

Reviewed by Sabrina Negri

# *Italian Ecocinema: Beyond the Human*

by Elena Past.

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The influence of location shooting on the ethics and aesthetics of a film has been of interest to film scholars since at least André Bazin's work on cinematic realism. Less studied, however, is how films may affect the locations where they are shot. This mutual relationship is at the core of Elena Past's *Italian Ecocinema: Beyond the Human*, a well-researched and beautifully written study that draws on interviews, published works, and close readings of specific scenes. Past offers a new outlook on Italian cinema through the lens of ecocriticism—an interpretive framework that examines the films as well as the ecological context of their making, including “cinema's dependence on hydrocarbons and its significant waste stream, its use of nonhuman animals . . . and more generally human reliance on the more-than-human world.”<sup>1</sup>

Past's book is shaped by personal engagement with the films she discusses, encounters with the films' production crews, and trips to Italy. Each chapter opens with situated stories of the interviews she conducted as part of her research, marked in italics. This approach is integral to the book's argument, as Past's goal is to “trace some of the impressions Italian film productions have left on the world, while also documenting part of the process of doing this research.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, Past's ecocritical analysis of Italian cinema must include her own embodied role as a researcher examin-

1 Elena Past, *Italian Ecocinema: Beyond the Human* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 2.

2 Past, 1–2.

ing the relationship between locations, films, human and nonhuman actors, and crew members. This framework explains the book's structure as well as the lyrical style of Past's prose, which makes the book a joy to read but, conversely, is sometimes more impressionistic than analytical. The introduction to the first chapter, detailing the author's interview with Michelangelo Antonioni's assistant director Carlo Di Carlo, provides an example of how the author's physical presence shapes her writing. Past writes, "Like the places it captures on celluloid, the film is a product of an energy-intensive industry. Di Carlo's trip to the set to study the film, and my visit to Di Carlo to learn from him, add further layers to the film's hydrocarbon legacy."<sup>3</sup> Statements like this are frequent throughout the book, though rarely leading to more in-depth analysis.

In Past's view, Italian cinema lends itself particularly well to ecocritical investigation thanks to the peculiarities of the Italian territory. In Italy, Past argues, "closely interwoven human and nonhuman spaces have created a legacy of cohabitation, both constructive and destructive," such that while "walking slowly in Italy, you can find many reasons to scoff at the idea of a world where human and more-than-human matters are decoupled."<sup>4</sup> Even though Past clearly states that ecocriticism "is an interpretive approach, not a genre," the five films that she chooses as her case studies are particularly apt examples of the interconnectedness between cinema, environment, and human and nonhuman forces at the levels of both narrative and style.<sup>5</sup> Past identifies these films' frequent use of nonprofessional actors, long takes, handheld cameras, and long shots as markers of their intense relationship to the places where they were made: in so doing, she gives an ecocritical spin to long-standing theories of cinematic realism, thus showing the potential of subverting the hierarchy between humans, nonhuman actors, and spaces.

Each of the five chapters in Past's book is devoted to the analysis of one film. Chapter 1 offers a case study of Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964), the title that has by far received the most scholarly attention among the author's case studies. At the core of the chapter is Antonioni's main location for the film: the industrial periphery of Ravenna and the impact of its factories on the natural environment. Past's analysis engages with the existing literature while widening historical context in which the film is read. In addition to noting the often-cited Italian economic boom of the 1960s, Past also addresses the environmental movement that was beginning to take root in Italy around the same time. Past devotes many pages to the portrayal of pollution in Antonioni's film, yet she does not read *Il deserto rosso* as a condemnation of the modern industrialized world. Rather, she departs from Antonioni's admitted intent to "translate the beauty of this world, in which even the factories can be beautiful" to investigate the film's construction of a world where the boundaries between humans and environment are blurred.<sup>6</sup> The concept of trans-corporeality, which Past uses to read the interactions

3 Past, 23.

4 Past, 8.

5 Past, 3.

6 Past, 26.

between the protagonist Giuliana and the places that she inhabits, guides the author's formal analysis of some of the key scenes in the film.

The second chapter is dedicated to Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* (2008) and engages with many of the same issues as in the first chapter: this time, though, Past shifts her perspective from the cultural and environmental effects of industrial modernization to a focus on how organized crime profits from the activities related to it, film production included. In particular, Past investigates how the Camorra organization profits from the byproducts of industrial wealth by illegally disposing of garbage and toxic waste. The history of the *Gomorra* location (Naples's infamous housing project Le Vele) thus plays a prominent role in Past's analysis, which includes accounts of the crew's sometimes difficult participation in the daily life of the place.

The other three chapters' locations are seemingly less affected by the process of industrialization and modernization than the regions at the core of the first two case studies. Nonetheless, the films chosen by Past for the second half of her book demonstrate how difficult the interaction between humans and the nonhuman world can be while also showing the harshness of human cohabitation. Chapter 3 investigates *Il vento fa il suo giro* (*The Wind Blows Round*, Giorgio Diritti, 2005), a product of collective filmmaking wherein all crew members were also co-producers of the film. The communality of the project extends to both the film's narrative, a profound reflection on the limits of hospitality, and its production context, as the film crew lived for months with the people of a remote Alpine village and their farm animals. This chapter's theoretical framework is provided by posthumanism and animal studies, as the author investigates the far-from-picturesque coexistence of human and animal beings, particularly goats, on set. The death of a goat is in fact the key to both the movie and Past's analysis of the film, as she interrogates the ethical framework of the dead animal's presence onscreen: "Should *The Wind Blows Round* have filmed two, real, dead goats? If the goats were to die anyway, is it worse that they were killed for visual consumption than for a meal? And if they had been destined for dinner, what if those plates had gone uneaten, or those leftovers had spoiled in the refrigerator? Should we even watch films if they are based materially on animal sacrifice?"<sup>7</sup> These are clearly questions that cannot be answered univocally, and in fact Past closes the chapter by acknowledging that raising them is in itself a tribute to nonhuman lives: "If the film has done its work, these and other questions continue to haunt us long after the closing credits roll. . . . Haunted or not, we are not absolved of guilt. But if we stage our position as tragedy, as 'goat-song,' we at least sing it for ourselves and others and do not let it disappear from view."<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 4 focuses on non-anthropocentric sound by considering the acoustic geography of Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le quattro volte* (2010), a film that challenges narrative conventions by following four different stories, none of which feature human protagonists. In fact, the film has virtually no audible human dialogue, and the soundscape emphasizes those non-anthropocentric

7 Past, 117–118.

8 Past, 118.

sounds that the human ear tends to filter out. Past reads Frammartino's experiment as a successful attempt to immerse the spectator in a world where humans live in a nonhierarchical relationship with other living beings, a position with obvious ecological consequences: "The process of recording sound for *Le quattro volte* constituted an awakening to the world's eloquence, as Benvenuti and Olivero [the film's sound recordists] explained: 'When you remove the dialogue, you discover an enormous variety of sound.'"<sup>9</sup> No longer at the center of the film world, humans are forced to acknowledge the complexity of non-anthropocentric life through sound, thus challenging their supposed supremacy over the nonhuman environment.

Finally, the last chapter challenges anthropocentrism by focusing on volcanoes and volcanic territories. The case study here is on Giovanna Taviani's *Fughe e approdi* (*Return to the Aeolian Islands*, 2010), a narrative documentary that engages the seismic nature of the archipelago as well as its cinematic history—including Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1950) and William Dieterle's *Vulcano* (*Volcano*, 1950). Taviani's film combines archival material and new footage, interlacing the history of Aeolian cinema with the history of the territory, its inhabitants, and the filmmaker's own family. Past departs from the film to investigate the role that volcanoes play in the environment, both filmic and geological, in a fascinating reflection on human and nonhuman memory. In Past's words, "This is a tale of cinematic memory and its entanglement with Italy, especially the Aeolian Islands. It is the story of the vitality in volcanoes, cinema, water, and film crews, and about how the cycling and recycling of energies shapes Italian cinema. Finally, it is a proposal for how volcanic stories can help form disciplinary and material alliances between actors of all kinds."<sup>10</sup>

The five films chosen by Past invite a new outlook on modern Italian cinema, which is one of the several reasons her project is worthy of praise. The ecocritical lens that Past adopts is a fascinating framework both for rethinking the critical engagement with well-known films, such as *Il deserto rosso*, and for approaching less-known titles that are deserving of more attention, such as *Il vento fa il suo giro* or *Le quattro volte*. Hopefully, Past's book will spark more scholarly interest in these films and will enable their inclusion in a variety of class syllabi.

Another noteworthy feature of Past's project is her interweaving of film analysis, production history, and reflection on the process of her own research, even though the different threads sometimes seem to proceed on separate tracks rather than grow organically one from the other. At times, Past touches only briefly upon production history in favor of more conventional textual analysis; more than once, the reader's curiosity is titillated but left dissatisfied. For instance, Past's study of the ecological dimension of these films does not go so far as to engage with the material impacts of filmmaking on the environment, including the very places in which these films were shot. Past acknowledges that her scholarly goal is slightly different—namely, to "read the film in terms of pressing environmental questions"—yet one is left

9 Past, 128.

10 Past, 154.

wondering what is left of the shoots in their locations once the crews are gone and what kind of material impact these productions have had on the places, people, and nonhuman actors with which they interacted.<sup>11</sup> These issues are touched upon frequently throughout the book, but Past rarely engages with them in depth. This observation is not meant as a criticism of her project, but rather as a testament to the richness of both Past's approach and the material in which she immerses herself. One cannot but hope for future additions in her ecocritical work, which may hopefully provide answers to these questions while asking new ones.

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11 Past, 2.