

ITALIAN FRAME

EDITED BY SIMONA BUSNI AND ANGELA MAIELLO

BEYOND CATAS- TROPHESES

VISIONS AND PERSPECTIVES
ON POST-ANTHROPOCENIC ITALY

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BEYOND CATASTROPHES

Visions and Perspectives
on Post-Anthropocenic Italy

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Simona Busni and Angela Maiello

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Angela Maiello
INTRODUCTION
A NEW JOURNEY TO ITALY
Seeing Through Catastrophe

A system of different references made Italy, the history of images of Italy and the functions of an entire culture disappear: obliterated or flattened would be a more apt description, given the nation's long-standing framework of reference. Would it be fair to say that we only see Italy's south through the prism of realism, much as the only images we have of the north are of monuments and beaches, not to mention a plethora of postcards of dogs, lovers, sunsets and sunrises? Regardless of how advanced their work was, or whether they are young or very young, the photographers behind this *Viaggio in Italia* must indeed have pondered this matter: what framing should they apply to the subject as a whole? What framing would construct a true discourse on Italy and its culture?¹

This passage is from the renowned volume *Viaggio in Italia*, which was originally published to accompany the eponymous exhibition conceived in the mid-1980s by Pina Belli d'Elia, Luigi Ghirri, Gianni Leone, and Enzo Velati. The collective exhibition is considered one of the foundational moments in contemporary Italian photography, due to the impetus it gave to a renewal of the very idea of the Italian landscape. As Arturo C. Quintavalle writes, questioning the Italian landscape means questioning the very idea of photography; it means interrogating the forms of the image and of representation. Ghirri and the photographers who gathered around him worked on the concept of 'margins': the margins of the unseen, of contaminated rather than

1 Arturo C. Quintavalle, 'Viaggio in Italia', notes in the booklet accompanying the volume *Viaggio in Italia*, ed. by Luigi Ghirri, Gianni Leone and Enzo Velati (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2024), p. 13.

uncontaminated nature, and of the image itself. To make visible the reality of a country weighed down by its own visual stereotypes, it was necessary to begin with what is usually left out of sight.

The premise of this book is that catastrophe may represent one of several possible paths towards constructing a ‘true discourse’ on Italy and its culture, taking into account the complex relationship with its geography, its natural configuration, and the way in which forms of life are shaped and communities organized.

The history of the Italian peninsula is marked by its condition as a land exposed to risk: geological fragility, attributable to its ‘natural’ configuration, and hydrographic vulnerability, resulting from the Mediterranean climate, are accompanied by intense volcanic and seismic activity. Over the past five centuries, Italy has experienced 174 major seismic disasters — approximately one every four years — with a concentration of such seismic activity in the southern regions. At the same time, Italy is also a country historically shaped by an early process of anthropization, as evidenced by the remains of ancient civilizations that can be found throughout the peninsula.²

From its very etymology, rooted in the field of rhetoric, the concept of catastrophe describes a moment of upheaval, a turning point, which leads to the resolution of the drama and thus to a reorganization of the elements involved. The shift of the term from the poetic-rhetorical sphere to the cosmological-naturalistic realm occurred through the transformation of the natural event from disaster into spectacle. That event was the Lisbon earthquake of 1755: the geographical position of the city, together with the rise of emerging means of communication and information dissemination, made that disaster one of the most widely known seismic events in history, as well as a paradigmatic example of the representation of catastrophe.³

In the Age of Enlightenment, catastrophe became an occasion not only to call into question all forms of theological optimism,

2 Gabriella Corona, *Breve storia dell’ambiente in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), p. 35 [ebook]; *Disastro! Disasters in Italy Since 1860: Culture, Politics, Society*, ed. by John Dickie, John Foot and Frank M. Snowden (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

3 Andrea Tagliapietra, ‘I filosofi e la catastrofe’, in *Filosofie della catastrofe*, ed. by Andrea Tagliapietra (Milan: Cortina Editore), pp. 9–92.

but also to affirm human dominion over the Earth, even in the form of responsibility and guilt. In his letter of response to Voltaire, Rousseau identified the high population density of the city as the primary cause of the disaster — one that could certainly not be attributed to either Nature or Providence.⁴ And it is precisely Voltaire who, in his famous poem, addressed the rest of the Europeans by calling them ‘tranquil spectators’, who search for the causes of the tragedy, but who — if they were to experience the same fate — would ‘become humane, like us you’ll learn to melt’.⁵ As Andrea Tagliapietra observes, Voltaire brings to light the aesthetic dimension of catastrophe. The role of the intellectual is not to account for its causes, but rather ‘to resonate with the event, to expose its open wound, and to make aesthetic — indeed hyper-aesthetic — use of it’.⁶ This conception of catastrophe — strikingly contemporary in tone — emerged well before the advent of mass production and the dissemination of images through modern media.

Catastrophe, exemplarily represented by the Lisbon earthquake, constitutes the modern event par excellence, bearing witness to the conflict between humanity and nature. This framing of the catastrophic event is mediated primarily through images and narratives of disaster — an aesthetic, medial, and spectacular dimension. Catastrophe is thus not only a category of rhetoric, history, and philosophy, but also a specific visual theme. The question that underlies and animates this book is: can this visual theme offer an opportunity for a different understanding of the relationship between the human being and nature? And above all, can it be explored and analysed so as to grasp the complexity of the interwoven elements that define the specificity of that

4 Rousseau writes: ‘Nature did not construct twenty thousand houses of six to seven stories there, and that if the inhabitants of this great city had been more equally spread out and more lightly lodged, the damage would have been much less, and perhaps of no account’ (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Letter from J. J. Rousseau to Mr. de Voltaire’, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. III, ed. by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, trans. by Judith R. Bush (Hanover: University Press of New England), p. 110).

5 Voltaire, *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster: Or an Examination of That Axiom ‘All Is Well’*, trans. by William F. Bottiglia, in *Candide and Related Texts* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000).

6 Tagliapietra, pp. 64–65 (our translation).

hybrid network called Italy? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to take certain theoretical steps, which are implicitly or explicitly referenced in the texts collected in this volume.

First and foremost, anthropocentrism should be called into question, beginning with a critical consideration of the very concept of the Anthropocene, which has been the subject of extensive reflection within the human and social sciences. As it is well known, the concept of the Anthropocene designates an era marked by the consequences of human action on the planet.⁷ In doing so, it reinforces the traditional (at least within the Western framework) nature–culture dichotomy: on one side, nature with its laws, rules, and dynamics; on the other, human action that interferes with, alters, and permanently transforms the equilibrium of the planet. What is at risk is not nature itself — which will continue to exist without human presence, as the geological history of the Earth demonstrates — but rather the survival of the species. The difficulty in identifying a definitive criterion for dating the beginning of this new geological epoch⁸ — Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer propose the eighteenth century as a possible starting point, while acknowledging the possibility of extending it to include the entire Holocene — clearly reveals that the effects of the entanglement between nature and human action can be traced back to the very emergence of the *Homo sapiens* species. The narrative of humanity in conflict with nature — whether understood as a form of defence against uncontrollable natural forces or as a mode of domination and ultimate corruption — thus requires fundamental rethinking.

Since at least the latter half of the twentieth century,⁹ the problematization of the nature–culture dichotomy has permeated the human and social sciences within a framework

7 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The “Anthropocene””, in *Global Change NewsLetter*, 41 (May 2000).

8 Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, *The Human Planet* (London: Pelican Press, 2018); John R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

9 Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

that brings together epistemology, philosophy of science, political philosophy, and semiotics. While modernity is characterized by a process of ‘purification’ that enforces a clear distinction between the natural and the artificial, the proliferation of hybrids (Bruno Latour, in the early 1990s, referred to the AIDS virus, for instance) seems to confirm the impossibility — and indeed the illusoriness — of such a separation between what is human and what is not, between what belongs to the domain of nature and what to that of culture. The recent pandemic crisis, undoubtedly one of the catastrophes of contemporary times, has exposed the failure of this purifying process and the untenability of the distinction between human and non-human. For this reason, it also marks the end of the Anthropocene and calls for a renewed intellectual effort — a further conceptualization of the ‘post’ — aimed at moving beyond any form of humanism conceived of as a binary opposition between subject and object.

Felice Cimatti writes:

The world has always been contaminated; it is precisely for this reason that it has always been preserved. What is required is to enter a vital field inhabited by a multitude of agents, without a single overarching intentionality, without a judge who determines who is to be saved and who is not. This marks the fundamental shift from the era of the unquestioned primacy of anthropocenic naivety, when *Homo sapiens* believed itself to be the sole actor on stage, while the entirety of nature was regarded as nothing more than a passive and fearful object.¹⁰

From a methodological perspective, the challenge lies in positioning oneself within the broad interdisciplinary framework of Environmental Humanities.¹¹ Grounded in the understanding

10 Felice Cimatti, *Il postanimale: la natura dopo l'Antropocene* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2021), p. 71 (our translation).

11 Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017); *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, ed. by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); *Environmental Humanities. Vol. 1: Scienze sociali, politica, ecologia*, ed. by Marco Armiero and others (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2021); *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies*, ed.

that the current global environmental crisis requires an intellectual approach capable of addressing the paradox of producing knowledge that challenges any notion of human supremacy over the non-human, this framework offers a valuable perspective on the complexities of contemporary times. Of the many lines of inquiry within Environmental Humanities,¹² the one concerning agency is perhaps the most fruitful for addressing the questions posed by reflection on catastrophe. Catastrophe is an exemplary manifestation of multiple interacting agencies. It is the moment when the radical otherness of nature becomes apparent, when human beings realise that Gaia, as named by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis,¹³ is not a living planet that tends towards equilibrium to ensure the survival of the human species. According to Isabelle Stengers, Gaia intrudes, breaks in, and refuses compromise. Stengers writes:

We are no longer dealing (only) with a wild and threatening nature, nor with a fragile nature to be protected, nor a nature to be mercilessly exploited. The case is new. Gaia, she who intrudes, asks nothing of us, not even a response to the question she imposes. Offended, Gaia is indifferent to the question ‘who is responsible?’ and doesn’t act as a righter of wrongs.¹⁴

Once again, a paradox needs to be faced: although the terms used, such as ‘intrusion’ and ‘indifference’, fall back into an anthropomorphic register, the challenge lies in imagining possible modes of relation among different agencies that can

by Serenella Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti and Elena Past (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018).

- 12 Such interdisciplinary approaches include those that intersect with Gender Studies, Race Studies, and Postcolonial Studies. See *Ecologies of Gender: Contemporary Nature Relations and the Nonhuman Turn*, ed. by Susanne Lettow and Sabine Nessel (London: Routledge, 2023); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, ed. by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur and Anthony Carrigan (New York: Routledge, 2015).
- 13 James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- 14 Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. by Andrew Goffey (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015), p. 46 <<http://dx.medra.org/10.14619/016>> [accessed 31 May 2025].

transcend the anthropocentric dichotomy of ‘human’ and ‘nature’, or at the very least hold it critically in view. To think through these relations, Jane Bennett develops a theory of ‘distributive agency’ based on the concept of ‘assemblage’, as articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Assemblages are dynamic, decentralized groupings of diverse materials and forces, each of which possesses its own vitality yet gives rise to emergent effects that exceed the sum of their parts. No single element governs the whole: the structure is open-ended and temporal, marked by internal tensions and finite duration.¹⁵

In Bennett’s argument, catastrophe — exemplified by the 2003 electrical blackout that affected the northeastern and midwestern United States, as well as parts of Canada — serves as an exemplary instance of how such entanglements of agency function. Within this new materialist perspective, Karen Barad also engages with the theme of agency, emphasizing the relational dimension of the entanglement itself.

Phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies’. That is, phenomena are ontologically primitive relations — relations without preexisting relata. The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’, which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift.¹⁶

Images also participate in these intra-actions. At the end of the last century, media studies and visual culture focused particularly on moving beyond dichotomous thinking based on oppositions such as world versus representation, subject versus image, medial versus non-medial, and human versus non-human. Images have come to be studied and understood as ‘living forms’ endowed with their own agency. As William J. T. Mitchell writes, the ‘pictorial turn’ is concerned with a ‘postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery

15 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 23–24.

16 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 139.

of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality'.¹⁷

Media are no longer understood solely as devices of representation; rather, they are understood as agents of processes of mediation involving artefacts, natural elements, humans, and non-humans alike. Significantly, the concept of radical mediation, implicating both human and non-human actors, was developed by Richard Grusin in relation to the medial response triggered by natural disasters. In the face of catastrophes such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or floods, the media intensify their activity, producing what Grusin describes as 'mediashock'.¹⁸ This can be understood in at least four ways: as a form of media coverage and narrative framing of the event; as physical shock experienced by users and spectators; as the capacity of the media to regulate collective affectivity during or following a specific event; and as a producer of geopolitical, geophysical, and geoaffective effects on both human and non-human actants. Grusin writes:

Taken together, these four senses of mediashock emphasize the affectivity of media themselves as well as their relation to the affectivity of natural/technical disasters or crises. They also insist upon the ontological status of such geotechnical media events — which are produced neither by nature, society, or technology but emerge as complex assemblages with their own forms of agency.¹⁹

Grusin thus emphasizes the entanglement of planes, levels, and agencies involved in the production of mediashock during the unfolding of a catastrophic event. Although contemporaneity is characterized by an increasing difficulty in distinguishing these levels and planes, Grusin highlights that mediashock is not an exclusively twenty-first century phenomenon. In fact, he argues that the concept and its effects can be traced back to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

17 William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 16.

18 Richard Grusin, 'Mediashock', in *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, ed. by Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 29–39.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

What emerges, then, is a complex system of relations involving humans and non-humans, nature and technical artefacts, including images themselves. Images of catastrophe embody an irresolvable ambivalence. On the one hand, they represent a visual theme that has been codified and stereotyped, with it being instrumental to the process of distancing and purification that reiterates the opposition between humans and nature. Images of catastrophe can be seen either as the glorification of the defeat of humanity in its attempts to dominate nature or as a depiction of the devastating effects of human action. However, this perspective offers little scope for rethinking the human relationship with the world. On the other hand, images of catastrophe can be understood as elements within the broader entanglement of nature and culture, human and non-human, matter and meaning, which constitute human existence both individually and collectively. Images contribute to constructing a new sensibility through their role in processing of trauma, building collective memory, and reconstructing lost communities.

Starting from this ambivalence, this volume offers a reflection on images and through images, in an attempt to shape a new perspective on Italy and the various ways of inhabiting it. This book is structured in two parts. The first explores the concept of catastrophe from various disciplinary perspectives, including semiotics, philosophy, social sciences, and film theory, considering the relationship between catastrophe and its representation. Simona Stano examines how cinema depicts catastrophe, identifying two matrices through specific film examples: 'natural catastrophes' and 'cultural catastrophes'. Stano notes that a third matrix intertwining nature and culture has emerged in more recent film productions. From a culturalist perspective and the sociology of cultural trauma, Luca Mori observes that catastrophe can be understood as the processes of meaning-making triggered by specific events, regardless of any ontological foundation. Using hydrogeological disasters that have severely affected Emilia-Romagna in the last fifteen years as a case study, Mori questions the specific traumatic nature of events related to climate change. He notes that, unlike in cinematic and fictional narratives, this type of phenomenon does not produce unified stories and processes of symbolic elaboration, but rather fragmented and

disjointed ones. This poses a challenge to the development of collective consciousness regarding environmental issues. From a philosophical standpoint, Alessandro Calefati reflects on the disintegrative and fragmented nature of catastrophe, which calls into question the very concept of objectivity and reveals the limitations of the symbolic order. Chiara Falcone, on the other hand, explores the concept of a distinct Southern Italian (Meridional) perspective on the interplay of natural and cultural factors. The South emerges as an epistemological construct and a geosymbolic threshold — a site where ancestral knowledge systems and deep temporalities converge with the materiality of place, configuring a terrain that is inherently plural, relational, and iridescent in its ecological and cultural dimensions.

Starting from the perspective of film and media theory, Simona Busni, Francesco Zucconi, and Daniele Dottorini explore the relationship between image and catastrophe. Busni draws on Stanley Cavell's reflections on the relationship between the world and cinema, questioning how cinema relates to catastrophe and invoking the work of one of the most important authors on this subject: Jean Epstein. In 1923, the French director made *La Montagne infidèle*, in which he documented the eruption of Mount Etna. This provides an opportunity to reflect on the category of photogeny in relation to catastrophe, establishing a parallel between cinema and the volcano as agencies of transformation. Epstein's position is both illuminating and original: rather than capturing or embodying the human aspect of catastrophe, the eye of the camera becomes a material element acting alongside others. Zucconi engages with the work of another significant film theorist and director, Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, through an analysis of the Armenian filmmaker Artavazd Peleshyan 2020 film *Nature*. Zucconi's contribution explores the concept of nonindifferent nature, proposing a different balance between nature, image, and human beings based on the idea of a nature that is nonindifferent to itself. Finally, Dottorini investigates the relationship between cinema and the representation of catastrophe, focusing in particular on how *cinéma du réel* works with traces, debris, and post-event effects. This offers a space for reflection and testimony, often through negating a literal representation of disaster.

The second part of the volume is entirely dedicated to describing what might be called an Italian post-Anthropocene landscape. This

is achieved by presenting case studies related to catastrophic events and examining how images have been used to narrate, process, and reconstruct these traumatic experiences. Giacomo Tagliani focuses on the Vajont tragedy of 1965, analysing the role of images in creating the emerging ‘technolandscape’ dominated by the dam, as well as in narrating and elaborating on the disaster, which lacks a symbolic image. Reflecting on the Vajont tragedy invites consideration of the potential of imagination to develop a ‘renewed ecology of thought’ that incorporates non-human elements. Moving from one of Italy’s most well-known catastrophes to a lesser-known hydrogeological disaster in San Martino Valle Caudina (2019), an ordinary small town in the province of Avellino (Campania), Serena Olcuire reflects on the impact of the event on the community and considers catastrophe an opportunity to envision alternative futures and reimagine the human-ecosystem relationship. Corinne Pontillo and Giovanna Santaera examine imagery related to Etna. Pontillo investigates Pier Paolo Pasolini’s poetics and the symbolic role of Etna in his reflections on the transformation of Italian society, traces of which become visible in the landscape. Santaera, on the other hand, analyses two recent films — *Dove vanno i vecchi dèi che il mondo ignora?*, directed by Giuseppe Spina and Giulia Mazzone (Nomadica, 2022), and *Pietra Madre*, directed by Mauro Maugeri and Daniele Greco (Associazione Scarti and ArteScienza, 2024) — to explore the possibility of creating a visual atlas of volcanic phenomena that showcases the agency of nature and encourages reconsideration of the human relationship with the environment. The 2009 L’Aquila earthquake is the focus of the papers by Mirko Lino and Samuel Antichi. Lino proposes a survey of films dedicated to the earthquake, including *Draquila: l’Italia che trema* (2010) by Sabina Guzzanti, *Appennino* (2017) by Emiliano Dante, and *Io prometto* (2018) by Cecilia Fasciani. Such films emphasize how cinema documents the perceptual and symbolic transformation of the environment and the formation of a collective memory condensed in the ruins, which remain visible only through images. Antichi focuses particularly on Emiliano Dante’s trilogy — *Into the Blue* (2009), *Habitat: note personali* (2014), and *Appennino* (2017) — highlighting the idea that cinema can transform sites of catastrophe into traumascapes. Isabella Hernandez analyses the dystopian imagery of the television series *Anna* (2021), by Niccolò

Ammaniti. This is used as a lens to explore life beyond catastrophe and elaborate an epistemology that transcends anthropocentrism, attentive to multispecies entanglements and forms of knowledge embodied in the living world. Finally, Felice Cimatti identifies *Cosenza Vecchia* as a paradigmatic example of the city as a continuous process of ‘happening’ and ‘unceasing catastrophe’, where identity coincides with transformation.

The Italian landscape that emerges from this plurality of perspectives and images proves to be far removed from any form of stereotype or codified imaginary. This imaginary seems to entrap the Italian Peninsula from the era of the Grand Tour to contemporary forms of film-induced tourism. Catastrophe presents itself as an occasion of truth — a unique moment that repeats itself yet is never the same. It offers the possibility of returning to see. It offers the possibility of seeing for the first time. It offers the possibility of seeing in a new form what has always been before our eyes. The Italy that emerges here is a multifaceted land where cultural history, complex geography, and geological as well as symbolic stratification converge. Through catastrophe, Italy becomes a monstrous landscape: “a cosmogony inhabited by existences that keep themselves exceedingly busy”.²⁰ The natural elements — fire, water, and earth — escape aesthetic capture, resist the rhetoric of idyll or harmony, reclaim their own agency and succeed in rearticulating and soliciting imagination. The image thus becomes the custodian of memory and the bearer of that unrepeatable event and the possibilities it discloses.

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²⁰ Annalisa Metta, *Il paesaggio è un mostro. Città selvatiche e nature ibride* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2022), p. 9 (our translation).

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PART I
THE SPECTACLE OF CATASTROPHE