

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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A cura di Elisa Bolchi e Davide Vago

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VOLCANIC MATTERS: MAGMATIC CINEMA, ECOCRITICISM, AND ITALY

ELENA PAST

Return to the Aeolian Islands (*Fughe e approdi*, 2010) chronicles director Giovanna Taviani's journey to the Aeolian Islands, a volcanic archipelago off the coast of Sicily and setting for a host of films. *Return* documents the islands' geological past in a study of ecological, and not just cinematic history. This essay begins to unravel the threads of a magmatic Aeolian landscape where volcanoes, cinema, and memory collaborate in the creation of more-than-human stories.

Keywords: Italian cinema, ecocriticism, volcanoes, Aeolian Islands, Giovanna Taviani, posthumanism

Volcanoes are geological spectacles that have long captivated the human imagination, generating powerful rituals, histories, literatures, poems, and myths. Ancient stories correlated volcanoes with war, weapons, hell; the horned, red giant known in Japanese mythology as the Oni monster; the Greek volcano and fire god Hephaestus; and the Roman god of fire, Vulcan¹. The Aeolian Islands are said to be the home of Aeolus, Greek god of the winds, as well as the angry Cyclopes. Driven by deep, subterranean geological movement, the thermal convection in the earth's crust, volcanoes offer dazzling, visible clues to the processes that underlie existence on the planet. For some, like for poet Giacomo Leopardi, they provide incontrovertible evidence of human frailty and our inevitable mortal demise: the human is, suggests the poet, "nato a perir", or "born to die", and the volcano "minaccia / A lui strage"². In the poem *La Ginestra*, the eruption at Pompeii is evoked with a magmatic lexicon of violent geological movement:

così d'alto piombando,
Dall'utero tonante
Scagliata al ciel profondo,
Di ceneri e di pomici e di sassi
Notte e ruina, infusa
Di bollenti ruscelli
O pel montano fianco

¹ Some legends suggest that Vulcan resided under Etna, but Etna was supposed to be connected on a subterranean level with Vulcano and Stromboli; N. Genovese, *Cineolie: Le Isole Eolie e il cinema*, Edizioni del Centro Studi, Lipari 2010, p. 17.

² G. Leopardi, *Canti*, translated and annotated by J. Galassi, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York 2010, pp. 292-293.

Furiosa tra l'erba
 Di liquefatti massi
 E di metalli e d'infocata arena
 Scendendo immensa piena,
 Le cittadi che il mar là su l'estremo
 Lido aspergea, confuse
 E infranse e ricoperse
 In pochi istanti³.

Leopardi's dramatic metaphors capture matter between states, and assign agencies and volitions that defy any static notion of nature: boiling streams, enflamed sand, a mountain that hurls, confuses, and infringes. *La Ginestra*'s poetic energy comes in no small part from earth energy, and sketches a "visibile parlare" that, unlike the images on the walls of Dante Alighieri's *Purgatory*, does not just 'seem' to move, but decisively 'does' move. The volcanoes' magmatic movement rivets the human gaze. Early scientific accounts of volcanoes, like Lucretius' description of Etna in *De Rerum Natura*, work to draw our eyes to the skies:

The flaming storm, aroused for a destruction
 That is no mere mishap, first overwhelms
 The fields of the Sicilians, and then
 Draws all the neighboring people to look
 At it⁴.

Since volcanoes are one of the most intensely visible testaments to the fact that our earth is on the move, it is unsurprising that the fiery mountains also have a privileged relationship to the kinetic language of cinema, that art of moving pictures. Sharing an impulse to mobility and visibility, a cinema that turns its gaze to volcanic landscapes finds a world that speaks its language.

The volcanic Aeolian Islands just north of Sicily have been assiduously documented on film since 1946, when a group of four men sailed from the port of Milazzo to Lipari and formed the group Panària Film⁵. Francesco Alliata, who had experience behind the camera documenting the Second World War for the Istituto Luce, developed a waterproof housing for his 35 mm Arriflex camera and, together with his companions, filmed the short docu-

³ G. Leopardi, *Canti*, pp. 300-302. The English translation by Jonathan Galassi reads: "so, plummeting like lead from overhead, / hurled out of the thundering womb / deep into the sky, / night and ruin of ashes, / dirt, and stones, / infused with boiling rivers / or steaming in the grass / of the mountain flank, / an enormous downward flood / of liquid boulders, / metal, burning sand, / fused and broke apart / and buried within instants / the cities that the sea lapped / there on the far shore"; pp. 301-303.

⁴ Quoted in: H. Sigurdsson, *Melting the Earth: The History of Ideas on Volcanic Eruptions*, Oxford UP, New York 1999, p. 45.

⁵ Although the islands' popularity as cinematic destination really began after the war, Genovese also identifies several documentaries made in the early twentieth century. *Vulcani d'Italia* (1909), which has been lost, presumably included the Aeolian Islands; the shorts *L'eruzione dello Stromboli* (1918) and *Voli sui vulcani d'Italia: l'Etna e lo Stromboli* (1927), also both lost, certainly did. N. Genovese, *Cineolie*, pp. 22-23.

mentary *Cacciatori sottomarini*⁶. Alliaata's pioneering work with underwater photography inspired Roberto Rossellini, who helped support the group's efforts, to film on the islands several years later⁷. Rossellini began filming *Stromboli: Terra di Dio* (1950), starring his new love Ingrid Bergman, in April of 1949, just before William Dieterle began filming *Vulcano* (1950), starring his recently jilted lover Anna Magnani. The ensuing 'war of the volcanoes', or the tensions between Rossellini, Bergman, and Magnani as they worked on neighboring islands, hastened the international press to visit the Aeolian Islands and to document the romantic crisis. The two films, which both featured exciting volcano-driven drama (clouds of sulfuric gas, rumbling eruptions, flying rock, etc.), along with the copious reporting from the islands, also served as location scouting for future films, sealing their fame as destinations for cinematic productions⁸.

Fughe e approdi is a 2010 narrative documentary that recounts director Giovanna Taviani's journey to the Aeolian archipelago, and it is an archive chronicling the history of films made there. The film is a voyage in Taviani's memory and in cinematic history: her father and uncle (the Fratelli Taviani, or Taviani brothers) are among the most celebrated living Italian directors, and the film charts her complex past as actress, daughter and niece, cinephile, and film scholar. Her family vacationed on the island of Salina when she was a child, but the Taviani brothers also worked there, most famously situating one of the episodes of *Kaos* (1984) on Lipari's pumice cliffs. The footage that punctuates *Return* alternates between Taviani's contemporary digital film, clips from narrative films (*Stromboli*, *Vulcano*, *L'avventura* [1960], *Kaos*, *Caro diario* [1993], *Il Postino* [1994], among others), clips from documentary films (*Bianche Eolie* [1948], *Isole di fuoco* [1955], *Alicudi* [1961], and more), still photographs, and home video featuring Taviani and her brother and cousins. Yet any attempt to categorize the diverse archive of footage (celluloid or digital, of varying aspect ratios, black-and-white or color, fiction or documentary) that composes the film *Return* oversimplifies the categories, because each grouping shifts to admit others. Taviani the documentarian appears as an actress in *Kaos*; Nanni Moretti, director and star of *Caro diario*, visits the Taviani family and makes an appearance in home video footage; Taviani's father, director of *Kaos*, appears in *Return* to talk about his daughter as a child and his own filmmaking practice; *Return* is in part black-and-white and color film, historic and contemporary at the same time. Memory and history, in *Return*, are both deeply and irretrievably cinematic.

In following some of the delicately interlaced memories, histories, and stories, this essay proposes that the voices that speak through Taviani's film are more-than-human voices, as well, and that *Return*'s magmatic narrative uncovers a hybrid world co-constituted in

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

⁷ The four friends were Alliaata, Pietro Moncada, Renzo Avanzo, and Quintino Di Napoli. Avanzo was Luchino Visconti's brother-in-law and Rossellini's cousin. N. Genovese, *Cineolie*, pp. 25-26.

⁸ Nino Genovese's *Cineolie*, lists twenty fiction films and more than sixty documentaries that were filmed, from 1909-2010, entirely or in part on the Aeolian Islands (see the filmographies, pp. 177-181). See also a 2012 documentary film titled *La guerra dei vulcani*, directed by Francesco Patierno, that tells the story of Magnani, Bergman, and Rossellini.

the exchange between islanders, volcanoes, Mediterranean waters, and film productions. By juxtaposing contemporary shots of the islands with past films' portrayals of these same landscapes, *Return* also documents the archipelago's geological past – and its volcanic past in particular – in a careful study of ecological, and not just cinematic history. “Geography”, as John Calderazzo notes, “means ‘earth script,’ terrestrial writing, the planet’s story”⁹. In *Return to the Aeolian Islands*, the intertwined stories of volcanoes, immigrants, islanders, film productions, and cinematic technologies show the reciprocal relationship linking earth script and film script. Examining a film that is insistently focused on geography, memory, and place, it is critical to note that memory, as material ecocriticism shows, “does not only reside in the mind, but rather in the complex interrelations among bodies, minds, and landscapes”¹⁰. In this film, in other words, we can understand, as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands does in an essay on landscape, memory, and her mother, that “symbolic reflection and sensual perception” are “specific embodied practices that are not only physically but historically located – enabled differently in the context of different technologies, social relations, and interactions with the more-than-human world”¹¹. The four active volcanoes on the Italian peninsula, Etna, Vesuvius, Stromboli, and Vulcano, set it apart from other European regions¹². They testify to its geological youth (it emerged from the sea less than a million years ago) and to its continued instability (in fact the African plate continues to press northward by about 1 cm a year, shrinking the Mediterranean basin and creating volcanic subduction zones¹³). In the Aeolian Island chain, Stromboli and Vulcano rumble, spew sulfuric gasses, and spit flaming lava; Stromboli has been continuously active for the last two thousand and five hundred years, and Vulcano last erupted in 1888-90, recently enough for there to be early photographs of pyroclastic flows (deadly, fast-moving currents of gas and rock) running down its sides¹⁴. These islands accelerate the slow geological time of the lithic and thus urge conversations between landscapes, memory, and bodies.

The volcanic stories and myths cited above suggest how the volcanic imagination seems to be coded as stereotypically masculine, driven by images of warcraft, weaponry, and angry male gods. The Aeolian Islands, however, with their shorelines and active volcanoes, perform the fact that human identities are also mobile and porous, perpetually constituted by and reconstituted in collaboration with their surroundings in a way that resonates strongly with a material feminist understanding of our relationship with the more-than-human world. The multiform alliances forged in making the film – alliances between old and new

⁹ J. Calderazzo, *Rising Fire: Volcanoes and Our Inner Lives*, Lyons Press, Guilford 2004, p. 132.

¹⁰ C. Mortimer-Sandilands, *Landscape, Memory, and Forgetting: Thinking Through (My Mother's) Body and Place*, in *Material Feminisms*, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman ed., Indiana UP, Bloomington 2008, pp. 265-287, p. 279.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹² P. Bevilacqua, *The Distinctive Character of Italian Environmental History*, in M. Armiero – M. Hall ed., *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2010, pp. 15-32, 16-17.

¹³ H. Sigurdsson, *Melting the Earth: The History of Ideas on Volcanic Eruptions*, Oxford UP, New York 1999, p. 34.

¹⁴ N. Calanchi et al., *Guida ai vulcani e alla natura delle Isole Eolie*, Stabilimento Poligrafico Fiorentino, Calenzano 2007, p. 57.

film stock; humans, goats, and volcanoes; young documentary film crews and elderly island inhabitants, among others – are dynamic, generative, and nonlinear. Looking specifically at encounters of women, cinema, and volcanoes, the energy rumbling beneath the surface of the islands drives an understanding of landscapes as agents, and shows us what Serpil Oppermann describes as feminist ecocriticism’s “more reciprocally transformed sense of the human and nonhuman worlds”¹⁵, a perspective that favors “heterogeneity, [and] within which difference and otherness (in the sense of race, class, sex, gender, species), are indexed on a non-hierarchical ideology and appear as non-disjunctive categories”¹⁶. By suturing together many different films from so many different time frames and genres, and by doing so in a non-hierarchical fashion, *Return* offers a multitude of ways for human and non-human agents to “experiment with different modes of constituting subjectivity and different ways of inhabiting our corporeality”¹⁷.

Rossellini’s *Stromboli* (1950), starring Ingrid Bergman, William Dieterle’s *Vulcano* (1950), featuring Anna Magnani, and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960), starring his muse Monica Vitti, all filmed on the Aeolian Islands, are critical points of reference for Taviani’s voyage. Many of the documentary’s interviewees are also women: the elderly woman on Lipari who remembers the political prisoners on the island; the elderly woman on Vulcano who recalls Anna Magnani; the group of women who remember their mothers’ stories of marriage by proxy. Women protest lost loves, rebel against island limits, and spin tales of witches (the flying *maiare*), mysterious fiery-eyed donkeys, and perilous waterspouts. They confess their fear of volcanoes and talk about how, when men migrated *en masse* to other countries in search of better job opportunities, women stayed and worked. Film clips and still shots of photographs and drawings punctuate their memories and reinforce, in visual terms, their recollections.

Yet it is not simply the presence of all of these women in the film that is of interest here, nor is it the fact that *Return* is a significant cinematic work directed by a woman in an industry where, whether in Italy or in Hollywood, women are vastly underrepresented¹⁸. Rather, the female protagonists’ relationships to the volcanoes are touchstones for the ecological, visual, and existential play of absence/presence, memory/forgetting. Throughout the film, Taviani forms allegiances with Rossellini’s Karin, Dieterle’s Maddalena, and Antonioni’s Claudia, but also with her younger self, as she appeared in her father’s and uncle’s film *Kaos* (1984), and with the material landscapes where the narratives unfold. More importantly, *Return* also reframes and recasts the films that it cites so that – in a

¹⁵ S. Oppermann, *Feminist Ecocriticism. A Posthumanist Direction in Ecocritical Trajectory*, in *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, G. Gaard – S.C. Estok – S. Oppermann ed., Routledge, New York 2013, pp. 19-36, p. 28.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ R. Braidotti, *The Politics of ‘Life Itself’ and New Ways of Dying*, in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, D. Coole – S. Frost ed., Duke UP, Durham 2010, pp. 201-218, p. 209.

¹⁸ In April 2015, the American Civil Liberties Union called for an investigation into gender bias and discrimination in major Hollywood studios, citing studies that show that a tiny percentage of top-grossing films are directed by women. C. Buckley, *A.C.L.U., Citing Bias Against Women, Wants Inquiry Into Hollywood’s Hiring Practices*, “New York Times”, 12 May 2015.

way consistent with the material feminist notion of a plurivocal, non-hierarchical (here cinematic) practice – the directorial role cedes its centrality to other players. The telluric energy rumbling beneath the surface of the islands drives an understanding of landscapes as agents, and of the collaborative, continually shifting play between cinema, humans, and the more-than-human world. Working together, volcanoes, memory, and cinema map a new history of Italian film, where a “distributed agency” emerges, no longer only proper to human actors but to matter itself, in what Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann call the “complex, nonlinear, co-evolutionary interplay of human and nonhuman agency”¹⁹.

Volcanoes are “the manifestation at the surface of a planet or satellite of internal thermal processes through the emission at the surface of solid, liquid, or gaseous product”²⁰. Volcanoes, in other words, are a planet’s externalization of internal forces, and perhaps for this reason have been such powerful metaphors for human emotions, and such vibrant spaces for the encounter of myth and *materia*. The fiery mountains also have a long history of relationship to the female, a relationship that is both symbolic and material. Most notably, female sacrifices to appease angry volcanic gods are well-documented in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and the Incan Empire, with young girls either thrown into craters, into volcanic lakes, or buried at their summits²¹. In this sense, human history performs its wary antagonism in the face of telluric forces, and women are figured both as victims and perpetrators of such conflicts. Such antagonism dominates the films by Rossellini, Dieterle and Antonioni. The films’ paratextual marketing materials, in the form of publicity posters, feature images of the female leads in the foreground with smoke or fire or an active volcano flaming in the background. One of the posters for the film *Vulcano* announces in bold red letters that it is: “Untamed! Unashamed! Raw and Violent!” In a clip cited in *Return*, Bergman paces around a square on Stromboli, clutching her hair and crying, “I want to get out! I want to get out!”. Magnani staggers wearily through clouds of sulfuric gas and cries on her knees in front of a local church. In many ways, Rossellini’s and Dieterle’s films – or at least certainly the paratexts that surround them – are stories based in dualities: human vs. nonhuman, woman vs. man, nature vs. culture, diva vs. volcano. As such, they participate in the “dualistic otherness framed by the ‘gendered and dualistic symbolism’ in Western thought”²².

¹⁹ S. Iovino – S. Oppermann, *Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych*, “Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment”, 19, 2012, 3, pp. 448-475, p. 451.

²⁰ P. Francis – C. Oppenheimer, *Volcanoes*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2004, p. 2.

²¹ J. Calderazzo, *Rising Fire: Volcanoes and Our Inner Lives*, Lyons Press, Guilford 2004, pp. 73-75. Specifically, Calderazzo recounts in *Rising Fire* that fierce “rituals of appeasement” happened in Nicaragua, where a young girl was thrown into the crater of the Coseguina volcano every twentyfive years; in El Salvador, girls were thrown into lakes to keep volcanoes from exploding. At Lake Ilopango, such an appeasement may have happened as recently as 1880; p. 73. High-altitude graves in Peru, Chile, and Argentina reveal young girls buried ritualistically at the summit of volcanoes by Incan shamans; pp. 73-75. For more on volcanoes, narratives, and myths, see J. Calderazzo, *Rising Fire*.

²² S. Oppermann, *Feminist Ecocriticism. A Posthumanist Direction in Ecocritical Trajectory*, in G. Gaard – S.C. Estok – S. Oppermann ed., *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, Routledge, New York 2013, pp. 19-36, 20.

Yet while volcanoes, for their explosive power, might in some ways lend themselves to antagonistic understandings of the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world, they are also sites where resistance to that understanding can be built. Critical to the feminist idea of a dis-anthropocentric heterogeneity is the notion of dynamism, a notion that according to cultural geographer Doreen Massey characterizes space and place, not just time: “The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. [...] Places viewed this way are open and porous²³”. In parallel with this notion, Massey argues that: “Geography matters to the construction of gender²⁴, and recalls the traditions of Western thought which aligns time with the masculine and codes space as feminine. In these cultural codes, then, masculine time is credited with “history, progress, civilization, politics and transcendence,” while feminine space is marked by “stasis, passivity and depoliticization²⁵”. Massey advocates that the kinetic and ontologically mobile affirmation “keep moving!” can be a “gender-disturbing message” that overturns such essentialist notions, but she warns that: “The challenge is to achieve this whilst at the same time recognizing one’s necessary locatedness and embeddedness/embodiedness, and taking responsibility for it²⁶”. Messages regarding the planet’s porous dynamism abound in the posthuman perspective, even where mountains and rocks are concerned; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen insists that “Flow is the truth of stone, not its aberration²⁷”. Volcanoes, though, show us in human time the way that landscapes are mobile places, and when combined with the kinetic powers of cinema, they keep our eyes trained on the flows and forces that constantly shape and re-shape human and more-than-human history.

Thus *Return to the Aeolian Island*’s 2010 reclaiming of the films referenced above destabilizes and redirects the forces that portray women as volatile (or untamed! Unashamed! Raw and Violent!), specifically by keeping things moving. From a rocking sailboat to a gently rocking camera, from archival film footage to contemporary material, from 1940s to 1960s to 2009, production crew and cinematic production are constantly nomadic, moving from island to island²⁸. But humans are not the only beings on the move. Significantly, *Return* also focuses on the ‘geography’ of the images, the etching of landscape history on film, and thus it lends evidence of how volcanoes, too, write geographic and cinematic history, and of how volcanoes, too, keep landscapes in motion.

Return begins with a shot of a Strombolian eruption on top of the eponymous volcano. A still shot of the sea at sunset is alive with movement, as wisps of ash move quietly around the edges of the frame, and then a deep rumble, and lava erupts explosively. As the open-

²³ D. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1999, p. 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷ J.J. Cohen, *Stories of Stone*, “Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies”, 2010, 1, pp. 56-63, 57.

²⁸ These chronological shifts correspond to Braidotti’s idea of the nomadic: “Freed from chronological linearity and the logo-centric gravitational force, memory in the posthuman nomadic mode is the active reinvention of a self that is joyfully discontinuous, as opposed to being mournfully consistent. Memories need the imagination to empower the actualization of virtual possibilities in the subject.” R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Malden, Polity MA 2013, p. 167.

ing titles appear over the continuing eruption, the edges of film strip rolling by on the left map cinema onto geography, or film script over earth script, acknowledging the mobile powers of both and the collaborative relationship that will link them in this film. Shortly thereafter, the film introduces its palimpsestic strategy of overlaying archival film footage with graphic matches of the same landscapes in color, or using innovative eyeline matches in which a character in a black-and-white film gazes on a contemporary landscape in color. Thus the film crew spent significant time ‘matching’ archival shots to contemporary landscapes. Yet to say that the volcanic landscapes are ever the ‘same’ is reductive, and the film in many ways reminds us of this fact.

Posthumanist thinking has noted the purported human inability to distinguish significant differences between nonhuman animals and objects, suggesting that our eyes and minds are trained primarily to appreciate the subtle nuances only in the human face²⁹. Volcanoes, however, offer a form and figure of a landscape that seems to encourage differentiation, demonstrating that this ostensible human incapacity is in part only a failure of attention, and perhaps of imagination. *Return* is structured around the geographic, geologic, and narrative particularity of the archipelago, starting on the large island of Lipari; traveling to neighboring Vulcano, Salina, Stromboli, Alicudi, Panarea, and the rock Lisca Bianca; and narrating the differing ‘characters’ of each island. In fact, volcanoes, argues Calderazzo, have “character,” and “volcano character varies widely: some degas wildly just before an eruption, some don’t; some, like Mount St. Helens bulging out toward Spirit Lake and stubborn old Harry Truman, deform big-time before erupting, some hardly do at all”³⁰. In the Aeolian Island chain, the two currently active volcanoes Stromboli and Vulcano in fact give their names to two different definitions of volcanic activity, strombolian and vulcanian³¹. Strombolian activity is the result of low-viscosity magma rising through a conduit constantly, slowly, and smoothly; it is visually dramatic and relatively predictable, as volcanoes go³². Vulcanian activity, on the other hand, sends up much higher columns when it erupts – although it does so less frequently – and is more violently explosive³³. Vulcano, then, is notable for its covered crater which steams sulfuric gases through many fumaroles, and it promises to be much more dangerous when it blows its top (which, according to historical precedent, it could do at any time). As objects of study for millennia (Aristotle wrote about Vulcano, and Strabo and Pliny the Elder about Stromboli, for example), these particular volcanoes have long had a role in storytelling about planetary processes. Although contemporary science may shift our understanding of precisely how plate tectonics work or how the earth’s mantle moves, volcanoes and volcanic stories also remind us that, as the Icelandic volcanologist Haraldur Sigurdsson shows, our intellectual prede-

²⁹ See, for example, Carrie Rohman’s discussion of Levinas’ estimation of the importance of the human face, in *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013, pp. 1-29.

³⁰ J. Calderazzo, *Rising Fire: Volcanoes and Our Inner Lives*, Lyons Press, Guilford 2004, p. 208.

³¹ The distinction between “active” and other volcanoes is a loose one, and Francis and Oppenheimer argue that it is wise “to regard as *potentially active* any volcano that preserves geological evidence of eruptions within the last 10 millennia.” P. Francis – C. Oppenheimer, *Volcanoes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 17.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 118-120.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 120-123.

cessors advanced sophisticated, fundamental theories that were “forgotten or ignored, only to be reinvented”³⁴. *Return*’s nonhierarchical, archival approach also points the way to a knowledge that is not linear and not hubristic – as such, it advocates for a history not just of cinema but also of science and ecology that revalorizes lessons of the past.

This kind of memory recognizes the differing volcanic ‘character’ of all of the islands, which shaped the human history built on them. Various types of volcanic material have accompanied humans in the process of becoming *sapiens*: as Sigurdsson records, the most primitive stone tools, which are approximately 2.5 million years old, were made from lava³⁵, and in later epochs, obsidian. Pumice provides *Pozzolana*, a kind of cement made from volcanic ash, that helped the Romans construct the Pantheon and the Colosseum³⁶. Pumice and obsidian have made the islands crossroads of Mediterranean commerce since about 5000 years B.C., during the Neolithic period. Lipari’s pumice cliffs made the island a site of human work and also illness, as the airborne particles released in the process of extracting pumice led to severe respiratory ailments. Rich volcanic soil made the islands (especially Salina) fertile planting ground for vineyards, subsequently wiped out by the Phylloxera pest in the late nineteenth century. The relative isolation of the islands converted them into quarantines for cholera victims, then prisons for anti-fascists placed under house arrest in the 1930s and 40s, and then a refuge for Mussolini’s daughter Edda Ciano after the end of World War II. But Phylloxera, a Strombolian eruption in the 1930s, respiratory illness, and house arrest were also the reason for emigration and escape from the islands. These stories of give-and-take between human bodies, volcanoes, islands, labor, vines, and illnesses become the ‘volcanic stories’ of *Return*, or the oral and cinematic histories and mythologies that its human and nonhuman inhabitants recount. And these stories constitute a kind of knowledge that, as Iovino maintains in theorizing material ecocriticism, “materializes the porous exchange of inside and outside, the progressive becoming-together of bodies and the world, their intra-action”³⁷.

There are multiple moments that exemplify the film’s focus on mobile landscapes, including drifting sulfuric smoke coming from the fumaroles on Vulcano, the lapping waves and water spouts on the Tyrrhenian Sea, the stiff winds that lash the red sail of the tartan sailboat that carries the film’s central human figure, Franco Figliodoro, from one island to the next, and especially the explosive lava and ash that erupts from the cone of Stromboli to open and close the film. Nimbly moving across geographies and through cinematic time, *Return* opens its own porous borders to the world’s porosity. Yet one particular shifting landscape vividly illustrates the ways in which *Return* mines its relationship to a volcanic past. The pumice cliffs of Lipari, formed of the light-weight, porous rocks from volcanic eruptions, are particularly rich sites of narrative and ecological reciprocity. In the first se-

³⁴ H. Sigurdsson, *Melting the Earth: The History of Ideas on Volcanic Eruptions*, Oxford University Press, New York 1999, p. vii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

³⁷ S. Iovino, *Bodies of Naples: Stories, Matter, and the Landscapes of Porosity*, in S. Iovino – S. Opperman ed., *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2014, pp. 97-113, 103.

quence where these white cliffs appear, early in the film, Figliodoro recounts the story of pumice workers who, suffering from labor-induced respiratory illness, emigrated in droves leaving women to fish, farm, mine, and develop respiratory problems of their own. *Return* initially integrates historic photographs of the mine, and then soundtrack and eventually footage from a 1947 film *Bianche Eolie*. Striking in this historic footage is the dramatic instability of the pumice cliffs, which flow like water, collapse apparently at the strike of a pick, and down which workers rapidly slide. The cliffs' mobility testifies to pumice's commodity value – its fine-grained, abrasive quality makes it useful for making plaster, cement, and concrete, or to smooth feet, stone-wash jeans, or brush teeth. Thus it shows one of the reasons that people have long lived near volcanoes in spite of the risks of such cohabitation. Yet it also shows the fragility of the landscape itself, its portability, and the complicated system of exchange that characterizes human and more-than-human relation. Erupting volcanoes spew the material that becomes pumice, ejected from the earth by the forces of geothermal energy; now human labor extracts that material and also the petroleum to fuel the ships and other vehicles that will carry it around the Mediterranean. From the mobile sailboat (itself often filmed from a second boat), our position as spectators also reminds us of the resources and risks associated with the creation of motion pictures.



The pumice cliffs also feature in the film's closing sequence, when we return to Lipari and to the site of the filming of *Kaos*, the film directed by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani that adapted short-stories by Sicilian author Luigi Pirandello. The scene in question features a 14-year-old Giovanna, her brother and several cousins, and islander Franco Figliodoro, who accompanies her in the 2010 film as well. The layers of history are particularly dense here, with intercut interviews with Paolo and Vittorio, clips from *Kaos*, and some con-

temporary footage. The apex of this moment happens when Giovanna scrambles up the pumice cliff to join her brother and cousins, and on the soundtrack, her father, Vittorio, reminisces about the directors' desired effects – the children would almost feel like they were flying down the steep mountainside. Juxtaposed with the *Kaos* footage are clips from earlier films, showing women working to sweep pumice down the cliffs, children running down joyously, then men sliding down, at work. Generations of ecological, family, and cinematic history intersect and overlap; actors and directors age, film stock fades, light changes, colors shift. All the while, the mountain crumbles, and erosion sweeps pumice to the sea. Thus *Return* documents vividly that, as Braidotti has said, “Memory works in terms of nomadic transpositions, that is to say as creative and highly generative inter-connections which mix and match, mingle and multiply the possibilities of expansion and relations among different units of entities”³⁸.



These pumice cliffs today are substantially reduced from what they once were, having been physically carried away to serve human commerce, construction, and need – a practice that began in the 1700s but that intensified with more devastating industrial extraction in the 20th century³⁹. Now, after intervention on the part of UNESCO, the pumice mines are at last closed, although UNESCO and the Legambiente continue to denounce illegal building, cementification, and general disinterest in stewardship of the islands' heritage⁴⁰. In the history of Lipari's pumice cliffs, we see how the intense human use of the planet's resources in the Anthropocene can profoundly endanger human lives and radically change

³⁸ R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 167.

³⁹ N. Calanchi et al, *Guida ai vulcani e alla natura delle Isole Eolie*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁰ UNESCO alla Siciliana: i siti in sofferenza della bella Sicilia, Luxograph, Palermo 2011.

the profile of landscapes. Yet concern for the environment cannot lead us, in this space, to a view of a benevolent, stable mother nature, since volcanic landscapes also show us the complex character of environmental history: volcanoes can wipe out human history, or – as we know from the outdoor museum at Pompei – they can also preserve traces of it, and their perilous lava eventually gives way to fertile soil that nourishes life on the planet. Elsewhere, my research considers the ways that cinema, too, can alter the environment: leaching toxic substances when celluloid or digital materials are discarded, consuming petroleum and other planetary resources, leaving a waste stream when films are made on location. But in *Return*, by way of the reuse of old footage and the reclaiming of old narratives, we see the potentials for the camera, and for cinema or narrative more widely, to function as Nadia Bozak suggests that it can: “as a recycling implement itself, for it is capable of rejuvenating the discarded subjects it depicts and, perhaps, the physical world beyond them”⁴¹. *Return* shows us, as Braidotti suggests of posthuman subjectivity, that: “Power is not a steady location operated by a single masterful owner”⁴², be it a volcano, a mining company, a paternalistic husband, or a film crew. To the alienated victim-figures played by Magnani and Bergman, *Return* juxtaposes mobile human, political, and ecological histories. The film also, quite literally, gives voice to the volcano. In this encounter of plurivocal, nomadic narratives, *Return to the Aeolian Islands* shows one way to shift from what Jane Bennett suggests is “a world of nature versus culture to a heterogeneous monism of vibrant bodies”⁴³. Insistently mobile, Italian cinema was forged by a complex series of interconnected relationships linking films, people, and memory, and also, like Zeus’ lightning bolt, by volcanic fires.

⁴¹ N. Bozak, *Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2012, p. 91.

⁴² R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 188.

⁴³ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham 2010, p. 121.



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