

The Post-human Sound

An Interview with Michelangelo Frammartino

Alessandro Lanfranchi

Student, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bergamo

doi: 10.7358/rela-2016-002-lanf

alessandro.lanfranchi92@gmail.com

MICHELANGELO FRAMMARTINO is an Italian director capable of producing a major change in international cinema: his extensive experience with video art has been the beginning of a long philosophical and artistic reflection, which included his first full-length film, *Il dono (The Gift)*, presented at Locarno Film Festival in 2003; a path that led him to rethink the role that cinematography has had, since its origins, in the relation with non-human otherness. His great masterpiece, *Le quattro volte (The Four Times)*, (2010), praised by the critics in many festivals, including Cannes, presents a relational, modal and deeply dialogic notion of human identity. Frammartino abandons the stereotypical, traditional view that conceives of man as a rigid, introverted entity, trapped in a paradigm that postulates his innate superiority (a vision favored by a certain, antiquated, humanist tradition). He therefore welcomes in his works very diverse perspectives and needs: non-human ones, that can radically modify our point of view through a long process of mutual blending, that can allow us to reach a renewed understanding of what is “human”. In fact, the film tells four stories intertwined together: the story of a shepherd, of a baby goat, of a tree and, eventually, of some coal. Inspired by the Pythagorean view of *metempsychosis*, that postulates four different phases of the journey of the soul through life (human, animal, plant, mineral), Frammartino underlines how any life form, despite their different rhythms and processes, has in itself a baffling but precious potential. This awareness leads toward a dialogical attitude, that can question the notion of an unmovable identity, making it exceed the boundaries of humanity and blend with the surrounding non-human otherness. The following article is an interview that attempts to decipher and understand the poetics of the young Calabrian director, starting from his last movie, *Le quattro volte*.

AL: How did the project begin?

MF: The project was born around 2005. We began in places very dear to me, which I really belong to, especially the Ionian Calabria; that is the main source of inspiration in my films. The very origins of *Le quattro volte* came from this intimate relation with a place ... but I confess that it took a very long time for me to understand what I was working on: at first I thought I had in my hands only shards, and not a complete work. The movie, as you know, includes many fragments, and for a certain period, I believed I was working on different projects; at least until I found a perspective from which to interpret those four different realities: popular animism, which I came in contact with as a child. Only then did the whole material start to embody a compact and coherent movie. The aspect from which I started, then, was the landscape, the environment where we live. This is consistent with the fact that my movies are centered on the notion of threshold, the slippery limit between what we call “life” and otherness.

AL: The most evident feature of *Le quattro volte* rests in the fact that you leave man aside, creating space not only for non-human animals, but also for vegetation, rocks, coal, and even for the intangible essence of *lachrimae rerum*. You actually try and start a sort of “Gestalt re-orientation”, a conceptual and visual revolution that drives away human beings from their dominant position. Can you please get deeper into this aspect?

MF: You are right, in fact *Le quattro volte* was even too schematic in showing this conception: firstly, the protagonist is man, followed by animals, plants and minerals, in order to deconstruct, step by step, the human animal. Unlike many interpretations that have been given, these passages represent to me an authentic growth, since the reincarnation from man to mineral doesn't imply a simplification of the living, as we usually think of it, but on the contrary it represents an increasing merging into Everything, and therefore an exceptionally more complex and interesting degree of existence. From my point of view, it was important to show this progression *ad infinitum* with cinema. Heir to every optical machine, from zograSCOPE to the camera, cinema is the device that, above any other, puts man at the centre of the universe. It is the result of perspective: man comes to coincide with cinema's only, Cyclops-like pupil, that dominates everything. The seventh art, therefore, supports us in our anthropocentric arrogance, while, on the contrary, with this movie, I tried to apply a reversed procedure, aimed at weakening and deconstructing this only, adamant point of view.

AL: It seems that in your works there is no gap between man and landscape: both are at the same level and complete each other, without any

hierarchy. In this regard, do you believe that our society is going in this direction, or, on the contrary, your art – I’m thinking of both *Le quattro volte* and the video-installation *Alberi (Trees)* – aims at denouncing this detachment between modern man and nature?

MF: I don’t dislike any “ecological” interpretation of my works, but I did not intend to denounce anything. What I care about is to take back what we had: a healthy relationship with what is around us. This is really a vital aspect for me. This act of “taking back”, however, has not to be confused with possession: it resembles more a feeling of connection with nature, the re-establishment of a deep bond with it, which could allow us to perceive ourselves again as part of Everything and to grow a new, universal kind of love that broadens to include everything that surrounds us. *Alberi*, indeed, is totally centered on the myth of Satriano di Lucania (editor’s note: a village in the Southern Italian region of Basilicata), whose deep meaning, if you let me oversimplify for a moment, is exactly what I was saying before: we have to perceive ourselves again as particular elements immersed in a peaceful Whole; we have to *become* the world again. In my video-installation I tried to express this fusion also from a technical point of view: the eye that looks doesn’t recognize the characters, and so it merges with the environment.

AL: How was it to work with Vuk (the dog of the movie) and with the goats? Did you “direct” them, or did you leave them absolutely free? I remember a very moving scene from *La Nuit américaine* by Truffaut, where the troupe was struggling with the whims of a kitten ...

MF: Vuk is a border collie from Milan, and with him there was Gianluca Villa, his excellent handler. I have to admit that he really performed a miracle: thanks to his incredible understanding of animals we managed to design a complex scene (editor’s note: the central long take, that captures a procession), based on the active interaction of the dog with the context, the landscape. Vuk was directed by Gianluca, without whom we wouldn’t have been able to shoot the scene, but actually the animal established a magical and touching intimacy with what surrounded him. If you are interested in this scene, you can find its making-of inside the French edition of the DVD, or maybe also in the last Italian edition. With respect to the goats, it was quite a long job. I had been living with the shepherds for a very long time, with the very aim of understanding how to film them, how to arrange the camera, where to put myself, what kind of framing to choose, etc. In any case, I realized that directing them was simply impossible, since they obviously did not distinguish the camera from any other object. This has two big consequences: on the one hand, it is fantastic because you get rid of the *mise-en-scene*; on the other hand, it is particularly stimulating because

you do not direct anymore: instead, you are directed by the animals. I had to conform to their rhythms, put myself on hold, as if in a sort of “hierarchical downgrading”: I was not in command of my work anymore, since I was lead by the animals.

AL: About in the middle of the movie (min. 41:00), at the beginning of a new narrative section, there is a brief scene that has an incredible visual impact: a goat that is giving birth, and then eats her own placenta. How did you feel while filming it?

MF: You know, *Le quattro volte* is the result of two years of fieldwork, and I saw dozens of births. As I was saying, I spent so much time with shepherds, and in the breeding season, twice a year, we went into the stables, where more than a hundred and twenty kids are born. Helped by the experts I learned to notice when a mother was about to give birth, so that we could prepare and wait. But actually we have been very lucky, we were looking for a white kid, which is pretty rare, but we found it at our first take. It was the result of a lot of background work, nothing was written or prepared. I accepted to be overwhelmed by the events, the environment, the animals.

AL: A key role in your works is always fulfilled by the invisible, and silence. What is your relationship with faith and religion? In the Bible (1 King, 19:12) God is described as a “light breeze” ... (editor’s note: expression taken from the Italian translations of the Bible, quite different from the English renditions, in which God is either “a still small voice” or “a gentle whisper”).

MF: I have to admit that recently I’ve not been thinking about religion, but it is something I had reflected upon for a long time, also during the shooting. I had an anticlerical and irreligious education: the small village where I lived hosted, during the war, one of the few communist upheavals of Southern Italy. My family has been historically linked to communism, and perceived the Church as an opponent. Religion was really seen as a futile “opium of the people”, and I often looked down on believers. Yet, as time went by, I came to meet faith, the invisible and the transcendent, along my artistic path. I wanted to face these complex issues, trying to abandon my juvenile prejudices. Even though I never got close to any religion, in my movies, there is a huge interest in and respect towards those who believe: my intent is to get in touch again with faith in its original sense, meant as the uplifting of the spirit towards transcendence. Also the “animism” I was talking about before, the fact of perceiving yourself as part of the world, is a faith, because it implies a belief, a deep and spontaneous acceptance. Having said that, I feel the necessity of tying spirituality to the earthly world, even though faith remains invisible and mysterious.

AL: In your movies you choose to restrain the use of words, the expression of logos, leaving a vast space for the whispering of the wind, the bleating of the goats and, more in general, for natural sounds. Why?

MF: In my enterprise of distancing from man, who has always been perceived in a central and dominant position over animals and nature, I had to work on the overall sensory impact, using both sight and hearing. Therefore, words could not have been the common thread, the leitmotif of *Le quattro volte*, since it is a “human, all too human” instrument, linked to intellect. In order to develop a truly deconstructing effect, I had to employ other dimensions and other sounds ... Despite being there, as in the first episode, the *logos* actually does not shape or even enrich the plot; it never takes a central role, since it is always in the background behind the whispering of the wind and all the other sounds. To do that, we have worked on the sound design in Berlin, with very skillful technicians; but we had to discuss for a very long time to convince them to remove the very few voices of the movie from the central speaker, and put, in their place, the sounds of animals and nature. Historically, in cinema, that is the place for human dialogues. The technicians have been resisting for a few weeks this sort of “forbidden” substitution, but it was important to me, since it meant to recognize for all the living beings the dignity to stay in the central speaker.

AL: I read that you are working on a new project. Can you please reveal something in advance?

MF: I’m working on *Alberi*, in which, as you know, I merged two rites: the vegetation costume typical of the carnival of Satriano di Lucania, and the ancient tradition of *romiti* (editor’s note: plural of *romita*, a folk word meaning “hermit”), solitary and silent men, that I actually transformed, as jointly agreed upon with the inhabitants of Satriano, in a walking wood. After this experiment, the population decided to make become the walking wood their new tradition: so a video installation gave birth to a real rite! An incredible and wonderful evolution. Having said that, here it is the answer: I’m developing *Alberi* to transform it in a full-length film.