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ITALIAN ECO-TRAUMA CINEMA

From Vajont to Un posto sicuro

Experiences of emotional trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which we are condemned to be perpetually returned through the portkeys supplied by life's slings and arrows.

In the region of trauma, all duration or stretching-along collapses, past becomes present and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition.

(Stolorow 2011, 55)

ABSTRACT: Moving from Stolorow's works, the psychological notion of trauma is intertwined with a philosophy of existence that meets "worlds apart," inaccessible private universes based on traumatic experiences. Faced with these unfathomable emotional spaces, film gives images to what is unspeakable, and, through the contradiction between representation and what remains unrepresentable, film images are involved in the tension between a duty not to forget and a duty to help to forget. This article will focus on cinema of trauma and, in particular, on filmic representation of ecological catastrophes in contemporary Italian cinema. The two movies *Vajont* (Martinelli 2001) and *Un posto sicuro* (Ghiaccio 2015) will be analysed in order to highlight key aspects of a film aesthetic in which the anti-narrative dimension of traumatic experience is raised to the status of philosophical principle.

KEYWORDS: Film Ecocriticism, Ecological Catastrophes, Traumatic Experience, Italian Cinema, Eternit.

The incorporation of trauma theory into film studies and the identification of the eco-trauma cinema (Narine 2015) have brought to light the complexity of the relationships between calamitous events, film narrative, and audience interpretation.¹ From an ecocritical perspective, the focus is on the forms of

¹ In the introduction to her book *Eco-trauma Cinema*, trying to define this genre of cinema, Anil Narine (2015) wrote, "Eco-trauma cinema represent the harm we, as humans, inflict upon our natural surroundings, or the injuries we sustain from nature in its unforgiving iterations [...] Eco-trauma cinema takes three general forms: (1) accounts of people who are traumatized by the natural world, (2) narratives that represent people or social processes which traumatize the environments or its species, and (3) stories that depict the aftermath of ecological catastrophe, often focusing on human trauma and survival endeavours without necessarily dramatizing the initial 'event'" (9).

cinematic language through which the traumatic experience of the crisis in the relationship between the human being and the natural environment can be expressed. In this framework, key questions include the essence of trauma, the non-representative nature of the traumatic experience, and the value of memory and testimony. How can individual and collective trauma be represented by film? How do the dramaturgical and narrative means of film operate together to express traumata? Does the filmic representation of trauma undermine its references to real environmental catastrophes?

In order to try to deal with the issue, we have to consider the recent growing interest in trauma studies and the related cultural pervasiveness of the notion of trauma in the humanities, which derive from the recognition of trauma as an essential element in the process of identifying and understanding the human condition in the modern and post-modern age. There is an intrinsic correlation between modernity and trauma, and as Roger Luckhurst (2008) noted, “Trauma is a concept that can only emerge within modernity, [...] as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technological and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the ‘shocks’ of modern life” (19).

Based on psychoanalytic reflection, the formalization of the notion of trauma has therefore entailed a corresponding recognition of the dehumanizing character of modern industrial society. It is no coincidence that one of the founding and most often quoted books in trauma studies is *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) by the U.S. scholar Cathy Caruth who, moving between psychoanalysis and literary criticism, reconnects the theoretical legacy of the fathers of psychology Freud and Lacan to the new questions being posed by contemporary society. In her book, Caruth emphasizes the characteristic latency and belatedness of trauma. What distinguishes trauma is that even after the traumatic event, what has happened continues to torment the victim. As the Greek etymology of the term suggests, trauma is a wound: a wound of a past that has not passed. In this regard, Caruth wrote,

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)

Surviving a trauma does not mean understanding and overcoming it, but rather suffering a recurrent repetition, in the victim’s mind, of the traumatic experience. This happens not only because of the violent, devastating character of the traumatic experience, but above all because the ways in which this violence occurred are not fully understood. Trauma adversely

affects the defence mechanisms of the individual and impairs the psychic process of interpretation and assimilation. This is the latent and inexplicable character of trauma, which undermines the basic constructs on which individuals give meaning to themselves and to the world in which they live. The traumatic paradox (Caruth 1996) lies in a spasmodic need to express the trauma, in the hope of finding forms of reparative understanding, and the actual impossibility of giving an adequate representation of the traumatic experience, because of the profound unspeakability of the trauma. Thus, trauma demands and, at the same time, precludes testimony. For this reason, Caruth sees trauma as an aporia of experience, an “unclaimed experience.” Given this problematic condition, Caruth argues that the best way to attempt to express the tragic nature of trauma is through the figurative language of literary expression. The essence of trauma appears to be expressed through interruptions, pauses and silences, within a representation that avoids explicit utterances, thereby becoming strongly symbolic.

What is interesting from our point of view is that in *Unclaimed Experience* Caruth exemplifies her reasoning using cinema and discussing Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) as a paradigmatic case of narration of a trauma. The love between the film’s two protagonists serves to express the traumatic experience of war and the nuclear tragedy. Caruth wrote, “The interest of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* lies in how it explores the possibility of a faithful history in the very indirectness of its telling.” Indirect narration is necessary precisely because trauma as such cannot be represented: “trauma stands outside representation” (Caruth 1996, 17). Following Caruth, we can argue that trauma can be expressed through cinematic representation only to the extent that it remains explicitly unsaid. Such paradoxical representation, consisting in not saying directly to be able to say, reveals the relationship that binds the expression of trauma and film language. It is precisely the space of silence, and therefore what is not said, which constitutes the emblematic moment in the filmic expression of trauma.

In this regard, and in the context of Italian cinema and the environmental humanities,² the film *Vajont* (Martinelli 2001) appears to be particularly relevant for our discussion on cinema and trauma. The film is the history of the “dam of dishonor”; it describes the catastrophe that took place in October 1963 in Veneto, when a landslide of 260 million cubic meters of earth and rock broke away from Mount Toc and fell into the basin of the dam, provoking a 250-meter wave downstream that destroyed Longarone and neighboring towns, and caused the death of more than 1,900 people. The collective

² For a wide reflection on this context, see the recent works by Iovino, Cesaretti, and Past (2018) and Past (2019).

experience of this trauma, which struck Italy in the peak years of its economic boom and industrial development,³ finds expression in the film not so much in the description of the facts of the construction of the Vajont dam, but rather through the narration of the romance between the two protagonists Olmo (Jorge Perugorria) and Ancilla (Anita Caprioli). It is the narration of their shattered love and their long-desired but never-born son Libero that makes it possible to represent the trauma caused by the disaster.

The filmic representation is inscribed in highly symbolic sequences. In one of these, a wooden sculpture of a crucified Christ without cross floats abandoned on the surface of the flooded basin of the dam. The sequence depicts a symbolic crucifixion on water and announces the imminent tragedy. While the history of the dam's construction covers almost the entire duration of the film, the essence of the trauma is then condensed in a five-second sequence of black, which follows the images of the devastating wave sweeping away the towns downstream from the dam. It is an emptiness of image that expresses the existential void produced by the traumatic event. Thus the trauma is expressed by projecting it into an absence of image, a "narrative vacuum,"⁴ and it becomes possible to understand it as the result of what is filled in by the spectator, who becomes a witness to and interpreter of the trauma.

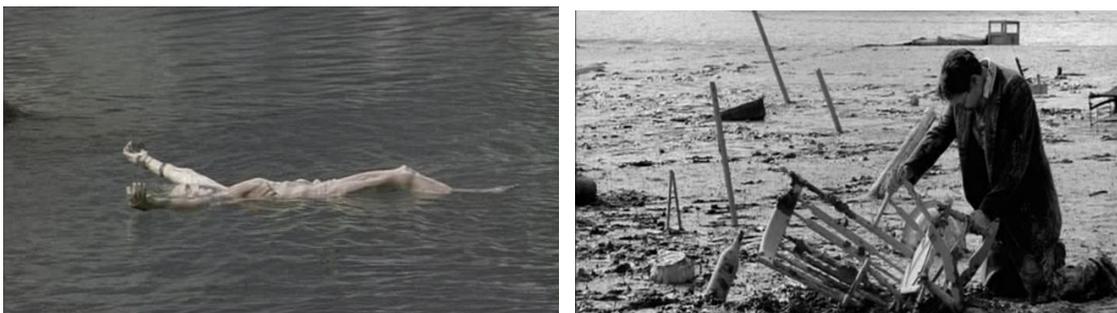
This sequence from *Vajont* exemplifies how it is precisely the space of silence, i.e. of what is not said because it is unspeakable, that constitutes the crucial moment of representation. The impossibility of narrating horror becomes a diegetic principle, and what is silent at the narrative level, what words and images cannot represent, becomes readable in emptiness and silence.⁵ This emptiness of image that in some way represents trauma is then

³ In *A Rugged Nation*, Marco Armiero (2011) discussed Vajont as the most tragic episode of Italian "nationalisation of mountain landscapes" and wrote that "the Vajont massacre is the epilogue to a long story of hydroelectric colonialism in the Alps, made possible by the marginality of these areas and their inhabitants" (155–56). Armiero critically observed that the tragedy of Vajont disappeared from the collective memory for decades, because it "did not fit well into the progressive tale about Italian modernisation" (156), and has also been disregarded by historians and the academic world (except for Maurizio Reberschak's work) (174).

⁴ In his essay "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma", discussing the inability of survivors to narrate their experiences in the extermination camps, Ernst van Alphen (1999) identified the Holocaust as a narrative vacuum. Van Alphen wrote, "the Holocaust situation did not fit into any conventional framework, it was almost impossible to 'experience,' and therefore later to voluntarily remember or represent it" (34).

⁵ In an attempt to explain how film can offer a form of representation to trauma, Elm, Kabalek, and Köhne, (2014) observed, "film functions as a medium that witnesses, remembers and is haunted and obsessed by traumatic historical events that can neither be seen in clear light nor be fully decoded. While film does not provide an absolute decoding of

reflected in the final scene in the film in which the survivor Olmo is seen wandering in tears in the mud. The unspeakable seems to open up and let us see, through the body of the survivor, the deep essence of the trauma. As Raya Morag (2013) observed, “The visibility of the trauma seems to be, first and foremost, the visibility of the human body” (44). Olmo’s tears do not need words and the human drama is symbolically represented in the image of Ancilla’s rocking chair tragically stuck in the mud.



Despite justifiably negative reactions to *Vajont* for its soap-opera style (from this point of view, the dry, touching theatrical monologue that Marco Paolini dedicated to the same event is much more impressive), the film is nevertheless useful to us because it clearly shows the contrast between two different forms of narration. Referring to Dominick LaCapra’s (2001) definition, we can identify them with the terms “writing *about* trauma” and “writing *the* trauma”,⁶ as two different representations, one rational and descriptive, the other deep and bodily. Of the two, it is the latter that seems better able, through the physical body of the witness, to express the deep essence of trauma. In this regard, Caruth (1996) observed, “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (7).

The traumatized body carries within it this unsolved oscillation between a devastating unacceptable experience and the unbearable burden of having

the traumatic experience, this medium comes, in a way, close to this goal, if only as a depiction of that which defies representation” (10).

⁶ Similarly, in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, describing the difference between “writing the trauma” and “writing about trauma”, Dominick LaCapra (2001) observed, “Writing about trauma is an aspect of historiography related to the project of reconstructing the past as objectively as possible without necessarily going to the self-defeating extreme of single-minded objectification that involves the denial of one’s implication in the problems one treats. Writing trauma is a metaphor in that writing indicates some distance from trauma [...] and there is no such thing as writing trauma itself if only because trauma, while at times related to particular events, cannot be localized in terms of a discrete, dated experience [...] Writing trauma is often seen in terms of enacting it, which may at times be equated with acting (or playing) it out in performative discourse or artistic practice” (186–87).

survived to it. The paradox of memory implies the betrayal of a tragic story of death with the continuity of the life of the witness. Thus, trauma consists not only in a confrontation with death, but also in the guilt of the survivor for a missing encounter with death. In *Vajont*, it is this burden of survival that Olmo cannot bear. What is traumatic is survival itself, missing death and leaving the place of trauma alive, becoming the bearer of an unbearable testimony.

From our perspective, there are therefore two aspects that need to be considered: not only the question concerning the representability of trauma in film, but also the wider issue concerning memory and testimony, and how they are implicated in the spectator's experience. The two issues are not unrelated but closely connected, albeit in a problematic way. In this regard, it has often been noted that in modern media society we are witnessing a recurring and growing mediatization of trauma.⁷ This means, on the one hand, the possibility that seeing a film can itself be a traumatic experience and therefore produce wounds and traumata in the audience. This led to the definition of the more complex concept of *mediated trauma*⁸ and a shift of the notion from the individual to the collective dimension. With respect to our subject, it is clear that images of environmental catastrophes and human tragedies can induce deep traumas in the viewer and can emotionally and psychologically upset a large audience. At the same time, in the opposite direction, it is equally evident that the relentless bombardment of imagery to which we are daily subjected may induce a certain addiction in the viewer and thus result in increasing insensitivity to tragic events.

On the other hand, if trauma is per se unspeakable and even incommunicable, an attempt to offer a representation could also appear to be ethically unacceptable—a distortion, a sort of falsification, which tries in some way to normalize and assimilate the traumatic experience. Thus, the

⁷ In this regard, in the essay “The Mediatization of Trauma and the Trauma of Mediatization”, Ben O’Loughlin (2013) wrote, “The form of mediatization that has brought participatory digital platforms and increased literacy and reflexivity affords individuals new ways to deal with traumatic experience [...] Digital media enables unprecedented voice and unprecedented risks to the private- or self-image. There may be less of a struggle to speak in the first place, but more of a struggle to retain control of one’s words and images” (211–12).

⁸ Many scholars claimed that mediated images can induce or transmit traumatic experience (Felman and Laub 1992; Hirsch 2004; Pinchevski 2015). For example, Amit Pinchevski (2015), considering the screen as a potential source of trauma, observed, “Recent studies in psychiatry reveal an acceptance of trauma through the media. Traditionally restricted to immediate experience, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is now expanding to include mediated experience” (51). The “trauma film paradigm,” first developed in the 1960s by Richard Lazarus (1963) and Mardi Horowitz (1969), has been adopted by many scholars and has offered a valuable experimental model for studying psychological trauma in laboratory (James et al. 2016).

question is how trauma can be represented and expressed without betraying its tragic reality.

Some recent Italian films focusing on the environmental crisis, such as *Il caso Acna* by Fulvio Montano (2005), or the more recent *Non si deve morire per vivere* by Daniele Gaglianone (2005), and *Polvere: il grande processo all'amianto* by Niccolò Bruna and Andrea Prandstraller (2011) are interesting case studies. To denounce the ecological disasters and human dramas caused by notorious factories in northern Italy—such as Acna in Cengio (Savona), IPCA in Ciriè (Torino), or Eternit in Casale Monferrato (Alessandria)—these films adopt the traditional form of the documentary, and use video interviewing techniques to collect the memories of survivors and offer us a documented reconstruction of the events. In this way, they show how individual traumata can be witnessed and activated through the film medium. Thanks to the testimonial value of the image, the traumatic experience moves out of the personal dimension and becomes collective.

Travelling through the places where the factories were located, alternating faces and intertwining voices and histories, these films enact a passage of testimony. In the filmic text, there is an implicit appeal to listening and sharing, consonant with an ethic of the image that emerges from the film's urgency to tell its story in order to give form to a collective consciousness. A direct relationship is established between the surviving witness who recalls his/her traumatic experience and the spectator who listens to the witness: it is the relationship Caruth referred to when she defined history as “the way we are implicated in each other's traumas” (Caruth 1996, 24).

Thus, the testimony is not only an attempt to rework something deeply devastating to seek a form of a possible narration that is understandable. The testimony is also our attempt to interpret the traumas that we as spectators perceive and can decipher because they are inscribed in the bodies that tragically populate the film world. The filmic experience solicits our personal involvement and gives us a testimony for which we become responsible.

The recent film *Un posto sicuro* (2015) by Francesco Ghiaccio allows us to make some further considerations regarding testimony and the representation of trauma. The film, whose title plays on the ambiguity of the blackmail involved when workers are offered steady jobs that endanger their lives, is set in Casale Monferrato, the Eternit factory's headquarters and the site of one of modern Italy's worst environmental catastrophes, with over 3,000 victims of pleural mesothelioma and other diseases caused by the uncontrolled dispersion of asbestos fibers in the environment.⁹ Unlike the

⁹ Serenella Iovino (2016) framed the tragic story of Eternit factory in Casale Monferrato under the category of “slow violence,” which, following Nuto Revelli's thought, is referred not only to the “intergenerational, interspecies and gendered violence of patriarchal

previously mentioned documentaries, to testify to the human drama experienced by the people of Casale, *Un posto sicuro*, like *Vajont*, uses the hybrid form of docu-fiction. Shot in 2011, on the eve of the sentence in the first trial against the factory's owners and managers, the film focuses on the relationship between Eduardo (Giorgio Colangeli), a former Eternit worker who discovers he is terminally ill, and his son Luca (Marco D'Amore), an aspiring actor who had broken off relations with his father. In narrating the rapprochement of the two and their experience of pain and grief, an experience that evidently does not concern only the two filmic characters but is used to represent an entire community, the movie recurs repeatedly to symbolic signification.

In one of the most touching sequences in the film, Luca drops hundreds of ping pong balls on a theater stage to symbolize the pain that thousands of families experienced. Each white ball serves to represent a victim of asbestos, and the sharp, repeated sounds of the balls bouncing symbolically gives voice to the mute suffering of the survivors. The original archive footage included in the film shows Eternit workers handling asbestos without protection of any sort, completely unaware of the risk they were exposed to. The danger did not only affect them, but also people who did not work in the factory. In a dialogue in the film, Edoardo tells his son Luca that "Eternit was the largest plant in Europe. Everything around it was white: there was asbestos dust everywhere. It reached the town, and everyone breathed it. Near the factory, there was a small island where families went to swim. Right there, Eternit's processing waste was dumped, and the children who played there then, are dying now."

Wearing a black sequined jacket for the show, the protagonist Luca has the face of a clown who can no longer smile. He is seen wandering drunkenly through the streets of Casale, searching for a reason for what befell its inhabitants. The representation of the weeping clown is the iconic image of trauma, the symbol of a tragedy that erases identities and sows anguish. In the filmic symbolic representation, asbestos is transformed into a serial killer, and like in a horror movie, newspaper cuttings are stuck on the wall to trace an identikit, in an attempt to capture and destroy it. When, after his father's

hierarchies" that has characterised the rural world and "dispossessed', modified and bent the peasant bodies" for centuries, but also to "the blurred contact zone between the rural and the industrial dimension" (138). In the clash between rural and industrial world, factory has reintroduced "hierarchies and exploitation" accompanied by a "novel and much stronger ecological risk" (139). In the case of Eternit, given the slow action of asbestos on the human body and the long latency period of pleural mesothelioma, for Iovino, the shocking sentence of the first trial against the factory's executives and its owner and CEO Stephan Schmidheiny, which acquitted them from the accusation of environmental disaster, is "another emergence of slow violence" against which the current Italian legislation appears to be inadequate (152-53).

death, Luca sets fire to these scraps of paper, it is a clear representation of having been defeated by this subtle, invisible enemy.

Another aspect of the film is particularly relevant for our reflection on the cinema of trauma: the possibility of overcoming trauma through a relationship with the other, an aspect that has been widely discussed in trauma studies. Many scholars have argued that, by virtue of our common existential finitude, we do not live our traumatic experiences as isolated, solitary individuals, but instead create bonds of profound emotional understanding with each other, through which we can try to understand and process our traumas. As Judith Herman (1992) observed in her book on trauma and recovery, “no one can face trauma alone” (153). Only through an “empathic listener” a traumatic experience can be translated into a narrative memory: “The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (Laub 1992, 68).

In *Un posto sicuro*, the issue of the intersubjective relationship of the traumatic experience is addressed not only in the development of the relationship between Luca and his father, or in the love affair between Luca and Raffaella, but also through the theatrical performance and the expression of the actor’s body in a scenic space. It is within this symbolic space that Luca tries to give expression to his trauma. Two crucial elements emerge. Firstly, the actor’s interpretation with its characteristic performativity, rather than a description of the traumatic experience, is a sort of “acting out” (Van Boheemen-Saaf 1999, 23) through which it becomes possible to express and go beyond the peculiar unspeakability of trauma.¹⁰ At the same time, an actor’s performance always involves the activation of a dialogic and emotional relationship with the audience, an aspect that appears to be essential in processing trauma. As Freud pointed out, “Individual Psychology is at the same time Social Psychology as well.” This implies not only an intrinsic otherness in the subject, but also an ethical statement that, in encountering the other and sharing a traumatic experience, calls on us to play the role of active witnesses.

¹⁰ In this regard, reflecting on testimony and representation of trauma in and by film, Tamar Ashuri (2010) wrote, “a witness to a traumatic event should not be seen as a mere conduit for transferring knowledge to the uninformed but rather as a performer of an excess of an event which has transformed him or her. By performing the excess of a transformative event, the witness calls upon the audience to participate in the performance” (172).



As a paradigmatic case of eco-trauma cinema, *Un posto sicuro* expresses a strong statement of condemnation, and a pressing demand for mobilization and change.¹¹ Such an appeal cannot leave us indifferent. Especially now that, after the first trial sadly ended without a guilty verdict because the statute of limitations had expired, in the second trial against Eternit owner Stephan Schmidheiny, the pronouncement by the preliminary hearing judge of Torino Court reduced the charge from murder to manslaughter.

A sorrowful, silent scream of pain arises from all these films. Moving from the valley of mud and death in *Vajont*, it spreads through the air in infinitesimal whitish fragments of asbestos, then creeps into and undermines our trusting, serene lives. Affected by these traumatic experiences, we become witnesses of the perverse mechanisms through which various forms of political and economic power have operated and continue to operate, systematically exploiting natural resources and people, devastating cities and countryside, destroying living beings and communities, in the name of an illusory progress.

Faced with this experience of trauma that calls on us to assume personal and direct responsibility, what clearly emerges is the ethical dimension of film, which through the depth and pervasiveness of its representations becomes an instrument of civil commitment and a powerful force for change.

¹¹ In regard to the theme of the power of film in opening up new perspectives and in building ecological awareness, it is worth noting Monica Seger's "Thinking through Taranto" (2018). In her essay, referring to the environmental catastrophe caused by the Ilva steel plant in Taranto, Seger discusses "the ways in which narrative practice and storyworld experience provide crucial space for the imagination necessary to make sense of challenging" (185–53).

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- SRG SSR idée Suisse/Iota Production/RTSI Televisione Svizzera/ARTE France, RTBF Film.
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