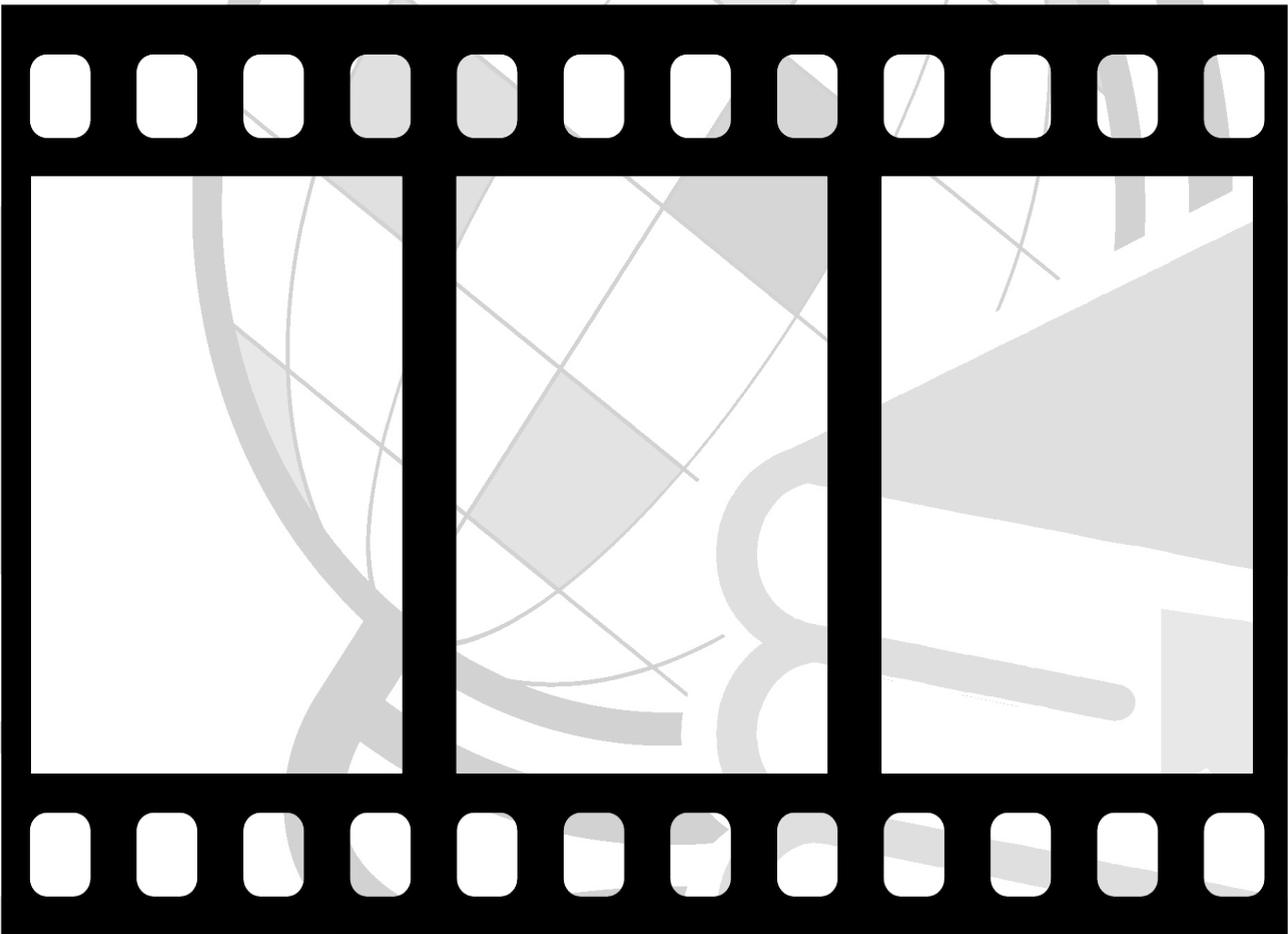


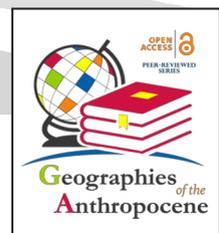
CINEMA, DISASTERS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Editors)



Foreword by David McEntire

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Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Eds.)

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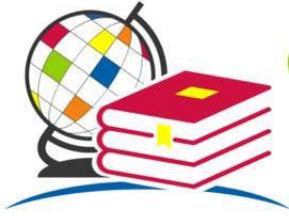


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9. The conquest of power. A look to hydroelectric landscapes of Alps through the lens of audiovisuals and cinema

Maria Conte¹

Abstract

In the early twentieth century hydroelectric exploitation represented a revolutionary opportunity for the Italian nation to emancipate from the slavery of imported coal, bridging the gap with other countries. The advent of hydroelectric power was also one of the most transformative key aspects of the “colonization of the Alps”: in this period the mountain landscape has been “under construction” both from a concrete point of view (through infrastructures, industrial and energy exploitation, tourism) and from a conceptual one. The mountain was imagined, conceived, conceptualized through a set of narratives, discourses and practices imbued with modernity, development and Nation. The interiorization of hydroelectric landscape as part of a collective identity was also made possible by the fundamental role of media and communication. It seems therefore interesting to reflect on the representations and narratives of the hydroelectric industry conveyed through television and cinema as a mirror of the spirit of the period.

The chapter – after contextualizing the enthusiasm for water exploitation in the broader phenomenon of Alpine Modernism - traces the parable of hydroelectricity through the gaze of some audio-visual products: from the emphatic tones of industrial documentaries to *cinegiornali* of Istituto Luce, to the short film shot during Vajont construction until Marco Paolini’s “civil theatre” show. In the last section, starting from the geographical film *Dove nuotano i caprioli*, it focuses on the area of Cadore and Piave river, outlining some of the long-term and long-distance effects of the deep artificialization of the river.

Keywords: mountains, hydroelectric landscape, water exploitation, audiovisuals, Piave.

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1. Introduction

Hydroelectric exploitation has been one of the most transformative key aspects of the colonization and modernization processes that affect the Alpine mountains in first half of the twentieth century, up to the 1970s. The mountain, as we know and perceive it today, has gone through a twofold process: on the one hand the re-organization of the territory through human projects and artefacts, on the other the “building” of an imaginary, of a representation and staging of the landscape. The transformation is therefore meant from both a material point of view (through infrastructure, industrial and energy exploitation, tourism) and a conceptual one: what was built and is visible can be considered as a lens or a clue to inquiry and understand how the mountain is imagined, thought, conceptualized (De Rossi, 2016, pp. 3-28).

De Rossi defined as “Alpine Modernism” the set of narratives, discourses and practices imbued with the values of modernity, development and Nation that determined a paradigm of use and organization of the landscape during the twentieth century (*ibid.*). These processes are also described in Armiero’s words: “Italian mountains have been shaped by words and bombs, by the rhetoric of modernization and by the tons of concrete that have given substance to the underlying rhetoric in form of dams, roads, railways” (Armiero, 2013, p. 15).

The appropriation/interiorization of geographical and symbolic mountain space as part of a collective identity was made possible also thanks to the organization of free time (colonies, open air activities and education by Touring Club Italiano and Club Alpino Italiano, scouting movement, alpinism and sport competitions, snow trains) (Soriani *et al.*, 1996) and the fundamental role of media and communications (De Rossi, 2016; Armiero, 2016).

As Bolin observes, symbolic landscapes are no less real than the material, geographical landscapes. Although both geographical and media landscapes structure our actions in the world, one could make a distinction, whereby the geographical landscape structures or sets limits on our actions in a ‘hard’ way, and the technological and representational landscapes of the media structure action in a ‘soft’ way (Bolin, 2004). The former talks to our tactile senses, while the symbolic landscape of the media primarily talks to our visual and aural senses. As such, the impact on our actions is not as direct and determining, but it is not always as obvious either. The soft structuring mechanism, then, cannot be described as weaker or less real than the hard. On the contrary, in its capacity of being naturalized, it is much harder to identify and therefore also to resist. We are not always aware of the impact of the

symbolic landscape in the same obvious way as we are of the geographical, physical ones (Bolin, 2006).

For Zinnermann, mass media pose an interesting spatial problem to geographers and related fields, not only because media representations are part of individual and societal conceptions of the world but also because of media's power to conceptualize and spread political ideas and reinforce hegemonic orders. Film and television emotionalize space, place, movement, and identity thereby affecting the viewer's perception. Visual media represent and re-construct specific ways of seeing which carry with them historic baggage. By doing so, sense of place is continually re-constructed from specific vantage points (Zimmerman, 2007). As Anderson notes, cultural geography is once again concerned with representations and the work that representations do, with the material-affective liveliness of images, words, and art works as things in the world which incite, move, anger, transform, delight, enchant or otherwise affect (Anderson, 2018), trying to understand what people do with images and conversely how images do thing with people and how they are involved in the creation and organization of experience (Coleman, 2015).

It seems therefore interesting to analyze the discourses and narratives of the hydroelectric industry conveyed through television and cinema as well as to reflect on the representations of water, mountains, and nature. How are hydropower and landscape narrated through audiovisual media? What kinds of man-nature relationship are conveyed? How do they change over time?

How is the relationship between audiovisuals and landscape - and more generally, between audiovisuals and geography - configured in the cases considered? How can a geographic film function - making, remaking, and unmaking worlds (Anderson, 2018)?

Building on these questions, in this chapter I will consider some archival and more recent audiovisual cases. In section 2 I will analyze the image of working waters through some products from 1930-1960 period; in section 3 I will focus on Vajont case through a dedicated short doc and Marco Paolini's theatrical/television show; in section 4 I will present the geographical research film I realized exploring the hydroelectric landscape of Cadore area.



Figure 1 - Vintage advertising images of well-known mountain localities (source: Google images).

2. Working waters, modernity and Nation

2.1. White gold

The water gushes from the rocky spring and becomes a mountain stream, some children draw fully from it, and then it continues flowing between jumps and waterfalls. Thus begins - presenting the genuineness of fresh mountain waters – the 1939 documentary *Oro Bianco* by Istituto Luce, focused on the water resource and its usage. The title follows the expression *houille blanche* used by the industrialist and hydraulic engineer Aristide Berges at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition to illustrate the enormous potential of hydroelectricity.

From a brief film analysis, it emerges how the choices of images and editing convey a certain type of conceptualization of what is represented. The absence of voice commentary, popular in documentaries of the time, is replaced here by an equally effective musical counterpoint that guides the

viewer's perception through an emotional rather than a descriptive/cognitive level (Ingold, 2000; Henley, 2007).

The documentary begins by presenting the upstream fresh water that has just gushed out. Children and young people quenched their thirst at the spring, creating a direct experience and drawing on the virtues of naturalness, authenticity and strength of these waters, but at 03:30 the musical commentary turns to epic and dramatic tones, accompanying the images of waters and waterfalls more and more majestic and uncontrolled, suggesting that nature is not always benevolent.

In the next cut, it is again the soundtrack which emphasizes the normalization of the atmosphere with the roar of waterfalls that turns into water games of the fountains in gardens and villas: an ordered and "*managed*" beauty, with no risks or unexpected events, in opposition to water as *wilderness*. The following sequences (06:10 – 06:30) on mills and lock systems remind us that water is primarily useful and necessary for transport and as a driving force. With the images of a flood (6:30 – 7:50), in a dramatic climax, nature shows its unpredictability and power that can become destructive violence if it is not tamed, managed and put to work through technique to create energy, work and civilization. The images then show dams, electric trains in motion, machinery and workers of industrial departments, sparks, pylons and, finally, an illuminated town square. In the final part the initial sequences of the flowing stream are re-proposed, as to reaffirm the proximity and interdependence of urban and production landscapes with mountain, in a circle that is made virtuous thanks to technical knowledge and progress.

We can find this vision explicit in the rhetoric of Istituto Luce newsreel of that period, whose episode of 27 April 1949, about a parliamentary conference on tourism in Cadore (Belluno), declaims:

(...) In these views, congressmen find key arguments for their tourism development project, without saying that the waters of these valleys, especially after the Tai plant, contribute to solving our difficult electricity problem. Here we certainly cannot speak of useless beauty!²

What emerges is a conception of beauty as "technological sublime" (De Rossi, 2016; Della Dora, 2019): a beauty that comes from nature when at service of man and technology, celebrating the marriage of nature and

² The translation of the quotes from the videos in the text is edited by the author.

technics and giving an essential contribution to reducing the gap between Italy and the other countries (and between the mountains and the plains).

Another newsreel report of 09/02/1949 on the inauguration of the hydroelectric plants of Perarolo di Cadore (Belluno), proclaims:

One day this river defended Italy, today it helps its resurgence with its waters! (...)

The snows sparkle in the sun, the darkness will not descend on Italy!

In these discourses, the construction of landscape imagery, particularly of the waters of the Piave River, went hand in hand with Nation-building processes: water became an anthropomorphic element, both a tireless worker and a sentinel, helping the national resurgence and independence. As Della Dora observes, the scenarios of tamed and useful waters entered the power plants too, as in the case of the mosaic that decorates the walls of the Achille Gaggia hydroelectric plant in Soverzene (Belluno), where the peaks and waterways of the Piave basin no longer appear as (unproductive) nature or romantic or panoramic setting, but within a scheme of controlled and regimented water reserve for Veneto region (Della Dora, 2019).

The management of river basins was one of the strategic tools for the economic and social progress of the nation, according to a functionalistic and utilitarian vision of the territory. A modern territory was a territory that worked: energy and the increased capability of technology to control nature provided the condition to enable a new territorial restructuring (Soriani *et al.*, 1996).

2.2. *The industrial documentaries of Ermanno Olmi*

A rich source on this topic is represented by the post-war industrial documentary cinema, and by the 1950s production of Ermanno Olmi³. In those years he had been working for Edison, one of the largest electricity companies in Italy, and his career began just from the cinema section of the company. Through his works it is possible to observe a cross-section of the “hydroelectric epic” and the rhetorics that accompanied the Italian “conquest of power” of that period.

³ The documentaries and short films mentioned in the paper can be found in the dvd video collection *Ermanno Olmi. Gli anni Edison. Documentari e cortometraggi 1954-1958*, published by Feltrinelli in 2008; except for *Cantiere di inverno* and *La mia valle*, available on the Youtube Channel <https://www.youtube.com/@edisonchannel>.

In *Cantiere d'inverno* the construction site of the dam in Val di Chiese (Trento) is vividly described by the voice-over commentary as "a living and pulsating creature, which has broken the silence of the peaks and filled the most hidden valleys with voices and sounds" (00:38-00:46). The dam loses its article and takes on a proper name, it becomes "Dam", an anthropomorphic living being with "curved and powerful back and shoulders", compared to a mythological creature "as Atlas supports the earth that the dam will hold a lake" (05:55-06:03).

The philosophy that supports the company's activity is clearly explained by the comment: "our work is aware of the importance and mission of civilization and progress" constituted by the hydroelectric revolution in those years.

Hydroelectricity represented an opportunity to break free from the slavery of coal and other fossil fuels imported from abroad. In 1905 Italy ranked third in the world to produce hydroelectric energy, which covers 70% of the needs. Other numbers: between 1898 and 1914 the hydraulic electricity produced went from 40,000 kWh to 850,000 kWh. In 1921 Italy had 91 artificial lakes and 41 under construction (Armiero, 2013, 31-32).

This enthusiasm and trust in the water resource were translated, in addition to the above numbers, into a profound transformation of the alpine landscape and reorganization of the relationships between the plains and the mountains.

The same ideological elements can be found in *La mia valle*, short film guided by a voice-off monologue of a mountain dweller who traces the story of his life as reflected in the valley. He remembers his youth as marked by poverty, depopulation and immigration, at least until the advent of a hydroelectric plant: this great opportunity of change was announced by two white doves coming to rest on a mill, as if indicating the "working water" as a mythical and saving element for people of the valley.

The protagonist describes the valley modified by the dams and enriched by lakes as "more beautiful" and he feels he has nothing to envy to his brother who emigrated to the USA.

In this work large dams are described as modern cathedrals that enrich and exalt the waters and the mountain landscape. The idea of symbiosis between industry, technology and nature, if on the one hand had to satisfy the corporation, on the other hand it does not seem forced because Olmi feels the hope that the nascent industrial society can coexist with the peasant culture in a harmonious way (Aprà, 2008). It seems that the director has gradually managed to conquer his own expressive freedom, progressively freeing himself from moral debt and material obligations with the client. But this evolution does not appear completely linear and does not exclude, at least up

to a certain level, its adherence to the corporate philosophy rooted in an idea of technological progress and economic growth going hand in hand with the respect and enhancement of needs of the individual (Bruni, 2008).

In *Tre fili fino a Milano* and *La pattuglia di San Giacomo*, Olmi shot the high voltage pylons as wefts of lace embellishing the sky and the movements of the workers climbing up to repair the lines like aerial choreographies. And so he did for dams, modern architecture, cities, factories, showing - behind a feeling of concern for the high speed of change - their Promethean beauty (Toffetti, 2008). It is reflected in the curious and amazed gaze of women, children and mountaineers who stop and look at the workers at work, as if they saw their future: the author sensed that what he was filming was an epochal passage and confrontation between two worlds and two lifestyles.

Tre fili fino a Milano is referred to the electric wires starting from the dam and connecting the destiny of the city and the mountain, present and future. In the words and in the gaze of the peasant at the end of the film it seems to be able to retrace his thoughts, aimed at imagining the distant metropolis he probably never seen or only heard in the stories (*ibid.*).

Another important work on hydroelectricity is *La diga del ghiacciaio*, centered on the Morasco dam in the upper Val Formazza (Verbania). This documentary is set with a tone and a vocal register which are conventional for the era and the industrial genre: a rather intrusive voice-over commentary that provides many information and details on the functioning and characteristics of the dam, underlining figures and objective data. But in this rather conventional work we find some traits that will be distinctive of the director's later cinema: the intimate and humanist gaze that lingers on the faces of the protagonists to explore their existential horizon; the attention to work, discreetly observed in moments of fatigue as well as in those of rest and comradeship. The first images and words are dedicated to a small church replacing the ancient one submerged by the artificial basin and dedicated to the workers who died during the construction of the dam: the author focuses on the invisible dimension of the hydroelectric landscape, giving attention to what was "all around" the hydraulic work itself.

As noted by Castiglioni and Ferrario, hydropower landscapes deal in several aspects with invisible landscapes: a large part of the system is invisible as it develops underground (pipes, siphons, underground power plants) for technical reasons or lack of space, while sometimes the invisibility is given by the camouflage and masking of the elements to make them more aesthetically acceptable. Other kinds of invisibility are represented by the *disappeared landscapes* (valleys with pastures, huts, mills, narrow streets, entire villages and localities) in the sacrificed zones of energy transition

(Ferrario & Castiglioni, 2015) and by the *landscapes of the absence* of the dead at work.

Another aspect to note in this short film is the semantics used to refer to the work and the glacier: at 02:48 it is said that “the dam is overcoming the millennial giant and causes colossal gangrene at its feet” and again at the 03:10 “small icebergs float on the surface of the lake like the wrecks of a huge shipwreck...”. In the power of these words and images seems that Olmi starts to feel the intensity and pervasiveness of human work as a geological force, sometimes the brutality of the comparison between man and mountain.

3. Vajont

3.1. *H max 261,6*

2023 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Vajont disaster, one of the most tragic events in Italian history and according to UN one of the five most serious environmental man-made disasters. What was the highest dam in the world in 1963 and the pride of Italian engineering has become a "monument to eternal shame of science and politics" (Merlin, 1983), a mausoleum of nearly two thousand innocents standing out in the mountain landscape of Veneto region.

In a little-known short documentary on Vajont construction, entitled *H max 261.6* (the meters of Vajont dam, the highest in the world at the time), the engineer Semenza describes the project and the works in progress. From the very first seconds, the sounds of controllers and electronic devices take us inside the laboratory where tests on scale models of the dam are carried out, giving the video a futuristic-technical taste.

At 01:30 the engineer Semenza, introducing the geography of the place, underlines that the dam will find its place "in the so-called *orrido*⁴ of Vajont, so much the nature here is inaccessible and inhospitable". A few minutes later he will say, referring to the valley, that "it seems made on purpose to build a barrage of exceptional size". In these statements we find again the conception of the mountain as hostile, wild and dangerous nature, which needs to be tamed through human work. The mountain seemed to be conceived as a scenography of peaks and gorges useful for supporting dams and grandiose

⁴ *Orrido* is an Italian word to mean a canyon, a gorge.

projects, whose oversized dimensions were exhibited as a pride (Varotto, 2021).

The video presents then the team of scholars and technicians who are working at the project, including an "electronic brain that performs in 90 hours a series of calculations for which a team of mathematicians would take years" (03:20-04:00), and then illustrates the trials on miniature models of the dam to test the resistance of the structure: the attention in the video is entirely concentrated on the work, proof of technical and engineering skill to be exported in the world.

That the dam was well-built was proved by the fact that on the night of 9th October 1963 - when a landslide of 260 million cubic meters ruined in the reservoir - it remained standing. But everything that was around disappeared, canceled by the furious wave of hundreds of meters high that hit the valley and raze the villages of Longarone, Pirago, Faè, Villanova, Rivalta and damaging Codissago, Castellavazzo, Fortogna, Dogna and Provagna.

The "futuristic taste" of this representation of hydroelectric work seems to reflect and reproduce the technicist and colonial gaze and approach to the Vajont question as a "modernist workshop" where there was no space for the real world with its imperfections and empirical knowledge of everyday life (Armiero, 2013). As Varotto puts it, the top-down projects did not consider the social and economic effects on the inhabited microcosm and on traditional agro-forestry-pastoral economy. Villages, woods, pastures and valleys, places already full of human and social functions and meanings, were little considered or declassified as empty spaces that could be used according to the projects and needs of others. The requests of the population, local communities and committees asking for clarity and answers also remained unheard (Varotto, 2020).

3.2. *Orazione civile on TV*

The submerged voices of the inhabitants of Erto and Casso were collected, in the years before the disaster, by the journalist Tina Merlin, who in 1983 published the book *Sulla pelle viva. Come si costruisce una catastrofe*, a dense and fundamental book which clearly documents the intertwining of economic power, politics, science and technology. It's from this book that Marco Paolini, one of the most important exponents of narrative theater in Italy, draws strong inspiration for *Il racconto del Vajont*, an *orazione civile* he took performing in small theatres, public squares and to radio audiences since 1993.

On 9th October 1997, on the 34th anniversary of the disaster, Paolini's show was performed on the landslide in front of the dam and broadcasted live in prime time on RAI2 television. The three hours show was followed by nearly three million spectators (the program also won the Oscar in 1997 for best television show) and brought the disaster to general attention as had not happened since 1963.

The effects of this catastrophe heavily influenced the delay in the formation of a "collective memory" among the survivors. As analyzed in Capelli's research, the disintegration of the local community and the dynamics linked to reconstruction/repopulation led to the lack of a collective dimension, indispensable for the elaboration of a shared memory. It thus remained "trapped" in an individual dimension and in a silent form and, in a circular process, the stopping of transmission caused the stopping of any process of collective elaboration of the trauma (Capelli, 2006).

Among survivors and witnesses, the identification of Paolini's TV show as the watershed in the re-birthing of the memory of the disaster is widespread. Renato Migotti, president of the Survivors' Association, explains that because of the spreading of that monologue there seems to have been an awakening of consciences, and the people realized that they had a role, they felt they were conscious protagonists as "informers of memory" for future generations.⁵

Its effectiveness was then undoubtedly intensified by its dissemination through the medium of television, which helped amplify the communicative process underlying any social representation of the past. It provided the necessary and ultimate legitimacy to intervene personally as actors in the process of establishing a collective memory of the disaster. Indeed, within a few years of the thirty-fourth anniversary, the phase of collective association and mobilization by committees and associations began (Capelli, 2006). The shock provoked by the program was so strong that in the following days the road to the dam had to be closed because of the hundreds of visitors coming by to know and see for themselves.

The show influenced the perception of the disaster and of the work at a national level as well. It is noteworthy that after the tragedy most of the chronicles insisted on the fact that the dam was perfect: the Vajont disaster was painted as a mockery to human ingenuity, which can do nothing if nature decides to wage war on us.⁶

⁵ See the article *Con Paolini anche i superstiti hanno riscoperto il Vajont* listed in the sitography.

⁶ See newspaper articles listed in the sitography.

The following are some excerpts from the newspapers of 11th October 1963:

Giorgio Bocca writes in *Il Giorno*:

(...) In atomic times, one could say that this is a clean disaster, men have nothing to do with it, everything was done by nature, which is neither good nor bad, but indifferent. (...) There was nothing to be done, there are no culprits.

In the pages of *Corriere della Sera* Dino Buzzati tells:

In front of the dead of Belluno, still stands the prestige of science, engineering, technique, work. But it was not enough. (...) Once again the imagination of nature has been greater and more cunning than the imagination of science.

In *Il Gazzettino* Armando Gervasoni writes:

(...) It was not the highest arch dam in Europe, one of the most daring achievements of hydraulic technology, that caused one of the greatest disasters in memory. It was the mountain that betrayed.

The *leit motiv* that ran through the national press in the autumn of 1963 (except for *L'Unità*, then accused of taking political advantage of the tragedy) was saying that sometimes nature rebels against man's arrogance but it didn't follow that the man is guilty of having dared. This acquittal of responsibility, established in the days following the disaster and reinforced by the outcome of the trial in 1971 - which convicted only two of the defendants with relatively mild sentences - projected its effects for years.

With the Paolini - following Merlin's footsteps - contributed to the narrative of "natural catastrophe" and shifted away from the representation of "a cruel nature" and of "a mountain that betrayed", taking the viewer step-by-step into the background of what looms as a predictable and therefore avoidable man-made disaster. The representation of the incident shifted from a discrete event that breaks in an independent system ("a stone fell into a glass filled with water and the water overflowed onto the tablecloth" was the metaphor used by Dino Buzzati on *Corriere della Sera*) to dynamic processes, which are built over time by creating preconditions within the system itself (see Ligi, 2009).

This was the story of many works that are completed excluding entire populations from choices that put their lives on the line. Paolini's show shed

a light on the asymmetries of power that are inscribed in the hydroelectric landscape of that valley and made it an "archetypal account of environmental injustice", whose ingredients are the power of a large industrial group, the resistance of local communities and the connivance of the authorities and politicization of science (Armiero, 2013).

The Vajont disaster - only briefly outlined here - constitutes the most tragic parable of the strident dialectic of centralization/marginalization of mountains after World War II, but that is not the only one -not even within the Piave basin - where the interests of local actors and communities remained in the background.

4. Piave, a hydroelectric workshop

A case that anticipates the Vajont dynamics is explored in the research documentary *Dove nuotano i caprioli*, the result of a filmic and public geography work I carried out in the period 2018-2021, which investigates the hydroelectric landscape of the Centro Cadore (Belluno) by collecting memories, testimonies and perceptions of dwellers and community.

In the locality of Sottocastello di Cadore, the construction of the dam on the Piave river by SADE was completed in 1949, creating a reservoir of 67 million cubic meters of water: consequently, Vallesella di Cadore became the closest hamlet to the lake. Because of the karstic nature of the soil (well known among local people), after the filling of the reservoir the village started to present hydrogeological problems as cracks, collapses, and damages to the buildings. In few years it was brought to crumble both in the material and the relational aspect. The houses were declared inhabitable and abandoned, the town razed to the ground and confusedly rebuilt in a higher location. It was a troubled story both from a human and a legal point of view because SADE denied any involvement and filed a series of appeals even after the ministerial technical commission confirmed the correlation between the reservoir and the instability.



Figure 2 - *The Piave valley of Cadore before becoming a reservoir. Bottom left the village of Vallesella (source: archive of Municipality of Domegge di Cadore).*

Currently, Vallesella is an invisible village for tourists and patrons, but still well present in the memory and hearts of those who lived it⁷, especially for what it represented: a sense of community, union, and solidarity. What emerges is a relational conception of the concept of *village*, where what is most missing is precisely that dense web of exchanges and shared practices located in the spaces, which is contrasted today by housing dispersals and the fraying of the community. The decision to make filmic research has to do with its potential ubiquity and ability to spread in different circuits, reaching a wider and more heterogeneous audience (Jacobs, 2016; Varotto & Rossetto, 2016) and with the great sense of bitterness, helplessness, and injustice that I felt from the local people with respect to the events that had pitted the small town against the interests of an industrial giant. Moreover, at the time these events were very little known outside the valley and many people were glad to have the possibility to share their experiences. The goal of the research was therefore to bring these voices and stories out of invisibility, restoring importance and recognition to their experience, told through a choral and first-person narrative. The realization of the research film seemed to be experienced by some witnesses as forms of redeeming of memory for a

⁷ A dweller interviewed told me “When I open the window in the morning, *I see* the old Vallesella” (Conte, 2021a).

feeling of injustice and bitterness that persists. Others felt as important to bring up and creating interest in certain issues and places (Conte, 2021a).

In addition, audiovisual seems well suited, because of its potential at the level of expression and for its characteristics of multi-sensoriality and polysemy (Jacobs, 2016) to create relation between dialectic elements as full/empty, proximity/distance, past/present. Through certain directorial and editing choices, the documentary intends to return a representation that is certainly "reduced, approximate, symbolic, but also authorial, complex and negotiated representation of the landscape" (Varotto & Rossetto, 2016).

If in the first part the documentary deals with the issue of water and hydroelectricity focusing on the microcosm of Vallesella, in the second part the gaze is broadened to a wider scale, considering the effects of the artificialization of the river in a system perspective.

Piave river owns a complete overview of every form of water exploitation conceived and developed in the name of progress. With about fifty inlets in high-altitude streams, a by-pass system of over 200 km of pipes, mostly underground, 17 medium-sized reservoirs, 30 power plants and an infinity of other dams and interventions, Piave is the most exploited river in Europe for energy production (Franzin & Reolon, 2009; Marzo Magno, 2018). In addition to a radical territorial transformation, these interventions have produced fundamental ecosystemic consequences in the fluvial dynamics, which will be investigated only decades later, when the "hydroelectric euphoria" will vanish, leaving room for more critical attitudes (Soriani, 2004). If on the one hand the hydraulic engineering can be considered as an admirable result of a cultural competence, it is also true that in this case and many others, it shows the limits of an arrogant interference in the morpho-hydraulic equilibrium (Vallerani, 2004).

In the last thirty years, the various uses of the Piave have reduced the flow by about 1/3 in its final part and by about 90% in high mountain streams (Franzin & Reolon, 2009). The upstream hydroelectric system modifies the hydrological regime, which is today characterized by the disappearance of moderate flow levels (completely absorbed by the regulating reservoirs), leaving the rivers in persistent conditions of reduced flow rates interrupted every few years by great overflows.

As a result of the flow regulation operated by the reservoirs, the previous braided-structure turned into a channel-like section and the current has no longer the strength to migrate and distribute the material downstream, posing potentially dangerous situations (D'Alpaos, 2004).

The shores of Venice lagoon are also affected by the alteration of the outflows, as the reduced intake of sediments is no longer able to compensate

for marine erosion (Zunica, 1987). The need to protect reclaimed coastal land and seaside tourism fostered a series of defense works with increasing economic and environmental costs (Bondesan, 2004).

One of the still unsolved issues is the hydrogeological risk of the areas in the lower course of the river (where large floodplain sections have been unwisely invaded by agronomic and settlement expansion). To cope with this situation, the Veneto Region has foreseen the construction of a massive basin with a capacity of 30-40 million cubic meters in Crocetta del Montello (Treviso) area: a work (rated 150 million Euros) of huge environmental, ecological and landscape impact, which would deeply alter an area protected at European level (Zanatta *et al.*, 2021) and against which citizens and municipalities have appealed to the Water Tribunal.

These sketches of the Piave situation, necessarily synthetic and far from being exhaustive, delineates a complex system of multiple business interests and unsolved issues, and outlines a "water conflict" that periodically emerges and that it is the deeper legacy of a deep artificialization and industrialization of the river (Bonan, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The chapter offers a reflection on the relationship between the conquest of power-through the construction of hydropower landscapes-and audiovisual media, focusing on some cases of interest. The first part of the article considers some examples that convey and support a modernist rhetoric and a utilitarian approach to waters and mountains. As De Rossi puts it, modernism in the Alps was characterized by the simplification and emptying of cultural and historical landscapes, a premise for an over-meaning with few elements and concepts (De Rossi, 2016). The image of the mountain conveyed by the media has undergone a similar process of rarefaction and abstraction, distilling few essential elements related to nature and technology. Photographs, advertising posters as well as television and film products have often depicted pure objects, the result of heroic and technological construction sites in dialogue with snowy peaks. Imposing dams and reservoirs celebrated the partnership between progress, nation, and mountain. Varotto observes that the stereotypes of mountains in 20th century are often featured by an *exogenous origin* - coming from an extraneous and highly selective gaze; by the *simplification* in some details and elements that should define the quintessence of the mountain and orient expectations and imaginaries; by the *reiteration* of a vision spread by the mass media, which becomes the dominant image (Varotto, 2020).

We can say that audiovisual media, similarly to *words* in McGeachan & Philo's, "are crucially reflexive of the goings-on in the human world, but also unavoidably generative of that world in all kinds of ways. They can shape, wound, fracture and direct how lives, and the material landscapes housing those lives, are planned, enacted, altered, and obliterated" (McGeachan & Philo, 2014).

Narratives around hydropower projected the mountain at the center of the national agenda as the pivot of a renaissance economy but in many cases local communities and interests were left behind.

The most tragic and well-known case is that of Vajont disaster, which is featured in Paolini's teathrical/television show. As we have seen, Paolini's broadcast on prime-time television contributed to the widespread dissemination of a new social perception of the disaster in its procedural dimensions and to the collective and national elaboration of the tragedy in what has been called an "artistic catharsis"⁸. The author highlights asymmetries of power that are inscribed in landscapes and the underlying logics often characterized by environmental and social unsustainability and a substantial blindness for the geomorphological limits and for the socio-cultural contexts in which the large hydroelectric works were settled (Varotto, 2021).

A renewed attention is given to the specificities of places and to the practices and resistance of local communities, thus redeeming their visibility in representation and their role.

With similar inspirations I moved through the geographical film *Dove nuotano i caprioli*, in which choral narratives of the Central Cadore hydroelectric landscape and invisible geographies are given over to the very voices of witnesses and inhabitants.

As Garret notes, the film can also be conceptualized as an experience in which the author shares agency with the participants, losing some of the control over the construction of the project: in this sense it helps to destabilize the hierarchies and power relations inherent in knowledge production (Garrett 2014; Kondon, 2016). Making a geographical film has first to do with encounter, with a "new" space and with the people who make that space a culturally, lively place, dense with meaning. It can be a powerful incubator and accelerator of relationships, stimuli, ideas, connections that are established and radiate in many directions. In this sense the final product is not the only outcome to be considered: the process is equally important

⁸ See the article *Con Paolini anche i superstiti hanno riscoperto il Vajont* listed in the sitography.

because, through collaborative research actions and the involvement of different audiences, the researcher and subjects contribute to a shared construction of meanings and can trigger the creation of new networks, collaborations, ideas-actions, with possible spillovers on the territory in terms of awareness and agency (Conte, 2021a).

Audiovisual media are then viewed here from two angles: as complex texts that re-present and re-construct specific ways of seeing, carry historical baggage and affect the viewer's perception emotionalizing spaces and places, landscapes, and identity. But they are also intended as performative tools and processes who can creatively engage with people and landscapes and participate as active agents in re-building the sense of place.

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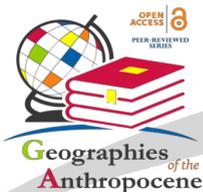
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The Anthropocene concept identifies a geological era in which human action leads to changes on a planetary scale with long-term irreversible effects. This volume collects insights into geographical research, with a specific look at the challenges of 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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