

Il buco, or *Underground Language* in the Anthropocene¹

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ABSTRACT

This article follows the search for a cinematic language adequate to address the vast temporal and spatial scales of the Anthropocene, by examining *Il buco*, a film directed by Michelangelo Frammartino (2021). The film reconstructs a 1961 expedition by the Italian Geological Expedition to explore the Bifurto cave in the Parco Nazionale del Pollino, Calabria, and I suggest that in the process, it launches a quest for an underground cinematic language for the Anthropocene: a language that must reckon with visual, spatial, and acoustic limits. *Il buco*, which opens with historic footage of the Pirelli Tower in Milan, architects a vertical landscape in which commercialized words above ground are counterbalanced by the audio-visual language of the underground. In the Bifurto abyss, human language abstracts and dissolves, the language of material prosperity falls flat, and cinema expresses its yearning to watch and to listen, even as cavernous darkness and resonance challenge its ability to do so.

KEYWORDS

Underground, Anthropocene, Michelangelo Frammartino, *Il buco* (2021), Pirelli Tower, Italian ecocinema

1. *Searching for Language in the Anthropocene*

The scale of the Anthropocene, the era when the human species has become geological, is vast in temporal terms: geologists expect that humans – and the hybrid plastiglomerates and technofossils that modernity has created – will remain a geological force for millennia to come (Oppermann, 2018). The Anthropocene is also vast in spatial terms, its effects extending to every corner of the globe. Microplastics are lodged on the highest mountain peaks and radionuclides from atomic testing linger at lofty altitudes, from the stratosphere to the troposphere (Corcho Alvarado, 2014). Down deep into the earth's lithosphere, hydraulic fracking and buried nuclear waste lend evi-

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dence of the intervention of the human species. If the Anthropocene is partially the process of (some, privileged, mostly white, mostly Western) humans leaving grim earthly reading material for future beings to peruse, the planetary manuscript is dense with text.

Yet despite the eloquence of these material traces, the scale of the Anthropocene in many ways confounds its representation. Projects such as the film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (directed by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, and Nicholas De Pencier, 2019), a “cinematic meditation on humanity’s massive reengineering of the planet,” work with dramatic aerial photography and aesthetically captivating patterns – terraces, trash heaps, piles of burning elephant tusks – to attempt to articulate “our species’ breadth and impact,” as the promotional website explains (theanthropocene.org). It is questionable whether the film’s dazzling beauty, however, offers a new or useful language in which to confront contemporary environmental crisis. Stacy Alaimo has framed the scientific abstractions at the root of climate change calculus and modelling as a “view from nowhere,” identifying perspectives that, in spite of their earnest desire to understand the vast phenomena at work on Earth, may (inadvertently or not) re-entrench the “delusions of hyperseparation, transcendence, and dominance” that ushered in environmental crisis in the first place (2009, p. 28). In many ways, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* seems to revel in just such an abstract view, removed from time and space. With its sweeping overhead views and hypnotic rhythms, across most of its 87 minutes, the film “tracks broad ‘anthropogenic’ changes without any sense of history, causality, and contingency,” as Sara Pritchard observes in a highly critical review for the journal *Environmental History* (2020, p. 379).

So where and how should we position ourselves in order to take stock of the Anthropocene’s vast scale? What aesthetic forms speak a language most apt to encapsulate Anthropocene problems, and what should their subjects be? Disagreements about what to call the unfolding planetary emergency – Capitalocene, Manthropocene, Anthroscene, Chthulucene, etc., etc. – signal intellectual, political, and linguistic breakdowns, not to mention environmental ones. Another frequent linguistic quibble when speaking in or about the Anthropocene regards a practice that Pritchard finds “infuriating” in the film: the use of the universalizing terms “human” and of the pronoun “we” in a way that “conveniently erases disparate past and present benefits, costs, and responsibility,” as Pritchard rightly notes (2020, p. 378). Certainly, the “Anthropos” of the Anthropocene needs to be interrogated; the “we’s” must be disaggregated

and re-assembled to recognize power differentials, the politics of race, class, different abilities, wealth and poverty, geographic locations, degrees of affection. But add intellectual uncertainties to the problems of temporal and spatial scale, and it can seem daunting indeed to speak about contemporary environmental meltdown. People still need to speak – speak out, speak up – don’t they?

Robert Macfarlane, an author whose books’ eloquence and elegance stem from a deep-seated love of language and etymologies, struggles with the question of how to write about the Anthropocene in *Underland*, a book that voyages below the earth’s surface:

The idea of the Anthropocene repeatedly strikes us dumb. In the complexity of its structures and the range of its scales within time and space – from nanometric to the planetary, from picoseconds to aeons – the Anthropocene confronts us with huge challenges. How to interpret, or even refer to it? Its energies are interactive, its properties emergent and its structures are withdrawn. We find speaking of the Anthropocene, even speaking *in* the Anthropocene, difficult. It is, perhaps, best imagined as an epoch of loss – of species, places and people – for which we are seeking a language of grief and, even harder to find, a language of hope. (Macfarlane, 2019, p. 364).²

Macfarlane’s journey takes him, in *Underland*, on a series of voyages below the surface of the earth, into caves and caverns, burial places, nuclear storage facilities. He feels called to these “underlands,” he writes, because, in the Anthropocene, “things that should have stayed buried are rising up unbidden”: the anthrax spores in unfrozen reindeer corpses in the Arctic, for example, or the bodies of fallen Alpine climbers formerly entombed in ice (2019, p. 14). Yet underground, where he and the book travel on their quest, was a space where at times language was “crushed” (2019, p. 49) and at others, became “thick”: “often it felt easier to say nothing; or rather, to observe but not to try to understand” (2019, p. 364). If the underground is, perhaps, not a curious thing to write *about* (Dante’s *Inferno* being an obvious precedent), the language-crushing depths of subterranean worlds seem a curious place for a writer to physically *go* in search of inspiration.

Cinema, of course, calls on a different toolbox where language is concerned, as Christian Metz theorized in the 1960s, and it thus may find inspiration in places where written or spoken language falters. Director Alice Rohrwacher explained provocatively and simply to an interviewer:

² Macfarlane uses “we” in his narrative but takes care to acknowledge the inequities that cause many to take issue with the term “Anthropocene,” noting that ours is a moment “in which ‘crisis’ exists not as an ever-deferred future apocalypse but rather as an ongoing occurrence experienced most severely by the most vulnerable” (2019, p. 14).

si fanno dei film perché ci sono cose che non si possono dire. [...] [L]'oggetto di cui parliamo è da vedere, da vivere; qualcosa che entra in altri campi, quelli iconografici e della potenza dell'immagine; qualcosa che agisce su cose fisiche e mentali e non sulla parola (Zonta, 2017, p. 185).

Its capacity to *act* on objects and on minds, to be a material-industrial *thing*, is cinema's challenge and its opportunity in the Anthropocene. Laura Di Bianco argues that Rohrwacher and her filmmaking philosophy exemplify an Italian ecocinema, which she defines as a non-anthropocentric, bioegalitarian cinema, through "*ars et praxis*." In the case of *Lazzaro felice*, this meant scripting and filming an imaginative, non-anthropocentric storyline and producing it with producer Tempesta's Ecomuvi sustainable filmmaking protocol (Di Bianco, p. 152).³ Another of the most compelling examples of Italian ecocinema are the films directed by Michelangelo Frammartino, whose three feature-length films, *Il dono* (2003), *Le quattro volte* (2010), and *Il buco* (2021) have articulated a radically posthuman cinematic language for the Anthropocene.⁴

What happens when Italian ecocinema trains its lenses on the underground? In the sections that follow, I examine the encounters of sound and space in *Il buco*, a film Frammartino wrote in collaboration with Giovanna Giuliani, to unpack what the film might suggest regarding a language for the Anthropocene. *Il buco*, which reconstructs the 1961 expedition by the Italian Geological Expedition to explore the Bifurto cave in the Parco Nazionale del Pollino, Calabria, architects a vertical landscape in which commercialized words above ground are counterbalanced by the visual and acoustic language of the underground: a space where human language abstracts and dissolves, the language of material prosperity falls flat, and cinema expresses its yearning to watch and to listen, even as cavernous darkness and resonance challenge its ability to do so.

2. Cities, Cinema, and the Vernacular of Verticality

Before dedicating itself to the world belowground, *Il buco* establishes the *lingua franca* of the Italian economic boom, that period in the late 1950s and early 1960s when consumer spending, road-building, and petroleum consumption (among many other things)

³ Ecomuvi is a certification launched by Tempesta Film in 2013 that works to reduce carbon emissions and waste on set, and recycle, rent, repurpose, and donate materials for sets. Their website provides information about several films made following the certification protocol, as well as about the methodology (See: <https://www.ecomuvi.eu/>).

⁴ I outlined the radical potentials of the soundscapes in *Le quattro volte*, which conjures a posthuman language that avoids a focus on human voices (see Past, 2019).

increased dramatically in Italy.⁵ Within a few minutes of the film's beginning, historic RAI footage of the Pirelli Tower in Milan fills the screen. A construction elevator, mounted on the side of the building, slowly travels up the building's smooth sides. The RAI journalist on board the elevator narrates the voyage: "stiamo salendo verso l'alto." The ascent speaks volumes.

The Pirelli Tower was constructed from 1956-1960 by a team of architects and engineers led by Gio Ponti, Pierluigi Nervi, and Arturo Denuso.⁶ Together with the nearby Torre Velasca (by the group BBPR), it was considered the most eloquent expression of the "Italian approach to verticality" (Faroldi & Vettori 2015, p. 57). In *Amate l'architettura*, the aphoristic philosophical treatise written by Gio Ponti when the "Pirellone" (as it is popularly known) was being built, the architect affirms the value of modern architecture: "nitida, essenziale, pura: *pura come un cristallo*" (Ponti 1957, p. 7, emphasis in original). Although the building was largely ignored in the Italian architectural press, which preferred the historical style and social engagement of the Velasca, the international architectural response to this "spotless mirror of placid affluence" was "overwhelmingly positive" (Kirk, 2005, pp. 171, 170).

The Pirelli tower is a structure written in the Milanese architectural vernacular of the 1960s, a language worth contemplating for a moment. Architectural studies speak of "vernaculars" to refer to concepts of folk, rural, or indigenous architecture, as distinct from formal or intellectual architecture. Scholars suggest that the notion of "vernacular architecture" was canonized in 1964, when Bernard Rudofsky curated an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York titled "Architecture without Architects." According to this critical tradition, an architectural vernacular evolves in a particular place to take account of locally available building materials and knowledges, climatic and environmental concerns, and local sociocultural codes. Rudofsky's show at the MoMA was part of a reaction against the modern and international styles like those visible in Milan's enthusiastic verticality (Benkari, 2021). Today, vernacular architecture is being evoked by architects seeking solutions to intensifying climate and energy crises, and as such is at the centre of conversations about sustainable building practices (Battistella, 2022, pp. 46-49).

⁵ See Paul Ginsborg's *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi* (1989), especially the charts and graphs pp. 581-602 that document the "miracolo economico" and the precipitous growth in consumption.

⁶ Sources cite different dates for the Pirelli Tower's construction: Arnardóttir (2004) positions its construction in 1955-1958; Faroldi and Vettori from 1956-1960 (2015, p. 56).

Yet although the Pirelli Tower is not an example of “vernacular architecture” in this canonical sense, it was fluently speaking the language of boom-era Milan in ways that reflect the social and intellectual climate of the time. The Tower spoke a language of commerce, both that of the thriving Pirelli brand and the “brand” of Milanese architecture. Ponti and his team promoted their work strategically with more than a dozen publications that began before construction did, and these became a vital part of the “logiche di marketing aziendale” for Pirelli (Faroldi and Vettori 2015, 58), and in circular fashion, also for the firm’s architectural aesthetic itself. “Amate le meravigliose materie dell’architettura moderna: cemento, metallo, ceramica, cristallo, materie plastiche,” urges Ponti (1957, p. 6). In its 127 meters of glass, steel, and reinforced concrete, the Pirelli tower was architecture-as-advertising, articulating consumerist modernity through its materials, many of which were extracted from the earth and shaped, with massive energetic costs, into new forms. The Tower also communicated via its verticality, which set it apart in the landscape, where “its communicative value was not expressed in dialogue but as an individual statement about itself and its sculptural qualities” (Arnardóttir 2004, pp. 92-93). The upward thrust of the crystalline structure reaffirmed the pre-eminence of human ingenuity, the dominance of the Architect over the landscape. “L’Italia l’han fatta metà Iddio e metà gli Architetti,” proclaims Ponti provocatively (1957, pp. 3-4).

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that the Pirelli Tower was voicing the architectural language of the Anthropocene’s Great Acceleration, the mid-century moment when, according to an international committee of geologists, “marked and abrupt anthropogenic perturbations” of all kinds began to destabilize Earth Systems (Subcommission 2019). Cities, where the majority of the world’s population now live, have been key contributors to climate change; urbanization in its present form “functions as an accelerating aspect of the Anthropocene” (Elmqvist *et al.* 2021, p. 1). As a powerful symbol of Italy’s economic boom, the Pirelli skyscraper and the rhetoric surrounding its construction exude the “hegemonic masculinity of aggressive consumption” that Stacy Alaimo identifies at the root of the climate crisis (2009, p. 26), that same view from above dominant in the film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*. The tower’s crystalline structure, its imperviousness to the outside, its aggressive height compared to other buildings in its vicinity, the hierarchies of corporate power stacked within its 32 floors, all meant that the Pirellone embodied the kind of triumphalist thinking that accompanied the boom.

The Pirelli Tower also wielded the considerable power to capture attention and command the gaze. Photos in architectural journals and Wikipedia pages accommodate Ponti's vision of the crystalline independence of the structure, figuring an elegant edifice whose height renders the surrounding cityscape mostly indistinguishable, a kind of visual background noise. For this reason, it seems particularly interesting that the Pirellone's representation on film, at least in a few significant examples including that of *Il buco*, takes another aesthetic form.

Architectural language has often also been the language of cinema, and the Pirellone has spoken loudly in the city of Milan since its construction at the apex of the economic boom. Perhaps most memorably, the skyscraper appeared at the beginning of *La notte*, the modernist masterpiece directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1961), when the camera travels part of the way down its height, picturing the city reflected in the glass. Before the camera begins its descent, there is a glimpse of the Pirellone from a nearby street, but the building is in the background, in profile, and as the camera pans upward, it seems (perhaps coyly) to instead focus on a stout building in the foreground. Once the camera reaches the tower, the perspective is disorienting, because from the elevator mounted on the side of the building, what is visible is not the tower's crystalline perfection, but rather the tower-as-mirror: the city reflected on its smooth surfaces. The film that follows this abstractly elegant opening sequence articulates a critique of mid-century prosperity, lamenting the social isolation and ennui that come with riches and taking note of the growing divide between rich and poor.⁷ And indeed this critique might be seen to begin with that view of/from the Pirelli Tower, whose architectural and engineering achievements are strategically muted by the recalcitrant establishing shot followed by the disorienting close-up. In *La notte's* rendering, the Pirellone is all surface sheen and no depth: a "sheer materialization of the self-contained enjoyment of capital, the self-excitation that has no purpose, no meaning, and no message other than its own infinite perpetuation," argues Sławomir Maślón in an article about the film (2022, p. 119). *La notte* effectively denies the tower its self-excitation, destabilizing its triumphalism just as it emasculates the boom.

In the RAI footage of the Pirellone used by *Il buco*, the voyage is an ascent, not a descent, and the audience is presumably a broad Italian television public which the journalist in the open elevator addresses. In a reflection in one of the polished windows,

⁷ For more on Antonioni's cinema and the Great Acceleration, see Past (2023).

we can see the cameraman, 16mm camera, guide, and journalist all crammed into the tight space as they travel upward. Yet like in *La notte*, in *Il buco*'s chosen clip, the Pirellone is fragmentary, dizzying, and interrupted abruptly. Most important here, however, is the vast distance between that ascent and the subsequent descent into the depths of the Bifurto cave, down south in Calabria, further south than any previous Italian speleological expedition had ventured, as a title screen announces at the beginning. In *Il buco*, the Pirelli Tower dialogues with *La notte* and with the history of its construction to signal a moment in time, the 1960s boom-era. But, as a monolith built of extracted materials in a cityscape whose underground was also being plumbed, the Pirellone might also be read as a beacon, pointing (surreptitiously, perhaps) to that which lies beneath it.

When *La notte* and that RAI footage were being filmed, in fact, the notion of verticality in the city of Milan extended below the earth's surface: the first line of Milan's extensive subway system was built between 1957 and 1964, so the city's infrastructure was expanding underground as well. In their article "Un-earthing the Subterranean Anthropocene," Maria de Lourdes Melo Zurita, Paul George Munro, and Donna Houston argue that "historical changes in human-subterranean relations," from mineral extraction to urban underground infrastructures, are a critical piece of Anthropocene discourse, and that changing "sub-surface relations" is a key to addressing environmental crisis (2018, p. 301). They point out that there are a whole host of culturally and ecologically significant "undergrounds," including springs and rivers, burial sites, scientific labs, and dumps. Serpil Oppermann goes even further, charting in an article about the vast scale of the Anthropocene how human bioturbation, or the rearrangement of the geological substratum for infrastructure construction, mining, nuclear testing, and storing waste, is one of the most impactful and damaging planetary shifts of this era (2018, pp. 2-3). Regarding finding a language to address the "subterranean Anthropocene," it is important to note that many of these underground projects are specifically situated to be out of sight, however, and thus intellectually out of mind.

A question that Melo Zurito, George Munro, and Houston ask in their proposal for "subterranean political geo-ecologies" is pertinent here: "what can we learn from placing ourselves into imaginative proximity with the diverse inhuman geological agents inhabiting subsurface spaces?" (2018, p. 301). *Il buco* offers a response to this question, inviting imaginative proximity with the subsurface, while also building a range of metaphors that show how "undergrounds" proliferate around and within us.

3. *Descent to the Underlands*

Although it serves as the film's anchor to historical time, the visual and narrative signpost to orient viewers to the moment of the Bifurto exploration, the RAI footage of the Pirelli Tower is not the first image in *Il buco*. Before the loquacious journalist occupies space on the soundtrack, the film opens with a black screen. Water drips in a resonant environment and crickets create a high-pitched continuo. Gradually, the screen lightens, and sky appears through the rocky, mossy mouth of a cave. When two vocal bovines poke their heads into the frame, their bells clanging and moos echoing in the cavern, the low camera angle makes evident that the spectator is positioned below, looking up. We are, in other words, underground.

From that cave mouth, the camera will move to capture breath-taking views of Calabria's Pollino National Park, and then various frames of a weathered cowherd, Zi' Nicola, who vocalizes musical but wordless calls to his herd (often: oh-ah, oh-ah, tei, tei, tei). Cut to a dusk shot of a village nestled in the mountains, buttery lights glowing in a few windows. Cut again to a gathering of people, seated transfixed before a small television screen in front of the "Cinzano Bar." The black-and-white images illuminate a crowd of rapt faces. The entire film soundtrack is now that of the television, the RAI sequence of the ascent of the Pirelli Tower. Our vision turns to the screen, then the television becomes the screen. Up, up, up, past the 24th, 26th, 30th floors, past the office of the Vice President. The camera turns to capture the skyline, which is engulfed in haze. Cut to a black screen, silence, and the film title: IL BUCO. The title disappears and, in the background, we faintly hear a voice announcing the departure of a train for Reggio Calabria. After that, the film bids adieu to human language, at least for the most part, and to the verticality of the Pirelli Tower and Milan, and in large part to the world above ground.

As in the case of *Le quattro volte*, *Il buco* does not specifically avoid human voices; it simply refuses to prioritize them. Sound recordists Simone Paolo Olivero and Paolo Benvenuti, who worked on *Le quattro volte*, once again recorded direct sound for *Il buco*, this time joined by a third recordist, Matteo Gaetani. The philosophies and practices that they pioneered for recording sound for *Le quattro volte* – practices of attentive listening, philosophies of openness to nonhuman sound – guided them in this film as well. As in *Le quattro volte*, the recording strategy avoids directional mikes that amplify human dialogue, and instead the recordists distribute sound capture devices across a broad plane, drawing listeners into an im-

mersive soundscape.⁸ Human speech emerges, comprehensible, at various points: in a church, where the congregants chant “ora pro nobis,” or in the cave, when the explorer shouts “corda!” or “ferma!” to the teammates above her. Human sounds of other sorts are also abundant: footsteps, giggles, snuffles, music, and especially the sonorous calls of Zi’ Nicola, whose story is the film’s second significant narrative thread. But these words and sounds take their place alongside a nonhuman soundscape that is breathtakingly various: low-grumbling engines, piercing whistles, doors opening and closing, cheeping birds and crickets, clanging cowbells, honking geese, plaintive moos, anxious porcine grunts, urgent donkey brays, wind, logs crackling in a fire. Discussing the choice to have no specific dialogue track, Frammartino explained: “Volevo mantenere un equilibrio tra gli esseri umani e il paesaggio, so che le parole, se ci sono, tendono a nascondere tutto il resto” (Ardito, 2021). As in the case of *Le quattro volte*, here, too, “words are sounds in the midst of many others,” as Frammartino has said, and no more or less communicative than these (Past, 2019, p. 123).

Although the soundscape expresses a nonhierarchical, posthuman ideology, *Il buco* tells the story of an exceptional historical moment, that novel exploration of the Bifurto abyss, which would be recorded as the world’s third deepest cave in 1961. The typology of the cave is that of an “inghiottitoio,” or swallow hole; the entrance, a rocky maw in a grassy field, looks quite literally capable of swallowing the explorers who enter it. After the Pirelli Tower clip, much of the rest of the film observes the speleologists as they carefully descend into the abyss, measuring the distance they cover both because they want to map it and because, by measuring, they ensure the safe passage of their bodies through tight spaces and into precipitous drops. The first tool of measurement is sound. One of the explorers drops rocks into the cave and listens to them bounce: here, the absence of sound speaks volumes, since it signals the extent of empty space below, the distance a rock travels before clacking down on a hard surface. The second is light, and specifically flame: one person ignites a page ripped from a magazine, then drops it into the darkness. The flame illuminates the spaces around it, dancing downward and eventually disappearing. The brief gift of illumination quickly gives way to darkness; so does the sunlight that lights a few meters of the entrance but then reaches no further. Sometimes the screen is entirely black; sometimes, a small window of it is brightened by burning paper or the bulb of a headlamp.

⁸ Regarding the recording practices for *Le quattro volte* (see Past, 2019, pp. 123-152).

The last instrument of measurement is the measuring tape, which allows the creation of a scale map of the cave. It is perhaps the most intrusive of the technologies the speleologists use – but we will return to it below.

In short, through its narrative of measurements, *Il buco* foregrounds both that which is unknown and that which is absent in the film. Working against more obviously legible languages of cinema, including human dialogue and well-lit landscapes, *Il buco* foregrounds constraints: tight spaces where the camera's options (not to mention those of the human body) are extraordinarily limited, disorienting echoes, absent infrastructures. The innovation of *Il buco*, instead, is in large part its creation of a language in acoustic and visual collaboration with the Bifurto. *Le quattro volte*, a Pythagorean-inspired film, explored the transmigration of the soul through material states, human, animal, vegetable, mineral. In the process, it was attentive to speak in all those languages, in both visual and acoustic terms. *Il buco* attends to all these materialities as well, but its focus, dropping beneath the earth's surface into the smooth chambers of the Bifurto, is more specifically the lithic. Roberto De Gaetano observes, regarding the film: “[Q]ui c'è un suo divenire minerale. Ma la pietra trasuda, vive e respira essa stessa” (De Gaetano, 2021).

Living, breathing stone: this is the zone of the “inhuman”, one of the horizons of difference that new materialist scholars have called into action to nuance concepts of the Anthropocene. In his poetic book *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes that “[r]ock is thick with time and relation,” recalling the significance of grave markers, cairns, cave art, stone tools, boundary walls (2015, pp. 53-54). Reflecting on impressions of human hands in caves the world over, some of the earliest known art, Cohen observes that “Human and stone do not harmonize but meet in strange likeness and inalterable difference. Worldly entanglement thickens, intensifies” (2015, p. 54).

Strange likenesses and inalterable differences indeed characterize the cinematic aesthetic that emerges in the Bifurto. In the dimly lit lithic space, vision plays tricks. Human breath and humidity create haze. A smooth, moist, orangey-yellow surface looks flesh-like. A caver, disappearing into a narrow opening, blocks the golden light produced by a headlamp ahead of him, and the screen resembles a giant feline iris, his body a constricted pupil. The image of the eye is an interesting one, since vision is limited here, as is perspective. Between the darkness and the sightlines restricted by the contortions of the cave walls, at a certain point it becomes pointless to

strain to see, or to understand. The importance of the auditory is heightened, but its capacities to communicate sound change as they bounce off the hard surfaces.

Corda, ferma, cala. Simple two-syllable words work well in the cave's resonant acoustics, where words otherwise mush together incomprehensibly. So does a piercing whistle. "Ri – sa – lir" when needed, each syllable distinct from the one before. Sometimes, just "OH-oh" and a jiggle of the hanging ladder, a vocal and physical tug on the world above. Two speleologists in close proximity to one another can, it seems, speak to one another (although without directional mikes, their words are just a hum for the film audience), but when separated by a distance or by cave walls, they must distill language to a minimum. Much of the time, they don't speak at all. Instead, they feel their way down and through, gloved hands braced against moist walls or clutching narrow ladders.

4. *Caves, Vulnerabilities, and Changing the Cinematic Vernacular*

The metaphor of cinema-as-cave has long been a foundation of film theory, since Plato's metaphor of projection, spectatorship, and illusion captured the imagination of film theorists. Jean-Louis Baudry's influential and oft-cited essay "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" argued that cinema and Platonic *mise-en-scène* shared both the topoi of "projection, dark hall, screen," and a spectatorial position of "suspension of mobility and predominance of the visual function" (1974-1975, p. 46).

Critics have, unsurprisingly, frequently cited the Platonic cave in writing about *Il buco*, and in some ways, the static positionality of the spectator seems to be what the director envisioned in creating this film. Because of its many dimly lit images, *Il buco* was imagined for the ideal viewing context offered to viewers in a dark cinema, and because of its meticulous and dense soundscapes, its sound was designed with Dolby's immersive Atmos system (from "atmosphere") (Ardito 2021). In a screening of the film at Roma Tre's Palladium Theater in November of 2021, Frammartino, who was present, explained that "il film ha bisogno di *molto* volume," and requested that the technicians turn up the volume after the film began (Frammartino, 2021).

Yet *Il buco*, and the production crew's years-long relationship to the Bifurto, is not metaphorically cinema-as-cave, but rather *literally* cinema-as-cave. The cinematic language I described above—the language of nonhuman elements, of restricted sightlines, of scant

light—is a far cry from an “ideal vision” which “assures the necessity of a transcendence,” as Braudy suggests the cinematic apparatus does (1974-1975, p. 41). As such, might it work against the “hypermasculine” Anthropocene language Stacy Alaimo credits with enabling and legitimating toxic environmental behaviours?

To counter the “hegemonic masculinity of aggressive consumption” and the “transcendent scientific visions” that advocate for improbable technofixes for environmental crises, Alaimo advocates for an “insurgent vulnerability” based in a feminist worldview (2009, p. 26). There are ways in which the search for alternative, non-transcendent perspectives resonates with the project of *Il buco*. In the film’s press conference at the Venice Film Festival, Frammartino explained that the story of the exploration of the Bifurto was the “controistoria” – counterhistory, or counternarrative – to the story of the economic boom in Milan, one that would replace it with an underground story that had largely been invisible to Italian history.

The making of *Il buco* implicated a crew eager to occupy a different kind of positionality – one focused principally on listening, sensing, collaborating, respecting. As in the case of *Le quattro volte*, Frammartino, joined by screenplay writer Giovanna Giuliani, spent months on location, interviewing locals and speleologists, learning how to descend into caves, tracing the curves and spaces of the Bifurto. *Il buco*’s cinematic language reflects the production’s vulnerability to the contingencies of gravity, the uncertainties of darkness, the limits of vision in an extraordinarily enclosed space. Descending into the cave was an experience at the limits of the representative powers of cinema. Total darkness is possible underground; words falter; the “noise” of the cosmos is blocked out by layers of rock.

Il buco is also an intriguing next step in an unfolding project by Frammartino and his collaborators, to change the language of cinema not just on screen, but also as process of production and distribution. In this regard, Frammartino seeks to shift the stubborn centrality of the director’s role in making a film. For *Le quattro volte*, he told me that he wanted to distribute the film without his name, as director, appearing in a prominent position, and many of the Italian film posters were issued accordingly.⁹ As his renown as director grows, such a possibility becomes more difficult. Nevertheless, when he presented the film in Venice, screenwriter Giovanna Giuliani, various producers, and speleologists young and old were part of the team at the press conference (*Venezia Biennale Cinema* 2021). At the screening I attended in Rome, Giovanna Giuliani

⁹ Frammartino, interview with author, Milan, Italy, 29 June 2011.

was present as well, and Frammartino directed questions her way, eager, it seemed, to have the intensely collaborative process be recognized. Although the conventions of both cinematic marketing and cinematic criticism continue to celebrate the director's name above all, *Il buco* seems to seek to credit a more choral space than many films.

Yet although the heights of the Pirelli Tower offer a memorable visual symbol for the hubristic ambitions of the Great Acceleration, in some ways subterranean anthropoturbation is an equally eloquent signal of the extent to which planetary limits have been breached. And although *Il buco* took a gentle and collaborative approach to production, filming the descent into the Bifurto could never be an entirely innocent endeavour. There are in fact ways in which we might read the descent into “il buco” as a descent into the underbelly of the boom, a phenomenon continuous with it. The final images of the film depict the hand of a speleologist finalizing a map of the cave, rendering it legible. Here we can speculate about why Piedmontese speleologists, traveling with military vehicles and the support of the Italian military, are mapping caves in the Italian south. The history of resource geologies and extraction, not to mention the tense history of the Kingdom of Piedmont in Southern Italy, would strongly suggest that such exploration is never disinterested.

And then there is the fact that if, even in some ways, the cast and crew opened themselves to the contingencies of their space, in other ways, the film and its making dominated it. This irony is visible several times in the film when the speleologists – and their pioneering descent – are depicted from below. As they set out to plumb the depths of the unknown, sometimes pushing feet first through narrow dark enclosures, at times, the camera captures the bottom of their sturdy boots: cinema was there first, it shows us. The technique is repeated with flaming pieces of paper, which flutter downward to a camera that observes from below. It is an irony echoed in the paper that accumulates in the depths of the cave as trash. The explorers find unincinerated pages of *Epoca*, which they dropped to measure the depths ahead, featuring the faces of Richard Nixon, JFK, Sophia Loren. This trash functioned as another visual marker of the historical epoch in the film, but it also signposts how consumer waste from the north–here, brought by the Piedmontese speleologists–would be abandoned in Souths the world over.

This outrage – the fact of being preceded by human trash even while achieving a supposed “first” – offers a dark cinematic coun-

terpoint to stories of microplastics being found on the summit of Mount Everest. It also offers a new perspective on cinema-as-cave. In the interview cited at the beginning of this essay, Alice Rohrwacher affirmed that “la caverna è il luogo principale del cinema.” But she frames this idea in terms of her ecologically engaged awareness of what cinema can envision, and what cinema *does* as the process of envisioning unfolds. She tells a story of going to visit friends who were speleologists, and then discovering several films of caves they’d shot in Super 16:

Era sera, abbiamo acceso il proiettore e caricato le bobine, e subito è apparso un luogo favoloso, una sorta di giardino di pietra che avevano filmato. Medusa di cristalli, filamenti, colonne possenti... [...] In quel momento mi sono resa conto che tutte quelle forme erano nate e si erano sviluppate al buio. Ora, tornando al cinema, noi stiamo parlando di una luce che entra dentro una caverna e ci racconta un mondo che esiste perché la luce lo porta in vita e ci permette di vederlo con tutte le sue stalattiti, ma può anche rovinarlo (Zonta, 2017, p. 186).

Rohrwacher’s “epiphany,” as Di Bianco dubbed it, recalls how while stories “can teach us to look at, restore, and safeguard [...] friable landscapes, the act of filmmaking can alter or even ruin certain fragile beauties” (2020, p. 161).

Cinema’s desecration of landscapes is something of which Frammartino is well aware: “Noi siamo contaminanti per la grotta,” he agreed in discussing the film in Rome, acknowledging the danger of entering fragile subterranean ecosystems. “Noi siamo il virus.” Yet entering the cave can also be read as an act of mediatic discovery, an acknowledgment of the close ties between media cultures and the underground. Metals and minerals are essential for mediation—from the silver in celluloid film stock to silicon and gallium for semiconductors (and we could go on). Jussi Parikka’s *A Geology of Media* lays out how “media history conflates with earth history; the geological materials of metals and chemicals gets deterritorialized from their strata and reterritorialized in machines that define our technical media culture” (2015, p. 35). For cinema, entering “il buco” is also, in a sense, going home.

5. *Catastrophe, or, Reaching the Bottom*

Whether the search is for something sufficiently pragmatic to incite action, visionary enough to express its scale, or theoretically capacious enough to encompass its diverse causes, finding a language adequate to the Anthropocene proves difficult. The editors

of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* write of the contemporary ecological moment that: “Living arrangements that took millions of years to put into place are being undone in the blink of an eye. [...] The enormity of our dilemma leaves scientists, writers, artists, and scholars in shock” (Gan *et al.* 2017, p. G1).

This sense of shock sent Robert Macfarlane underground in search of language to the material place where “catastrophes” unfold, in etymological terms:

An aversion to the underland is buried in language. In many of the metaphors we live by, height is celebrated but depth is despised. To be ‘uplifted’ is preferable to being ‘depressed’ [...] ‘Catastrophe’ literally means a ‘downwards turn’, ‘cataclysm’ a ‘downwards violence’. (Macfarlane, 2019, p. 13)

Although *Il buco* descends to the underlands, where language is crushed by the acoustics, the weight, and the constraints of geology, a new language nevertheless emerges. One of the most significant ways the film creates this language is in the dialogue between above and below ground, between the cave mouth (that “swallow-hole”) and the open mouth of Zi’ Nicola, who falls ill midway through the film, and thereafter lies in bed, attended to by his fellow cowherds and barely breathing.

In a lengthy sequence we might consider the final montage (although it lasts for the final 45 minutes or so), the film alternates with slow, pulsating regularity between spaces below and aboveground, suturing parallels between the world of the Calabrian cowherds and the world of the Piedmontese speleologists. Aboveground, a physician peers into Zi’ Nicola’s eyes with a pen light. Below, a flashlight beam presses against the edges of a dark, narrow aperture in the Bifurto. Above, the elderly cowherd’s breath slows, falters. Below, the intensity of the soundscape grows, while above, the sounds of the mountain plain are gentle, quiet.

Below, the resonant sounds of enormous cavern-echo chambers give way to the more subdued sounds of a small stone room. One speleologist looks up at her companion, who has just made his way through the narrow passage, feet first. Their headlamps light a golden stone wall and a still brown pool. She waves her hands horizontally, in a crossing motion. *Finito*, her hands say. They’ve reached the bottom. They breathe.

Above, dusk falls on the cowherds’ hut, where Zi’ Nicola lies in a bed, breathing no more. His companions smooth a rough blanket over his head, and then they carry him out into the light. The door closes behind them, leaving an empty dark room.

Both sequences depict endeavours that might be carriers of

massive significance: the final destination of an ambitious human expedition; the end of a life. Yet in the ecocinematic language of *Il buco*, these “events” are placed in dialogue, via a cinematic parataxis that represents the film’s ethical position. Both are capable of signifying something universal: a quest, the arc of a life. Both, though, are gently and deliberately uneventful: quiet, specific, private, and undramatic.

Here, I suggest, is a proposed alternative language for the Anthropocene’s unfolding catastrophes, a cinematic vernacular for what Anna Tsing, Andrew Mathews, and Nils Bubandt call a “patchy Anthropocene.” Their proposed Anthropocene thinking works against grand narratives (like the crystalline Pirellone)—the idea of “a big, universal, and scalable dream world” where technocrats, “green capitalism,” or ecomodernism promise to save humanity from catastrophe using the same intellectual toolkit that created ecological disaster (2019, p. S192). The anthropologists argue, instead, that hope is not scalable, because it requires “collaboration – open and curious – across multiple registers of knowledge” (2019, p. S193).

Il buco’s language is not the apex drama of tipping points, not the terrifying figuration of falling ice shelves and burning rain forests, typical of climate change documentaries. Not the majestic, awe-inspiring story of entanglement with the more-than-human world on display in David Attenborough’s BBC series. To listen to the language of the Bifurto is to entrust oneself to a film that will offer only patchy views of the underground landscape, providing scant illumination. It is to acknowledge that even in the deepest chambers of the earth, even in the furthest point south, capital precedes the human; waste marks human passage. It is a cinema that opens its microphones and its lenses to the world, a cinema that watches and listens, even when things are nearly impossible to hear or see. A cinema that comes to an end point and accepts its limits and its despoliations, even as it tries to minimize them. A quiet Anthropocene language, one that doesn’t claim to know the solutions: one that believes it is worthwhile to stop to listen to the multispecies, sometimes indistinguishable, voices of others.

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