

Itinerant Ecocriticism, Southern Thought, and Italian Cinema on Foot

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Abstract

This short essay explores an impulse guiding Italian ecocriticism, and also a recurrent trend in Italian cinema: that of thinking on foot. Drawing on the work of sociologist and philosopher Franco Cassano, I consider why contemporary philosophers seek to understand Italy at a pace that works strategically (sometimes defiantly) against petroleum-fueled speed. Three recent Italian films that proceed on foot (*Basilicata Coast to Coast* [2010], *La lunga strada gialla* [2016], and *Il cammino dell'Appia antica* [2016]) attempt to reanimate southern Italian landscapes as “vehicles of identity, solidarity, and development” (Cassano xxxvi). Each film represents a socio-political project enabled by its walking pace; each, in turn, has the potential to unveil how these projects depend on the natural-cultural health of the landscapes being traversed. Against the “slow violence” being perpetrated on Italian landscapes—a slow violence of toxic contamination at the hand of ecomafias, of the cementification of agricultural lands and delicate coasts—and against the speed of turbocapitalism, thinking on foot enables modes of ethics and aesthetics simultaneously attuned to historical depth and ecological crisis. In this view, Italy is no longer a “*bel paese*,” but rather an ecocultural landscape in which the seeds for meaningful change are deeply embedded.

Keywords: Cassano, Italian cinema, walking, slow cinema, Southern thought

Resumen

Este breve artículo explora uno de los conceptos que está impulsando la ecocrítica italiana, así como una de las tendencias más recurrentes en el cine italiano: el acto de pensar a pie. Basándose en el trabajo del sociólogo y filósofo Franco Cassano, se consideran las razones por las cuales los filósofos contemporáneos buscan entender Italia con un ritmo que funciona estratégicamente (a veces desafiadamente) frente a una noción de velocidad alimentada por el petróleo. Usando breves ejemplos de tres películas italianas recientes en las que se “piensa a pie” (*Basilicata Coast to Coast* [2010], *La lunga strada gialla* [2016] e *Il cammino dell'Appia antica* [2016]) se observan los intentos de reanimar los paisajes del sur de Italia h “vehículos de identidad, solidaridad y desarrollo” (Cassano xxxvi). Cada película representa un proyecto sociopolítico habilitado por el ritmo de su marcha; cada uno, a su vez, tiene el potencial de revelar cómo estos proyectos dependen de la salud cultural-natural de los paisajes que se atraviesan. Contra la “violencia lenta” que se perpetra contra los paisajes italianos (una violencia lenta de contaminación tóxica a manos de las ecomafias, de la cementación de tierras agrícolas y costas delicadas) y contra la velocidad del turbocapitalismo, pensar a pie permite modalidades de ética y estética simultáneamente compenetradas con la profundidad histórica y la crisis ecológica. Desde este punto de vista, Italia ya no es un “*bel paese*,” sino más bien un paisaje ecocultural en el que están profundamente arraigadas las semillas para un cambio significativo.

Palabras clave: Cassano, cine italiano, caminar, cine lento, pensamiento meridional

What kind of cinema does Italy need in the Anthropocene? This is a recurrent question for an Italian film scholar and environmental humanist, in particular when she

observes Italian landscapes being “cementified,” as Salvatore Settis argues powerfully, their surfaces disappearing under parking lots, roads, factories and suburban developments. She considers UNESCO World Heritage Sites, like Venice, at grave risk because of climate change. She reads the *Rapporto Ecomafia* and learns of environmental crimes perpetrated across the peninsula. She understands why Italians feel “besieged and suffocated” (12) by contemporary environmental challenges, as Settis writes.¹ She perceives why scholars and residents in Italy and elsewhere need to seek “a more-than-human practice of resistance and liberation,” as Serenella Iovino argues, to weather these challenges and find space for hope (5). By transforming the world’s embodied stories into text and images, Iovino urges, narratives can become “a practice of liberation” (5). The pages that follow consider one possible road to resistance, a road traversed by films that, echoing the Mediterranean philosophies of Franco Cassano, “think on foot.”

Southern Thought, Slow Cinema, and Thinking on Foot

The first subsection of Cassano’s meditative philosophy of the South, *Il pensiero meridiano* [*Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*], is titled “Thinking on Foot,” and is nested in the chapter “Going Slow.” Cassano’s landmark work outlines a decolonial philosophy that requires two significant moves: first, it reclaims “the autonomy of the South” by dislodging the “false neutrality and universality of dominant representations” from the Global North. Second, it defends “cultural multiplicity and diversity, the conviction that the future will be plural or not at all” (xxxv). From the outset, *Southern Thought* is about time, since the “backwardness” conventionally attributed to the South often stems from negatively judging a pace of life that does not mirror the speed of globalized modernity. To reclaim autonomy and plurality, the South must reclaim time itself.

In this context, “thinking on foot” is both a political and a deeply ecological process. It allows the walker time to observe the wounds inflicted on landscapes and people by petroculture, turbocapitalism, overbuilding, abandonment, waste. An engaged Southern thinker can *also* “go slow and love the pauses that enable us to see the road we have covered, feel the weariness conquer our limbs” (Cassano 9). From this itinerant perspective, the unique needs of Southern places emerge, and it is possible: “to care [for] and respect them, and to rebuild, through *pietas*, our shared public properties, those properties that belong to everyone and are vehicles of identity, solidarity, and development” (Cassano xxxvi).

Italian cinema has long traversed the landscapes of the peninsula with an attention to ideologies of walking. As Lino Micciché outlines, the notion of a walking cinema precedes the famous neorealist commitment to “pedinamento,” or trailing the subject on foot, as Cesare Zavattini would theorize. In an intriguing article published in *Cinema* in 1939, the artist and critic Domenico Purificato argues for an “obiettivo nomade,” a concept that can be translated either as a “nomadic lens” or a “nomadic objective”: “There exists a

¹ Translations of Settis and of all works listed in Italian in the bibliography are my own.

cinema that we would like to call nomadic, and a cinema that we would call, in antithesis to the former, sedentary” (195). Purificato argues strongly in favor of the former cinematic practice, for a cinema that “unfolds with migration (to lands near or far, on or beyond your own continent)” (195).² Cinema must, he argues, resist the “bourgeois, respectable” tendency to “impoltronirsi” (“be lazy,” but literally, “become an armchair”) and instead emerge from the studios to encounter its subjects.

It may seem ironic to argue that cinema, a kinetic medium designed for sedentary viewers, can help us read local landscapes on foot. Cassano’s *Southern Thought* is suspicious of media, warning that mediatic productions “uproot us from localism, just as money and commerce have uprooted us from the community based on localized personal consumption. At the same time, we become close to very distant people and events, and distant from people and events that are very close to us” (47). Yet cinema can “think on foot,” as I have argued before, advocating for a deep commitment to landscapes, natures, and ecologies (Past 140-41). In what follows, I briefly consider three examples of intensely local cinema focused on long peripatetic journeys. The films’ nomadic lenses seek to fulfill equally nomadic objectives, urging viewers to consider the ways in which questions of Italian politics, ecologies, and existence might be confronted from the roving perspective of the walker.

Itinerant Cinema in Contemporary Italy

Basilicata Coast to Coast (2010), *Il cammino dell’Appia antica* (2016), and *La lunga strada gialla* (2016) proceed on foot through the Italian South, vibrantly illustrating the limits and potentials of itinerant filmmaking, while exploring ways cinema might participate in reclaiming Southern autonomy, plurality, and time. Against the slow violence being perpetrated on Italian landscapes—toxic contamination at the hand of ecomafias, cementification of agricultural lands and delicate coasts—and against the speed of turbocapitalism, thinking on foot enables modes of cinematic ethics and aesthetics simultaneously attuned to historical depth and ecological crisis. In this view, Italy is no longer a “bel paese,” but rather an ecocultural landscape in which the seeds for meaningful change are deeply embedded. The lands of the South are celebrated as a commons that the filmmakers, and the walkers, attempt to reanimate as “vehicles of identity, solidarity, and development” (Cassano xxxvi). Each film represents a socio-political project enabled by its walking pace; each, in turn, has the potential to unveil how these projects depend on the naturalcultural health of the landscapes being traversed.

Development

Basilicata Coast to Coast is a feature film directed by Rocco Papaleo, depicting a company of friends who make their way from the Tyrrhenian to the Ionian Sea, crossing

² “Esiste pertanto [...] anche una cinematografia che vorremmo chiamare nomade, e una cinematografia che per antitesi all’altra chiameremo sedentaria. [...] [S]i svolge con la migrazione (verso terre vicine o lontane, entro o fuori il proprio continente)” (Purificato 195).

a short span of the Italian peninsula (just over 100 kilometers) as they travel to a music festival on foot. The band's express goals are existential: "Life is too short of a journey, unless you make it longer," they announce at their pre-departure press conference. The production's goals, however, are promotional. With financing from a number of regional sources (the Regional government and the European Regional Development Fund, among others), *Basilicata Coast to Coast* worked to "brand" the landscape and bring attention to one of Italy's least known, and least populous, regions (Bencivenga et al 7-9). In pursuit of both goals, the band ambles slowly along, stopping in small towns, on mountain tops, in barns and under bridges, beside lakes and amidst dramatic, rocky geological formations, performing songs as they prepare for their performance in Scanzano, on Basilicata's east coast. In the process, as Bencivenga et al demonstrate in a study of the film's effects on tourism in the region, the film traces a deliberate tourist itinerary and allows for "vicarious consumption" of the landscapes, a factor which researchers suggest enhances tourists' enjoyment of places when they arrive (9).

Promoting tourism, of course, hardly seems like an ecological goal. The environmental impacts of tourism are significant and include issues like the carbon costs of traveling to a particular destination, resource abuse and overuse on location, and the building of resorts and hotels with lack of attention to fragile ecosystems. As David Fennell summarizes, "too much pleasure and accompanying pressure in an environment is bad for the ecology of an environment" (118). Film tourism, or the inspiration to travel to a destination after seeing it on screen (see Bencivenga et al 5), can certainly have harmful environmental consequences.³

Yet *Basilicata Coast to Coast*'s proposal for "development" is not focused on building tourist infrastructure, or indeed on promoting saleable destinations. The protagonists set out as local tourists and witnesses to the changing landscape. This function of film-as-witness is not environmentally or culturally innocuous, since all film leaves a material trace. Yet it can be important all the same: for its archival preservation of images of changing landscapes, for its condemnation of environmental problems, or for its affirmation that people, places, and creatures need to have a voice, to see themselves mirrored in narrative. Cinema can witness injustice: Giorgio Bertellini has powerfully outlined the work cinema did in the 1990s and 2000s to reveal "the extent to which national places and spaces have become key evidence of an unchallenged logic of profit and civic disregard that, by defeating any sense of *publica utilitas*, is causing environmental and anthropological devastation" (40). Yet it can also propose correctives to the invisibility that plagues places like Basilicata, which, as a voiceover insists simply at the beginning of the film, "exists." Cinema, suggests Bertellini, can engage its creative powers to articulate the "need to recuperate a physical sense of place" (40), allowing what Lovino calls "a magnified expression of the world around you" (114).

In *Basilicata Coast to Coast*, by walking their itinerary, the band's entire voyage is such a work of recovery, an attempt to regard places, creatures, sounds, and people that

³ Most famously, tourism to Phi Phi Lae Island in Thailand subsequent to filming *The Beach* (2000) demonstrated the significant risks of such fandom (Sakellari 195-97).

had been forgotten or sidelined. Shot sequences capture the friends walking down provincial roads, accompanied by a horse and cart outfitted with a solar panel so that the band's bassist can record sound along their journey. They stay with locals or set up simple camps on the road. In Aliano, they toast writer Carlo Levi and actor Gian Maria Volontè, who played Levi in the film version of *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* by Francesco Rosi. In Craco, they witness a ghost town abandoned after landslides (partially caused by the building of modern infrastructure) and a violent earthquake rendered it too unstable for human inhabitants. The main character observes that Craco "didn't hold up to modernity," but then adds, "I like to think it refused it."

This question of what *modernity* is supposed to mean resonates with Cassano's idea of the South. Tracing (capitalist) modernity's etymology in "modo" ("now, at this moment"), Cassano recognizes its obsession with the "endless production of the new," "the novelty of the present" (xli). Instead of running after the eternally new, Cassano recommends slowing down to experience the world in places "from which we cannot exclude others" (15). Craco—the entire trip through Basilicata, really—stands as a monument to the strange and enduring places that are both public and forgotten: the "roads, beaches, and gardens for everyone" that Cassano says "will return to visit us" if we stop seeking to buy them (15, emphasis mine). In this sense, "development," in Cassano's *Southern Thought*, is not a strategy for infrastructure and marketing, but instead a technique of waiting for the beauty that has "withdrawn" to "resurface": "it will only resurface as the result of a pilgrimage, when one will risk much to know it, when it will be the discovery that comes at the end of a transformation" (14). The film's surfaces become vehicles via which (and on which) Basilicata's landscapes re-surface, and the film's duration is an experiment in dilated time that works against the novelty of endless production.

Identity

Historical surfaces are also the guiding principle of *Il cammino dell'Appia Antica*, a documentary account of journalist Paolo Rumiz's walk along the length of the ancient Roman Appian Way (and an audiovisual adaptation of his 2016 book *Appia*). This peripatetic outing is very specifically a work of recovery, a lay pilgrimage, and a responsive listening to a landscape. The historic Via Appia, 612 kilometers long, runs from Rome to Brindisi, and Rumiz gathered a group of fellow walkers who decry the "dilapidation, carelessness, and ignorance" that caused the road to be abandoned and forgotten. The Appian Way, he writes, was begging to "be traversed, lived" (Rumiz 15). Even more expressly than *Basilicata Coast to Coast*, the film's goal is not to create a tourist destination, since Rumiz insists in the film's prologue that "heritage is not a saleable good." Rather, *Il cammino*'s mission is to strengthen Italy's "weak identity," to give Italians a sense of belonging to something worth defending.

Identity is another tricky concept in Cassano's thought from the South: "strong, but constitutionally plural, location of clashes and encounters, of victories and losses, of exchanges and invasions" (137). Mediterranean identity must be "rediscovered and

reinvented through its links with the present,” argues Cassano (137). Rumiz and company’s “rebellion against oblivion” works to uncover both the material traces and the contemporary, affective anchors of this place. Rumiz explains at the beginning of *Appia* that in spite of its massive historical importance, the Appian Way is now lost amongst access roads, parking lots, supermarkets, quarries (15-17). Yet heritage, he says in the film, is “fatherland” and the Via Appia is Italy’s “forgotten mother.” Film and book, thus, attempt to reconstruct an Italian earth-genealogy, where the worn stones of the Appia are the roots of an Italian material-historical conscience. As they walk, the travelers’ feet listen to and read the landscape, a text that “emerges from the encounter of actions, discourses, imagination, and physical forces that congeal in material forms” (Iovino 3).

However powerfully evocative, the Appian Way resists the fundamentalisms of the single narrative, thanks to the walkers’ attention to the sedimentation of knowledge and the plurality of voices along its course. The group stops to speak with experts of all kinds, including archaeologists, shepherds, historians, walkers, and winemakers. The spaces they traverse recount the histories of the Romans, the Samnites, nomadic shepherds, ancient and contemporary politicians, artists, and architects. The stories they hear are celebratory, mystical, and critical; the landscapes alternately pastoral and urban, verdant and scarred. Their company flexes to admit new walkers, and they are accompanied each step of the way by observers: “We appear to be eight, a nice train moving along, but in reality we are more. A thousand eyes follow us, from behind curtains, from paths in the fields, from windshields” (Rumiz 177).⁴ These eyes mirror those watching on cinematic screens, the eyes of voyeurs but also of potential future walkers, who might leave their armchairs and vehicles and venture out onto the sedimented roads, become active partners in conserving their substance and their histories. It is only a few short steps, after all, from the curtain to the street, from the cinema to the sidewalk, where the Mediterranean “multiverse” awaits (Cassano 137).

Solidarity

The longest of the cinematic journeys considered here took place in *La lunga strada gialla*, a documentary directed by Christian Carmosino and Antonio Oliviero. It follows Mirko Adamo, Federico Price Bruno, and their mules Giovanni and Paola as they walk 1200 kilometers from Portella della Ginestra in Sicily to the Quirinale in Rome, seat of the Italian government. It is part of the project “Ecomulo,” an advocacy group and online platform that promotes ecology, sustainable tourism, biodynamic and organic agriculture, and alternative medicine in Sicily. *La lunga strada gialla*’s express goal is to carry a “message about a different Italy” to the heart of political power in Rome.

“Human nature is part of a greater nature: It shares solidarity with the land that hosts it,” writes Cassano (70), in one of various suggestions that nudges Southern thinking towards the posthuman. In the film, this “different” Italy begins in the opening

⁴ “In apparenza siamo otto, un bel treno che va, ma in realtà siamo di più. Mille occhi ci seguono, dalle tendine scostate delle finestre, dai sentieri nei campi, dai parabrezza delle automobili” (Rumiz 177).

soundscape, which captures bleating, mooing, chirping, tweeting, and other sounds of a lively barnyard. One of the mule-protagonists munches grass as her human companion gives her kisses on the nose: “We’re leaving tomorrow, mule,” he whispers tenderly, preparing the way for a voyage across southern Italy that will perform the “commensality” with human and nonhuman others that Cassano insists is necessary for a healthy democracy (xliv). Christian’s and Antonio’s, Giovanni’s and Paola’s, is a performative listening tour, in which they ask farmers and villagers, young and old, to report on their frustrations, fears, and concerns for the ecocultural future of Italy’s countryside. At Portella della Ginestra, they recognize that in the historic, violent massacre of workers in 1947, the first to fall was a mule. “We have to propose an ecological path,” they insist, and their film attempts to do so by traversing the historic roads carved by laboring humans and laboring animals, by respecting their sacrifices and by making them visible, if only momentarily, in the busy urban capital.

After more than a thousand kilometers, the four walk through the streets of Rome, crossing busy streets and clopping perilously in the city’s heavy traffic. The documentary ends as Mirko and Federico wait in an antechamber of the Quirinale, where Giovanni and Paola can no longer accompany them, the camera focused on an illuminated door which never opens. This journey was never about the destination, and the “message” was never singular: it was a capillary conversation with each person, creature, and landscape along the path, an archive of “patterns of relationships and experience that are precious for a more just and wiser world” (Cassano xliv).

Reflecting on a journey his family made to Greece, Cassano observes that: “traveling is at the same time an incredible way to know the Other and an unconscious series of desecrations” (51). The same accusation might be leveled against cinema. All films, like all journeys, leave a footprint, consume resources, occupy space and shift trajectories. No matter at what pace they travel, films are imperfect means of communication and energy-consuming art forms. But each of these films offers an innovative, slow way to read a southern Italian landscape. Each film extends an invitation to viewers to reanimate, with their own feet, Mediterranean values of identity, solidarity, and development. Cassano urges: “There is no single solution, just the desire to keep the problem alive” (51). He hopes for a day when the South “can look at itself with the strength of a knowledge that, in some ways, it already possesses” (Cassano 6). The nomadic lens of itinerant cinema helps chronicle that knowledge, and it can mirror that strength.

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