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There as here: living ecologies of film in Le Quattro Volte

Augusto Corrieri

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‘The purpose is not to describe or represent bodies ... representations are bodies too’

Deleuze & Guattari

(1987: 87)

‘A thing must be viewed in the same way that it views itself... You must observe water as water observes water.’ Dōgen Eihei

(in Han 2018: 54)

(fig 1. Still from the opening of Le Quattro Volte)

The soul in a black box

Picture: a wide shot of hills, sky and clouds.

Picture: a goat herder

Picture: a group of goats.

Picture: a stone.

Picture: a large tree

Picture: a small village in southern Italy.

Picture: a batch of smouldering charcoal.

Picture: an ant crawling on a man’s face, dust motes floating inside a church, a dog removing a stone that’s propping up a scooter, a man coughing, a kid goat sneezing, smoke drifting over hills, a goat being born.

Crucially, picture yourself among an audience in a cinema auditorium, watching these images. Or, if these images seem too remote, then simply picture yourself in a cinema auditorium; although the projector is whirring, it is a black image that is being projected on the screen: a dark rectangle, in a dark room. This particular state of darkness - a suspension inviting us to acknowledge the simple fact being here - will recur four times (quattro volte) in this film, in a strange but reassuring rhythmic cadence. The darkness is an affective reminder of who is doing the watching on this specific occasion, in this particular black box. We might say: our presence completes or 'makes' the film. Or even, that our presence is the work. Or better still, that the 'life' over there on the screen (breathe in) is concurrent with that of us spectators sitting here in the dark (breathe out). For it is a singular animation that is at play here, in Michelangelo Frammartino's Le Quattro Volte.

This text is an attempt at reflecting on ecological affect and animacy - 'liveness' even - within this particular cinematic encounter: a film in which background elements move to the fore, in a quiet, surprising and insistent recognition of the always entangled and co-emergent relations between beings, things, organic and inorganic matter, entities both animate and inanimate. Across these thresholds and differences, material bodies (including the spectators') emerge as woven into a common fabric, vivified and traversed by an ethereal 'other' (soul or spirit), yet always irreducibly worldly; always temporary, because insistently elemental.

Affective collisions

To begin with a few bare facts about Le Quattro Volte (the four turns, or the four times): it is an 88-minute film by Italian director Michelangelo Frammartino, whose background is in video and installation art. It was released in cinemas in 2011 to strong critical acclaim, after winning awards at European film festivals. Void of dialogue or speech, the film takes place in and around the Calabrian village of Caulonia, in the south of Italy, and it is mainly structured around the four turns of its title: four 'protagonists' successively come to occupy centre stage, each passing away to allow another to come into focus: first an elderly goat herder, then a new born goat, then a large tree, and finally batches of smouldering charcoal. One at a time, human, animal, vegetal and mineral matter each become the main subject, the

'actor' or actant in a performance of relational mattering; it is a meditation on death-in-life, on how beings and things come to be made, to exist and to perish, to affect each other, in ways that are gentle, comical, surprising and endearing. It is a film of affects (if affects, as David Cole writes, 'entail the colliding of particle-forces delineating the impact of one body on another' (in Bennett 2010: xiii)). In one sense the entire film is nothing but a series of delicately rendered bodily collisions varying in kind, speed and scale: a group of snails escaping from a lidded pan, causing a stone to fall from a window, causing a driver-less scooter to crash into a goat pen. The resulting filmic genre might be termed more-than-human slapstick: life as perpetual domino-effect of all that is, of all that can ever be, in a sensuous cinematic detailing of exchanges of energy, motion and animacy.

We can better understand Le Quattro Volte's engrossing elemental collisions via a detour, by considering the celebrated video artwork by artist duo Fischli and Weiss, Der Lauf der Dinge (The Way Things Go 1987). Here a variety of objects and 'inanimate' materials are carefully arranged so as to perform a continuous domino-like series of explosions, rotations, smacks, flights, crashes, tumbles, leaps, sprays, and ignitions. The artwork suggests a kind of ramshackle science experiment in which chairs, candles, bags and watering cans appear vigorously animated, adventurous, thoughtful or hesitant, as we track the energy (in physics, the capacity to perform work) that quite literally passes from one to the other. It is a paean to glorious mundane materiality, as though repeatedly answering the Deleuzian Spinozism 'What can a body do?' through a choreographed chain reaction of endless bodily collisions. In the makers' own words, the impression is that 'the things move on their own, without human help, [...] they become spirited, living beings.' (Fischli in Le Feuvre 2010: 144)

For all its insistence on clock-work procedure, The Way Things Go can, nevertheless, be viewed as metempsychosis, or transmigration of souls, a linear journey of a singular anima, 'a mobile energy that is independent from the bodies it infuses' (Papapetros 2012: 188). The work's animistic appeal might be partly due to its comedic overtone: over a 30 minute duration, the familiar delight of a cartoon-like illusion ('the chair looks alive!') gradually yields a different way of perceiving the hierarchical relation between humans and things. Similar to how a continuously repeated word can provoke laughter by dissolving linguistic sense and foregrounding

sounds themselves, here the repeated insistence on the crude 'thingness' of things flattens ontological hierarchies of animacy. To put it differently: the more I watch these objects tumble acrobatically into each other, the more I am dethroned, incapable of being (if I ever was) a sovereign subject looking down upon objects that merely 'appear' alive. Though I know I am different from these balloons, car tyres and foam bubbles, their insistent motility and incredible volition trouble my assured or assumed metaphysical footing: what if 'I' am just like a dumb watering can? What if the watering can possesses a degree of mind that I'm just too dumb to notice? The fraying of ontological certainties is accompanied by the speculative possibility that all matter, regardless of its assigned status, thinks, feels and lives. What is staged in The Way Things Go - never seen but always in full view - can be named as physical energy, or (as Durkheim describes it, in relation to animist religions) as 'an impersonal god, without name or history, immanent in the world and diffused in an innumerable multitude of things.' (in Papapetros, 2001: 201) All things are full of gods.

The background in the foreground

The soul's transmigration and omnipresence is further implied and amplified in Le Quattro Volte, shot in a part of southern Italy where animist religious beliefs have become integrated with Christian practices: early in the film, the goat herder collects a batch dust from the church floor and dissolves it into a glass of water which he then ingests, believing the solution to have magical curative properties. In the director's own words, this film 'urges the viewer to seek out the invisible connection which breathes life into everything that surrounds us...to discover a common fabric that binds all things'. (Le Quattro Volte press book 3) This is achieved by a minimalist mode of observation, with no music or visual artifice that might suggest a mystical presence (no strange flickers or spectral overlays). If the film finds a common breath or anima it is by adhering to and registering what is there, in a quasi-documentary style, tracking what is immanent and embedded in Calabrian rural practices, landscapes and vegetation. The result is neither a detached survey nor a pastoral celebration, but rather a careful attempt at finding or constructing an essayistic line-through, as Frammartino explains:

The film starts in a traditional way: by placing its focus on the human. It then diverts the viewer's attention to the surroundings: the objects that are usually part of the scenery. The human being is removed and made to blend in with the background and what was in the background is brought to the foreground, thereby giving way to a pleasant surprise: the animal, vegetable and mineral realms are granted as much dignity as the human one.'

(Le Quattro Volte press book 3)

The statement echoes the famous opening of Michel Serres' The Natural Contract, in which a Goya painting, depicting two men fighting in a sinking swamp, is used to illustrate the fact that the modern subject has hitherto constructed 'nature' as a background entity, as abstract décor. Today, Serres argues, the elemental is recovering 'voice, presence, activity, light' (Serres 1998: 48), for the background has moved centre stage: 'earth, water, and climate, the mute world, the voiceless things once placed as a décor surrounding the usual spectacles, all those things that never interested anyone, from now thrust themselves brutally and without warning into our schemes and maneuvers. (Serres 1998: 3)

(fig 2. A goat stands on the kitchen table, still from Le Quattro Volte)

The film also presents a sequence of chain reactions, in a manner not unlike The Way Things Go. One by one the four main subjects of Frammartino's film tumble into one another, transferring energy or soul: the goat herder's dying and entombment is immediately followed by the birth of a goat; the kid goat eventually gets lost in the woods, coming to rest and perish under a large tree; the tree is then cut down by the villagers as part of an annual celebration, and finally its bare trunk is chopped and converted into charcoal through the traditional practice of the scarazzo, large oven-like mounds of burning wood that produce brittle charcoal for home use. The film's initial and final shots are of these smoky burning mounds, suggestive of a basic elemental circularity: this leads to this, leads to this, leads to this. Ends are beginnings, deaths kindle lives. It is hardly surprising that both The Way Things Go and Le Quattro Volte end with shots of dissipating smoke.

Even if spectators don't track the journey of a single 'soul' across the four subjects (I certainly didn't when I first saw Frammartino's film), what is striking is the passage between species and kingdoms. There is a commitment to allow for the background to emerge as cinematic subject: landscape, weather, nonhuman animals, vegetation, dust, charcoal and smoke are all given due screen time, in what we might term 'a constant redistribution among a collectivity of persons and things.' (Papapetros 2001: 187)

A statement by the director lays bare the film's inspiring (from the Latin 'to breathe') intention: 'Can cinema free itself of the dogma which dictates that human beings should occupy the leading role?' In its disarming simplicity, the question couldn't be more urgent for our times of ecological collapse, and broadly applies to all the arts and humanities (as an exercise, try substituting any other medium for 'cinema' in Frammartino's question: can theatre free itself of the dogma which dictates that human beings should occupy the leading role? Can music, can literature? etc).

The director's statement, which may perhaps appear foolish, is an appeal to powerlessness, a decentering of Anthropos and a lessening of its godly reach and capabilities (unlike environmental dogma, which mainly construes a human subject who powerfully 'solves' ecological collapse). This diminished agency or change in perspective mirrors Serres's plea to 'master our own mastery', in order to recover an elemental relation: 'We no longer know the world because we have conquered it.' (Serres 1998: 34-35)

This is echoed, from an animal studies' perspective, by film theorist Anat Pick, who

writes of an urgent gesture of contraction, a way of 'making ourselves "less human," as it were, whilst seeking to grant animals a share in our world of subjectivity.' (Pick 2011: 6) Pick suggests that such a contraction or dehumanization offers a way out of anthropocentric certainties: 'Absolute powerlessness and foolishness (impersonality, inhumanity even)' might afford 'the path out of the clutches of power: subjection to the illusions of self-hood and... the illusions of species.'(16)

Frammartino's statement might seem foolish in its inherent contradiction. Cinema (like theatre) is firmly grounded in the humanist anthropocentric tradition: filmic terms like 'close-up', 'mid-shot' and even 'landscape' all presuppose, or construct, a human presence. If this presence is the measure of all things, is the absencing of the all-too-human figure not bound to reproduce the same perspective, the same mastery?

This conundrum is answered by the film itself: by the mode of perception it encourages - lingering on beings and events - and the reflective laughter that accompanies it.

Laughter and calm

Frammartino's film and Fischli and Weiss' The Way Things Go share a calm but infectious humour, coupled with a relaxed self-awareness of the theatrics at play: a subtle irony pervades this animist vaudeville. The artist duo's own manifesto, 'How to Work Better', arranged as ten short suggestions, ends with: '9. Be Calm. 10. Smile.' (in LeFeuvre 2010: 145)

When I first saw Le Quattro Volte, quite by chance one evening at the Rio Cinema in East London, I was struck by individual and collective moments of laughter in the room: energised guffaws of delight and surprise, adults somewhat returned to a child-like excitement, all too happy to observe the undirected movements of goats, apprehensively wondering about the fate of a piece of wood, or calmly contemplating the smoke drifting through the forest. In hindsight, what was at stake for that audience was a deep engagement with the filmic elemental: how to navigate an affective relation to, or even enmeshment with, nonhuman rhythms. Anat Pick suggests that an attention to 'the material, the anonymous, and the elemental... provide a powerful antidote to anthropocentrism.' (Pick 6) As an audience we were trying out, together and alone, modes of 'cross-ontological fellowship', to borrow an

expression from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's Stone: an ecology of the inhuman.

That such an elemental fellowship might be cause for joy and delight is no coincidence, as Frammartino explains:

I like to think of the film as an interactive installation, which can only exist if there is a spectator watching it... The spectator is the fundamental pole in a shared journey: I consider the movie a dead body that needs the spectator's active gaze to come alive. The ability to connect a viewing subject - the human - to an object - things - is part of a vital affective tension, which with a touch of rhetoric I might say has something to do with happiness.

(Le Quattro Volte press book 7)

The joyous possibility of establishing an accord with 'things', with other-than-human beings, rhythms and elements (including our own inhuman 'thingness'), partakes in the political project of new materialism. Indeed, the film could be said to be an example of Bennett's 'enchanted materialism', infused as it is by what Bennett describes as a 'force that, though quite real and powerful, is intrinsically resistant to representation.' (Bennett 2011: xvi) Curiously, in her first book Bennett relates that the early modern European terms for wonder - admiratio, mirabilia, miracula - seem to derive from an Indo-European word for smile (Bennett 2001: 5). As Frammartino proposes, the possibility of relating to more-than-human entities is strongly linked to elation and joy.

Although the film charts the journey of a soul from different kinds of subjects (human, animal, vegetal, mineral), and Bennett is explicitly opposed to 'ensouling' matter, the film certainly is in line with a new materialist political project: namely, to recognize a distributive agency across ontological categories. In the article 'Animal agency in Le Quattro Volte', film theorist Laura McMahon writes: 'By offering what Bennett calls 'a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants', Le Quattro Volte suggests ways in which cinema might reimagine the distribution of power and agency beyond the violent asymmetries of species divisions.' (McMahon 2015: 114)

One way the film works with this distributed agency is through playing with relative scales. For instance, early on we are presented with a shot of dust swirling through the air in a church: this slow drift of white particulate matter is later echoed by a far

landscape shot in which goats, now mere white specks, drift smoke-like across the green hill. Or else we watch an ant crawl on the goat herder's face, traversing a furrowed landscape of human skin, just as later it crawls across the bark of a tree: further on in the film, again from a distance, we see a child clambering ant-like up a bare tree.

(fig 3. A child climbing up a tree trunk. Still from Le Quattro Volte)

Whilst these simple echoes might sound overly didactic (as a group of students were all too keen to inform me), their function is primarily to promote an engagement with fairly 'static' shots, inviting a calm observation of what is there: what happens, what moves, what lingers. There is an invitation here, after Adorno, to pursue 'the tempo, the patience and perseverance of lingering with the particular.' (Adorno 2005: 77)

The universality of beauty can communicate itself to the subject in no other way than in obsession with the particular... The eyes that lose themselves to the one and only beauty are sabbath eyes. They save in their object something of the calm of its day of creation. (Adorno 76)

Together with Bennett's smile, the film unfolds through Adorno's calm or 'sabbatical' (restful) engagement. Calm and laughter permeate even the minor transitions, the seemingly less significant peregrinations of matter. For instance, in the first third of

the movie a single rock is put to various uses by different parties (the goat herder, a rout of snails, a child, a dog, and a tribe of goats). It begins with the goat herder picking the rock up during his daily walk; once he arrives at his house, he places the rock on top of a lidded pot on his kitchen table. Later returning to the kitchen, the goat herder finds the rock has fallen to the floor, having been displaced by the numerous snails that (we now realise) he'd been keeping inside the pot. The goat herder takes the rock and drops it outside his kitchen window: it hits the ground below with an audible thud, which seems to briefly agitate a few of the goats in the pen below. Following this, in the film's central or core scene, the same rock is then used to prop up an old scooter. A lone boy runs by and suddenly stops in his tracks, intimidated by the goat herder's dog barking at him. To distract the dog, the boy mimes throwing an object towards the scooter: the dog 'falls' for the trick, and walks towards the scooter, where it finds and removes the stone from beneath the wheel. The scooter begins to roll down the steep incline, accumulating speed and finally crashing into the goat pen below. The goats, now released, begin to wander out of their enclosure, eventually reaching the goat herder's kitchen.

Every action happens deliberately, in real or 'slow' time, and without drama or forced humour, allowing for the delight of lingering with the particular (indeed, the whole film is nothing but particular passages, motions, actions, objects). Admiratio, mirabilia, miracula: in this cosmology, matter is unpredictable, always emergent, here and now. Things are made up as they go along. Particles colliding, forming and unforming things. And spectators there, watching, colliding, forming and unforming things.

Liveness

Common (academic) sense suggests that live performance requires spectators, or witnesses, in order to take place: 'you had to be there...' By attending and lending attention, spectators effectively make the event of performance. It is difficult to imagine the 'live' without people, or bodies, in a place, negotiating affective encounters that wouldn't otherwise occur.

Le Quattro Volte, with its lingering vaudeville animist turns, foregrounds and explores the performative qualities of cinema itself: the occasion of human bodies gathered in

a darkened room, navigating images and sounds. It seems apt that the work's animist proposition would vivify (literally to make live) the cinema screening, a situation that is typically thought of as not (a)live, due to the obvious mechanical reproduction. This film 'happens' in the moment of spectating, as though requiring a live exchange; the 'soul' in question spills out of the frame and is 'breathed' across different bodies and temporalities, as transcorporeal exchange of energy and anima. What are at stake are affective and ecological collisions, animist transmigrations occurring within and without the cinema screen: as spectators we never forget that we are 'just' watching a film, and it is through this apparatus (not despite it) that a common breath or anima plays itself out, as one-off event or singular experience. With a touch of rhetoric, I would say that Le Quattro Volte doesn't happen 'there', but rather 'here': to follow and engage with these material-animist turns is to open simultaneously to 'our' animal, vegetative and mineral natures. Just as watching a typical plot-driven film requires us to identify with, or at least relate to, the characters on screen, in this film we are required to identify with, or at least relate to, the uncanny passages of animist matter.

As Stacy Alaimo proposes, in writing about transcorporeality, what we call "the environment" is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves.' (Alaimo 2010: 4). There as here: a transcorporeal synching occurs between the film (images, sounds, rhythms) and the auditorium: a partially fictitious cosmology pertaining to the south of Italy - a landscape infused by the animist conception of transmigrations of souls across entities or kingdoms - becomes an opportunity 'to bear witness to the vital materialities that flow through and around us.' (Bennett 2010: x). It is an opportunity to find out not who we are, but where and what we are: to attune to the elemental, and to outplay identification on the basis of species.

And we (a pronoun that now smacks of anthropocentric mastery), the ones doing the watching, navigate through guffaws and delight and prolonged silence. It is by being there, in that cinematic black box, that more-than-human agency is collectively acknowledged as never properly 'ours', yet intrinsically of us.

Perhaps the film's animistic promise is most starkly rendered during the four dark 'intervals' - the dark screen in the dark auditorium - which suggest the soul's passage across the main protagonists, as one dies and another comes into being.

Let's take for instance the black screen following the goat herder's death. At the end of a small funeral procession, we watch as the villagers place the goat herder's coffin inside a vault, which is then sealed with a stone slab; as this is shot from within the vault itself, once the slab slides across, everything grows dark: the image, the screen, the auditorium. We are quite literally left in the dark for a few seconds, the darkness of the closed vault and that of the black box cinema now coinciding completely: what is there is here. Light will return with the next passage, the birth of the kid goat. Until then, however, plunged in the dark for a few seconds, without an image as such, the audience becomes an audience, the cinema becomes a place, and whatever nonhuman entities and rhythms were depicted 'over there', on the screen, come to fully coincide with those inside the auditorium: this changing moment, these breaths, these bodies, these affective and shifting forces and associations.

(Fig 4. Still from the end of Le Quattro Volte)

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