the level of non-Italian productions, examples abound: in literature, one cannot fail to cite *1984* (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*) by George Orwell (1949) or even *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932); at the cinema, science fiction films (often adaptations of novels and/or literary sagas) such as *Dune*³, *Mad Max*⁴, *The Hunger Games*⁵, as well as their recent remakes and/or spin-offs, are just a few examples, together with other cult films such as *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang (1927), *Escape from New York* by John Carpenter (1981), or even *Terminator* by James Cameron (1984), at various times. Their common denominator is science fiction as a means of anticipating a difficult future, proposing in words, images, and sounds an alternative world inspired by our present that goes beyond the notion of simple

3 The literary saga *Dune*, written by Frank Herbert and first published in 1965, with several volumes until 1986, was first adapted in 1984 by David Lynch, and will be followed by a multi-part adaptation directed by Denis Villeneuve in 2021.

4 The film by Australian director George Miller dates back to 1979, giving birth to a franchise consisting of several films: *Mad Max 2 - The Road Warrior* (Miller, 1981), *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (Miller and Ogilvie, 1985), until recent episodes *Mad Max - Fury Road* (2015) and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* (2024), again directed by Miller.

5 It is based on Suzanne Collins' multi-volume book, which includes *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), *Mockingjay* (2010), and the prequel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020). Five films make up the saga *Hunger Games* at the cinema: *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Lawrence, 2013), *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014), *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 2* (Lawrence, 2015), *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (Lawrence, 2023).

entertainment. As we have seen, other media expressions are part of this trend, but it is the small screen that recently seems to be offering a privileged space for the dissemination of dystopian stories through television series, thanks to the transnational roll-out of SVOD⁶ platforms providing access, to ambitious (especially financially) audiovisual (and sometimes transmedia) productions that are already cult hits, such as the series and mini-series *Black Mirror*⁷, *The Handmaid's Tale*⁸, *The Last of Us*⁹, etc. These few examples have met (and are still meeting) a great international success. It is easy to think that the spectators are convinced, in a certain way, by the link with reality, with a topicality which they experience, or at least know, more or less closely. This link with an alleged “true history” or, at least, a history that may come true, is the initial premise, the wager to hook a large part of the public that can read in these stories (literary, serial, cinematographic) what they want to find in them: a way to frighten themselves in the face of an uncertain and necessarily dramatic future, or a way to make a reading of a History (with a capital H) in progress and/or yet to come — like almost a document or documentary, despite the qualification of fiction. The hybrid nature of the dystopian story allows for this confusion of genres. Indeed, according to Jean-Pierre Esquenazi,

fiction is the result of a combination of two representational operations: the first consists in inventing characters and events in which these characters are the heroes; the second endeavors to situate the narrative within a real universe or one inspired by a real universe, which serves as the setting for this narrative. (2009: 87)

Thus, the very definition of the word “fiction” refers to the idea of a fantasy creation that transforms reality. And this is undoubtedly even truer for alternative narratives such as dystopias and euchronias, which constitute a kind of revisiting of History based on a founding event¹⁰. Viewers cannot avoid reading back and forth between the history they have experienced, or are likely to experience from their own point of view, and the fictional narrative presented to them by an author or a group of authors. In this projection into the future, the question is whether a better world or a nightmare awaits *us*. In dystopia, the pessimistic counterpart of utopia, the aim is to evoke a distorted reflection of reality and warn of potential abuses, from a critical and political perspective (Clary 2020). The success of this trend is due both to the fact that it is rooted in the real, the known and the probable — especially in these uncertain

6 Subscription Video On Demand.

7 It is a British series whose latest seasons were produced and broadcast by Netflix.

8 Based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, it has been a hit series for 5 seasons (2017-).

9 It is TV series produced by HBO (2023-) and based on the action-adventure videogame developed by Naughty Dog in 2013.

10 See the definitions and examples given by Eric B. Henriot in his book *L'Histoire revisitée, Panorama de l'euchronie sous toutes ses formes* (2005).

post-pandemic times marked by international geopolitical tensions — and in the imaginary, the unknown and the unattainable. It is this ambiguity that gives the dystopia its special character, also seen as a kind of anti-utopia; in other words, history turned upside down, in a negative sense. In any case, this is the line taken by the authors of two contemporary Italian audiovisual productions: one serial, *Anna* (Ammaniti, 2021) and one cinematic, *Mondocane* (Celli, 2021).

Italian Dystopian Fiction on the Screens: *Anna* and *Mondocane*

The two examples chosen for this study are representative of the audiovisual panorama in Italy today from the point of view of the transnational circulation of works between television serialization and cinema (feature-length fiction films). Indeed, the affirmation of audiovisual consumption through SVOD platforms is now a reality, boosting the visibility of films and, above all, series worldwide. The TV series are now an extension of the cinematographic experience which, until now, has characterized Italian audiovisual production seen in its movement from local to global (and vice versa, for the return image we can see there), in the context of a transnational circulation of audiovisual production and thus of the availability of products created both for an Italian and a foreign viewer, also seen in the light of the *European television fiction renaissance*, according to the definition given by scholars Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (2020). In this global market, Italy is no exception, since its series, more than the cinema by now, manage to meet a very large mass of the public, thanks to the development of new but now established distribution channels, which literally exploded during the pandemic and the lockdown but which already existed before and are already modifying themselves to adapt to the continuous evolution of consuming these products. Today, TV series — but also, sometimes, the most successful films — manage to export themselves, thanks to video-on-demand, paid platforms and/or free channels, but also to commercial distribution. At the cinema, it is much more complicated now but film festivals continue to give visibility to recent films, both blockbuster and niche.

For this study, the choice has been made to focus on two recent audiovisual productions: a TV series¹¹ and cinematographic fiction which, naturally, present both commonalities and differences. From a scientific point of view, bringing together two works that differ in format, length, target audience, mode of expression, aesthetic choices, etc. might seem strange, almost forced. However, it must be admitted that, despite the different categorization, the two intentions

11 For reasons of methodology and relevance, I will not consider the analysis of Niccolò Ammaniti's book *Anna* (2015), at the origin of the series, which takes up the title, the story, and the characters.

can be brought together in a movement, albeit brief, dealing with the present and the future through the anticipation (imagined or prefigured) of a dark future (near or far), of an imaginary (to the point) situation of the society, which uses comparable elements to portray (including the use of children and forms of violence), and which are set in southern Italy, whose regions and *film commissions* (Sicily, Apulia) offered their contribution to the production.

Thus, the 6-episode miniseries *Anna* by Niccolò Ammaniti (i.e., the adaptation for the small screen of the author's novel of the same name) and the science-fiction film *Mondocane* by Alessandro Celli, both premiering in 2021, have several elements in common: the evocation of a post-apocalyptic society, a world populated by little girls, little boys, and teenagers; the loss of reference points and the construction of a new hierarchical organization; the deliberate setting in territories in Southern Italy, namely Sicily for *Anna* and the city of Taranto for *Mondocane*, thought of precisely as two islands, geographical and/or symbolic as the case may be; social issues, with a virus capable of decimating the adult population in the first case, and pollution that has generated a form of hell on Earth in the other; etc. While the dystopia is environmental in *Mondocane*, with the evocation of a place ruined by an ecological disaster, it tightens around the human in *Anna* and a return to the natural state, whether in the hierarchy of human relationships or in the invasion of a formerly urbanized territory where, inexorably, Nature reclaims its rights. Between ecotopia and prophetic narrative, symbols are everywhere (art, religion, economy, law), to raise awareness of the excesses of modernity, like a distorting mirror capable of magnifying the images of the present, in a discourse no doubt intended to be prophetic.

The airing on television and the almost concomitant, albeit coincidental, cinema release of these two audiovisual productions leads one to believe that contemporary Italian cinematography and seriality, understood as a means of expression and militant testimony with a didactic vocation, capable of reaching different target communities, in Italy as elsewhere, appear as a “necessity”, that is, to grasp topics of burning topical interest in order to denounce, warn, evoke the drifts of the present in order to better prepare the future as well as the relationship that human beings have, today and tomorrow, with their environment. In both cases, the presence of a South is certainly not without significance. This is one aspect, among others, that my study intends to address, through the analysis of the contents and aesthetics of the works in the corpus: perhaps this will allow us to better understand the meaning and functions of dystopia as a choice to narrate Italy, the South, mankind (?), at the beginning of the 2020s, in a period — as we all know — that is particularly uncertain for contemporary societies.

Anna, A Prophetic Tale?

Niccolò Ammaniti's *Anna* is a drama mini-series inspired by (and faithful to) the novel of the same name published in 2015 by the author, here showrunner of his second series after *Il miracolo* (2018). It is an Italian-French-American co-production, aired in Italy by Sky on April 23, 2021. It consists of 6 episodes, each lasting around 50 minutes: *Il bosco ci protegge* (The forest protects us), *Tu devi fare il gelato* (You must make ice cream), *Ridono le iene* (The hyenas laugh), *Il cinghiale invisibile* (The invisible boar), *I gatti sono superiori* (Cats are superior), and *Cose da fare quando la mamma muore* (Things to do when mum dies). The plot is as follows:

Sicily, 2020. A lethal virus has wiped out the entire adult population of the island, including children who have already reached puberty. Maria Grazia, an independent and courageous woman, before dying, left her children Anna and Astor, aged 9 and 2 at the time, a notebook full of instructions on how to survive without her, advising Anna to teach Astor to read and to always protect him. Anna, now 14, has taken her mother's instructions to the letter, lives camped out with her little brother in the house that has become a messy den, and only comes out to procure what is necessary for survival. Her goal is to find a cure before Astor grows up, and she will face an innumerable series of trials. (Mymovies 2021)

It is a journey through a post-apocalyptic Sicily, undertaken by Anna, a teenager searching for her little brother Astor, who disappeared while Anna was away. Only teenagers live in this world because all the adults have been infected by a lethal virus, *la Rossa* (the red one, which gets its name from the red spots on the skin), that kills humans after puberty. One fact that may seem anecdotal but we cannot keep silent is the irony of fate: although it is a fairy tale, the fact is that filming of the series began six months before the outbreak of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, at the beginning of each episode two sentences appear, written in white capital letters on a black background: «The series *Anna* is based on the novel of the same name published in 2015. The outbreak from Covid 19 broke out six months after filming began». It is therefore difficult not to hear the echo of this science fiction tale with what the audience, the spectator, has faced in so-called “real life”. The cruel tale thus becomes a prophetic tale, or almost, accentuating the effect of dystopian tragedy through this troubling reference to contemporary reality.

The series contains various elements that lead to the idea of a South afflicted by a drastic change of state, in both its human and natural aspects. What the viewer sees is an abandoned Sicily: places like Palermo, the region's capital, are generally deprived of life (as in all perfect dystopias, in keeping with the canons

of the genre¹²), between city center reclaimed by nature and animals (birds, in particular) and abandoned suburbs (collapsed bridges, wrecked cars on the roads).

Around the cities — and this is the pendant to these urban places — there are the natural, unspoiled spaces: forests populated by animals, fairytale landscapes that bring a very present touch of oneiricism, of mysticism, of constant poetry throughout the episodes (and the bewitching soundtrack accompanies this constant poetry) that contrasts with the chaos of the “human” spaces with the many waste and consumer objects scattered everywhere.

The curated direction enhances the landscapes thanks to long shots; for example, in the fifth episode, the Mount Etna suggests the idea of a non-terrestrial landscape: it looks like the moon, or another planet, mineral, devoid of human beings, like on a post-apocalyptic Earth.

The sea, finally, is barely visible. It is the protagonist at the end of the last episode, when it is a matter of Anna and Astor leaving the island, of crossing a threshold, a border, to go to Italy, to the continent, where the hope of another life is perhaps possible. In the end, however, there is the hope of a promised land, a land of possibilities. It is about escaping from the south, escaping from the island, from a closed space. And, after all, what if *la Rossa* had only touched the island?

The symbolic return to nature also concerns human beings, who seem to return to their wild essence, as a symbolic condemnation that is not necessarily positive. For example, Astor (like other characters) is often mistaken for an animal through disguise and zoomorphic masks. As in the animal kingdom, there is no law but that of the strongest within the herd. And in every herd there is a leader: here it is Angelica, a cruel and emotionless leader, whose face is blurred with white and whose hair is covered by a long-skinned peruke, who kills and mutilates according to her desires or needs. She is a guru, a prophet, a guide for a mass of children without reference points.

Like in other dystopias, Anna, the protagonist, makes a journey of initiation (along with a physical, geographical travel through Sicily). There is a symbolic journey that strips her of her innocence and quickly leads her to adulthood, even before her mother dies. This idea of self-seeking involves trials, stages to be overcome, which are marked by the cruelty of interpersonal relationships, such as humiliation, dehumanization, verbal, moral, and physical violence. For example, in episode 3, children are caught like rats, caught with glue, then locked up in a cage (by another child), before forced labor, chained, while being fed with animal kibble.

12 Just think of the latest hit distributed on Amazon Prime Video, *The Last of Us* (2023-), the TV adaptation of the video game of the same name.

On this journey of death and nightmare, Anna encounters a gallery of characters that belong to a “Tim Burton-esque” universe, like a macabre and cruel version of *Alice in Wonderland*, a fantastic tale but with a concrete possibility of realization, between blood and poetry.

Among the many characters encountered by both Anna and the spectator (the evil twin, the guardian of Etna, etc.), there is Katia, *la Picciridduna*¹³, interpreted by the Italian actress Roberta Mattei. Katia, the only adult being to have survived *la Rossa*, is “anomalous”, in the etymological sense of the term: “irregular”, because s/he is hermaphrodite, man and woman in the same body. Katia is a theatrical character, a mythological “monster”, who underlines the symbolic aspect of Anna’s odyssey.

***Mondocane*, between Ecological Drama and Science Fiction**

The feature-length film of dramatic and fantastical genre *Mondocane* was released in September 2021, after its presentation at the Venice Film Festival’s Critics’ Week. Produced by Matteo Rovere and directed by Alessandro Celli, the film takes a bold approach to the aesthetics and content of contemporary Italian cinema. The plot is as follows:

In a not too distant future, Taranto is a ghost town surrounded by barbed wire where no one, not even the police, dares to enter. The poorest are left struggling for survival, while a criminal gang, the Formiche (the ants), led by the charismatic Testacalda (Alessandro Borghi), vies for territory with another gang. Two 13-year-old orphans, who grew up together, dream of joining that gang. Pietro, known as Mondocane for having passed the acceptance test in the gang, imposes Christian on the group, which mocks him by calling him Pisciasotto. But something cracks in their equilibrium, putting everything they believe in at risk. (SIC 2024)

The film did not meet with great box-office success¹⁴, despite its originality, the presence in the cast (and promotion of the film) of actor Alessandro Borghi, a true phenomenon of Italian acting as well as an essential and chameleonic figure of contemporary male stardom, and its distribution abroad. The film has been sold in a large number of foreign countries, either under its original title or in an English translation (*Dogworld*), more for the “action movie” aspect, almost a new *Mad Max*: an interpretation of the film that does not really reflect the true content and moral of the story nor the director’s intentions. The film opens with a caption in yellow letters on a black background, which sets the scene using strong language to evoke the idea of an area that has been

13 In Sicilian dialect, the term means “the big girl”.

14 The film’s box office gross was 118,000 Euros (Mymovies 2021).

degraded and abandoned by the State, by the Law and by Mankind: «In the favela born in the shadow of the steelworks, the children of neglect survive without law. Forgotten, in the symbolic city of a country marked by environmental degradation».

In both form and content, we find the same central ideas of the series *Anna*: abandonment, the absence of laws and rules, being forgotten. However, in *Mondocane* the territory is “a city” and the virus is nothing but “environmental degradation”. It is a denunciation film, a cry of alarm very much linked to current events and the present because it is a symbolic representation of the contaminated area (here, a no-go zone) of the ex-Ilva steelworks in the Apulian city of Taranto. Many press articles, from specialist and activist journals to Italy’s major national dailies, have reported on the scandal of land contamination by industrial waste, which has led to an increase in illness among the population. This ecological disaster has left its mark on people’s minds.

In the film (also), the steel mills have poisoned the inhabitants of the area, causing many deaths. The many orphans are “imprisoned” in institutions, or live in the favela, together with the adult survivors who exploit them, in a cartoonish atmosphere of yellowish, orange, brownish tones, in a world contaminated by pollution. The many large chimneys continue to belch their smoke over the beach, coloring the sky and spreading their poison as far as the sea.

The protagonists are Pietro and Christian, two young boys who were first friends and then separated by the betrayal of one of them. Like the other children, they are left to their own devices, brought up with violence, weapons and theft: learning and initiation take place through weapons and fighting, and elimination is natural; again like for animals, only the strongest and bravest survive.

Like in *Anna*, they too are victims of the absence of reference points in an abandoned world, without rules (or one has to transgress them to survive), without a father and without God: the cross, a religious symbol, is nothing more than a piece of trash like any other found at the bottom of the sea. Thus, the father figure, the guide is embodied by Testacalda, the charismatic and violent leader of the gang. He gives meaning to the lives of these children when the environment does not allow it. The children, called “the ants”, are Testacalda’s soldiers. However, the most interesting aspect remains the message of denunciation, the stern look that condemns what is happening in Taranto, as a city polluted by the former Ilva. In an interview, actor Alessandro Borghi also refers to the event:

this story concerns us closely and concerns a city that has had a serious problem for many years, even though some people pretend it does not exist [...]. In the film, Taranto has become a favela where anarchy reigns: maybe this will make some people think... (Aricò 2022)

The fact is staged, in words, images, and sounds: it is a well-known fact that is also treated abroad as the symbol of a health disaster in Italy, a scandal that is represented and re-presented here through dystopian storytelling.

(Partial) Conclusions

Despite the different character of the two filmic works, the analysis of *Anna* and *Mondocane* reveals a number of similarities that make it possible to classify these audiovisual products as two examples of the *distopie all'italiana*. Indeed, what do they tell us about the present and the future? They are, we have seen, the mirror of a present reality, where the South (Sicily and Taranto) acts as a laboratory, as an instrument to present things to the spectator and perhaps better involve him. Through the dystopian tale, it is a matter of evoking this South (and its evils) in a different way: the fairy tale, science fiction, the fable allow us to draw other forms, to interpret, to blur a reality that is difficult, perhaps, to film if not through the documentary. It is above all a question of putting one's finger where it hurts: a place, a society, the human who causes his own downfall. One has to make a journey to get out of it, to find a way out. In terms of the author-work-recipient relationship: if a message is conveyed, the film or series serves as a vector of ideas evoking the possibility and above all the need for change (of habits, consciences, values, points of reference). Understood as a mirror of a society's current crises, dystopia is not so far away. This would be the message.

Therefore, this Italian-style dystopia serves to underline the very strong theme of the fragile environment to be protected, in one way or another: human's damage to nature and, consequently, to himself. The Souths, which lose their folkloric and de facto marginal aspect, are a laboratory where expression becomes universal. The awareness does not take place (for once?) in large urban centers. The dramas are also those of the peripheral territories, these lands of the forgotten that must be reconsidered, protected, in the face of the great challenges of contemporary societies and the dramas generated by global dehumanization. The place, which is admittedly circumscribed, recognizable for some, anonymous for others, allows the universality of the subject matter, since the themes tackled, the prophetic nature of the stories, and their facilitated international dissemination. The question is perhaps a little ambitious: is the Italian (or even Mediterranean) dystopia a new form of mythical and allegorical storytelling that can help structure collective imagination in a time of great change? Is this a far cry from the idyllic vision of the Mediterranean, presented as a lost paradise, or one to be reclaimed? The Mediterranean is said to be a victim of modernization and is facing the dangers caused by the Anthropocene: the over-exploitation of natural resources, the threat of atmospheric pollution, the destruction of ecosystems, the concreting of the coastline, etc. (Jourdain-Annequin and Claval 2022: 297-309). The return to nature is sometimes idyllic

(*Anna*), sometimes hellish (*Mondocane*). But it is the human race that must change, and that constitutes both the greatest danger and the greatest hope: the face is double, the balance is complicated and reconciliation difficult. It is a complex history in the making.

The dystopian fiction allows us to think about the future in order to influence the present, as a cry of alarm, therefore, through artistic works with a didactic vocation, addressed to the masses and to communities of spectators, through cinema and/or television. These are works with a message: and that is perhaps the role of dystopia, understood as a contemporary example of the traditional *impegno* (commitment) in Italian audiovisual creation.

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Chapter 16

Techno-Aesthetic Sustainability in the Audiovisual Praxis*

Alberto Spadafora

University of Torino, Italy.

alberto.spadafora@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-6559-1433

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c419>

Abstract

By considering the debut feature-length documentary *Honeyland* (2019) by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, this contribution focuses on the sustainability in the audiovisual praxis. The North Macedonian environmental documentary — which chronicles the life of Hatidže Muratova, one of the last European female wild beekeepers — is an ideal example of the so-called ecocinema that can also be discussed from an ecocritical approach and an eco-materialist perspective simultaneously. Moreover, my contribution aims to show how the ecological side of *Honeyland* relates not just to the narrative of an actual issue, but also to the achievement of a sustainable cinematic practice. By examining the making of *Honeyland* in terms of production, storytelling, and techno-aesthetics, I aim to detect its “film ecology”, i.e., the ways Kotevska and Stefanov, together with cinematographers Fejmi Daut and Samir Ljuma, create a cinematic practice that acknowledges the environment, adapts to it, and is inspired by it: visual solutions, logistic limitations, crew equipment, shooting schedules, cameras typologies, and lighting processes all reveal indeed an ecological and sustainable consciousness in filmmaking.

Keywords

Honeyland; audiovisual studies; ecocinema; ecocriticism; ecomaterialism.

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Technology is the mastery of not nature
 but of the relation between nature and man
 Walter Benjamin (1928: 487)¹

Ecocinema, Ecocriticism, and Ecomaterialism

Following its debut in Literary Studies, a wider range of disciplines including Audiovisual and Media Studies seized the significant contribution brought in by the ecocritical approach in the Environmental Humanities.

Twenty years ago, the publication of the ground-breaking essay *Toward an Eco-Cinema* (MacDonald 2004)² helped to pave the way to an ecological conversation on the cinematic genre of environmental films also known as “environmental cinema” or “ecological cinema”. However, as Stephen Rust and Salma Monani put it, «ecocinema studies is not simply limited to films with explicit messages of environmental consciousness» (2013: 2). The ecocritical approach then encouraged to understand «how media has spoken the environmental movement, and how films have shown the nonhuman natural world and humanity’s relationship to it» (Vaughan 2018: 105)³. Next to the ecocritical approach, the so-called “ecomaterialism” then fostered a further insightful perspective on the «cinematic footprint» (Bozak 2012), since «the making of audiovisual works has an environmental impact [...] in terms of resources extracted and depleted, carbon dioxides dispersed in the atmosphere, and creative and non-creative waste produced» (Bellotti, Cesaro, and Formenti 2024: 17). In other words, the scholarly conversation moved «away from the conventional focus on representation to instead assess the environmental impact of media practices» (Vaughan 2018: 104)⁴.

Ultimately, my contribution aspires to corroborate the premise by Elena Past (2019), who states that in order «to understand the complexity of a film’s engagement with the world, we should examine what happens before the film makes it to the screen» (11-12). Also, whereas D’Angelo (2008; 2014: 11-55) wonders what cinema can do for the landscape, my contribution wonders what cinema can do for the environment.

Approaching North Macedonian *Honeyland* as an ideal audiovisual sample for these issues, I believe the appropriate method of analysis should consider

1 In original German: «Und so auch Technik nicht Naturbeherrschung: Beherrschung vom Verhältnis von Natur und Menschheit».

2 See also Scott MacDonald (2013).

3 For further contributions on the ecocritical approach in Film and Media Studies see, among others, Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (2013, 2023), and Sean Cubitt (2020).

4 For further contributions on the ecomaterialist approach in Film and Media Studies see, among others, Elena Past (2019), Hunter Vaughan (2019), Pietari Kääpä (2018), Nicole Starosielski and Janet Walker (2016), and Nadia Bozak (2012).

the ecocinema genre, the ecocritical «interpretive approach» (Past 2019: 3) and the ecomaterialist examination simultaneously. All the three paradigms together shape a significant theoretical framework: the conceptual trajectory along which ecocinema, ecocriticism, and ecomaterialism follow one another represents indeed a wider and more effective method of investigation.

As a matter of fact, I aim to acknowledge the ways *Honeyland* either belongs to the ecocinema genre or provides ecocritical and ecomaterialist examinations: *Honeyland* is ecocinema as its actual themes and narratives are ecologically and environmentally driven; it addresses a matter of ecocriticism as it deals with the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in contemporary Southeastern Europe; it deals with an ecomaterialist issue as its visual and techno-aesthetic procedures are consciously concerned with the impact of filmmaking in the natural world.

With this in mind, I focus my analysis on a documentary which, at the same time, represents the narrative, creative, technological, social, and environmental sides of sustainability in the audiovisual productions.

Honeyland

Medena žemja (*Honeyland*, 2019) is the debut feature-length documentary by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov. Following its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2019 — where the movie was awarded the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize for Documentary — *Honeyland* gradually conquers festival circuits around the world, until, in January 2020, it becomes the first picture in film history to be nominated for the Academy Award in both Best Feature Documentary and Best International Film categories. Besides being a proud occasion for the North Macedonian cinema, *Honeyland's* distinction also includes its global commercial success — rarely reserved to such genre.

Honeyland portrays Hatidže Muratova, a beekeeper of Turkish descent who lives with her blind and bedridden mother Nazife in a remote village in central North Macedonia. While busy with looking after her 85-year-old mother, harvesting honey and selling it at Skopje's markets, Hatidže's secluded life is temporarily either enlivened or disturbed by the arrival of her new neighbors — a large family of nomadic herders. The family man Hussein learns beekeeping from Hatidže and begins to sell honey, but his greed for profit threatens the balance of the local ecosystem. Their eventual relocation and the death of her mother force Hatidže to choose a new future for herself. As Kotevska tells Vittoria Scarpa (2019):

We couldn't predict her mother was going to die, but we knew that it would be the logical conclusion to this story in that village, because from that moment on, Hatidže's life would change dramatically. It turned out that it happened during

filming. It's the end of an era. We don't show where Hatidže goes afterwards, but we know that she's finally free to live her life.

While originally committed to realize a documentary short subject about the rural villages along the Bregalnica river in central North Macedonia, the two filmmakers eventually abandon their initial project after they encounter Hatidže Muratova. Supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and financed by the North Macedonian Film Agency, Kotevska and Stefanov decide then to chronicle the life of one of the last European female wild beekeepers.

While it reminds us of the «anthropo-cosmomorphism» the audiovisual medium aspires to (Morin 2005), *Honeyland* represents a parable of either the tensions between environmental sustainability and capitalism in remote rural areas of Southern East Europe or the concerns about the threats to biodiversity and natural resources.

Visual Procedures and Practices

A series of extreme long shots introduces Hatidže while she is immersed and concealed in the rugged mountainous scenery. A vertiginous aerial shot captured by a drone then finds her balancing on an overhanging cliff⁵. Eventually, a sequence of close-ups and extreme close-ups shows the woman scraping wax from the honeycomb placed inside the cavity of a rock. Back in the village, while framed backlit in a medium shot at sunset, Hatidže recites archaic chants as she places the beehive that will store new honey-filled combs⁶.

Other visual solutions range from fixed long takes of establishing shots or indoor dialogues between Hatidže and her mother, to handheld shots of children playing around the bovines, elaborate artisan process of scraping off, crushing, straining out, and bottling the honey, or train rides and marketplaces. As Chang (2019) recalls: «The heretofore sedate, steady camerawork turns suddenly volatile in clamorous scenes of the kids playing, quarrelling and aggressively handling the livestock».

From the very beginning Kotevska and Stefanov direct a work that is primarily visual, joined by North Macedonian cinematographers Fejmi Daut (M.S.C.) and Samir Ljuma (M.S.C.) — who, as Kotevska herself, both graduated in Skopje at Fakultet za Dramski Umetnosti and are also at their feature film debut. As Kotevska confesses, «we wanted to make sure the movie's narrative

5 For further readings on the revolutionary use of drones in contemporary aerial cinematography see Tara Jenkins (2021) and Steen Ledet Christiansen (2017). Oddly enough, we shall note that the English term “drone” also refers to the male bee.

6 Anthony Oliver Scott (2019) reflects on the opening sequences by stating: «The opening minutes of *Honeyland* are as astonishing [...] as anything I've ever seen in a movie». Likewise, Justin Chang (2019) adds: «The opening scenes of *Honeyland* [...] are wondrous to behold».

is completely understandable even if it is followed visually» (MakeDox 2019). Hence, ranging from the extreme long shot to the detail, the four filmmakers employ every solution available in framing and filming techniques⁷.

First and foremost, they rely upon the visual scope due to language reasons: Hatidže speaks archaic Turkish dialect with her elderly mother and Turkish with her new neighbors. As Ljuma tells Emily Buder (2019):

My colleague [Fejmi Daut] understands Turkish but because the language Hatidže and her mother are speaking is very archaic, most of the time he couldn't understand what they were talking about. And I don't speak Turkish, so I didn't understand anything. I was only there to observe and to shoot their interaction, [...] trying to feel what was happening. Her mother, most of the time, didn't even know that we were there shooting because she can hardly hear. I didn't know what she was saying.

It is only afterwards, in the editing process and with the help of a translator, that the North Macedonian filmmakers examine the recorded dialogues and forge a comprehensive dramaturgy.

The filming of *Honeyland* also presents logistical restrictions: the village lacks electricity and running water; the crew is small and minimum — only the two directors, the two cinematographers, and the sound technician are on set, all of them camping in a tent opposite Hatidže's hovel over the three-year shooting period; and the technical equipment is modest and with a running capacity for just a few days. In this regard, Daut recalls the crew was forced to return to Skopje every three-four days to resupply with food and recharge their equipment batteries (Tizard 2019).

The restrictions are equally revealed by the cameras operated by the two cinematographers, who shoot *Honeyland* using the most common and popular — even to non-professional photographers — digital reflex: Nikon 800, 810, and Nikon D5. As Ljuma tells Buder (2019):

We used all kinds of DSLRs [Digital Single-Lens Reflex] mostly because that was what we had available. Mostly, the movie was shot with Nikon 810 and 800. That was how we started. And then we could afford to buy a Nikon D5 with different lenses — usually, some 15 mm with F1.4, 85 mm with F 1.8, 105 mm macro with F 2.8. And some zoom lenses — 2470 mm, and 8400 mm for some of the scenes. Also, we used Canon for certain times when the Nikons were not available.

All these restrictions define the style and lighting solutions in *Honeyland*. With no power generator available, Daut relies solely on natural light and existing supplies in the village — such as candles, oil lamps, and braziers (MakeDox 2019). Ljuma, on his part, relates such lighting approach for indoor shots to

7 On documentary cinematography see, among others, Peter Delpout (2012).

the seventeenth-century Dutch pictorial mastery — so frequently mentioned in cinematography history:

There was no electricity in the village. The conditions were like in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. We discussed whether we could bring some LED lights to support, but we decided not to use any kind of additional lighting support, except what was there. The big masters of cinematography are always citing the paintings of Dutch artists from the eighteenth [sic] century as an inspiration for how to use natural light. I think that with natural light, you can provide the most extraordinary results. You can easily create a strong sense of mood with window light. And you can create a beautiful contrast when your subject is close to the window. For the day scenes, we only had one little window which gave us this chiaroscuro look. And that was all. For the night shots, there were candles that Hatidže was using, and these oil lamps. So that was the only light source that we were using. (Buder 2019)

Moreover, Daut and Ljuma mostly prefer handheld camera shots. As the latter recalls:

In the beginning we were using the Osmo [3-axis image stabilizer for moving cameras] and drones, like when she is approaching a cliff to one of the beehives. [...] Then we decided that we didn't want that kind of look. We wanted most of the movie to be shot handheld. [...] We decided we wanted the *cinéma vérité* approach with handheld [...] shots as much as possible. (Buder 2019)

Documentary and Sustainability

Regarding the “*vérité*” approach mentioned by Ljuma, *Honeyland* follows the documentary tradition pioneered by Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov⁸. Far from either the investigative style by Barbara Koople and Michael Moore or the observational method by Frederick Wiseman, however, the work by the four North Macedonian filmmakers — who do not interfere in the filmed actions and events — enters the “direct cinema” rather than the mentioned “cinema-truth” by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin⁹, and totally distances itself from the ethnographic cinema¹⁰.

8 For references on the history of documentary cinema see, among others, Bill Nichols (1992; 2001), and Guy Gauthier (1995). For further readings on contemporary documentary cinema see, for instance, Marco Bertozzi (2018), and Daniele Dottorini (2018).

9 Both emerged in the 1950's and 1960's, *Cinéma vérité* acknowledges the French film experience while Direct Cinema affects the Canadian and North American film culture. In the former the filmmaker creates and joins in the action he or she is filming, in the latter the filmmaker documents events which occur independently from his or her own control (Simonigh 2020: 212; Alonge 2008: 312-313).

10 According to Jean Rouch (1988, 2003), the ethnologist must operate the camera as well as the sound technician must speak the language of the people he is recording. That is why, due

Some aspects may seem to loosen the distinctions though¹¹, as Kotevska herself states:

From the very beginning, we wanted the story to feel like fiction, even if it wasn't. In our minds, the line between documentary and fiction should disappear [...]. I was more focused on the people, Ljubomir [Stefanov] on the environmental issues. We were always interested in maintaining a perfect balance between the human story and the environmental side. We didn't want to make a stereotypical documentary with a narrating voice, with interviews, etc. (Scarpa 2019)

The limitations as well as the consequent visual procedures and solutions contribute to document the (un)balanced relationship between the human, the nonhuman, and the environment in such an authentic way that also becomes a sustainable way.

In *Honeyland* authenticity and sustainability, for instance, are conveyed through the spoken languages as well as the natural light. Authenticity results in filmmaking procedures that adheres to criteria of sustainability: neither major equipment nor power generators are placed in Hatidže's village; neither rail tracks for dolly shots are built on-site nor spotlights and lights projector are installed.

We are fully aware of the environmental impact — in terms of waste, cumulation, break down, and stow away — caused by those very same digital and electronic technologies that are often described as clean and eco-friendly but they actually are not, as Jennifer Gabrys (2011) and Sean Cubitt (2017) well documented. However, the use of digital cameras and devices by the four filmmakers reflects an ethical and aesthetic employment, which tries to mitigate their impact.

Honeyland is one of those contemporary motion pictures that engage in a profound interchange with the actual natural world and can provide a cinematic view of the mutual human and nonhuman relationship. *Honeyland* integrates indeed the ecocritical approach with the ecomaterialist concern through visual and cultural insights. In the current «postdocumentary era» which chronicles narratives in a mediocre audiovisual way (Perniola 2014), *Honeyland* pursues an authentic practice of sustainable filmmaking which acknowledges, adjusts to, is inspired by, and coexists with, the environment. The techno-aesthetics features are adapted to the environment the four filmmakers are documenting, not vice versa. It is the environment that inspires and determines technical limitations and creative solutions which then leads to an idea of moviemaking that connects with, experiences, feels, and documents, the environment.

Then again, as anticipated in the opening of this chapter, technologies such as audiovisual apparatuses are sustainable whereas they express «the mastery of

to either the language barrier or the contribution by the two cinematographers previously discussed, *Honeyland* cannot be classified as ethnographic cinema.

11 As Chang (2019) points out: «As the movie is in the venerable tradition of direct cinema, [...] it also takes on the stirring quality of an ancient folk tale or myth».

not nature but of the relation[ship] between nature and man[kind]» (Benjamin 1996: 487). In *Honeyland* both relationships, between Hatidže and the bees as much as the filmmakers and the natural setting, are *de facto* sustainability-driven. The North Macedonian documentary issues an ecological warning while it also represents a relevant yet unconventional type of ecocinema, since it firstly stands out as a conscious praxis of filmmaking and audiovisual production.

Conclusion

Through the techno-aesthetic consideration of *Honeyland*, my contribution has transcended the preliminary notion of ecocinema, which is essentially thematic and narrative, and pondered over theoretical paradigms such as the “eco-critical” perspective, the “cinematic footprint”, and the “materialist” approach in the audiovisual studies.

The environmental documentarism is ecocinema’s mainly audiovisual model, yet *Honeyland* is significantly more than that. It does not just represent ecological issues. It epitomizes its own ecocritical approach, showing the relationship between the human (Hatidže) and the nonhuman (the bees)

Hatidže [...] handles the honeycomb with bare hands and not a moment’s hesitation, and the bees seem thoroughly unagitated by her presence. Her humane, ecologically sound methods are rooted in traditions that seem as old and durable as the majestically photographed Macedonian landscape that surrounds her. [...] That philosophy extends to the way Hatidže treats her bees, whose survival, she knows, is closely tied to her own. “Take half, leave half” is an instruction she repeatedly mutters as she carefully removes what she needs (and nothing more), until the words begin to sound like an incantation. *Honeyland* [...] is first and foremost a graceful evocation of interspecies coexistence, of lives lived in delicate balance with the natural world. (Chang 2019)

The North-Macedonian documentary follows accordingly ecocritical criteria such as considering and understanding the human and nonhuman relationships behind the camera and in front of the camera.

Also, environmental issues and ecocritical interpretation in *Honeyland* are further connected whereas we consider its executive aspects, i.e., its impact on the environment. By assuming that filmmaking does interfere with the environment and eventually does pollute it, the four North Macedonian filmmakers conceptualize not only *Honeyland*’s environmental film genre and its ecocritical narrative, but also its cinematic footprint — or the ecomaterialistic side of its own audiovisual production.

Honeyland distances itself from the environmental-themed narratives of the “environmental cinema” or “ecological cinema”, and becomes a practical model and aesthetic solution to the desirable «film ecology» (Hayward 2020),

i.e., the regenerative understanding of filmmaking as ecological experience and procedure.

Approaching sustainability in audiovisual studies should consider both narratives and their production procedures such as crew equipment, lighting processes, shooting schedules, logistical plannings, and language implications.

After all, the ecological artistry involved in the making of *Honeyland* evokes the similarity between film practice and beekeeping as expressed by Semih Kaplanoğlu: «Film is handicraft. Just like making honey is handicraft» (Verstraten 2012: 56)¹².

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12 This is how Turkish filmmaker Kaplanoğlu reflects on his movie *Bal* [Honey] — which was awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2010: a film that follows little Yusuf searching for his beekeeper father through the woods of the Black Sea eastern coast.

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Chapter 17

Framing Beekeeping, Environmental Change, and Adaptation in the Italian Alps. An Anthropological Perspective

Lia Zola

University of Torino, Italy.

lia.zola@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0003-3738-2148

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c420>

Abstract

This chapter wishes to delve into concepts such as assemblage (Tsing 2015) and sympoiesis (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015) and examine them within the framework of my ethnographic fieldwork on beekeeping in the Western chain of the Italian Alps. I believe that the implications of notions such as sympoiesis and assemblage can be seen to surface in the context of bee-keeping and bee culture, as they emerge as multi-species activities where everything and everyone involved can be regarded as a social actor. In this respect, the most relevant issues I would like to tackle are referred to knowledge production and know-how among beekeepers who keep their apiaries in the plains for most part of the year and move them to mountain areas for the summer.

Keywords

bees; Alpine anthropology; sympoiesis; assemblages; humans/non humans.

Introduction

In this chapter I will take into account the connection between nomadic beekeepers¹ who work in the Italian Western Chain of the Alps and the adaptation of their knowledge system to climate change.

I began working in the Western Alpine Chain, specifically in Susa Valley in 2005, as a parallel research to the one I have carried out until 2019 in Eastern Siberia². Unlike my Siberian fieldwork, which mostly delved into the revival of shamanism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, my Alpine research at the very beginning focused on ritual and ceremonial practices in the Alps (Zola 2011, 2013); it then gradually shifted towards a more ecological approach to the study of the Alps. Since 2017, as a matter of fact, I have been analyzing the relationship between “new highlanders” and alternative ways of contrasting social and environmental marginality, such as beekeeping or growing ancient varieties of crops (Zola 2017a, 2017b). I am now at a stage of my research where my interests in Siberian indigenous cultures and those regarding the Alps share some common features. My last fieldwork in Siberia focused on the relationship between hunters and wolves in endangered areas, characterized by changing climate settings; my most recent research on the Alps examines the connections between beekeeping and a rapidly changing environment.

As a number of authors have highlighted, in fact, the Alps have undergone in the past 150-200 years significant changes that led to the creation of “new landscapes” (Tasser et al. 2024): the decrease of agricultural practices has favored the spread of forest in abandoned areas which, at its turn, has produced a decline of plant species. Another important factor which has had a strong effect on alpine environment is represented by an increase of the air temperature. As stated by Antonio Mingozzi et al. (2022), there have been strong climatic variations which have impacted on the ecosystem and its features but also on human settlements and activities. Warmer winters, hot summers, longer periods of drought, increase in wind intensity and other factors make Alpine landscape closer to a Southern environment.

In this respect, beekeeping and bee culture act as an assemblage of people and things, of human and non-human actors which trigger new ways of

1 Nomadic beekeeping consists of moving the apiaries from one area to the other according to the variety of nectar plants so that bees can forage for a longer period. In my case study, the beekeepers I worked with transfer the hives from plain lands or hillside territories to mountainous ones during the summer. On the contrary, sedentary beekeeping involves settling the apiaries in a fixed place and leaving them there until the season is over, approximately between late October and November.

2 I started carrying on fieldwork in Sakha-Yakutia, a Sovereign Republic within the Russian Federation in 2005. Unfortunately, since 2019 I was not able to get back to the area mostly for sanitary reasons and also for the current limits relating to the complex and unstable political situation.

facing climate changes, as landscape is increasingly understood like a practice and form of body politics (Krauß 2018; Olwig 2018), an assembly of entangled multispecies actors that comes into being. This resounds well with the issue of sympoiesis, as elaborated by Donna Haraway:

sympoiesis is a simple word; it means “making with.” Nothing makes itself, nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing [...] Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it. (2016: 58)

The idea of sympoiesis, in its turn, echoes with the critical thoughts elaborated by Anna Tsing about independence and autonomy as unique forms of living of the human species:

One of the many limitations of this heritage is that it has directed us to imagine human species being, that is, the practices of being a species, as autonomously self-maintaining—and therefore constant across culture and history. The idea of human nature has been given over to social conservatives and sociobiologists, who use assumptions of human constancy and autonomy to endorse the most autocratic and militaristic ideologies. What if we imagined a human nature that shifted historically together with varied webs of interspecies dependence? Human nature is an interspecies relationship. (2012: 144)

The idea of sympoiesis also matches with the notion of assemblages: in this respect, Haraway (2016) speaks of linked metabolisms of humans and non-humans which are held together by sympoietic ties and relations. As Anna Tsing states, «assemblages are open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making» (2015: 23). Further on, Tsing compares the notion of assemblage to that of polyphony: if we frame it in a farming perspective, which draws us closer to the topic of this chapter, commercial agriculture has selected single crops and improved them in order to foster simultaneous ripening and coordinated harvests. However, crop selection has not been the only way of farming. If we imagine that multiple rhythms and other social actors such as pollinators, insects, microbes, and other plants can actively take part into farming, the notion of polyphonic assemblage unfolds as a gathering of different actors.

These two key concepts can prove to be very useful tools for anthropologists. On the one hand, as mentioned above, they appear to be the most recent outcomes of almost two decades of reasoning about the nature-culture divide; on the other, they can be adapted to European contexts. The “ontological turn” and its related debates, at the very beginning, mostly referred to extra-European areas. Nevertheless, in recent years, a growing body of works produced by scholars based in Western regions is gaining ground, thus showing the efforts

which are being made to try to reconcile these theoretical insights with contexts where there is (at least apparently) neither shamanism, nor totemism, nor animism.

I believe that the implications of notions such as sympoiesis and assemblage can be seen to surface in the context of bee culture, specifically in Alpine areas. In fact, beekeeping and bee culture emerge as multi-species activities where everything and everyone involved can be regarded as a social actor.

Non-Human Agents and Anthropology

Working with non-human subjects, broadly speaking, does not mean that, as anthropologists, we have to embrace and fully adopt the non-human actor's point of view. As Viveiros de Castro suggests, the question

is not one of knowing "how monkeys see the world" (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990), but what world is expressed through monkeys, of what world they *are* the point of view. I believe this is a lesson our own anthropology can learn. (2004: 11)

Therefore, it is not of primary importance to give voice to non-human actors and, thus, to understand how bees think, but to highlight what sort of world is represented through bees, what sort of connections, intersections and interspecies collaborations are on display. This also resounds with what Bruno Latour argues about dealing with non-human actors: he sees parallels between politicians who speak for other people and biologists who speak for non-humans (2004). Latour's model for bringing democracy to nature involves consensus building among human "spokespeople".

To this extent, the most relevant spokespeople for a better understanding of bee culture are beekeepers, recognized as "privileged ecological interlocutors", as a beekeeper whom I interviewed defined himself. Beekeepers can be of much help to anthropologists not only in terms of bee caring and beekeeping, but also regarding how we should look at bees and from what angle, how a set of skills and know-how that beekeepers hold can cope with rapid environmental change. Beekeepers not only are ecological interlocutors, but also have to become necessarily multispecies specialists.

The two latter issues where beekeeping is involved and which bear parallels with Alpine anthropology are firstly the question of nomadism, which in its turn recalls the practices of pasture and of herding, to such an extent that in some contexts, beekeeping is labelled as "flying herding"³. Finally, the second issue is connected to urban and Alpine settings, which is a common topic in Alpine anthropology. If, on the one hand, urban and Alpine dimensions have

3 The term "flying herd" is mentioned in a Mongolian NGO project which takes into account the interdependence between pastoralism and bee culture (Greenmongolia 2024).

often been opposed, on the other hand current research stresses the importance of continuity between these two settings which have to be considered in their dialogical dimension rather than in contrast one with the other.

My fieldwork, which goes on extensively since 2017 mostly in the Susa Valley, has taken into account nomadic beekeepers, such as those specialists who keep their apiaries in the plains or on the hillsides for most part of the year and move them to mountainous areas for the summer. The recurrent reference to the continuity between plain and mountain and between nomadic and sedentary beekeeping are well established topics in the beekeepers' talks, as shown by O.B., who lives in Soubras, a small village at a height of 1,480 meters in Susa Valley:

It is my business partner who keeps the bees in Avigliana⁴, we have been working together since 2008, when we embarked upon this project with bees [...] The thing is that it is hard to keep them here [in Soubras] all year round, so my business partner keeps them mainly in Avigliana, and they could well live in Avigliana 12 months long. Until three years ago, we did not even have to feed them, but then we decided to have a defined amount of permanent hives in Avigliana, which can be moved to other places according to the type of honey we want to harvest. For example, some hives are moved to Cascina Roseleto⁵ in order to have dandelion honey, some others come here at the beginning of June until the end of the month, when the blooming season is at its peak. However, it is all up to the weather conditions: some years at the beginning of June it is still cold and flowering stops abruptly, other times the blossoming is gorgeous but the flowers are empty, and bees cannot find any food [...] (OB 2022)⁶.

This beekeeper hints at a common problem her colleagues had to deal with in recent years, that is blossomings with no nectar. L.B., a beekeeper who works between Langhe and Roero, a hillside area of Southern Piedmont, has faced the same predicament: the contrast between an apparently rich flowering season and the lack of particular scents indicates an alarming situation. He claims:

It is a nice sunny spring day, temperatures are between 22 and 25 degrees, no wind, apparently there would be very good conditions for the bees to forage abundantly. However, if you keep an eye out, you will hear just a light buzz lost among other noises coming from the wood. If you smell the air, the acacia flowers' scent, which is normally pervasive, is only slightly perceivable. So there is a

4 Avigliana is a small town in the lower Valley of Susa. It is surrounded by mountains and hills, and also features two lakes of volcanic origin. It is an area with considerably mild climate conditions.

5 Cascina Roseleto is a farmstead in Villastellone, near Torino, whose owners since 2009 have started to practice sustainable and extensive livestock management in order to produce *Latte nobile* (noble milk), that is milk obtained from livestock grazing in specific areas where forage crops are abundant. The case study of Cascina Roseleto is an example of how sympoiesis works, as the grass growing in these areas can be useful both for the cows and for the bees.

6 All the translations from Italian are my own.

sort of contrast between the flowering, which seems to be so rich, and the lack of specific scents. (LB 2022)

Beekeepers themselves cannot find an explanation to this: by observing the facts and figures of the last ten years of climate conditions, at least in Piedmont, if compared to the previous decade there has been a sequence of springs which have been colder and windier, sometimes characterized by late frosts. In a word: illusory springs with warmer temperatures and then abrupt cold snaps.

This could be one of the reasons for the lack of pollen, hence showing that, in changing situations, the “hands-on” empirical knowledge beekeepers hold, sometimes is not enough.

Adaptations and Environmental Change

The need of adapting their know-how and skills to rapidly changing environmental circumstances is a common topic among the beekeepers I interviewed. A summer season like the one we experienced in 2022 has shown that they have had to adapt to dry climatic conditions and flows of unusual heat, fostering new ways of interacting with bees, for instance, feeding them. Supplying bees with a replacement nectar, called syrup, a mixture of water and sugar, is no new practice, however 40 or 50 years ago feeding the bees was out of the question. Providing them with extra water is another way of facing a climatic challenge: sometimes the beekeepers position the hives very close to water sources, such as springs, small rivers, permanent wetlands or fountains, especially in extremely dry years. Another practice that emerges as a direct consequence of environmental changes is represented by “hive stocking”, that is creating a hive stock ready to be moved in case of need, as again witnessed by O.B.:

Once, in beekeeping, the timing was good: the first to blossom was the acacia, then came the chestnut tree, but now what happens is that chestnut trees will start blooming a week after the acacias, while your bees are busy [...] How can you cope with it? Luckily enough, this year we had ten extra hives that were ready to be moved according to different flowerings. This is a new way of thinking, which implies planning your moves well ahead and be ready to take action at any time. This also implies that the hives are less productive than they used to be, because with a good timing you could have all your hives forage the same flowers, whereas now they scatter to forage different flowers simultaneously. (OB 2022)

The issue of new sorts of know-how and skills is inextricably linked to that of interspecies collaboration, where humans and bees are just a part of a complex network of actors, but not the only ones: bees’ health, together with the health of other wild pollinators, is contingent upon the health of the plants and flowers they forage, which, in its turn, depends on the physiology and

composition of the soil. All this creates an interspecies assemblage of human and non-human actors who work together, and therefore the role of ecological informants held by the beekeepers comes to light too.

Langhe and Roero, a hillside area of Piedmont where L.B. has his apiary, is well known for its wine production, in particular of the renowned Barolo and Barbaresco brands. These areas bear the mark of an intense human effort towards monoculture, which wrested away their due space from the woodlands, and featured an extensive use of impressive amounts of herbicides to free the vineyards of parasites.

Some wine producers, however, have stopped to practice weeding between the vine lines and have started to grow green manure crops such as clover, lupins, phacelia. Green manure implies leaving uprooted or sown crop parts to wither on a field so that they serve as a mulch and soil amendment. It is commonly associated with organic farming and can play an important role in sustainable annual cropping systems.

This practice is also encouraged both by recent viticulture manuals and by a number of guidelines issued by Regione Piemonte. The Guidelines for Integrated Agriculture issued by Regione Piemonte report that

it is strongly recommended to plant and grow green manure. It has beneficial effects on the roots of the plants and crops, as it allows the roots to grow deeper into the soil to assist with aeration and breaking up heavy soils such as clay. However, they also offer similar benefits in the summer months, with the leafy foliage acting as a defense against the drying effects of sun and wind. (RP 2022: 7)

A viticulture manual, instead, states that «in order to foster the fertility of the soil and to provide it with organic matter and mineral elements, it is recommended to sow green manure mixtures of legume forage crops» (Bottura 2011: 128).

The forage crops in the vineyards help maintain the soil moist and, thanks to the synergic cooperation between microorganisms living in the ground and the vines, the organoleptic properties of the wine resulting from the enriched soil have improved considerably. Once again, an example of sympoiesis, where contamination ends up being also a form of cooperation, as Anna Tsing (2015) would state.

Some relatives of L.B.'s own some hectares where they grow vines. He reports that, since they started to reintroduce green manure crops, specifically lupins and clover, the wine they produce has gained «flavors and scents that they could not recall tasting and smelling before» (LB 2022). Some green manure crops, when allowed to flower, provide forage for pollinating insects too, and habitat for beneficial predatory insects, which allow for a reduction of insecticides where clover crops are planted. The predatory insects, just like the pollinators, need pollen and nectar in order to feed themselves. Consequently, also the most recent guidelines for viticulture suggest to introduce flourishing

plants in the vineyard; they also recommend for vines to be planted close to small woods and fences, the so called hallways of connection (Alberoni, Bosco, and Ercole 2021; Zola 2021).

Plants, microorganisms of the rhizosphere and pollinators are thus considered a biological unity, an assemblage which grows, reproduces and evolves conjointly.

Another example of interspecies cooperation, back to Alpine areas, is represented by the case study of Soubras, where different social actors, both human and non-human interact: soil, plants, animals, and humans.

Since we started bringing the bees here a month a year from Avigliana, the fields where the bee hives lay have totally changed. Everything seems to have strengthened, and long disappeared plants such as clover, vetch, pheasant's eye, wild carnation, plantain [*plantago lanceolata*] and wild sage are growing again. The amount and the variety of species in the fields has increased, and the grass itself looks thicker. This has also impacted on the quality of the hay we harvest every year. Last summer, in spite of the dry weather, we did not have a significant decrease in hay production: instead of 500 hay bales we managed to have 470. This means that everything that grows in these fields grows mainly thanks to our bees. Both our bees and the meadows have adapted to harsh climatic conditions: last summer it was so dry that some varieties have inevitably dried out; however, there were other species ready to grow, balancing the lack of some species in favor of others.

The thing is that, before placing our apiary here, there were less flowers and more "grass", but since the bees have started to forage, flowers bloom more frequently and grow in number the following year.

Another good thing about bringing the bees here and having a flowering field is that we harvest and sell hay, but in recent years we faced some problems because of the price of hay. Ours is generally more expensive because it is harvested at high altitudes, but luckily enough a young man from Vazon [the upper village] has started to breed two cows and a veal, and next year he will have seven. We agreed that he will come and cut our hay and will use it for his cows. For us this has a twofold advantage: the fields are mown and the hay will go to Vazon. (OB 2022)

From a beekeeper's perspective, quite surprisingly, this sympoietic aspect took place in 2022 too. For many farmers it has been a terrible year in terms of crops, of lack of water and rains. The few rains of autumn 2021 were followed by only one snowfall in December, then almost no rain until March-beginning of April, when rain was more frequent but not enough to limit the damage of a dry period. These were the premises of a disastrous season, for if the spring was warmer than average, it was followed by an even hotter summer. Considered the particularly negative farming and agricultural season, everyone would have expected similar results for beekeeping as well. On the contrary, the year 2022 has been surprisingly good, as L.B. reports:

For the past ten years, we have had an unusual warm weather already in February, then temperatures would drop again abruptly, and it is not uncommon to have frosts in April or even at the beginning of May. This affected the whole flowering system, which did not have time to complete its cycle. This year, instead, we have had cold weather on 10th March and the plants still had to grow. When temperatures began to lift, the first to grow was grass, followed by leaves, whereas last year the leaves grew first, so the grass and underwood had not enough light to grow. The end of winter 2022 and the beginning of spring have followed a more “natural” cycle: rain in autumn, the one snowfall in December, December temperatures quite warm. When the weather has started to be very dry, luckily enough the grass favored the soil’s thermoregulation and it also preserved the small amount of water that had been absorbed, helping the flowers at the same time. I am also referring to the role played by plants blossoming after the cherry tree and before acacia. (LB 2022)

According to his words, then, there would be a close relation between some environmental variabilities and pollen production. This would also mean that climatic upheavals could in fact impact on the reproductive and adaptation abilities of plants. In spite of the lack of rain, the year 2022 favored the ideal conditions for grass growing and the soil, as a consequence, has retained the ideal amount of water according to its needs, sustaining itself and also favoring the survival of microorganisms and of plants.

Concluding remarks

The summer 2022 with its unpredictable consequences both in farming and in beekeeping contexts, together with climatic variations over the last 10-15 years, has had a strong impact on those activities which rely on a body of empirical and “hands-on” sort of knowledge. Skills and know-how relating to bee culture are rapidly evolving and adapting to the circumstances. To this extent, they could be labelled as volatile as, just like bees, they need to swarm and form a new body of knowledge which keeps changing. This situation is not limited to Alpine areas. However, I chose to take into account beekeeping in mountain contexts because, by virtue of their position as innovation sites rather than barriers, I understand Alpine areas as privileged grounds for observing and assessing new ways of engaging with a specific environment (the Alps). Finally, as anthropologists, we need to acknowledge that carrying on research on human and non-human actors in upland contexts, thus adopting a multispecies perspective, is in fact opening new paths for exploring the multiple ways of bee-coming.

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Chapter 18

Transmedia Environmental Poetry in the Pacific: Between Literature and the New Media

Paola Della Valle

University of Torino, Italy.

paola.dellavalle@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-6484-9674

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Abstract

Poetry is a major artistic expression in the Pacific, due to a longstanding tradition of indigenous oral literature. In the present climate emergency, “poet-performers” or “spoken word artists” have risen in this geographic area as militant figures that compose poetry and act it out on websites, in videos, during public performances and in important political venues. Pacific poets trespass the boundaries of a single medium and genre, mixing narratives, poetry, music, acting, photographs, videos, and paintings. They have created a transmedia form of art, in which integrated elements of a narrative are dispersed through different channels to offer a unified experience. Spoken word artists make use of the potential offered by new technologies and the web to form a participatory environment, which can give visibility to people who need to have their voices heard. My contribution will analyze a selection of Pacific performance poems from an aesthetic, literary, and environmental point of view, showing their transmedia nature.

Keywords

Pacific spoken word poetry; transmedia; environmental activism and new media; C. Santos Perez; *The Missing Slate*.

The Pacific Region: Past and Present

Since the beginning of the sixteenth century and the arrival of European explorers, the history of Pacific islands has been one of exploitation, first by European powers, then by the USA and Japan. Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch voyagers claimed those territories for their governments (or the governments sponsoring them), followed by British, French, and German ones. Oceania was mapped into three main sub-divisions by nineteenth century Western geographers and given denominations that imply a vision of the area as fragmented (Polynesia), small (Micronesia), and inhabited by black (and therefore inferior) people (Melanesia). Maps and atlases represented the Pacific as a “lost sea”. They fabricated a vision of the ocean as “terra nullius”, «clear of data irrelevant to navigational purposes» (Heim 2015: 183), and depicted the islands as mere anchoring points in an ocean which becomes the natural space for free trade, thus fostering «the notion of a socially empty space» (Heim 2015: 184). Cartography contributed to forming the idea of the Pacific «not as a place to live but an expanse to cross, a void to be filled with lines of transit» (*ibidem*). The idea of the Pacific as a network of relationships between peoples and cultures — a sophisticated eco-system elaborated throughout centuries of interconnection between humans and the environment — was totally ignored by the Western imperialist powers together with the concept of the sea as a means of connection rather than of separation, a view conversely highlighted by Epeli Hau’ofa, in his seminal essay “Our Sea of Islands” (1993). The Tongan-Fijian sociologist, in fact, contrasts the Western vision of Oceania as small “islands in a far sea” with the holistic image of “a sea of islands” (Hau’ofa 2008: 37), suggesting that the deep bond of Pacific islanders with the ocean is encompassed in an ontological view that was crushed under the commercial capitalist logic of profit.

The Rise of New Transmedia Artistic Genres in the Pacific

In the course of three centuries the Pacific was colonized and its islands and waters were exploited for their natural resources, including copra (the dried meat of the coconut), tuna, whales, sugar, trees, phosphate, and other minerals. Poet and scholar Craig Santos Perez, from Guåhan/Guam¹, underlines how the Pacific islands have been used as commercial plantations, military bases, nuclear

1 The island in the Mariana archipelago was called Guam after it became a territory of the USA. Guåhan is its indigenous name in the CHamoru language (this has been the official orthography of Chamorro since 2018). It means “we have” or “a place that has” (Santos Perez 2021: 10-11).

testing grounds, detention centers, mines, shipping harbors, and tourist destinations, and to carry out agricultural experiments, for example those with genetically modified crop fields (Santos Perez 2017). In his “Guest Editorial” to a 2017 special number of the online journal *The Missing Slate*, focused on «Pacific Islander Climate Change Poetry», Santos Perez refers to Western development as «the history of carbon colonialism» that has caused the global climate crisis and underlines how climate change is pushing the Pacific to the brink of habitability. Unpredictable weather, in particular devastating tropical storms alternated to droughts, makes crops fail. Rise in temperature and droughts cause fires. Ocean warming and acidification of the sea have led to coral bleaching and sea life destruction. Another consequence of ocean warming is sea-level rise and the erosion of habitable and cultivable land, causing the disappearance of entire islands and nations. Western «environmental imperialism», says Santos Perez, «has bulldozed, dredged, contaminated, irradiated, bombed, depleted, and destroyed the health and biodiversity of Pacific ecologies» (2017), creating an entire generation of climate refugees.

The poems he has selected for the special number are examples of a new form of militant civil poetry that is spreading in the area to describe the disastrous effects of global warming, denounce its causes, draw the public attention and prompt rapid measures, especially from the “developed” industrial powers that caused climate change in the first place. A young generation of “poet-performers” or “spoken word artists” has in fact risen in many of the countries affected by the climate emergency as militant figures who write poetry and act it out on websites, in public performances and during important political venues and Climate Summits, such as the United Nations Climate Change conferences, the so-called COP (that is, Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC)². “Performance poetry” or “spoken word poetry” can be defined as a genre orally performed before an audience or recorded in videos uploaded on the web, dealing with contemporary serious issues, and characterized by fast rhythm, film images or pictures, sounds or music, and improvisation. Some poems can also appear in printed versions and/or published collections.

Poetry has become a militant instrument within the international political events because it seems to be an efficient vehicle to convey a narrative that does not only explain but shows, does not only analyze problems rationally but touches sensibility and feelings, producing a deep emotional involvement. Marshallese Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, for example, performed one of her most compelling environmental poems dedicated to her baby daughter, “Dear Matafele Peinam”, at the 2014 United Nations Climate Summit in New York to urge effective policies by the industrialized “First World” in order to contain the rise

2 UNFCCC means “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change”. The 198 countries that have ratified the Convention are called Parties to the Convention.

of global temperature and, consequently, the sea-level rise that is devastating the Marshall Islands. Her performance, followed by the appearance of her husband and daughter in the flesh, caused the standing ovation of the UN members, overwhelmed by the power of her words, her emphatic dramatization and the presence of real human beings in front of them. The next year, four Pacific Islanders and spoken word poets were selected from an international contest to perform at the 2015 UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris: Samoan American Terisa Siagatonu, Filipina Australian Eunice Andrada, John “Meta” Sarmiento from Guam, and Filipina American Isabella Avila Borgeson. Their countries are undergoing the worst effects of climate change. All of these poets present themselves as spoken word artists or poet-performers, that is, they not only write poetry but perform it in public events, bookstores or in professional videos. They have their own websites, which include the texts of their poems, accompanied by pictures, photos, videos and the recordings of their readings and performances. They can be contacted through chats, blogs, and emails. The political, educational, and activist intent of their art is declared from the way they introduce themselves. On the pages of their respective websites³ they define themselves as: «poet, performer, educator» (Jetñil-Kijiner, n.d.); «poet, educator, community leader» (Siagatonu, n.d.); «poet, educator and cultural worker» (Andrada, n.d.); «poet/rapper» (Sarmiento, n.d.; he also offers thematic creative writing workshops). The eclectic Sarmiento has recently embraced two more professions as «boxing coach & personal trainer».

If poets from the Pacific region perform in the world of international politics, politicians in this area have also promoted the environmental cause by featuring in artistic documentaries or films. An example is Kiribati former president Anote Tong who featured in the prize-winning docufilm *Anote's Ark*, directed by Matthieu Rytz and premiered in 2018 at the Sundance Film Festival⁴. The film illustrates the impact of climate change on the archipelago of Kiribati, which will be one of the first countries on earth to entirely disappear underwater in the event of a sustained sea-level rise. This is not just a usual documentary listing a series of facts, graphs, and interviews. It is also a narrative. Two threads are intertwined: the story of a woman, who is eligible to emigrate to New Zealand from Kiribati, and that of the President, in both his official public role and from an everyday human perspective. The scenes featuring the woman offer an emotional representation of what being a climate refugee means. They show what she is losing in terms of cultural identity, affections, social connections, material and spiritual bonds. As in Jetñil-Kijiner's performance at the UN Summit, in *Anote's Ark* public and private overlap: *Anote's Ark* is non-fiction and fiction, it includes refined cinematography, pictorial natural images, and a plot

3 Among them, Borgeson is the only one who does not possess a personal website.

4 For news about the documentary and its trailer, see the website (Rytz 2018).

with two interconnected threads. It is a hybrid genre, not just a cold documentary, telling the story of a land, a culture, a nation, and single individuals. It is a docufilm, but also a highly poetic visual representation of a land, its people, and its President.

The Concept of Transmedia

The examples I have just mentioned show how artistic expressions and politics collaborate and even overlap in the environmental emergency. They also show how, in the contemporary digital era, poetry has turned into a “transmedia genre”, at least in the Pacific region. The adjective “transmedia” was first used by psychologist Marsha Kinder in 1991 to describe the way in which children learnt stories about the same characters (for example the *Mutant Ninja Turtles*) appearing in different media, formats, and digital platforms that were not coordinated: comics, graphic novels, illustrated books, animated cartoons, videos, TV series, films, videogames, toys, and gadgets (Bertetti 2020: 7). Children recognized the protagonists and settings, embracing them in a unified imaginary world.

It was media theorist and sociologist Henry Jenkins, however, who first talked about “transmedia storytelling” in a 2003 article published in the *MIT Technology Review*, to describe a process in which the integrated elements of a narrative are dispersed through different channels to create an entertaining and unified experience, and where each element contributes to the whole narrative structure:

Let’s face it: we have entered an era of media convergence that makes the flow of content across multiple media channels almost inevitable. [...] In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa. As *Pokemon* does so well, any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. (Jenkins 2003)

“Transmedia” is not the same as “multimedia”, a word that in the 1990s defined the use of various communicative instruments (videos, written documents, audio files) coordinated on the same platform, as in a CD-ROM (Bertetti 2020: 19). It also differs from the concept of “intermedia”, which refers to genres trespassing the boundaries of a single medium (and involving at least two media) and emphasizes the exchanges and transformation taking place in the passage. Adaptations, transpositions, and interdisciplinary artworks can be considered intermedia phenomena. “Crossmedia” is probably the term which is closest to “multimedia”, that is, the spreading of content through different media platforms, without necessarily involving the idea of a narrative.

It is therefore mostly applicable to communication and marketing campaigns (Bertetti 2020: 20). Conversely, in the transmedia approach the contents are expressed through a variety of different separate channels and contribute to forming a unified narrative. Jenkins mentions several “transmedia products” that achieved an enormous commercial success, first using only one medium, then through several others. The stories of the British archaeologist Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* started as a videogame, reproduced in many series, and were then turned into three films (the first two starring Angelina Jolie), printed comics and books, animated TV series, and gadgets. Other similar transmedia phenomena include *Pokemon*, *Indiana Jones*, *Star Trek*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Star Wars* (Jenkins 2003). In his subsequent study *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Jenkins also explores the *Matrix* series, another transmedia work whose complex story cannot be unraveled only by a single medium (Bertetti 2020: 11).

In the course of time the transmedia logic has become more and more central not only in entertainment but in many other fields such as information, marketing, education, the record of cultural memory, and basically any type of communication. In a more recent study, *Spreadable Media* (2013), Jenkins, Ford, and Green concentrate on the potential of the “participatory environment” created by transmedia technology, which can favor not only broadcasting corporations, the media industry, and marketing agencies, but also non-corporate media producers, activist groups, churches, educators, non-profit organizations, and independent artists. They underline the passage from a culture based on the logic of broadcasting towards one fostering grassroots participation:

The growth of networked communication, especially when coupled with the practices of *participatory culture*, provides a range of new resources and facilitates new interventions for a variety of groups who have long struggled to have their voices heard. (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: xii; emphasis added)

The authors therefore record an emerging hybrid model of circulation of information and cultural products, a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces that determine the material that is shared across and among cultures. In their view the term «participatory culture» has evolved throughout time: from defining the cultural production and social interaction of fan communities, it now refers to different groups using media production and distribution to serve collective interests. The «spreadability» of media allows a new form of political and cultural participation (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 3). «Spreadability» is a key word in this study. Jenkins et al. distinguish between the two concepts of «stickiness» and «spreadability». The former characterizes corporate media and their ability to discover content that attracts the audience’s attention and activates engagement, so that it can be utilized for commercial purposes:

Applied to the design of a website, companies hope to achieve stickiness by placing material in an easily measured location and assessing how many people view it, how many times it is viewed, and how long visitors view it. Under the stickiness model, companies gain economic value by offering merchandise through some kind of e-commerce catalog, charging for access to information (through some kind of subscription or service fee), or selling the eyeballs of site visitors to some outside party, most often advertisers. (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 4-5)

Stickiness is therefore a concept to measure success in online commerce: the ability to keep audiences attached and a way to quantify them in order to exploit their potential as customers of products.

The spreadability of media, on the other hand, is their capacity to create content in easy-to-share format. The term refers to the pervasive force of media circulation and the technical and cultural potential they have for audiences who want to share content for their own purposes. Therefore, spreadability is a quality of the media that acknowledges the importance of social connections among individuals. Spreadability has lowered the cost of content distribution and political speech, and can motivate participation in the political process, serve activist groups, and help grassroots organizations to rise. This is why the authors define «civic media» those media that help circulation of content which increases civic engagement (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 219-224).

Jenkins, Ford, and Green also agree with activist and media theorist Stephen Duncombe that cultural and political communication should appropriate and remix elements of popular culture to appeal not only to people's head but also to their heart. In his *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy* (2007), Duncombe criticized the rationalist language of the American Left, which appears exclusionary and cold, affirming that the contemporary cultural context could provide a model for a new type of activism, more spectacular and participatory (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 221; Duncombe 2007). The corollary of this view is that high-brow culture, academic research, political and militant speech should be more open to the forms and instruments of popular culture and entertainment in order to create that "participatory environment" the authors were talking about with reference to the potential of multimedia technology and transmedia communication: a lesson that Pacific poets and activists seem to have learnt.

Paolo Bertetti has summarized the seven basic principles of transmediality, defined by Jenkins in the MIT conference "Futures of Entertainment 4" and then re-elaborated in his blog (Jenkins, n.d.) highlighting the fact that they could be functional not only to an economic marketing logic but to the promotion of a symbolic, political, and cultural capital. They are: 1) spreadability vs. drillabillity; 2) continuity vs. multiplicity; 3) immersion vs. extractability; 4) worldbuilding;

5) seriality; 6) subjectivity; and 7) performance (Bertetti 2020: 71-75)⁵. The oppositional qualities of the first three principles are not mutually exclusive in transmedia productions and are simply a side of possible options. The first principle, for example, refers to the capacity of a transmedia project to involve audiences: *spreadability* is the capacity to reach the largest possible number of people through digital networks (extensive quality), while *drillability* is the capacity to stimulate the audience to investigate into the media content and catch all its complexity and details (intensive quality) — that is, to delve deep into a story at different levels. The second principle encompasses the capacity of a transmedia project on one hand to offer a coordinate and unified experience through different media platforms (*continuity*), on the other to prompt various imaginative story lines within the same continuous and coherent realm — that is, the construction of parallel or alternative stories, following a “what if?” attitude (*multiplicity*). The third principle underlines the impact of the transmedia product on everyday life: its ability to make the audience enter into the world of the story, even if briefly, suspending disbelief and forgetting their real-world circumstances (*immersion*), or its ability to provide elements (material or symbolic) that the audience can bring into their everyday life (*extractability*). *Worldbuilding* is the construction of vast narrative worlds, within which the single work is like a tile of a mosaic. *Seriality* is the capacity of transmedia projects to reproduce the same mechanism as that of eighteenth-century novels in instalments, namely appearing as segments of a whole, but in a hyperbolic way and across different media. *Subjectivity* is the multiplicity of views and dimensions that transmedia may offer — that is, presenting the story from different perspectives, according to different characters in different media. Finally, *performance* implies that the audiences of multimedia projects are not passive receivers but can interact with each other and can also participate, for example by expressing opinions, voting, and investigating cryptic clues that appear in a medium.

Some of these principles can also be found in Pacific performance poetry, as will be further explained.

Transmedia Environmental Poetry in the Pacific

Pacific performance poetry (whether dealing with environmental issues or not) appears in diverse formats and media. Some poets have authored collections in print. For example, Jetñil-Kijiner published *Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* in 2017. Andrada wrote two collections: *Flood Damages* (2018) and *Take Care* (2021). Some of their poems can also be found in printed anthologies, on their websites, and in online poetry archives such as Poetry Foundation or Red Room Poetry. Other poets rely on the online media only. All of them circulate

5 See also “Transmedia Journalism” (n.d.).

video-recorded readings or professional videos (including images and music), uploaded both on their websites and on YouTube. There can also be recordings of live readings in public events (like the participation of Jetñil-Kijiner at the 2014 COP). In the case of Sarmiento, besides his printed collection *Tie Your Shoes Kid* (2017), poetry mixes with music (mainly rap) in albums such as *Jungle Rules* (2023) and *Meta Mob* (2022) or the single *Go Back* (2019, with Sierra Lucia) and the EP *Nobody Knew* (2018)⁶. Videos of poetry readings, concerts, performances, and the video clips of his songs are also easily found on the web.

In the passage throughout all these multiple versions and media — a printed collection or anthology, an online archive, a professional official video, an unprofessional fixed-shot video of a reading, a video in a public event, a music CD — the text is necessarily subject to slight changes, a process which recalls the modalities of indigenous oral poetry (and oral poetry in general), but the incisiveness of the message remains and is reinforced by the diverse formats. Given the potential of transmedia communication, it is no accident that nations who are geographically and culturally marginalized from mainstream geo-politics, like Pacific islanders, have rapidly embraced the new and pervasive modality offered by the digital era. The visibility guaranteed by new media, the numerous possibilities of exchange and communication that the social platforms offer and the promotion of models of participatory culture, all these factors facilitate spreading the voice of those who need to be heard. As in a fan-club, the public can communicate with the author by mail from the website and follow the author's social accounts, which means the creation of a dynamic or user-generated content of the world that surrounds the author and his/her poetry as well as the participation in a virtual community of people sharing the same concerns, in this case the environmental emergency in the Pacific.

The possible direct connection of the audience with the author and his/her works without any filter, that is the absence of an intermediary (a publisher, a bookstore, a theatre, for example), follows the trend of digital society 2.0, based on the principle of disintermediation (Chadwick 2023), which can be found in the world of finance (with the removal of banks, brokers, or other third parties, allowing individuals to transact or invest directly), in information (with the so-called phenomenon of citizen journalism) but also in online shopping. Moreover, the web provides many other instruments to investigate the topic of Pacific environmental crisis: essays, articles, and reports. Docufilms such as *Anote's Ark* also provide a background for environmental poetry: a sort of framework that contextualizes the issue illustrated in single poems (for example, the effects of sea-level rise in Jetñil-Kijiner's "Dear Matafele Peinam"), connects it to present reality and, through evocative images, also conveys the indigenous cultural and mythical perspective.

6 EP commonly stands for "extended play", a musical recording which is popularly understood as shorter than a full album.

Pacific Performance Poetry indeed seems to follow many of the transmedia principles illustrated by Jenkins et al., especially if we consider the theme of environmental emergency and its inflections by poets from different countries suffering from the same problems: not only *spreadability* is guaranteed by the enormous visibility given by the digital networks and the readers' interaction, but also *drillability*, as the stories narrated from different perspectives on the same issue allow the public to delve deeper into it. *Continuity* is provided by the fact that the effects of climate change in the Pacific region constitute a unified narrative, which also triggers the imagination to create a parallel world, the so-called "what if it happened to me, here?" effect (*multiplicity*). *Immersion* and *extractability* are found in the type of involvement produced especially by videos that enthrall the audience, but also connect them to everyday life. Different poems allow a diverse view to come out (*subjectivity*), but each represents the tile of a mosaic — that is, it contributes to *worldbuilding*.

An example of transmedia poetry project is the special number of *The Missing Slate* (2017) on "Pacific Islander Climate Change Poetry", which has been mentioned before. On the cover of the online journal is a highly suggestive detail of Pacific visual artist Joy Lehumanani Enomoto's painting *Nuclear Hemorrhage: Enewetak Does Not Forget*, (watercolor and thread, 2017)⁷, inspired by the devastating nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands carried out by the USA in the atolls of Bikini and Enewetak between 1946 and 1958 ("The Nuclear Chain", n.d.). The circular cobweb of red threads (similar to blood vessels) running across a blue surface (the ocean) evokes the injured body of the personified ocean. There follows the table of contents and Santos Perez's "Guest Editorial" (*The Missing Slate* 2017).

Eight entries are included in the table of contents corresponding to eight poems by different authors. As in a hypertext, each entry is a link connecting to the poetic text, which is always accompanied either by an evoking painting/photo of a Pacific artist or by a video. Only one poem is recited in video without a script: Siagatonu's discursive performance of "Layers". Unfortunately, the images of the paintings and photos are no more visible on the website, probably due to the expiry of copyright, while all the videos can still be watched. The URL links to the paintings/photos that are still retraceable on the web are all provided here in the references. These are the journal's contents:

- "Dear Matafele Peinam", poem by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (text + official video);
- "The Caregiver's Story", poem by Evelyn Flores (painting *Manatu* by Dan Taulapapa McMullin + poem's text)⁸;

⁷ The detail is the bottom part of the painting, marked with the caption "nuclear hemorrhage detail" (Enomoto 2017).

⁸ See Taulapapa McMullin (2013).

- “Gaia”, poem by Serena Ngaio Simmons (video + poem’s text);
- “Basket”, poem by No’u Revilla (complete painting *Hemorrhage* by Joy Enomoto + poem’s text)⁹;
- “Praise Song for Oceania”, poem by Craig Santos Perez (video + poem’s text);
- “At Palau Pacific Resort”, poem by Emelihter Kihleng (photo *Entering the Unknown* by Syed Hassan Pasha + text)¹⁰;
- “Layers”, poem by Terisa Tinei Siagatonu (video);
- “Water Remembers”, poem by Brandy Nālani McDougall (untitled photo by Mark Wyatt + text)¹¹.

In his editorial, Santos Perez underlines that Pacific Islanders’ bond with the natural world, especially the ocean, and their belief in the inter-connection between all species are central factors of their culture:

Over time, our ancestors developed complex societies in sustainable relationship with the environment. Pacific epistemologies teach us that humans, nature, and other species are interconnected and interrelated; that land and water are central concepts of native identity, community, and genealogy; and that the earth is a sacred ancestor and the source of all life, and thus should be treated with respect and reverence. (Santos Perez 2017)

The theme of oral tradition and indigenous mythology as a source of Pacific islanders’ environmental consciousness is also a relevant aspect in the journal’s poems together with the poets’ outcry for the ecological disaster in the Pacific, as will be briefly illustrated below in the analysis of the selected works.

Jetñil-Kijiner’s “Dear Matafele Peinam” opens the journal accompanied by its official video, available also on her website. The poem is a mix of material facts and lyricism, references to real events and expressions of intense emotion, scientific/formal language and the intimate/colloquial words of a mother telling her baby daughter about the possible dreary destiny of Pacific islanders, who risk losing their home and culture due to sea-level rise (Della Valle 2018a and 2018b). The video dramatically reinforces the content of the poem, read by the author’s voice-over, and prompts the identification of the public with Marshallese people and all those countries affected by climate change. It begins with a shot of the poet on the foreshore from behind, watching the ocean: a mythical presence suspended between earth and sea. It is a figure that seems to be part of the environment and ecologically in tune with it: a symbol of what humankind should become. After that, Jetñil-Kijiner becomes a woman

9 See Enomoto (2017).

10 The photo cannot be currently found on the web.

11 The photo cannot be currently found on the web. For other photos, see Wyatt (1979-2019).

in the flesh, strolling with her child along a beautiful lagoon, which might soon disappear under the sea. Throughout the video, scenes of natural beauty are juxtaposed to images of polluted water, brutally industrialized landscapes, waste heaps, sterile mining areas and territories devastated by hurricanes and floods. The poem conveys the promise of a mother who wants to defend her daughter's rights not to be a climate refugee. Frequent close-up shots of the chubby little girl depict her as another natural marvel. Jetñil-Kijiner's promise is not just theory. We see repertoire images of the poet participating in demonstrations, with many other protesters, activists, and people from civil society all over the world, carrying placards in the streets of the "First World". This time Jetñil-Kijiner watches the camera intently. The poem incites all the people who care to make their voices heard, to act, and to act now. The video closes in a circular way, with the same image as the beginning: a warning that the only path to follow is to become one with nature again, before it is too late.

In "The Caregiver's Story", Guam poet and scholar Evelyn Flores reports about a woman (the caregiver of the title) from one of the Chuuk islands¹², who is collecting plastic bags, not for ecological purposes but to send them to her relatives back home. They need the bags to carry the food they must now buy from stores, «because the ocean has crashed once more into the land / flooded the taro fields / they have no food / it will take two years for the salt to return to the ocean / and the garden become good again to grow taro» (Flores 2017). So, they have to go by boat to other islands to buy food, a trip that can last an entire day. Torn between the risk that those plastic bags may pollute the sea («the hungry ocean») and the pity for those humans starving («the hungry people»), she finally decides to give the woman all her bags. Dan Taulapapa McMullin's painting *Manatu* represents a leaning lofty historical building (from the Western world) about to collapse and sink into apparently black water, reflecting its image: an evocative representation of what could happen in the Northern Hemisphere, too.

"Gaia" is a monologue recited in video by Māori poet Serena Ngaio Simmons, who defines herself "poetry facilitator" for her involvement in teaching writing workshops across Hawai'i and New Zealand. She embodies a wrathful Gaia «Mother of lands and all encompassing / Terra, Haumea, Prithvi», who is summoning her children — Oceanus, Tsunami, Fire — to help her teach a lesson to ungrateful mankind: «Silly creatures / Nothing better to do than create havoc upon my skin / Having to heal new sores everyday is a nuisance and I am tired» (Ngaio Simmons 2017). Her offspring must act on her behalf. She «disemboweled crevices, releasing manifold demons», and now they must continue and finish her work of extermination until «the last corpse is seen floating» (*ibidem*).

12 Chuuk Islands is a cluster of 16 much-eroded high volcanic islands in the Federated States of Micronesia, western Pacific Ocean. They are encircled by a barrier bank composed of some 85 sand and coral islets (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2023).

Her collaborators will thus be turned into bright stars: a reminder of Gaia's wrath. Ngaio Simmons underlines the fragility and flimsiness of humans within the earth's ecological system. The video consists in a fixed shot of the poet reciting in a recording studio. The black circular frame around her, as if she was observed through a keyhole, gives a halo of technological mystery to the scene.

No'u Revilla's "Basket" goes to the core of the message conveyed by *The Missing Slate*. The poem describes a woman carrying a basket and showing its content to a «host». There are «earrings, mats, testimony» but, most importantly, there are «names» and «stories» in it (Revilla 2017). The basket turns into a metonymy for people, their culture and traditions, their songs and poetry. While «they» bring ships and bombs, the woman provides «medicine» for the ocean. «They» can be identified with the American government, since Revilla is a Polynesian poet and educator, born and raised in the island of Maui (Hawai'i); ships and bombs can easily be referred to the US militarization of many territories in the Pacific and their nuclear tests. The poem is dedicated to Jetñil-Kijiner, whose collection carries the reference to a basket in its title. "Jep Jältok", in fact, means «a basket whose opening is facing the speaker» in the Marshallese indigenous language and is the way female children are defined. It also refers to the matrilineal society of Marshallese society (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017). Words, names, stories, and poetry are thus therapeutic for the injured body of the ocean, which is a living being not just an empty space. The poem is accompanied by Joy Enomoto's full painting *Nuclear Hemorrhage*, representing the mushroom-like shape of a nuclear explosion as a bloodshed from a body.

Finally, Santos Perez celebrates the resilience and energy of the Pacific region in his "Praise Song for Oceania" (2016): a long hypnotic prayer. The video consists in images of the ocean in all its possible shapes and meanings: waves in phosphorescent ripples, running up to merge into the beach sand; the blue mesmerizing underwater world inhabited by fascinating living beings (dancing schools of fish, corals, turtles, and dolphins); billows crashing against cliffs. The poet's voice-over recites a celebratory hymn to the sea, in which the phrase "praise your capacity" is repeated over and over again in different contexts: the capacity for birth, for renewal, to survive, to endure, to forgive, to bury, to remember. The sound of a constant breath seems to remind us how the Pacific Ocean is a huge lung for the whole earth.

Conclusion

To conclude, this brief exploration of environmental poetry in the Pacific shows the evolution of an indigenous genre that has undergone a transformation from oral to written and then to a transmedia modality in order to adapt to different conditions and take advantage of the potential of the new media. It also proves indigenous poetry to be still alive and kicking in its combination of

ancient wisdom and modern technology. Pacific poetry is a valuable instrument to educate about climate change, promote the rise of environmental consciousness and take a militant stand in the defense of the environment. It is a good practice that hopefully can inspire a south to north innovative philosophy. Most of all, Pacific environmental poetry reminds the world that Oceania exists and is in danger. And that this could be the destiny of many other sites in the planet, if measures are not taken. Pacific poets and artists, and Pacific Islanders in general, are willing to show their resilience, because, as Joy Enomoto says as a motto on her website: «They tried to drown us, they did not know we are the sea» (Joyenomoto, n.d.).

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Chapter 19

Green Generation and the Global South: TikTokers, Creators and Climate Change*

Lorenzo Denicolai

University of Torino, Italy.

lorenzo.denicolai@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-6777-8613

Valentina Domenici

University of Roma Tre, Italy.

valentina.domenici@uniroma3.it

ORCID: 0009-0006-6988-5785

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Abstract

Climate change and the Green New Deal are among the most discussed topics on social media, which acts as a sounding board for ecological questions and offers visibility to geographical areas not considered by the mainstream media. In recent years, TikTok, in particular, has become the site of a collective narrative aimed at building widespread ecological awareness; for example, a global movement of activists who make climate change awareness videos has sprung up around the hashtag “#ecotok”. Starting from these considerations, the contribution proposes an analysis of some profiles that exploit the potential of TikTok to communicate the climate emergency of southern areas, such as Africa, India, and territories with complex management of environmental policies. Thus, the aim is to reflect on the ecological consciousness of Generation Z, the primary spokesperson, and the practices of production, imitation, and storytelling promoted by TikTok.

* The two authors conceived and developed the concept, organized the ideas, and analyzed the cases together. However, Lorenzo Denicolai is the author of the paragraphs: “TikTok, Engagement Dynamics, and Collective Narratives” and “Between Green Influencers and Citizen Influencers: An Analysis of Case Studies”, while Valentina Domenici is the author of the paragraphs: “Introduction”, “Participation and Media Affectivity in the Platform Society”, and “Discussion and Concluding Reflections”.

Keywords

TikTok; activism; social media; #ecotok; gen Z.

Introduction

The intention of this chapter is twofold: on the one hand, to reflect on the growing interest, especially among Generation Z, in environmental issues, an interest that has seen the emergence of new forms of global activism in recent years, born and supported by the internet; and on the other hand, on the critical role of social platforms in disseminating the climate crisis and in building community sentiments regarding this issue (Papacharissi 2016).

We focused on the TikTok platform, widely used by young generations, analyzing some profiles that exploit this social media to create engagement and activism mechanisms and narrate the climate emergency of certain areas considered metaphorically, for various reasons, “South of the World”. In particular, we considered profiles that address climate change, especially in some areas of Africa, India, and South America, territories characterized by substantial socio-economic disparities and complex environmental management. In this way, we will reflect on the intersection between the political and ecological consciousness increasingly advocated by Generation Z today and the production, imitation, and audiovisual storytelling practices promoted by a social media platform like TikTok.

The theoretical and methodological framework adopted refers to Media Studies and Platform Studies, primarily because they acknowledge platforms’ weight and “affective” aspect and pay attention to the deep connections between technologies and consumption practices. The intention is to conduct an exploratory analysis to identify and highlight the main communicative trends adopted on TikTok regarding climate change in some areas south of the world. Through an initial qualitative analysis that enables us to formulate a research hypothesis, we can distinguish, as will be seen, at least two overarching trends: on the one hand, the emergence of the green influencer who chooses to put their image at the service of the ecological message, and on the other hand, a different trend characterized by a more documentary-style expressive and communicative approach, detached from the figure of the individual disseminator.

In the first case, beyond the influencer’s fame, the construction of the videos relies on the communicator’s presence (discursively and aesthetically studied). Therefore, the green influencer acts by consciously exploiting dynamics of empathic and emotional engagement, and in some cases, with elements of comedy or entertainment that can strongly contrast the conveyed message.

In the second case, however, communication does not rely on self-representation practices. The main objective is to document in real-time the effects of climate change, effectively operating akin to participatory citizen journalism bolstered by the advent of social media platforms. In this case, the narrative register seems less theatrically and aesthetically curated and responds to the desire to primarily use social media as a vehicle for information and dissemination rather than personal expression.

As will be seen from the analysis of the case studies, these trends seem emblematically to correspond to two distinct geographical macro-areas: the predominantly US and Anglo-Saxon area, where users and green influencers make greater use of TikTok's expressive potential and the trends launched by the platform, and the areas of countries south of the world (predominantly Africa and South America), where the absence of visual and narrative schematism in video production suggests a lesser interest in exploiting the affordances offered by social media.

Participation and Media Affectivity in the Platform Society

Undoubtedly, climate change, sustainability, and the importance of a Green New Deal are among the most discussed topics in contemporary public debate and, particularly prominently in recent years, also in the digital environment, especially on social media. In this regard, various researchers have long been demonstrating how social platforms, thanks to their "affective mediation" (Grusin 2017; Papacharissi 2016), that is, their power to regulate individual and collective affectivity and to facilitate feelings of commitment and emotional involvement (Dean 2010), are now more effective than traditional advertising campaigns in encouraging users to be attentive and sensitive to ecological issues (Bedard and Reisdorf Tolmie 2018).

Above all, TikTok is a social platform capable of creating a particularly appreciated and shared cultural framework utilized by the youngest to define themselves and their experiences precisely about the state of the world around them, thus giving further meaning to the social, political, and economic phenomena that surround them (Burton 2019).

Regarding the ecological issue, in particular, the Chinese platform serves as an influential sounding board for various forms of communication and representation of climate change. The platform makes disseminating information on these topics more immediate and widespread. It offers visibility not only to individual network activists but also, more broadly, to geographical realities that are only sometimes taken seriously by mainstream media.

Today's forms of youth activism on the internet are nevertheless the expression of the intersection between the participatory culture typical of digital media and political and civic participation; an intersection that expresses and brings out, on the one hand, the distrust, especially from Generation Z, in politics and institutions, and on the other hand, the profound expansion of communicative and organizational resources available today. Online activism gives rise to what has been emblematically defined as "connective" action (Papacharissi 2014), in which diverse opinions, perspectives, and viewpoints are connected by a strong "structure of feeling" made possible by social platforms. Compared to traditional collective action, connective action is a strongly self-motivated action that involves the integration of personal framing and forms of self-narration, crucial for the success (in terms of dissemination) of the action (Bennett and Segerberg 2011).

Within this affective public (Papacharissi 2014) mobilizing for the environmental cause, the figure of the so-called "green influencers" has emerged in recent years from various parts of the world. Green influencers, individuals with a large following on social media who raise public awareness about the environmental crisis and sustainability issues adopted as a lifestyle, utilize the audiovisual language and communicative style specific to digital platforms to disseminate these themes and integrate them into practices of self-representation (Highfield 2016), through which they construct a storytelling often intertwining the private and the public, the personal and the political. Several crucial elements generally exist to increase or decrease trust in this figure, including similarity (of ideas and viewpoints), perception of authenticity, and identification (Pittman and Abell 2021). The latter can be strengthened through the ability to exploit the expressive and communicative potential of social platforms. For these reasons, observing how influencers choose to narrate the theme of sustainability helps to reflect on the dynamics and relationships between storytelling and platform characteristics and between audiovisual language and social media design.

Based on these theoretical premises and intending to explore the vast landscape of digital creators engaged in disseminating ecological themes, we chose to analyze the visual and communicative style of some profiles of green influencers and others operating on TikTok and their different ways of utilizing the platform. Through case analysis, we aimed to focus on the different aesthetic-pragmatic dynamics of visual and audiovisual productions but also highlight a trend that seems to emerge, especially at the international level, namely the preference for using TikTok as a privileged environment for social engagement actions and the construction of ecological awareness.

In recent years, this platform has become a privileged place for meeting, discussing, and sharing concerns about the fate of the Planet and the setting for a collective narrative — for example, starting from the hashtag *#ecotok*

— essentially based on the presence of video streams, which aims to spread greater awareness about the ecological issue.

TikTok, Engagement Dynamics and Collective Narratives

Before delving into the analysis of some cases of international green influencers and user-generated video content, we briefly mention the pragmatic dynamics and engagement typical of TikTok. The platform enables the construction of audiovisual material based on relatively simple procedures: from the fixed first-person shooting, in *selfie* style, to a more elaborate work that also involves editing, in any case with a technological tool provided by the platform itself (as do all other social media platforms). Using green screens and numerous graphic effects — both for image and framing overlay and optimization and for modification and enhancement — is very common. Generally, many influencers — including green ones — resort to a multicode compositional organization (Denicolai 2023) to favor a multimodal semiotic process (i.e., through sense-making construction according to the principles of multimodality inspired by Gunther Kress’ theory, 2009) and a synesthetic and syncretic communication (as described, among others, by Pietro Montani 2020), thus making the products a sort of audiovisual meme (Marino and Surace 2023; Zulli and Zulli 2022). Since its launch, the platform has proposed some user engagement formats. Among all, the challenges, duets, stitches, and trends stand out. Almost all of these production forms are essentially mash-up operations typical of Remix Culture (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikstrom 2022; Zhang 2021): stitches, for example, allow the user to enrich their recording with part of another user’s video that is directly edited into their video by the app at the beginning. Similarly, duets enable users to dialogue with another video through editing that typically organizes content with a split-screen.

The vast array of graphic and facial effects makes TikTok an environment of solid experimentation and sharing of audiovisual objects, as well as a revival of some so-called “traditional techniques” with clear cinematic and audiovisual derivation (such as the possibility of using green screen or stop-motion filming). Hypothetically, given the high quantity of graphic elements and special effects, each user could narrate endless moments of their daily life with different styles and effects without risking reproducing the same object. The trend is interesting for at least two interconnected reasons in the logic of social media and digital activism (Gerbaudo 2012; Hautea et al. 2021). First, it fully exploits the generative-imitative mechanism of the platform; second, and consequently, the trend contributes to fueling the gradual transformation of individual affectivity and sensitivity into a flow that shapes and recognizes itself in a collective identity, which is constantly changing and dynamic, because it is continually fueled by user participation (Gerbaudo 2022). According to Corey H. Basch,

Bhavya Yalamanchili, and Joseph Fera (2022), social media platforms, including TikTok, play a central role in population engagement dynamics, with the younger part being the most active. For research, social media are helpful as a source of information, as a place for disseminating awareness of social issues, and for active involvement in actions of social and cultural mobilization. TikTok, specifically, seems to be one of the preferred environments for young people to discuss various issues, as was the case, for example, during the pandemic period for COVID-19, during which the platform became one of the most functional places for the transmission of information and, above all, awareness among peers of the risks of virus transmission and contagion.

As mentioned above, the functionality of the trend is based on the imitative and re-propositional logic of a model (stylistic, narrative, discursive, etc.), which is replicated in almost all of its structural parts, while leaving some freedom and formal variability to individual products: with the same framework — for example, the presence of a musical line; the choice of a narrative situation; the choice of a linguistic style; etc. — every TikToker can participate in the trend, telling and explaining their version. In this way, a series of variables are constituted that give rise to an entire semiological production, contributing to the constitution of an almost infinite narrative, capable of being more recognizable and immediately familiar. In this sense, beyond the individual conveyed content, the trend functions as a mechanism for dissemination and recognition of an experience that goes from being individual to collective, not only because it is shared in a social environment but because it is an active part of a semiological process in progress that reacts, like an actual narrative and media ecosystem, to the solicitations brought by the community (Denicolai 2023). For these peculiarities, the trend also seems effective in green communication (Denicolai and Domenici 2023), as can be noted in some international posts that we mention here only as an example to introduce the comparative analysis of cases. For example, the song “Fire on Fire” by Sam Smith (2018) is the musical line on which a considerable number of videos on climate change have developed (we are talking about billions of views) (Denicolai and Domenici 2023). In addition to the musical line, visual and narrative schematisms are present and add to the reference musical formula; for example:

- The TikToker who, with each frame — which marks, also graphically, the passing of time — undergoes a deterioration of their appearance (e.g., with increasingly purplish makeup, with plastic material protruding from the mouth, etc.);
- Alternatively, the image of an ice cream gradually — with the same flowing manner of time — melting;
- Or, yet, multiple images of the Earth in parallel montage (places in optimal conditions and the same ones deteriorated).

The combination of Smith's musical line and these patterns (which are among the most common) form the basis on which the trend extends, along with its related variations through which TikTok constructs its narratives. In this way, for example, the schema of the TikToker undergoing the deterioration of their face is replicated each time as minimal nuances compared to the baseline (which, of course, remains indistinguishable due to the vast number of nearly identical objects present). The individual narrative units — such as the green one, specifically in our study — thus seem to be variables of a single narrative nucleus that, like the versions of ancient myths, constitute that sort of fusion into the collective we mentioned earlier, allowing TikTok to be so effective in terms of storytelling and its related “storylistening” (Sturm 2000).

One more point has to be considered before moving on to case analysis. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019), among others, has studied the importance of the emotional sphere in communication and political journalism, focusing on analyzing the central dynamics related to journalistic writing and language that enables an emotional grip on the reader. In particular, the scholar, introducing the concept of “emotional storytelling” and reinterpreting it in the context of social media communication, emphasizes the use of «personalized storytelling», i.e., «a narrative form which draws on the experience of a particular individual caught up in a story to dramatize a broader social issue» (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019: 47) as a hybrid mode of information, where there is a continuous balance between the rational and objective part of an event and its emotional part. According to Wahl-Jorgensen, moreover, the emotional dynamics encountered in social environments are constructed by the discursiveness of the media itself, as it is the media that — we could say Foucauldian-ly and from a media-archaeological perspective — originate the conditions of existence. Based on these premises, emotional storytelling (and personalized storytelling in particular) would play an essential role in the presumed authenticity value of this type of communication — due to the immediacy of the medium, the empathic-emotional strength of the image, the “emotional contagion” (Plantinga 2009) that can derive from viewing a post, etc. — and in fueling «compassion oriented towards the creation of communities that seek social and political change» (Plantinga 2009: 88). According to our hypothesis, these aspects are part of TikTok's daily practice, even regarding climate change topics. Similarly, Montani (2020) argues that short audiovisual forms (including TikTok videos), by nature endowed with a solid syncretic structure, are semiotic materials with which the user can establish forms of material engagement², that is, engagement with the object that presupposes cognitive as well as emotional work on oneself. In this way, processes would be activated, resulting in the user re-evaluating what they have just seen (or read), i.e., better understanding — perhaps paradoxically

2 The author directly refers to Lambros Malafouris' Material Engagement Theory (2013).

even pre-rational? — of the message they have consumed, thus also promoting reflective action on the conveyed message (as well as reversibility that Montani attributes to the very nature of web communicative forms).

Between Green Influencers and Citizen Influencers: An Analysis of Case Studies

As mentioned in the introduction, green communication on TikTok can be roughly divided into two main blocks corresponding to different geographical areas. Our exploratory investigation of audiovisual products related to climate change in the Global South stands out compared to other areas of the Earth, just as it is possible to distinguish between communication managed by green influencers and that organized by ordinary users, which we define as citizen influencers, borrowing and slightly adapting the concept of the citizen journalist that emerged on social media around the turn of the 2010s following the social and political upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring.

Unlike the audiovisual products of influencers and green TikTokers from Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, or American regions (which are among the main vectors of the theme), materials from certain areas in the Global South (particularly Africa, India, and South America) seem not to replicate the identified schematics and, in any case, do not employ the same level of compositional, narrative, and discursive complexity as the mentioned green influencers. Upon initial consideration, it appears that videos depicting climate change in some regions of the South are more straightforward and basic, both narratively and discursively; they hardly ever use graphic effects, and at most, they include picture-in-picture editing, descriptive captions, and a few other elements.

Following Helle Kannik Haastrup (2023), the green influencer acts as a spokesperson for content/product (thus transforming the issue of climate change into a tangible object to be disseminated and advertised, into a sort of social advertising), using both the discursive baggage of audiovisual production and elements of linguistic and paralinguistic items that are appropriate for communication professionals (what ancient rhetoric summarizes in the concept of *actio*). It is the person/character as such that acts as a catalyst for action and message; it is the user who transforms themselves into a communicative object, into a performative act that inserts them into a studied and perfectly oiled media discourse so that they can — theoretically — achieve a specific goal in terms of contacts and followers. Italian profiles such as Cristina Coto (@cristinacotom), Sofia Pasotto (@telospiegasofia), and comedian Giovanni Storti (@giovannistortiuff); Belgian Eve The Econista (@eve.the.econista); American Izzy Lause (@izzylaure); various associational groups of green influencers working on environmental issues on TikTok (such as Action 4 Climate,

@action4climate); Argentine green influencer Tinjones (@tinjones); and many others (including Greta Thunberg³ herself, who in some way represented the initiatory model of the green influencer), all have, despite each one's creative variation, a recognizable style that can be attributed to the underlying pattern: the face and the person are central in the narrative line they propose. In this way, the human figure is the actual medium — in the anthropological and mediatic sense of the term — meaning the communicative channel, the means through which awareness of climate change can reach the audience. On the other hand, the citizen green influencer — who, in our investigation, is more active in areas further South and generally characterized by socio-economic conditions traditionally less favorable than those in the previously considered areas — seems to embody a typical attitude of participatory culture: they are inside the event, an observer who acts in the field, adopting a hypothetical yet paradoxical participatory stance (following Malinowski 1922). The user narrates what they see and experience, using cinematic and audiovisual language as an ideal representation of a “written language of reality” (Pasolini 1972), thus contributing to the message's increasingly authentic value and emotional impact.

Let us briefly examine some cases that we consider illustrative of this second mode of green storytelling, specifying that our investigation focused on videos from areas in the Southern regions of the Planet (or not belonging to the wealthiest areas):

- @mma_mablomo (2022): This influencer, in what appears to be a domestic setting (or, in any case, a typical indoor environment), speaks to the webcam (a fixed frame, selfie-style/long take) and narrates the situation of climate change in South Africa, supporting the narration with nearly continuous subtitles. The only creative touches (if one may call them that) are the variation in font size for terms she deems most significant and the overlay of some images depicting the consequences of climate change.
- @afrikanblackmedia (2023): Similarly to the previous case, the creator speaks to the webcam using a rather basic, unpolished green screen and simultaneously offers images — including videos — of issues related to climate change (#cc) in Sudan. In this case, too, the creator accompanies their narration with subtitles.
- @africanstream (2022): Following the same line as the previous ones, with some extra attention to the product's composition, especially regarding

3 The activist does not have a personal profile on TikTok (although she is active on Instagram); however, Greta is featured in many videos on the Chinese platform.

the use of transition effects and some picture-in-picture for the presentation of images.

- @grande5721: This is a citizen green influencer (although there is no profile description) who presents a collection of videos related to environmental disasters due to climate change in various parts of the world, with particular attention to the most disadvantaged areas. All the videos are a mix of materials presumably filmed by other users and likely sourced from the internet or other media; thus, they are mash-up operations, remixes of materials (perhaps even found footage) that directly and extremely dramatically depict the daily situations arising from climate change. Unlike the previous examples, the profile is a collection of brief e-news providing updated news on climate-related incidents. Like the previous cases, these products do not feature internal (channel-specific) or external (derived from an identifiable trend) modeling but maintain the impromptu nature of video collage, discursively unpolished.

In general, these products seem to be emotionally less immediate compared to the schematics we described earlier, i.e., those of the more sought-after green influencers (such as those based on Smith's song "Fire on Fire"), if we consider them from the perspective of traditional cinematic and communicative rhetoric (based on the traditional categories of audiovisual language). On the contrary, if we consider them as testimony from those experiencing such an event (the citizen influencer, precisely), they take on a significantly more meaningful value from a documentary standpoint and, above all, from an existential and emotional participation perspective. Among many, a video by @smvarela971 (2021) also struck us as impactful. This product builds emotional engagement more with the simple and surreal climate situation it depicts (which can be communicated exclusively through almost documentary-like images) than with the mechanisms typical of the platform. In this case, the narration is in voice-over, and a single caption remains constantly present, following a memetic logic. The contrast is generated by the estrangement achieved between the cheerful amazement of the children and the excessive snow, albeit in the African winter period.

Among the cases mentioned, only @africanstream (2022) seems to be oriented towards a more significant visual construction aimed at generating a specific emotional impact: the TikTok, when framed, does not have direct eye contact with the camera, and gradually, he is seen sitting in a chair, with a thin layer of water lapping at his feet (most probably simulating sea level rise?).

A similar communication approach emerges in TikToks from the Indian region (or those depicting that territory). For example, @climatevanguard (2023) follows the pattern mentioned above: the TikTok is framed, and with a primary green screen, it shows images related to the climate situation.

In Argentina, in addition to videos quite similar to those just described, there is the already mentioned figure of the green influencer Tinjones (@Tinjones), whose communicative style is based on a series of short stories highlighting human actions toward the climate. Tinjones acts similarly to other international green influencers, including the Italian Cristina Coto. They do not just recount a climate-related event but seek accountability, presenting short videos that resemble more an investigation than the emotional engagement typical of the platform. Compared to all the products described earlier, one can see a schematic, a discursive formula based on a specific choice of graphic captions accompanying the TikToker's voice. With direct eye contact with the camera, the influencer explains each video's content, aiming to promote collective awareness of the climate condition in the Argentine territory.

Discussion and Concluding Reflections

Based on the observation of a significant number of profiles, this general overview first reveals how TikTok mobilizes a vast audience. Many of the cases analyzed easily surpass one million views. This confirms that TikTok has emerged as a significant platform for activism, supported both by the use of hashtags and by the platform's nature. The engaging dynamics of TikTok encourage imitation and repetition of easily recognizable patterns. This mechanism efficiently disseminates replicable content, which can contribute to continuous and collective engagement on sustainability and protecting the Planet.

Thus, TikTok is a fertile ground for spreading messages related to the environment and sustainability, facilitating the creation of collective awareness on these crucial issues. Its visual and immediate nature effectively engages the audience and promotes positive actions for the environment. At the same time, it has emerged that audiovisual materials, specifically from certain areas in the Global South (particularly Africa and South America), tend not to replicate the typical patterns of TikTok and, in general, do not fully utilize the platform's expressive potential, foregoing a certain level of compositional and narrative complexity that is common in videos produced in Anglo-Saxon regions.

Upon initial consideration, the videos from profiles depicting climate change in some regions of the Global South appear more basic overall in narrative and audiovisual language. This aspect is significant as it manifests and testifies primarily to the urgency of communicating specific issues and denouncing the status quo. As observed from the analysis of selected cases, most profiles depicting climate change in the Global South address political leaders and representatives directly through a dry and journalistic style rather than engaging with their community members. The primary objective is denunciation, directed towards governmental bodies and those responsible for public administration. Conversely, the communicative register is notably different in other regions

where green influencers also raise awareness about climate change. There is a greater emphasis on the construction and aesthetic coherence of the profile and the audiovisual content offered, as evidenced by the more calculated use of TikTok's affordances (for example, adherence to the platform's significant trends). Here, the image of the individual influencer and self-narration play a central role within the communicative project, primarily directed towards their followers.

These two different communicative styles respond to different needs related to a greater or lesser perception of risk and urgency and, therefore, to a consequent greater or lesser concrete call to action. In both cases, however, the focus on the effects of climate change and the rich audiovisual production on this topic testify to the growing "TikTok activism" for climate change. This form of expression is typical of post-media generations, aiming to build global engagement actions on the issue of climate change and utilizing more or less refined expressive formulas that all leverage the platform's active and activating nature.

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Chapter 20

Mediterranean Calling: Hunger, Revolt, and Migration in French-Language Graphic Novels

Miriam Begliuomini

University of Torino, Italy.

miriam.begliuomini@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-5128-7564

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c423>

Abstract

A wide range of materials contribute to a historiography of the ideas and imaginaries that developed around the Mediterranean in the modern era: maps, technical reports, paintings, magazines, films, documentaries, posters and advertising brochures. What is the contribution of the new millennium? The “Ninth Art” is becoming increasingly important in many countries, including those around the Mediterranean. Several works from the French-speaking world published in the last two decades have the “Middle Sea” and the riparian countries as their setting (or protagonist). Hunger, revolt, and migration seem to unite most of these graphic novels, which take place on the shores of the Mediterranean. Hunger, revolt, and migration will therefore be the common threads running through our discourse, as *topoi* of a systemic crisis and an imbalance between a “North” and “South” in which the Mediterranean remains the fundamental barycenter.

Keywords

Mediterranean sea; comics; French literature; French-speaking literature; imaginary.

Introduction

Analyzing the photographic Sicilian imaginary that tourist industry and individual consumers produce, Douglas Mark Ponton borrows Van Leeuwen's terms of exclusion, suppression, and backgrounding (Ponton 2023: 5; Van Leeuwen 1996). Ponton emphasizes how,

[i]n analyzing photography, which has pretensions to show simply “what is there”, this perspective cannot be ignored. It will be seen that there are significant absences in the corpus; there are very few human figures, and none from the non-human world, where this term refers to animals, insects, birds, etc. In Stibbe's terms, these absences appear as “erasure” (Stibbe 2012, 2015), a significant semiotic feature contributing to discriminatory representation. (Ponton 2023: 5)

While we do not ask graphic novels to depict reality as it is, it is true that we have long asked them to embellish it for our entertainment. This is especially true since their setting turns out to be an exotic and generic “South”. Are these mechanisms of exclusion and backgrounding also present in the representation of the South that graphic novels offer? Or do these prove, on the contrary, capable of deconstructing stereotypes (even their own)?

This chapter will firstly focus on why it may be interesting to interrogate the Mediterranean imaginary that graphic narrative (Chute 2008) has constructed in recent history, as well as how this imaginary has changed over time. Afterwards, the article analyses a sampling of recent Mediterranean graphic novels, following the thread of hunger, revolt, and migration. These topics demonstrate that today's graphic novels are anything but a disengaged art, especially on the Mediterranean shores. The Mediterranean in graphic novels does not necessarily contrast with current representations on the same theme in newspapers, social networks, videos, and films, but certainly completes them.

Child's Play?

In its origin, graphic narrative (Chute 2008) was a disengaged genre and aimed at a young audience. Even more so when its setting was non-European. Limiting myself to my field of specialization, the French-speaking context, episodes of Tintin or Spirou could make twentieth-century readers dream with exotic settings and daring adventures: they would then reassure them with a happy ending. Today graphic narrative is aimed at adults and is often used to express harsh stories. Upon examining literature from the French-speaking world, one observation spontaneously arises: the time when the Ninth Art was light-hearted and disengaged is definitely over. This seems even more true on the shores of the Mediterranean: looking at the southern “border” of Europe,

French-speaking graphic narrative seem to express difficult, conflicting, and, sometimes, mournful realities.

The enormous success of the sagas *L'arabe du futur* by Riad Sattouf (2014-2022) or *L'odyssée d'Hakim* by Fabien Toulmé (2018-2020) demonstrate how it is possible to entertain and make readers reflect on painful stories, both individual and collective¹.

«The Mediterranean is lively, too lively!»², exclaimed the French poet Gabriel Audisio in 1958, and he went on to say: «Which of its shores has not erupted? The fever of nationalism, convulsions and fanaticism, frenzies, insurrections, repressions, revolutions... The liquid continent rises, boils, and its boiling makes the lids blow off»³ (Audisio 1958: 16). The recent geopolitical record seems to confirm these old assertions: economic, strategic, and cultural reasons put the Mediterranean back at the center of media and academic attention. It may therefore be interesting to ask what image or images of the Middle Sea the Ninth Art conveys to us. Moreover, the Mediterranean is inextricably linked with its image: paintings, photographs, films, advertisements and even “clubs” have, over time, crystallized a Mediterranean “imaginary”, and even in the twentieth century, a certain “brand”⁴. From a historical point of view, before being an area or an idea, the Mediterranean is an image: the one that maps show us, with borders that vary in size from one era to the next. As Anne Ruel points out, it was geographers who established the Mediterranean as an autonomous object of study⁵. In the age of the internet and social networks, Mitchell's «pic-

1 Historian Henry Laurens explains the presence of the Arab world in French-language comics: «In the twentieth century, the images of the contemporary Arab world conveyed by French-language comics were aimed at a young audience and created a whole imaginary world. Today, the comics are aimed more at adults, expressing the conflicts, exile and dual cultures of today's Arab world. Over the course of two centuries, the messages of this committed art form, imbued with a pleasant and stereotyped vision, have been transformed and replaced by much harsher political realities» (Laurens 2022; «Au XX^e siècle, les images du monde arabe contemporain véhiculées par la bande dessinée francophone étaient destinées à un public jeune et créaient tout un imaginaire. Aujourd'hui, cette dernière s'adresse plutôt à des adultes pour exprimer les conflits, l'exil et la double culture dans le monde arabe actuel. Sur deux siècles d'histoire, les messages de cet art engagé, empreints d'une vision plaisante et stéréotypée, se sont transformés et ont été remplacés par des réalités politiques bien plus dures»). All the translations of French texts are my own; the original versions are provided in footnote.

2 «Vivante, trop vivante Méditerranée!».

3 «Lequel de ses rivages n'est pas entré en éruption? Fièvre quarte des nationalismes, convulsions et fanatismes, frénésies, insurrections, répressions, révolutions... Le continent liquide se soulève, bouillonne, et son ébullition fait sauter les couvercles».

4 On these alliances between culture and marketing, see Guellec and Hache-Bissette (2012); Thérenty and Wrona (2020).

5 «To speak of the Mediterranean, you had to be able to think of it. The birth of the word therefore takes us back to the work of geographers: they were at the origin of the concept of a Mediterranean whole. [...] Élisée Reclus was the first geographer to establish the

torial turn» (Mitchell [1992] 2017: 79) is complete: massive access to precise and cheap technological equipment, such as smartphones and drones, generates an infinite number of landscape views, selfies and videos every day (Rouillé 2020). Today, the omnipresence of images is a fact, and also plays a role in the context of cultural production⁶. It is therefore no coincidence that comics and graphic novels⁷, hybrid forms of writing and drawing, are very popular with the public. At the intersection of words and images, they adapt to the rhythms of an increasingly fast-paced, fluid, viral and largely iconocentric society.

Contemporary Mediterranean graphic novels are obviously characterized by a range of subjects, styles and orientations. The Ninth Art is gaining increasing prominence in many countries, including Arabic-speaking countries around the Mediterranean⁸. Here, graphic narrative proves above all capable of telling difficult stories and conflicting realities⁹. Perhaps these patterns simply draw our still Eurocentric attention. Researcher Alexandra Gueydan-Turek rightly observes: «All too often confined by critics to works from its diaspora, and only reaching a select audience of mainly French readers, Maghrebi comics have long been regarded as a minor genre living outside its region»¹⁰ (Gueydan-Turek 2019: 45).

Mediterranean as an independent object of study. His view of the sea shifted from a restricted geophysical definition to an awareness of a historical, economic and cultural space. [...] The construction of a geographical object was replaced by the birth of a cultural entity» (Ruel 1992: 8-9; «Pour parler de Méditerranée, encore fallait-il pouvoir la penser. La naissance du mot nous renvoie donc à l'œuvre des géographes : ils furent à l'origine de la conception d'un ensemble méditerranéen. [...] Élisée Reclus est ainsi le premier géographe à consacrer la Méditerranée comme un objet d'étude autonome. Le regard qu'il porte sur la mer se déplace d'une définition géophysique restreinte à la prise de conscience d'un espace historique, économique et culturel. [...] À la construction de l'objet géographique s'est substituée la naissance d'une entité culturelle»).

6 See Bonnet (2017); Doueïhi (2008); Pascal, Thérenty, and Tran (2021).

7 On the difficulty of establishing the literary status of graphic novels, considered by specialists to be more in the commercial or publishing category, see Beaty (2007); Baetens and Frey (2014); Benvenuti (2019); Brienza and Johnson (2016); Delorme (2019); Tosti (2016).

8 In 2018, at the Angoulême Festival, an exhibition was devoted to “Nouvelle génération. Arab comics today”. The catalogue of the same name, subtitled *Un tour d'horizon du neuvième art méditerranéen*, presents the work of various artists from the countries of the Maghreb and the Levant. Dalila Nedjem, a comic strip artist, has been organizing the Algiers International Comic Strip Festival since 2001. The younger generation often use the internet to share their work: Noha Habaieb uses Instagram and Behance to share her panels, which alternate between Arabic, English and French; Zainab Fasiki has published parts of *Hsbouma. Corps et sexualité au Maroc* via social networks before being published in volume. Using comic strip language, and often social media, they try to raise awareness of issues concerning the status of women in Maghrebi countries. More and more French and Arabic language blogs and groups work mainly via the web.

9 See Nabizadeh (2019); Serrano (2021); Comberiati and Spadaro (2023); Busi Rizzi et al. (2022).

10 «Trop souvent confinée par le champ critique aux œuvres issues de sa diaspora et ne touchant guère qu'un public d'initiés principalement composé d'un lectorat hexagonal, la bande

Nevertheless, hunger, revolt, and migration are subjects that constantly return in graphic novels in relation to the Mediterranean space and therefore deserve to be read as a whole, starting from some case studies.

Memories of Migration

Various contemporary French authors are using graphic novels to retrace their own family history, and their mixed origins. Individual stories become intertwined with history, which inevitably coincides with France's colonial past in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jacques Ferrandez has devoted an entire cycle, *Carnets d'Orient* (2019), to reconstructing his family's Mediterranean adventures at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Spain to Algeria. The ten volumes of the cycle span an extended period, from 1986 to 2009. This provides an interesting sample for analyzing the evolution of the language of comics in the space of twenty years. Indeed, the volumes Ferrandez published in the 1980s were graphically very different from today's graphic novels. Autobiographical inspiration dissolves among the very dense plots, text-filled clouds, and numerous characters: it's no coincidence that the first volumes appeared in the comics periodical *Corto Maltese*. Ferrandez's work is both aesthetically pleasing and richly documented. The author's personal memories are interwoven with in-depth historical research. Many iconographic sources support the narrative: maps, plans, architects' sketches and the notebooks of traveller-painters and military-painters, in the words of the author¹¹.

A similar autobiographical and transmedia approach characterizes the work of Joël Alessandra, whose surname evokes Italy. His *Petits-fils d'Algérie* (2015) investigates his origins, starting with the port of Marseille where the *pieds-noirs* (black foot), including the Alessandra family, landed in 1962. But the real center of the story is Constantine, in Algeria. In his introduction to *Petits-fils d'Algérie*, historian Benjamin Stora reconstructs the socio-geographical mosaic of this city, full of European immigrants: «poor people, full of hope, who did not shy away from the toughest tasks»¹² (Stora 2015: 3). Indeed, Alessandra's grandparents emigrated from Sicily to Algeria in the nineteenth century; initially bricklayers, they later became building contractors. While there, Alessandra (re)discovers the contributions his ancestors made to the architecture of Constantine. This historical and biographical reconstruction is based on hybridization: photos,

dessinée maghrébine a longtemps été considérée comme un genre mineur vivant hors de sa région».

11 Intervention at the conference “Le monde arabe dans la bande dessinée francophone”, February 18, 2022. Accessed July 31, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXCn-JnTzTSQ>.

12 «Des gens pauvres, pleins d'espoirs, et ne reculant pas devant les tâches les plus rudes à accomplir».

magazine covers, and newspaper articles are integrated into the narrative, sometimes as originals, sometimes as drawn reproductions. This “meta-drawing” is an effective strategy: it breaks the rhythm of the narrative and presents historical documents of interest to the reader, integrating them directly into the narrative. As the pages turn, Alessandra seems to come to terms with his own personal history — and nevertheless, this graphic novel is the expression of unresolved stories and memories about the Algerian Independence War, which the author approaches in a neutral tone, confining himself to listing the facts.

Alien Species

The theme of migration links the stories of yesterday and today, but by inverted paths. While Ferrandez and Alessandra recount crossings from the north to the south of the Mediterranean, the contemporary world conjures up images of odysseys from the south to the north. Edmond Baudoin had already published the illustration book *Méditerranée* with Gallimard in 2017, which poetically told a story of migration and shipwreck. In 2018, he signed another Mediterranean-themed work, *Humains. La Roya est un fleuve*, in collaboration with his colleague Troubet (Jean-Marc Troubet). This comic strip reportage, with an introduction by Jean-Marie Le Clézio, recounts the week the two cartoonists spend between Ventimiglia and the Val Roya, following in the footsteps of migrants trying to cross the border between Italy and France. The pages are filled with episodes from an abnormal daily life, as well as portraits of the migrants and the people who help them. While the point of view on the events recounted is undoubtedly that of the two authors, a series of small speech bubbles accompany some of the portraits of the migrants, quoting their words. Despite various mediations — translation from the original languages into French, written versus oral formulations — *Humains* is an attempt to give a voice to those who have none.

The setting here is more explicitly Mediterranean than elsewhere, in its marine and hilly dimension, between Liguria and the Côte d’Azur. The sea is that of tourists on holiday, who barely get a dip in the water because near the border «the rocks are sharp and full of sea urchins»¹³ (Baudoin and Troubet 2018: 6), as well as that of migrants who «certainly can’t swim»¹⁴ and who take the «the passage of death» at the top of the hill (*ibidem*). It’s also the sea that the two cartoonists see through the window of the train going to Nice: «It’s blue, pure and bright»¹⁵ (Baudoin and Troubet 2018: 48), but to their eyes, it appears as a cemetery.

13 «Les rochers sont coupants et sont remplis d’oursins».

14 «Me doivent certainement pas savoir nager».

15 «Elle est bleue et pure. Lumineuse».

The work *Humains* by Baudoin and Troubet presents another interesting image that concerns those who look at the Mediterranean from its northern shore. When asked why he does it, Marco, a volunteer at the Ventimiglia border, replies: «The tomatoes no longer taste good, so I wanted to understand»¹⁶ (Baudoin and Troubet 2018: 92). Tomatoes, along with lemons and oranges — which, we will see, feature on many Syrian pages — are often associated with the Mediterranean imaginary and diet; but tomatoes, lemons and oranges come from elsewhere¹⁷. They are not indigenous species, but rather species alien to the Mediterranean. Thus, these fruits are the tangible sign of a journey and mixing typical of the Mediterranean; at the same time, ironically, they are also the *topoi* of an imaginary never free from the risk of stereotypes, and this on the basis of a supposed “authenticity”.

The image of (alien) species also returns to describe the Syrian diaspora, whose stories of forced migration are sadly the focus of many graphic novels in recent years. Their pages are full of images of men rebelling in the name of God and freedom, and other men shooting at them. But before depicting human beings, several Syrian works begin with the presence of plants: gardens dotted with citrus fruits, plants and flowers, that seem to suggest a lost paradise. *Haytham, une jeunesse syrienne* (2016) is a first-person account rewritten by journalist Nicolas Hénin and drawn by Korean cartoonist Kyungeun Park. It tells the story of the son of a Syrian activist, a refugee in France against his will. The graphic novel opens with the image of a boy sitting on a branch, and the words: «What I loved as a child was climbing the lemon trees in the garden. Planting onions under the orange trees. And eating clementines under the trees»¹⁸ (Hénin and Park 2016: 3). Even the first two panels in *Freedom Hospital* (2016) by Syrian visual artist Hamid Sulaiman show the black-and-white silhouette of an olive tree, a wall and a jasmine. There are few indications of the context: Turkey, near the Syrian border, March 2012, forty thousand victims since the start of the revolution. The contrast between the idyllic setting of the drawings and the harshness of the facts described in words strikes the reader.

16 «Les tomates n'ont plus de goût, j'ai voulu comprendre».

17 Back in 1940, Lucien Febvre wrote: «I can imagine the good Herodotus making his journey around the Eastern Mediterranean again today. What astonishment! These golden fruits, in these dark green shrubs, which he is told are “characteristic of the Mediterranean landscape”, orange trees, lemon trees, mandarin trees: but he has not the slightest recollection of having seen them in his lifetime... - By Jove! These are Far Easterners, carried by the Arabs» (Febvre 1940: 29; «J'imagine le bon Hérodote refaisant aujourd'hui son périple de la Méditerranée Orientale. Que d'étonnements! Ces fruits d'or, dans ces arbustes vert sombre, qu'on lui dit “caractéristiques entre tous du paysage méditerranéen”, orangers, citronniers, mandariniers : mais il n'a pas le moindre souvenir d'en avoir vu de son vivant... - Parbleu! Ce sont des Extrême-Orientaux, véhiculés par les Arabes»). Later, the discourse includes cacti, agaves, aloes, palms, cypresses, tomatoes, aubergines, chillies, etc.

18 «Ce que j'aimais, quand j'étais petit enfant, c'était grimper dans les citronniers du jardin. Planter des oignons au pied des orangers. Et manger des clémentines sous les arbres».

Among stories and testimonies of diaspora, *L'odyssée d'Hakim*, by Fabien Toulmé, has been a great success in France, to the point of being translated in several foreign countries. In three volumes, *L'odyssée d'Hakim* recounts the trials and tribulations of a young Syrian fleeing the regime of Bashar al-Hassad. Unlike the classic odyssey, however, there is no return. In these diaspora narratives, plant metaphors recur to signify belonging. Hakim, who spent his childhood «between school and his father's nursery»¹⁹ (Toulmé 2019: 21) and who meets coincidentally — or perhaps not — his future wife under a lemon tree, says at the start of his adventures: «In the end, we exiles are perhaps a bit like plants. When you uproot them and put them in a pot, they continue to grow, but with less strength and desire»²⁰ (Toulmé 2019: 260). The image effectively conveys resilience, but also the irreparable loss imposed by exile.

In general, the human and inhuman miseries find more space than anything non-human in this story of daily hardship. The landscape is given little space. Nevertheless, in several pages of the second volume of *L'odyssée*, the sea takes center stage when Hakim, with his baby Hadi, has to cross the waters separating Turkey from Greece. The double register of writing and image is very effective here in building a tormented crescendo to the sea crossing that ends in tragedy. The Mediterranean firstly appears as a sonorous presence: «We couldn't see it, but we could hear the sea»²¹ (Toulmé 2019: 193). Through Hakim's memories, we see a precise representation of the whole ritual that the smugglers impose on their clients, from the night-time wait on the beach to the crossing when one of the migrants, in exchange for a discount on the ticket, takes over driving the dinghy. Toulmé knows how to balance the space of the word, of the drawing and of color in the moment of disaster — the driver of the boat is disoriented by the lights on the opposite coast, the boat's engine breaks down, there is no signal to call for help and the situation degenerates. It is from the contrast between the black immensity of the sea at night and the few words that stand out at the top of the page that anguish arises in the reader: «We found ourselves in the middle of the water in a deadly silence»²² (Toulmé 2019: 195). Despite numerous other vicissitudes, this anguish is partially diluted when, in the end, we learn that Hakim manages to find the rest of his family in France and rebuild his life. However, in the epilogue to volume 3, the narrator-Toulmé declares that Hakim's son, Hadi, is now 6 years old. In Turkey, he often went to the beach with his parents and he loved it, but since his arrival in France, he has been very

19 «Entre l'école et la pépinière de son père».

20 «Finalement, nous, les exilés, on est peut-être un peu comme des plantes. Quand on les déracine et qu'on les met dans un pot, elles continuent de pousser, mais avec moins de force et d'envie».

21 «On ne la voyait pas, mais on entendait la mer».

22 «On s'est retrouvés au milieu de l'eau dans un silence de mort».

afraid of the water, in a sort of indelible mark that the Mediterranean crossing has left on him (Toulmé, “*Épilogue*”, 2019).

The Frog and the Snake

Still on the theme of revolt, but on other shores, the two Tunisian authors Seif Eddine Nechi and Aymen Mbarek have signed *Une révolte tunisienne. La légende de Chbayah* (2022), first published in Arabic and then translated into French by Marseille-based editions Alifbata. This work falls outside the strictly Francophone production, but it is interesting to consider it briefly.

Although set in the 1980s, this graphic novel is reminiscent of Tunisia in 2023. At the end of December 1983, a government-imposed increase in the price of cereals triggered riots in the streets — with the slogan «bread, freedom and dignity» (Nechi and Mbarek 2022: 120) (fig. 20.1) — and violent police repression.



Fig. 20.1 – *Une révolte tunisienne. La légende de Chbayah* (Nechi and Mbarek 2022); courtesy of Alifbata ©

Nechi and Mbarek decided to approach the events that took place between December 30, 1983 and January 6, 1984 in Tunis from a particular point of view. Against a backdrop of growing tension, a pirate radio station, run by

someone hiding behind the pseudonym Chbayah (ghost), disrupts official communications and spreads misinformation to the police, thereby siding with the demonstrators. This marginal but real episode is interwoven with the stories of a few fictional characters. The authors imagine that the pirate radio is launched by little Bachir, a novice in the political life of his country, and his grandfather Ahmed, a former soldier in the battle of Monte Cassino; in the middle, Salem, Bachir's father, who works in Tunisian institutions but who has a painful past as a militant student in 1970s Tunis.

Nechi and Mbarek have produced a work of great narrative and graphic quality. Several narratives intertwine, several temporal planes alternate and a certain multilingualism, albeit marginal, characterizes the work. In order not to be overheard, Rachid's grandfather and his hairdresser speak in Italian; elsewhere, brief incursions in Arabic make an appearance. Realistic scenes of urban *guerrilla* warfare, with smoke bombs and shouting from both sides, show the confrontation between the police and the demonstrators. Nechi and Mbarek uses the non-human to symbolize the human: in terms of violence, these two worlds seem to coincide. Indeed, several «interludes», of excellent pictorial quality, stage the struggle between the two sides in the much quieter form of a fight between a frog and a snake. Here, there is no place for words, but only for glances, expectations, and attacks. Once again, it seems that when the tension becomes excessive, showing with drawing, instead of showing with telling, is the preferred method of communication chosen by cartoonists and scriptwriters.

The Seas, Their Stories

The Ninth Art, in contact with the Mediterranean sea, gives life to different stories, in different forms. To speak of a singular Mediterranean imaginary is impossible today. While the sea constitutes a liquid continuity, the “Mediterraneans” are multiple, segmented and diversified according to the point of view adopted (French, French-speaking, Arabic), the period considered (colonial period, contemporary) and the country concerned²³. The (de) construction of the Mediterranean imaginary also involves the observation of this fragmentation of narratives. In this regard, it is worth mentioning again the meritorious translation operation that the Marseille-based publishing house Alifbata has been carrying out for the past few years. Alifbata translated and published another work from English into French, which features the theme of refusing to leave, in contrast to the strand of migrant literature discussed above:

23 The opposing intellectual positions on the unity and diversity of the Mediterranean have a long history, between proponents of unity (Braudel, Matvejević, Chambers) and diversity (Pirenne, Aboulafia). In this regard, we note the recent Italian publication of Horden and Purcell (2024).

Je ne partirai pas. Mon histoire est celle de la Palestine (2023), by Mohammad Sabaaneh. Here too, the prose is simple, concise, devoid of lengthy didactic texts. To convey the message of injustice and oppression, the album relies above all on the beauty of aesthetics and the simplicity of the graphic narrative: locked in his cell, a prisoner finds freedom through art.

If, as we have said, graphic narrative was traditionally considered “light” literature, today’s graphic novels prove capable of telling tough stories with great poetry. In this way, they oppose the exclusion, suppression and backgrounding mentioned at the beginning of this article. In the panorama of contemporary forms of storytelling, graphic novels constitute new forms of witnessing, telling, denouncing (and thus possibly redeeming) disasters involving human and non-human beings. This is possible precisely thanks to a storytelling that combines graphic signs and words, an association that is an empowering tool for these stories, capable of greater communicative capacity. Thus, graphic novels make it possible to reach a wide audience, without renouncing the story, but on the contrary emphasizing it through images. As science teaches us, the latter have a more immediate impact on the human brain, which is why a whole branch of “visual storytelling” studies has developed in recent years. Far from distracting or sublimating, the combination of writing and drawing generates narrative clarity and greater emotional involvement on the part of the reader. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that often the most violent scenes are entrusted precisely to the drawing, with little or any verbal commentary²⁴. Despite its dual resources, not even the graphic novel seems to escape ineffability.

If, as already mentioned, authors around the Mediterranean are increasingly exploiting the graphic novel to tell very different stories — sometimes epic, sometimes of ordinary everyday life — many francophone narratives stage stories of hunger, uprisings, and migrations in relation to the Middle Sea. These *topoi* seem emblematic of an unbalanced relationship, which graphic narrative denounces against all erasure. This system crisis concerns first and foremost the relationship between human beings (dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, the condition of women, migrants and foreign workers); then, in the background, the relationship between human and non-human (humans and animals, but also

24 See Nechi and Mbarek (2022: 134-135); Sulaiman (2016: 123, 152) (fig. 20.2); Sabaaneh (2023: 29). Sabaaneh also states in his introduction: «I did not draw the pages of this book. I used the linocut technique. In prison, I kept wondering how the other inmates managed to engrave their names on the rough walls. I myself was unable to write mine on the walls of my cell. That’s why today I’m determined to engrave their stories and share them with the world» (Sabaaneh 2023: 3; «Je n’ai pas dessiné les pages de ce livre. J’ai utilisé la technique de la linogravure. En prison, je n’ai cessé de me demander comment les autres détenus se débrouillaient pour graver leurs noms sur les cloisons rugueuses. J’ai été incapable, pour ma part, d’inscrire le mien sur les murs de ma cellule. C’est pourquoi je suis bien décidé aujourd’hui à graver leurs histoires et à les faire connaître au monde»).

humans and the environment); finally, between this «North» and «South», as between this «West» and «East» of the world, of which the Mediterranean, Paul Valéry's «ever-renewed sea»²⁵ (Valéry 1920: 157), Gabriel Audisio's «liquid continent»²⁶, remains a fundamental barycenter.



Fig. 20.2 – *Freedom Hospital* (Sulaiman 2016); courtesy of Éditions ça et là ©

25 «La mer toujours recommencée».

26 «There is no doubt in my mind that the Mediterranean is a continent, not an inland lake, but a kind of liquid continent with solidified contours» (Audisio, 1935: 23; «Il ne fait pas doute pour moi que la Méditerranée soit un continent, non pas un lac intérieur, mais une espèce de continent liquide aux contours solidifiés»).

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About the Contributors

Gaetano Albergo is Independent Researcher and teacher of philosophy at the Liceo Blaise Pascal in Giaveno (Torino), where leads the Department of History and Philosophy. He holds a PhD in Cognitive Sciences and was Visiting Assistant in Research in Philosophy at Yale University. He published several papers on the relationship between imagination and social cognition, with particular attention to the role of pretending for a theory of representational arts. He participated as a speaker at over 20 international conferences on philosophy and cognitive sciences. He is currently working on a book on Kendall Walton's theory of mimesis, in particular on the nature and origin of props that prescribe specific imaginings in literature.

Emily Antenucci is Visiting Assistant Professor of Italian at Vassar College. Her research and teaching interests are in twentieth and twenty-first century Italian literature and culture, with specific attention to feminist thought and its resonance with literature, performance, visual art, and film. Her work on feminist thought in the writings of Carla Lonzi, Natalia Ginzburg, and contemporary writer Espérance Hakuzwimana has appeared in *The Italianist* and in the forthcoming volume *Italian Feminist Thought Today and Tomorrow*.

Miriam Begliuomini is Research Fellow in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature and Modern Cultures at the University of Torino. She holds a PhD in French Studies from the University of Turin and worked as a lecturer at the University Jean Moulin - Lyon 3. Her research focuses on cultural exchanges in the Mediterranean and the Alps in the 20th century, the relationship between literature and the press, and literature and landscape. On these topics, she has recently published two monographs entitled *La Méditerranée de Gabriel Audisio: Cartographie d'une idée* (Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2023) and *Un joyeux flâneur des montagnes. Gli zig-zag di Rodolphe Töpffer in Valle d'Aosta* (Le Château Edizioni, 2023).

Pietro Deandrea is Full Professor in English Literature, Postcolonial Literature, and Literary Translation at the University of Torino, Italy. Among his publications are the monographs *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literatures* (Rodopi, 2002) and *New Slavery in Contemporary British Literature and Visual Arts: The Ghost and the Camp* (Manchester UP, 2015). He has also translated fiction, poetry, and drama by William Shakespeare, Moniza Alvi, William Beckford, André Brink, Ethan Coen, John Graham Davies, Buchi Emecheta, Hannah Lowe, Pauline Melville, Abi Morgan, and Niyi Osundare.

Paola Della Valle is Associate Professor at the University of Torino. She specializes in New Zealand and Pacific literature, postcolonial and gender studies, and eco-criticism. Her articles appeared in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Textus*, *NZSA Bulletin of New Zealand Studies*, *Loxias*, *Le Simplegadi*, *RiCognizioni*, *Semicerchio*, *Lingue e Linguaggi*, *Altre Modernità*, and *Il Tolomeo*. She published the monographs *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Maori Literature* (2010), *Stevenson nel Pacifico: una lettura postcoloniale* (2013), and *Priestley e il tempo, il tempo di Priestley* (2016). She has recently contributed to the volumes *Uncommon Wealths in Postcolonial Fiction* (2018), *Antroposcenari: Storie, paesaggi, ecologie*, (2018), *Trees in Literatures and the Arts: Human/Arboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene* (2021), *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film* (2023), and *Always Connect: Transdisciplinarity and Intercultural Contact in Literary Discourse* (2024). She is a member of the International Advisory Board of the *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies*.

Lorenzo Denicolai is Researcher in Cinema, Photography, and Television at the University of Turin, where he teaches Image Languages and Media Theories and Audiovisual Communication Methodologies. His work focuses on the human-technology relationship and the use of audiovisual media in education. He has authored essays in national and international scholarly journals in the field. He has published the monographs *Scritture mediali. Riflessioni, rappresentazioni ed esperienze mediaeducative* (with A. Parola, Mimesis 2017) and *Mediantropi. Introduzione alla quotidianità dell'uomo tecnologico* (FrancoAngeli, 2018). He has edited the volumes *Robotmedium: dispositivi, intelligenze, cinema* (Meltemi, 2022) and *Racconti paralleli: la (de)legittimazione della scienza tra media, tecnologia e immaginario* (with G. Nencioni, FrancoAngeli 2024). He is a member of the scientific committee of 'Luciano Gallino Laboratory for Behavioral Simulation and Educational Robotics' (University of Turin) and co-referent of two inter-university research group, on the role of media in knowledge dissemination, and on Cinema, Media and Childhood.

Giulia A. Disanto is Associate Professor of German Literature at the University of Salento. Her research interests include German literature from the eighteenth century to the present, notably with regard to the interplay between literature and history (war and peace studies), in avant-garde studies (in particular: dadaism, the literary work of Kurt Schwitters), in ecocriticism, in the literary genre of poetry. The main authors she has dealt with have been Paul Celan, J.W. Goethe, Franz Kafka, Hans Werner Richter, Erich M. Remarque, Raoul Schrott, Kurt Schwitters and Frank Wedekind. She translated into Italian works by Döblin, Schwitters and Schrott. She has appeared as speaker at several national and international scientific conferences emphasizing her topics of

research and is currently part of the editorial team of *Ecozon@. European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*.

Valentina Domenici is Associate Professor of Cinema, Photography, and Television at Roma Tre University (Department of Education). Her current research interests focus on the relationship between Generation Z and participatory digital media and the use of audiovisual media in education. She is the director of the 'Cinema and Visual Culture' series for Armando Publishing and the author of articles in scientific journals in the field. Among her most recent monographic publications is *Le nuove generazioni nel paesaggio mediale contemporaneo. Tendenze, icone e modelli dei giovani attraverso il prisma del cinema e dei media* (Armando, 2021).

Fabien Landron is Associate Professor at the University of Corsica Pasquale Paoli, where he teaches Italian language and culture. Director of Studies in Modern Foreign Languages and Head of International Relations - Cooperation with Italy, he is also a member of the UMR CNRS 6240 LISA, and scientific leader of the CITÀ multidisciplinary axis. His research focuses mainly on the figures, currents, identities, transnational circulation and reception of contemporary Italian cinema and television series produced in Italy from 2000 to the present day. He is the author of numerous articles, essays and scientific works, and is also Vice-President of the Ajaccio Italian Film Festival.

Víctor Martín García is PhD Student currently working on his doctoral project at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) in which he is dealing with the practice of appropriation cinema. His ongoing research focuses in particular on the different audiovisual manifestations capable of creating alternative narratives of memory, suggesting new discursive hypotheses through the reinterpretation of the images characteristic of this type of production. He holds a degree in Art History and Fine Arts (UCM). He did a Master's degree in Contemporary Art History and Visual Culture (UCM-UAM-MNCARS). He published the essay, "Il film che visse due volte: il riutilizzo delle immagini di *Vertigo* e la sua persistenza attraverso i nuovi media" in the journal *VCS* #6-7 and participated in the monograph *Madrid, Ciudad de cine* as co-author with Dolores Furió Vita in the chapter, "Para una imagen de Madrid. Recontextualizando las filmaciones soviéticas sobre la guerra civil".

Alessio Mattana is Postdoctoral Fellow in English literature at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Turin, Italy, where he also teaches English literature. His research interests primarily lie in the study of the mutual influences between science and narrative in the long eighteenth century. He has recently published a book on the influence of

the epistemology of Newtonianism in prose narrative, as well as articles on non-human points of view in Margaret Cavendish's poetry and on the narrative of natural disasters in Daniel Defoe's *The Storm*.

Dora Renna is a tenured Assistant Professor of English Language and Translation at the University for Foreigners of Siena. Her main research interests are audiovisual translation, language variation, intercultural pragmatics, discourse analysis, applied linguistics, corpus linguistics, and multimodality. She is also a member of the editorial board of the DOAJ and ANVUR-indexed journal of English and American Studies *Iperstoria*.

Biancamaria Rizzardi is Full Professor of English Literature and of Literatures of the English Speaking Countries at the University of Pisa. Appointed Visiting Professor at the University of Toulouse - Jean Jaurès (FR) for several years, she has founded and managed the first second-level Master in Postcolonial Translation. Her research interests and publications include Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, Romantic and late-Romantic Poetry, Victorian Poetry, Postcolonial Studies, Anglo-Canadian, Australian, and Anglo-Indian Poetry, and Translation Studies. She is the director of the editorial series *Diagoseria*, published by ETS, Pisa. Her most recent published works are: "Prelude and Solitude: Notes on the Female Characters in English Postcolonial Literature" (2021); "Orizzonti danteschi contemporanei tra Occidente e Oriente" (2022); "'We accept the reality of the world with which we're presented': The Truman Show effect" (2022). With Dennis Looney and Daniela Fargione, she is the editor of *COSMO's* special issue *Dante and Us: The Reception of Dante in Modern Anglo-American Culture* (2022).

Chiara Rolla is Associate Professor of French literature at the University of Genoa. Her research interests focus on contemporary French narrative prose. She published the first monograph on Michel Chaillou (*Michel Chaillou, arpenteur évasif*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2020) and several studies on other contemporary writers (C. Garcin, L. Mauvignier, P. Senges, M. Darrieussecq, C. Gailly). Together with Elisa Bricco, she edited issue no. 21 of the journal *Arabeschi* entitled "Antropocene: proposte artistiche per sviluppare un pensiero critico". Together with Chiara Fedriani, she edited issue 41 of the journal *Publiforum*, entitled: "Pensare l'antropocene: prospettive linguistiche, letterarie, artistiche" (2024). Her interests also include seventeenth-century French literature, especially narrative prose from the first half of the century (*L'apologie du roman. À la recherche d'un statut du roman dans la France de la première moitié du XVIIe siècle*, Aracne, 2006) and women's autobiographical writing. She also works on literary translation and ancient texts (M. Chaillou, *Elogio del démodé*, Ed. Dell'Orso, 2024; Francesco di Sales, *Lettere (1585-1604)*, Città Nuova, 2016).

Gabriel Serbu is Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Rijeka within a 3-year YUFE Programme focused on the theme of “European Identity and Responsibilities in a Global World.” He completed his PhD at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona in 2019 with a thesis on the interference between philosophy and literature in the works of J. M. Coetzee. Gabriel also holds an MA in foreign languages and literatures from the University of Torino, and has been a visiting researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. His research interests include philosophical hermeneutics, literary theory and aesthetics, with particular emphasis on the thought of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo.

Alberto Spadafora is Postdoctoral Researcher and adjunct professor in the Department of Languages, Foreign Literatures, and Modern Cultures at the University of Torino. His research interests are in Media, Audiovisual and Visual Culture Studies from an aesthetic approach and an environmental perspective. He is the author of *Cinematography Studies. La fotografia cinematografica tra medialità, tecno-estetica e cultura metavisuale* (Meltemi, 2024). He has written articles published in *Comunicazioni Sociali: Journal of Media, Performing Arts and Cultural Studies*; *CoSMo: Comparative Studies in Modernism*; *Elephant & Castle: Laboratorio dell'immaginario*; *The Cinematography Journal*; *Imago: Studi di cinema e media*; *Russica Romana: Rivista internazionale di studi russistici*.

Annarita Taronna is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Bari “Aldo Moro” – Department of Education, Psychology, and Communication Sciences. Her research areas include gender studies, translation studies, colonial and postcolonial studies, the use of English as a lingua franca in migratory contexts marked by gender-based violence, and linguistic mediation in intercultural contexts.

Lavinia Torti is Research Fellow at the University of Bologna, working on the PRIN PNRR project *For an Atlas of Italian Ecological Literature: From the Great Acceleration to the Pandemic* (LEDA). She has taught Italian Language and Contemporary Literature at Sorbonne University and previously held a research fellowship at the University of Bologna for the *Silva* project, which focuses on sustainability in Italy through literature, visual arts, and architecture. In 2022, she completed a PhD at the University of Bologna, jointly with Sorbonne University, with a dissertation examining the relationship between ekphrasis and iconotext in contemporary Italian prose. She is the author of the monograph *Doppie esposizioni. Forme dell'iconotesto italiano contemporaneo* (2023) and co-editor, with Beniamino Della Gala, of the collected volume *Pixel. Letteratura e media digitali* (2021). Her essays include studies on various Italian authors of the late 20th century, with a particular focus on Giorgio Manganelli.

Alessandro Vescovi is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Milano. His main interests are Victorian novel and Indian writing in English. He is the author of a monograph on the short story as a genre, a volume on *Amitav Ghosh* (Le Lettere, 2012), and several articles on Indian writers. He is editor of *The Topicality of the Shadow Lines* (Torino, 2020) and *Amitav Ghosh's Culture Chromosome* (Brill, 2021), edited with Asis De. His latest monograph is entitled *Covert Hinduism, Overt Secularism: A Postsecular Reading of the Indian English Novelistic Tradition* (Milano University Press, 2024). He is part of the board of postcolonial journals and secretary of the Italian Association for the Study of Anglophone Literatures (AISCLI).

Lia Zola is Associate Professor in Cultural Anthropology at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and Modern Cultures, University of Torino. Her research interests include environmental anthropology, Siberian shamanism in contemporary perspectives, local cultures and Alpine anthropology, with a focus on the relationship between humans and non-humans. Her most recent publications include: "Cunning as...a wolf. Multispecies Relations between humans and wolves in Eastern Siberia" (*Lagoonscapes*, 2021), and "Is This the Same Nature we Used to Know? Assessing Local Knowledge in the Sakha Republic" (*Shaman*, 2024).

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Reframing Souths

Ecological Perspectives on the South in Literature, Film,
and New Media

Edited by Carmen Concilio and Alberto Baracco

The volume offers a multidisciplinary inquiry into the manifold representations of the South(s), approached through an ecocritical and decolonial lens. Edited by Carmen Concilio and Alberto Baracco, the volume gathers contributions from scholars across literature, philosophy, media and visual studies to interrogate the South(s) not simply as a geographic entity, but as a dynamic cultural and epistemological construct. Divided into two sections — respectively devoted to “Literary, Ecocritical, Decolonial, and Comparative Readings” and “Images, Representations, and Visual Cultures” — the volume explores how Souths are imagined, narrated, and visualized across temporal, spatial, and media boundaries. Essays address oceanic and blue humanities, multispecies entanglements, ecological ethics, postcolonial narratives, environmental activism, and visual ecocriticism. Through its wide-ranging and timely perspectives, the volume offers a nuanced exploration of ecocritical concerns, capturing the shifting, dynamic quality of Souths and their role today in postcolonial literature, audiovisual production, and the humanities.

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