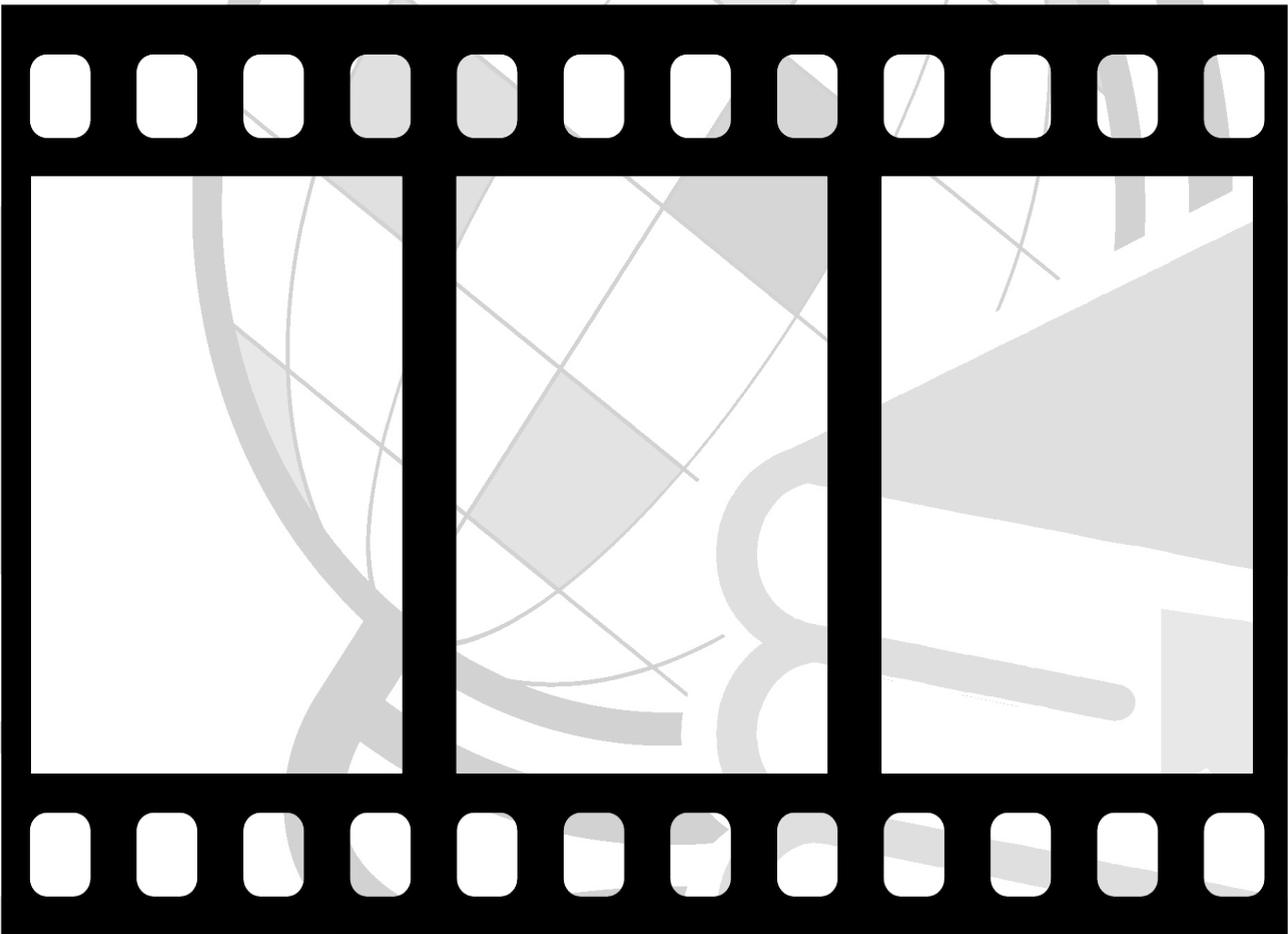


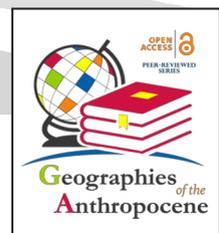
CINEMA, DISASTERS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Editors)



Foreword by David McEntire

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Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Eds.)

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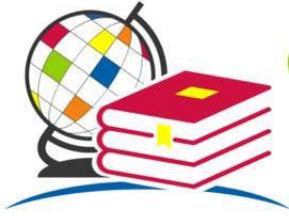


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the new processes of the Anthropocene epoch through the various worldviews of geoscientists and humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

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10. The China-Tibet Relationship in Film Stories: an Announced Disaster?

Antonietta Ivona¹

Abstract

Today cinema, by virtue of its diffusion and popularity, is the perfect tool for disseminating environmental issues and highlighting their critical issues. Documentary cinema, then, has become an effective tool for communicating environmental issues and their urgencies on a large scale. The paper intends to analyze the environmental issue in relations between China and Tibet through film and documentary narration. While being aware that this is a huge issue, the visual approach to the aforementioned theme can provide a further key to understanding.

Keywords: Environmental; geopolitics; visual arts; religion; balances.

1. Introduction

Since the dawn of the last century, science and its visual approach have created an uninterrupted union. The so-called "scientific imaginary" is therefore the immediate expression to refer to the multiple and mutual influences between science and imagination. The close relation between science and visual culture in western modernity has been widely commented upon. John Crary's (1992) seminal book, for example, shows the intersection, convergence, and exchange of disciplines ever since the birth of modern science. Jos van Dijck (2005) explained how interactions between man and technology do not occur only in places designated for science but are also represented everywhere in contemporary visual culture. Visual representations, therefore, play a significant role in explaining various important issues and phenomena. Over the last century, it has become clear that much of our scientific knowledge actually depends on its representation in visual culture. One of the focal points of the debate on the relationship between science and its visual representation has long been the topic of "truth". The nineteenth century idea that truth is self-evident by visualizing an object has given way to the Foucauldian idea that truth is an effect of the

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discussion. Certainly, over the years, the term "video" has been increasingly referring to a technological device but also and above all to a cultural tool that acts in the relationship of mutual mediation traditionally existing between man and world. Visual culture of the last few centuries is deeply indebted to, and has been made possible by, scientific and technological developments. They are all the result of the intersection, convergence and exchange of disciplines and skills belonging to both the technical-scientific and artistic-humanitarian fields. Crary, for example, argues that optical devices such as camera obscura and stereoscope are “points of intersection where philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses overlap with mechanical techniques, institutional requirements, and socioeconomic forces” (Crary 1992, p. 28). In all these cases, they are not one-off inventions but the result of a shared need to express a new vision of the world. Again, Crary sees in the stereoscope (from the two Greek terms *stereos*, solid, and *scopos*, which looks) the first instrument that began to express the activity of observation as an action, and more precisely as a process of immersion in what one sees, a real fusion between spectator and object. “No other form of representation in the nineteenth century had so conflated the real with the optical, an object with its image” (Crary 1992, p. 124).

When the short film *L'arrivée du train en gare de La Ciotat* lasting about 45 seconds, by the Lumière brothers, was screened by surprise in 1895, the audience panicked, thinking that the train was about to run over them. This episode is therefore referred to as cinema's first attempt to create the sensation of the third dimension.

The chapter explores the use of cinema as a research tool to examine the role of film-making in the dissemination of scientific knowledge. After a first visual approach of the initial filmography of the history of cinema as a medium of knowledge, the work will focus on the union between cinema and new environmental emergencies. But cinema also was, and is, an extraordinary instrument of social condemnation of issues that would otherwise be neglected; this is precisely the topic of the fifth paragraph, namely the climate and-social emergency in Tibet accurately described by various directors.

From a methodological point of view, the aim is assessed by companioning qualitative methods approach; it is proposed using a case-study approach by studying some original films for the visual analysis. In particular, the chapter is based on data collected by the viewing of significant films and documentaries. The methodology provides a typology to understand and analyse the different approaches to scientific knowledge from a century ago and to environmental issues today. The research aims at contributing to the

study of the role of cinema in raising global awareness on urgent issues that otherwise would only be limited to a local scale.

2. Film art supports science

Since the early years of the twentieth century, the first short documentaries began to appear that responded to the need to reproduce reality by showing a cross-section of society and historical-political events of the turn of the century. Visual art therefore began to support the dissemination of information also in the scientific field, which had previously been the prerogative of scholars only. It was a tool for expressing and spreading scientific achievements, otherwise considered unintelligible. In 1909 Jean Comandon filmed for the first time the syphilis bacterium, in the same years the German Wilhelm Pfeffer produced short films on the growth of botanical species; the Argentine doctor Alejandro Posadas showed footage of surgery during conferences; the German Ludwig Münch made short films on mathematics. We should also mention the ten-minute documentaries such as *La vita delle farfalle* (1911) and *Neuropatologia* (1908) by the Italian Roberto Omegna; but the most interesting productions were the ethnographic films, that were defined as “archaeo-newsreel”. Other productions followed the trend, abandoning the purely documentary slant but maintaining marked references to the scientific scene. Georges Méliès’ cinema marked the turning point in this direction, still referring to science but in a different way. Méliès’ great intuition was to talk about science by creating an exciting story. (Merzagora, 2006). By imagining a journey into space, at that time considered the best way to strike the imagination of the audience, he gave birth to *Le Voyage dans la lune* (Figure 1), considered by many as the forerunner of science fiction films. (Testa, 2007; Tosi, 2001).



Figure 1 - Two frames of the film *Le Voyage dans la lune* (Source: Ivona, 2022 from the film)

Over time and through experiments, science was able to document the continuity of natural phenomena and, perhaps unconsciously, it was increasingly closer to cinema. (Merzagora, 2006).

Robert K. Bonine's attempt to document the consequences of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 with his short film (*Films of the San Francisco Earthquake*) can be regarded as an example. This is a part of movies from the studio that "invented" them: the Thomas Edison Company. The same catalogue also includes two other interesting examples that represent the attempt to combine filmic representation with reality: *Storm at Sea* of 1900, by director James White and *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street, New York City* of 1901, by Edwin S Porter. Edison's film company also produced the first short films for educational purposes such as, for example, *The Wonders of Magnetism* of 1915.

Although motion picture cameras were invented in several times and places (and the Lumière brothers have a better claim on getting the first practical system into operation), this does include some of the earliest film footage that survives today. It's fascinating to watch how the films evolved with audience expectations. (Frank, 2003).

In short, the cinema before the Lumière brothers was experimented and developed to respond to specific scientific needs. Like telescope, microscope and many other scientific instruments, it too made it possible to see the invisible.

By convention, cinema was born with the public screening on December 28, 1895, of the Lumière brothers' film *La Sortie des usines Lumière* in Lyon (among the ten films screened at the first public cinema show) followed by a series of other footage films. Equally accepted is the idea that the birth of

cinema corresponds with the first public cinematic show with the aim of entertaining the audience. Yet, even abandoning the documentary spirit of pre-cinema, the links with science persist. The first real big cinematic success that allowed the seventh art to forcefully enter the entertainment industry was a scientific journey: Professor Barbenfouillis' journey to the moon in the aforementioned film by Georges Méliès. Lasting about fifteen minutes, silent and in black and white, during the film many 'clichés' of science fiction cinema are 'fixed' at an embryonic level: from the group of scientists who get together for an apparently impossible undertaking, to the encounter with alien races, until the triumphant comeback. Georges Méliès is the first to impress on the film the dream that for thousands of years had only been told orally or in writing, from *The True Story* (in ancient Greek: *Alēthē diēghēmata*, literally True Stories) of Luciano di Samosata to *De la Terre à la Lune* by Jules Verne of 1865 (Figure 2), which *Le Voyage* is loosely inspired by.

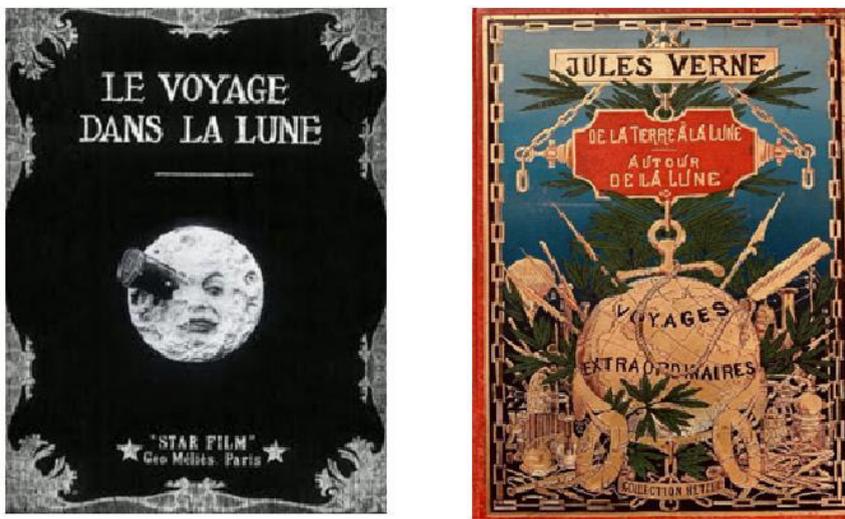


Figure 2 - The original movie poster *Le Voyage dans la lune* and the first cover of the book *De la Terre à la Lune* (Source: Ivona, 2022).

After the success of Méliès's film, cinema produces other examples of 'scientific' show, among which particularly valuable are Stuart Paton's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1916) with its stunning underwater shots and special effects with a massive use of divers (Figure 3); and the 1929 film *Die Frau im Mond* (A Woman on the Moon) by Fritz Lang, his last silent film, which merges science fiction and so-called "real" science, in an ironically

affectionate tribute to the nineteenth century, to Verne and to Georges Méliès. (Morandini L., Morandini L, Morandini M., 2017). After almost three intense decades of film experimentation serving science or, we may say, under the cover of science, the common path divides into new, increasing paths. "Science has become more complex and cinema is watching. Its eye also ventures where relations between science and society become thornier. For example, when scientists, willing or not, find themselves involved in the development of war machines." (Merzagora, 2006, p. 52).

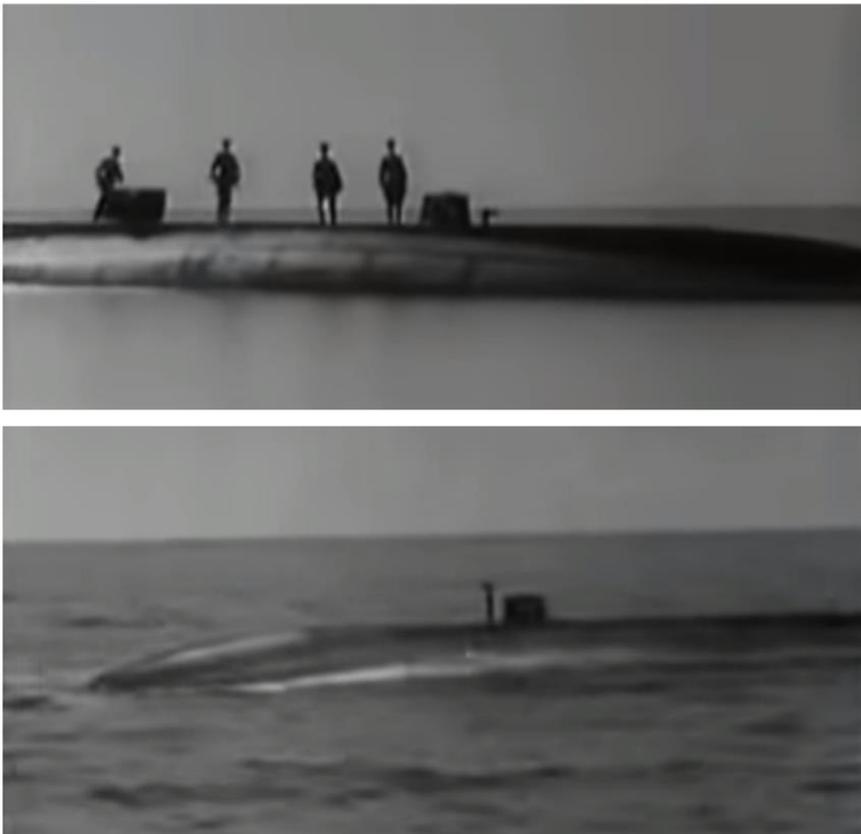


Figure 3 - Two frames of the film *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Source: Ivona, 2022 from the film).

3. Cinema and the environment, when the seventh art becomes sustainable

As mentioned, therefore, science had, and still has, deep impact on imagination; what Smelik (2010) defines as the 'scientific imaginary' thus ends up promoting knowledge of topics otherwise unknown to the majority of people. Popular media, art and science have become an intricate and interconnected contemporary visual culture. Over the past century it became clear that much of scientific knowledge actually depends on its representation in visual culture. One of the focal points of the debate on the relationship between science and its visual representation has long been the topic of "truth". The nineteenth-century idea that truth is self-evident by visualizing an object gave way to the Foucauldian idea that truth is an effect of discourse. The idea that seeing is knowing and understanding has been with us since the time of the Greeks; an idea that Foucault (Catucci, 2005), among others, revealed in his analysis of the construction of the medical gaze and clinical anatomy as an important tool for creating a certain truth in science.

Each human age had been characterized by a particular *episteme*, a Greek word that could be translated as certain cognitive truth. A definition that manifested itself through a system of rules on how to face reality and a set of reflections on this field of investigation. An articulated system of knowledge, similar to what the American philosopher Thomas Kuhn (2009) would have defined in the same years as a paradigm. A space within which the possibilities of scientific and historical investigation of a given period operated and, at the same time, a cultural tool through which some peculiar knowledge of each era was articulated.

Among the visual arts, again Merzagora (2006) argues that films have helped to shape the image of science and scientists among the general public; scientists sometimes become characters of popular cinema and the most common plot involving scientists concerns an unstable balance between knowledge and power.

Cinema acknowledges that science has the power to understand and change the world, and it harnesses this double-edged power to fulfil its narrative goals. For example, the great American film companies, besides focusing on classic science fiction topics such as the encounter with alien worlds, have used topics such as natural disasters, man-made environmental disasters, manipulation of the natural world, and relationship between science and war. Science, as portrayed in popular films, is not a representation of true science, nor are popular films a faithful mirror of science in society. Cinema, therefore, reflects, constructs and influences the public perception of science

and the interconnections between science and society in general. (Smelik, 2010).

According to the various eras and to what was happening in the world of experimentation and research, the scientific topics dealt with by world cinema are different; just as there are different interpretations of the role of science in preventing or combating fatal events for man such as natural or other disasters. In this interpretation, scientists often play a double role. On the one hand they can cause catastrophe but on the other hand, they not only know how to foresee it, but they can also stem it. Science is at the same time the cause and solution of the catastrophe and it depends on the historical periods and on the author how much the balance between one position and another fluctuates. Hurricanes, tides, climate change, comets and asteroids, eruptions, avalanches, earthquakes and fires are just some of the manifestations of nature that rebels against the actions of men by presenting apocalyptic scenarios.

Natural apocalypses appear in cinema since the very beginning, think of *Éruption volcanique à la Martinique*, by George Méliès released in 1902 or *The Hurricane* by John Ford of 1937, up to the first major production dedicated to climate change or *The day after tomorrow* by Roland Emmerich of 2004. The catastrophic and apocalyptic slant on climate change is also felt in documentaries.

Among the best known *An Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore of 2006 which tells how real and imminent the threat of climate change is. The 2016 sequel *An inconvenient sequel: truth to power* also takes stock of the situation by wondering what happened in the lapse of time between the two documentaries. *The 11th Hour* of 2007, directed by Leila Conners Petersen and Nadia Conners, produced and narrated by Leonardo di Caprio and *Before the flood*, a 2016 documentary directed by Fisher Stevens on climate change, produced and starring Leonardo Di Caprio, develop the same theme; they show the effects of global rising temperatures.

In Italy, one of the main promoters of environmental awareness is Ermanno Olmi, whose films reveal a deep love for nature (among others the documentary *Terra Madre*). Olmi also shot in 2014 the film *The meadows will come back*, made with a low environmental impact, in compliance with the guidelines of the Edison Green Movie protocol for sustainable cinema. Among the initiatives undertaken to reduce the impact was a lower use of film, a 60 percent cut in CO2 emissions and a ban on the use of plastic bottles on set.

According to Candau “Because of its narrative and imaginary potential, the memory of disasters has always been a precious fuel for art, all disciplines combined. Classical painting, as we know, was largely nourished by

representations of great battles. The same is true of literature and cinema where natural or man-made disaster has long been a recurring theme." (Candau, 2019, p. 9).

Cinema, thanks to its popularity, is the perfect tool for disclosing environmental issues. The beginning of this union between cinema and environment was inaugurated by the Lumière brothers who shot, in 1899, *Puits de pétrole à Bakou. Vue de près*, considered the closest thing to a current ecological documentary. Alexandre Michon filmed the fumaroles rising from the oil wells of the then Russian city of Baku. The scene, lasting about a minute, was filmed in 1887, but it was publicly screened only in August 1899.

In 1922 *Nanook from the North*, by Robert J. Flaherty, was released, a film in which the protagonists are, perhaps for the first time, the wilderness, the frozen lands of Hudson Bay and the life of a Canadian Inuit family are protagonists. Flaherty revolutionized the concept of documentary making the environment the absolute protagonist of the images.

Films on the environment have always existed in the history of cinema, but their number is increasing, reflecting the growing urgency of certain themes, such as global warming, deforestation, pollution, that cinema, as an art, feels obliged to tell.

4. Cinema, documentaries and the Anthropocene: a possible point of view

Film and media stories are instrumental, empirically and ideologically, to record this symptomatic awareness of man's visible impact on terrestrial ecosystems. Peterson and Uhlin (2019) believe that the 'Anthropocenery' of media history can be a tool for examining the ways in which film and media stories seem different from the Anthropocene perspective, which designates a new geological epoch in which human activities are significant enough to affect planetary ecosystems. Parallel to climate science's monitoring of the stresses posed to the environment by industrialization, film and media texts outline a cultural history of the Anthropocene, describing the ways of living and thinking that led to this crisis. "In addition to reshaping our understanding of contemporary media, the Anthropocene provides an opportunity to reconceptualize cinema and media history. The concept of anthropogenic climate change does not exactly provide a theory of history, but it pushes the limits of historical understanding and requires us to think across different time scales. Film history occupies only a tiny moment in the planetary perspective of Earth's geological history. However, human interventions have accelerated

a typically steady and slow-moving natural history, resulting in a new time scale of ecological change that is recent and fast enough for cinema to capture or imagine it." (Peterson, Uhlin, 2019, p. 144).

The term 'Anthropocene' declares that humanity now functions collectively as a geological force, capable of intervening in a biospheric system once considered large and stable enough to simply absorb the waste products of human civilization. Of growing relevance to environmental humanities, the term "Anthropocene" (the word Anthropocene comes from the Greek words *anthropo*, for "man," and *cene* for "new") was first popularized in 2000 by the chemist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer to suggest the end of the postglacial geological epoch of the Holocene, which coincided with the rapid expansion of the human species, and the beginning of a new epoch. "Considering these and many other major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term "anthropocene" for the current geological epoch. The impacts of current human activities will continue over long periods. According to a study by Berger and Loutre, because of the anthropogenic emissions of CO₂, climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour over the next 50,000 years." (Crutzen, Stoermer, 2000, p. 17). Humanity, they argue, is acting on the planet like a force of nature, a nature that seems to be turning against organic life, as it has been known to us. "We must now contend simultaneously with our species-being (vulnerability for extinction we share with all living things) and our apparently exceptional, suprahistorical status as a geophysical entity that rises above biology, sociality and politics. Anthropocene humanity and its world-building activities are the new nature that appears to us in the form of weather events and extreme environmental conditions that are more violent, erratic, and threatening than anything in our collective history" (Fay, 2018, p. 11).

Humanity is thus called to face a double challenge: the fight against the vulnerability typical of every living species and the defence of our 'suprahistorical' entity as a remedy that allows the living being to temporarily place itself above history, biology, sociability and politics. (Nietzsche, 1974).

Anthropocene humanity and its world-building activities are the new nature appearing to us in the form of extreme weather events and environmental conditions that are more violent, erratic, and threatening than any other event in our collective history.

The beginning of the Anthropocene (or the "Human Epoch" to indicate that human activity is set to leave an indelible mark on the geological record)

is often dated to 1945 as the inauguration of both the nuclear era and the Great Acceleration, designating an exponential growth of the stresses observable on planetary ecosystems from the effects of global capitalism. Identifying the transition between the Holocene and the Anthropocene in 1945, at the beginning of the post-war economic expansion, makes cinema witness a turning point in geological time, and consequently, the history of cinema and the history of climate become explainable with respect to each other. Other proposed dates link the Anthropocene to a longer history of industrial capitalism starting with the invention of the steam engine in 1780, or to the history of imperialism in which colonialist violence, mass death and intercultural contact intermingle and animal species have left distinguishable traces in the geological record. Regardless of the chronology scientists ultimately adopt, cultural historians can make use of the multiple start dates of the Anthropocene to find disturbing parallels, patterns, and synchronicities between human actions and ecological change. The Anthropocene, in other words, puts an end to any separation of natural history from human history, and if there is a representative medium that best captures natural environments made human, it is cinema. (Peterson, Uhlin, 2019).

Indeed, as a result of various ecocrises of the Anthropocene context, the state and fate of humanity's relationship with Planet Earth has been changed irrevocably.

While the Anthropocene, as a historical period, stretches back many centuries into human history, as a concept it is very much one of the 21st century. It is an idea that is arrived upon through the heightened scale of, and urgency to act upon, anthropocentrically induced climate change. While not an official stratification, the term is used quite pervasively to describe not only a geological epoch, but also more generally to describe the current global environmental crisis. Clark affirms this diversification of the term's uses and meaning "The term has rapidly become adopted in the humanities in a sense beyond the strictly geological. Its force is mainly as a loose, shorthand term for all the new contexts and demands – cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and political – of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale, notably climate change, ocean acidification, effects of overpopulation, deforestation, soil erosion, overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems. (Clark, 2015, p. 2).

The term "Anthropocene" is a topic of impassioned debate that has generated a number of competing frameworks for characterizing this epoch. "By foregrounding humanity as a unitary force (the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene) collectively responsible for ecological collapse, the Anthropocene arguably fails to account for the disproportionate responsibility

attributable to various actors. The continuing inequities of fossil-fuel capitalism and imperialism are integral to historicizing not only the differential causes of environmental disasters but also their unevenly distributed effects, as economically dispossessed populations are left vulnerable to a changing climate while the economies of the Global North develop mitigation strategies. The Capitalocene, an alternative framework to the Anthropocene most commonly associated with Andreas Malm and Jason W. Moore, emphasizes the capitalist extraction of value from nature in pursuit of unrestricted economic growth. This approach faults not humanity as a whole but industrialization's dependence on the "free gift" of nature." (Peterson, Uhlin, 2019, p. 145). Donna Haraway believes that the concepts of Anthropocene and Capitalocene are unsuitable for explaining the history of man-earth relations; she prefers to use the term Chthulucene as it more appropriately and completely describes our age as one in which the human and the non-human are inextricably linked in sprawling practices. Chthulucene, explains Haraway, requires *sim-poiesi*, or dealing with, rather than *auto-poiesi* or self-creation. Learning to endure the problem of living and dying together on a damaged earth will prove more conducive to the kind of thinking that would provide the means to build more liveable futures. (Haraway, 2016).

According to Fay (2018, p. 12) "The Anthropocene is to natural science what cinema, especially early cinema, has been to human culture. It makes the familiar world strange to us by transcribing the dimensionalities of experience into celluloid, transforming and temporally transporting humans and the natural world into an unhomely image."

The Anthropocene perspective on cinema and the media can be considered a tool for reading the current reality in parallel with the history of man and the effects it has generated on Earth from the past until today. In short, from the slow history of geological eras to the accelerated history of man on the planet.

Cinema in its various forms (films or documentaries) is able to question the binary oppositions underlying the anthropocentric discourse, such as human / non-human, life / matter or nature / culture, thus problematizing the very term Anthropocene. Nonetheless, cinema has great power to influence our perception of political and environmental issues and our emotional involvement in imagining possible solutions.

5. Tibet, environmental emergencies, visual representation

After the Chinese occupation of 1950, Tibet was divided, renamed and partially annexed to the neighbouring Chinese provinces, with little reference to the original borders between the Tibetan provinces. When China refers to Tibet, calling it the Autonomous Region of Tibet or TAR officially born in 1969, it means only U-Tsang and part of the Kham. The remainder of the Kham was divided between the Chinese provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan. Amdo was divided among the provinces of Gansu, Sichuan and Qinghai. (Goldenstein, 1998; Shaik, 2011).

The historical-political territory of Tibet, corresponding to the sphere of influence of the government of Lhasa at the time of the XIII Dalai Lama, that is until 1933, the year of his death, would make it the 10th largest nation in the world by geographical area. Tibet is often referred to as the cultural or ethnographic Tibet including the autonomous region Tibet, parts of the Chinese provinces Qinghai, Sichuan Yunnan and Gangsu; the Himalayan areas of India, northern Nepal and Bhutan.

Tibetans constitute one of the largest of the 56 ethnic groups recognized by the People's Republic of China. According to a 1959 census, there were more than six million Tibetans in China. To these, about 125,000 individuals of Tibetan ethnicity in India, 60,000 in Nepal and 40,000 in Bhutan must be added.

Tibet's environment is valuable for its beauty, but also for the Tibetan people who have administered it for generations. Still, all of this is in danger. It faces two huge threats: climate change and colonization. Both emergencies do not concern only the Tibetan population but also all the others depending, as will be seen later, on the preservation of the Tibetan environment.

The Tibetan Plateau is often known as the "Third Pole" and is home to the third largest water ice deposit in the world. Its glaciers feed many of the world's largest rivers, on which more than 1.5 billion people across South and Southeast Asia depend every day for their water supply.

Still, Tibet is warming three times faster than the rest of the Earth, losing about eight billion tons of ice every year due to the disappearance of glaciers.

Before the Chinese occupation, Tibet was, from an ecological point of view, a balanced and stable territory because the conservation of the environment was an essential part of the daily life of its inhabitants. The Tibetans lived in harmony with nature thanks to their faith in the Buddhist religion which asserts the interdependence of all elements existing on earth, whether they are living or non-living. This belief was further strengthened by the strict observance of a norm that we could define as "self-regulation",

common to all Tibetan Buddhists, according to which the environment must be exploited only to satisfy one's own needs and not out of pure greed. After the occupation of Tibet, the friendly and harmonious attitude of the Tibetans towards nature was brutally supplanted by the consumerist and materialistic view of Chinese Communist ideology. With the invasion, devastating environmental destruction occurred at the same time. Today the state of the environment in Tibet is highly critical and the consequences of this degradation will be felt far beyond its borders.

The environmental issue is also of great interest to Chinese and international filmmakers. This work has considered only a few particularly significant films and, above all, related to the environmental consequences of Chinese government choices. (Table 1).

Table 1 - *Films analysed in order of quotation*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Autor</i>	<i>Subject headings</i>
2015	Under the Dome	Chai Jing	China pollution
2009	Meltdown in Tibet	Michael Buckley, Wild Yak Films	Dams; Forced Migration
2011	From nomad to nobody (why is China snuffing out Tibet's nomad culture?)	Michael Buckley	Forced Migration
2009	The Yangtze River: China's wild lifeline	Films Media Group	Water Pollution; The Three Gorges Dam
2006	Silent Nu River	Jie Hu	Small rural villages in Tibet and dams
2007	Peng Hui zuo pin xuan - Videorecording	Hui Peng	Wildlife preservation in the Tibetan region of Kekexili
2007	China from the inside (episode 3)	Jonathan Lewis	Water pollution; Environmental degradation
2006	China rises	Michael Murphy	Social conditions

An interesting example of how the urgent need to discuss and represent the climate and environmental emergency is the Chinese documentary *Under the Dome* by director Chai Jing, formerly a journalist of China Central Television, presented in 2015 on some streaming platforms, which was viewed more than 200 million times in just two days. In a country where the media is tightly controlled, it is surprising, if not unprecedented, to see the

unhindered publication of a self-financed investigative documentary on one of the most sensitive topics challenging China's growth. This video is an investigative report about China's environment and the problems of air pollution. She learned about localized smog, i.e., polluted air, but also nationwide problems of cancer, polluted rivers, and issues with coal mining.



Figure 4 - Four frames of the documentary *Under the Dome* (Source: Ivona, 2022 from the documentary)

The urgent question of the construction of dams in China is the topic addressed, however, by director Michael Buckley, in 2009, with the documentary *Meltdown in Tibet*. The huge and potentially catastrophic Chinese dam construction projects in Tibet make it urgent to denounce, through film images and beyond, the potential risks of lack of water supply for entire populations. (Figure 5).



Figure 5 - Frames from *Meltdown in Tibet* (Source: Ivona, 2022 from the documentary)

These rivers are at great risk from rapid glacier retreat, accelerated meltdown from climate change, and large-scale dams and diversions, due to massive Chinese engineering projects. Additionally, to make way for these hydroelectric projects and mining initiatives, Tibetan nomads are forced out of their traditional grassland habitat and resettled in squalid villages, where they cannot earn a decent living. Buckley again dealt with the forced migration of Tibetan nomads in the documentary *From nomad to nobody (why is China snuffing out Tibet's nomad culture?)* (2011). He documents how between 1995 and 2015, the official Chinese policy aimed at the removal of more than two million Tibetan nomads from their land. This resettlement policy is designed to eliminate nomadic culture and its strong connections with traditional Tibetan values. Nomads are the stewards of the vast grasslands of Tibet: they have been grazing these lands with their yaks for nearly 4000 years. (Figure 6). Without nomads, grasslands (already affected by climate change) will deteriorate further and turn into deserts. This could have a global impact, as these grasslands are an important source of carbon. What are the reasons behind China's forced settlement of Tibetan nomads on such a large scale? Why are Chinese mining and dam construction companies moving to the same grassland regions? What does the future hold for the vast grasslands of Tibet? These are the questions that the documentary aims to explore, in this personal interpretation of the difficult situation of Tibetan nomads.



Figure 6 - *The documentary From nomad to nobody: the new settlements for Tibetan nomads* (Source: Ivona, 2022 from the documentary)

“Watching China destroy Tibet is like someone going and destroying the whole of Antarctica,” says Michael Buckley, author of *Meltdown in Tibet*. Buckley and others believe that China’s state-led development is threatening the livelihoods of millions of people living downstream and it’s getting worse.

Resource exploitation and the building of dams has only accelerated since 2006, when China finished construction of the Golmud-Lhasa railroad. The railway, one of the highest in the world, made the transportation of goods and equipment in and out of Tibet quicker and cheaper.

According to Buckley this is when he began to observe devastating changes. He tells *Equal Times*, “Everything is getting worse. The mighty rivers of Tibet are being dammed by Chinese engineering consortiums to feed the mainland’s relentless quest for power. Nobody is doing anything to stop the destruction and Tibetans have no rights to protect their own environment.” (Coca, 2017).

China has been building dams on a staggering scale and at an extraordinary rate. By 2000, China had built 22,104 large dams, providing a total of 77GW electricity generating capacity. For comparison, the US, the world’s second most prolific dam builder, had 6,390 dams, and India 4,000. By 2020 China had installed 430GW of hydropower and well over four times Australia’s total electricity generating capacity. China has built more large dams than the US, Brazil and Canada combined and shows no sign of slowing down. While only a fraction of these dams is found in Tibet, with the middle and lower courses of its rivers already heavily dammed, the only way for China to reach such capacities is to begin heavily damming rivers in Tibet. “As with large hydropower projects the world over, local communities bear the brunt of these controversial projects and reap few if any of the benefits. The electricity generated serves the needs of large cities and industrial centres rather than the local population.” (Australia Tibet Council, 2015, p. 9).

All this should lead us to consider the water grab in Tibet no longer a regional but an international issue. Dams not only interrupt the flow of water but also the flow of vital substances contained in it. With less river silt, the downstream soils are becoming increasingly brackish and less suitable for cultivation. Habitats are destroyed and species threatened. Ecosystems are deeply altered, affecting fisheries and livelihoods. (Chellaney, 2007; Franco et alii, 2012; Coca, 2017).

China's unchecked mining expansion and dam construction across the Tibetan plateau, compounded by climate change melting glaciers, are threatening the Yellow, Yangtze, Ganges and other rivers that hundreds of millions of people depend on, say observers calling for talks on a looming crisis. (Figure 7).

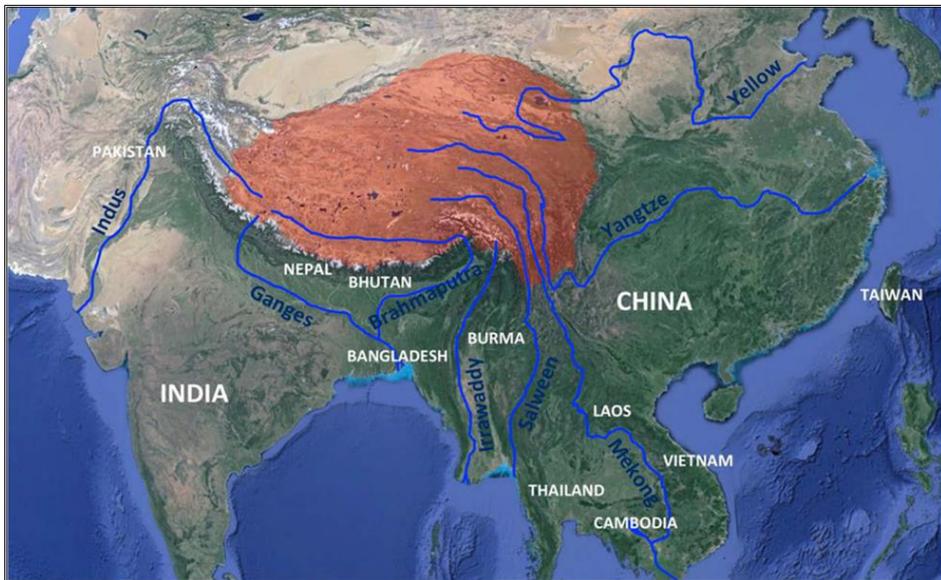


Figure 7 - Tibet and its many rivers (Source: ATC, 2015, p. 11).

China has not released official information on the construction of dams in Tibet; but the government's publicly declared outlook of economic growth suggests that many more will be built to massively increase Chinese hydroelectric electricity production. Some dams, such as the one about 300 meters high and the third largest in the world, in the Tibetan ethnic region of Sichuan, will flood several villages, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and sacred mountains. Likewise, the impacts on downstream countries are poorly understood due to a lack of available information.

There are other documentary films on the theme of the dangerous exploitation of water in China in relation to Tibet; among others: *The Yangtze River: China's wild lifeline* by the production company Films Media Group, produced in 2008. This program focuses on the Three Gorges Dam, which produced huge economic benefits but also moved thousands of people from their homes and irrevocably altered the flow of silt, the geological formations and the levels of fish stocks.

Silent Nu River, then, is a 2006 documentary by the director Jie Hu again on the theme of the impact on small rural villages in Tibet of the construction of thirteen hydroelectric dams, along the Nu River.

Director Hui Peng's 2007 documentary film *Peng Hui zuo pin xuan - Videorecording* immortalizes the struggle between residents of the remote Tibetan region Qinghai as they seek to protect the wildlife reserve's animals and poaching gangs. The director then portrays the harsh life of farmers in a drought-stricken mountain village in Tongjiang County, Sichuan Province, and their constant struggle for water.

An interesting point of view that we could consider the way China look at itself and its transposition through the media is the four-documentary series *China from the inside* by director Jonathan Lewis produced between 2003 and 2017. They examine China through the eyes of Chinese people to see how history has shaped them and where the present is leading them. The particularly popular episode 3 examines environmental issues in China. China is trying to feed 20 percent of the world's population with 7 percent of the world's arable land. One third of the world uses water from Chinese rivers. But rapid industrialization and climate change have led to unprecedented pollution. Environmental activists, Party officials, academics and scientists are engaged in a daily struggle for environmental damage in China.

Finally, it should be mentioned *China Rise*; it is a four-part documentary international co-production of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Cbc), The New York Times, Discovery Times, Zdf-Germany Television, France 5, and Britain's S4-C. The four-hour international production combines stunning, breath-taking images of China's cities and countryside with unparalleled intimate access to the men and women living an economic, political and social revolution and those left on the side-lines. This documentary portrait of China refuses to get trapped in stereotypes -for every economic "winner" profiled, also profiled is an economic "loser;" for every booming urban centre there is a rural contrast; for every industrial success story there are cautionaries about industrial accidents and environmental carelessness; for every young person there is an encounter with generations of family; and for every male portrayed there is a parallel female profile. "The

power of this documentary series is that it refuses to be seduced by a simplistic vision of what twenty-first century China is or isn't. In best dialectic fashion, the documentary seeks truth from facts and constantly presents the viewer with the dramatic contrasts and insistent conundrums that are modern day China. Perhaps better than any other video I have seen, this series introduces viewers to the contradictions that make up the reality of present-day China.” (Winship, 2006, p. 68).

6. Conclusion

Although it does not claim to be exhaustive, the work has outlined one of the aspects of the problematic relationship between two worlds, the Chinese and the Tibetan. Although close by geographic proximity, they are extremely distant culturally and historically. In the delicate plot that draws the relations between China and Tibet, a decisive node is the environmental issue in general and water grabbing in particular, which is widely manifesting itself with the physical capture of water in hydroelectric plants through the construction of dams. These projects also have multiple cross-border implications, with the complex dynamics between neighbouring countries on water management, which China has to deal with. The soft power exercised by the Chinese government has not, to date, resolved the question of the unequal distribution of the advantages of large dams, questioning their effectiveness as a development strategy.

To this the fear that climate change exacerbates the water crisis must be added. Being a high-altitude region, the effect in Tibet is similar to that seen at the north and south poles, which are warming faster than the rest of the planet. On the Tibetan Plateau, temperatures are warming three times faster than the global average, and scientists predict a 4.6 ° C rise by the end of the century, with increasing desertification, melting glaciers and permafrost, loss of natural habitats. The snow caps of the Himalayas are in melting mode due to climate change, accelerated by a shower of black soot resulting from the massive burning of coal and other fossil fuels in both China and India. These glaciers control the flows of rivers downstream and are crucial in the dry seasons. Tibet possesses vast freshwater resources in its thousands of glaciers and alpine lakes. When they melt, the outflow increases, which means less reliable flows.

But what is China taking from Tibet? The Tibetan Plateau is rich in natural and underground resources of great value to China. Tibetans do not enjoy the economic benefits but suffer from the environmental diseconomies of the

extraction and/or use of these resources. The diversion of water from Tibet to China to feed the dams described in detail in the preceding paragraphs is one of those problems. In addition, water from Tibet's rivers supplies around 1 billion people across Asia every day. Control over Tibet's rivers gives China a significant geostrategic advantage over its neighbours.

In this unbalanced geo-economic framework, the hope is that, despite the seventy years elapsed almost in vain, the international community will find ways to establish more effective communication between the Tibetan and Chinese worlds. But the international community itself must be informed in the best possible way; and cinema, as we have seen since its inception, has a strong visual impact. It is the media tool that can and will convey the importance of mutual traditions, knowledge and partnerships in the environmental field and, obviously, not only in that. If on the one hand cinema is denunciation, on the other it is the dream; but it has always been able to express man's natural will to overcome the limits of his knowledge.

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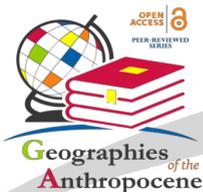
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The Anthropocene concept identifies a geological era in which human action leads to changes on a planetary scale with long-term irreversible effects. This volume collects insights into geographical research, with a specific look at the challenges of the future, and the potential of visual communication offered by cinema, documentaries and television series. In fact, fiction could represent the appropriate medium to examine the notions of the Anthropocene, being a language of global diffusion and highly evocative since it uses the engagement of narration and entertainment to convey messages of vital importance, arousing emotions in the viewer, shared awareness and, finally, responsibility. In the Anthropocene era, the challenge of climate change is not a problem of science but a failure of politics. And politics fails because the Great Acceleration has led to the good life and certainly a better life for people everywhere. Who is willing to give up the great stuff of the Great Acceleration? What would that new life look like? What kind of challenges does the future propose? Some of these questions, among others, are raised in the chapters of the present volume. The different geographical contexts and approaches, here collected, can play an important clarifying function, to reduce the complexity of (today's) social, economic, political, and technological reality, presenting a much deeper vision of reality than it appears to us, and at the same time offering us the means to navigate it. Thus, the volume deals with these issues in three sections, moving from narrative methods to the representation of ecological disasters and finally analysing a more specific topic.

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