3. HIGH AND LOW: POROSITY IN THE NEAPOLITAN ANTHOLOGY FILM *I VESUVIANI* (*THE VESUVIANS*, 1997) AND MARIO MARTONE'S EPISODE "THE ASCENT"

Daniel Winkler

Vesuvius and the Italian South

As a spectacular volcano oscillating between Heaven and Earth, city and sea, Vesuvius stands for the ambivalence of mountains as mythological places of the gods, long considered taboo or associated with danger for human life. As a landmark of Naples, it is a material sign of a pronounced local identity but, with its divergent climate and volcanic activity, it also symbolizes the material, social, and ecological precariousness of the Italian South:

> [M]ost travellers went no further than the environs of Naples, where Vesuvius loomed large. Just as Naples was a synecdoche for the south, so Vesuvius was a synecdoche for Naples and the south, underscoring the natural and picturesque connotations of both. (Moe 2002, 45)

From the eighteenth century onwards, Vesuvius increasingly became a place of longing because it made an extraordinary experience possible, because, as the paradigmatic volcano of the Italian South, it frequently erupted on the threshold of modernity. In this sense, it grew into a popular attraction and a stop on the Grand Tour and embodied the early modern topos of Naples as a "paradise inhabited by devils" (Moe 2002, 46ff.). For the travelers of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it became, as the cultural historian Nelson Moe points out, the epitome of an experience of foreignness

(Moe 2002, 55ff.). Hence, the volcano stands for a double, quasi-exotic longing for the Mediterranean South, imagined as passionate and chaotic, as well as for the intense physical and sensual experience of the natural volcanic spectacle.

As early as the seventeenth century, so-called tour guides, *ciceroni*, led visitors through the Phlegraean Fields, to various grottos and to the assumed tomb of Virgil in the north of Naples (Emslander 2012, 13ff.). The ascent of Vesuvius was soon embedded into the antiquity tourism around Pompeii, which was buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD and excavated in the eighteenth century (Richter 2007, 19ff., 71ff.). Thus, Vesuvius is closely interwoven with a double mythmaking of the Gulf of Naples. As the ascent of Vesuvius on the threshold of modernity became part of the itinerary of the Grand Tour, the view of Vesuvius turned into a topos of the film history of Naples with the first pictures of the Lumière brothers in 1898. Analogous to Ian Christie's observations on landscape painting, the landscape presented here is thoroughly inscribed with ambivalence, if only because the writings and films about the Gulf of Naples address the largely urban audience of Northern and Central Europe: "The represented countryside or rural landscape is thus already exotic, or picturesque or nostalgic for a majority of its audience, which has neither a philosophical nor proprietorial relationship to it" (Christie 2000, 168).

Starting from this cultural and historical background, this essay undertakes an exemplary counter-reading of the so-called New Neapolitan Cinema of the 1990s, which, as Roberta Tabanelli points out (2021, 96–97), is known for a specific grotesque realism that reformulates the (neo-)realist tradition on the basis of peripheral locations and shows everyday city life in a grotesquely distorted way. Against this backdrop, the relationship between mountain or topography and cinema will be examined in three steps: I begin with Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis's essay (1924) on Naples as a porous city and as a next step ask how far the "New Neapolitan Cinema" can be understood as specifically porous (Marlow-Mann 2011). If one looks from Benjamin and Lacis's theorization to the wider relationship between city, volcano, and cinema, a clear difference from canonical mediations of historical Alpine ascents in the style of the German mountain film emerges in both material and symbolic terms (Martin 2017, 30–36): The materially porous shape of the Gulf of Naples cannot be located in isolation through a simple aesthetic of altitude. Mountain and valley, or volcano and city, are already closely interwoven on a basic level through the genesis of tuff, which makes the perforated soil and is the main building material of Naples.

This is the starting point for an analysis of the anthology film *I vesuviani* (*The Vesuvians*, Antonietta De Lillo, Stefano Incerti, Antonio Capuano, Pappi Corsicato, Mario Martone, 1997), made by five representatives of the New Neapolitan Cinema and set in five different, mostly outlying areas of the

Gulf of Naples. The film explores the porous aesthetic of Naples by making spatial, artistic, and cultural references to heights and depths. *I vesuviani* is topographically characterized by a slow uphill movement that eventually leads to Mount Vesuvius in the final episode. At the same time, the five episodes are characterized by a dense network of references that oscillate more and more between lowbrow and highbrow as the film progresses, thus making the film also appear porous through a colorful mixture of these allusions to different genres, among other things (Hecken 2012, 11).[1]

Porous Naples

During the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Grand Tour, Naples became a popular destination for German philosophers and sociologists such as Theodor Adorno, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Walter Benjamin, and Asja Lacis. As the historian of science Christina Wessely outlines (2019), their observations on the Gulf of Naples are united in the concept of "Naples as the counter-place of a capitalist modernity."[2] Detached from southern Italian intellectual circles, the above writers developed a thesis in which Naples becomes the ideal of a different modernity, captured by Sohn-Rethel in 1926 in the "ideal of the broken," as well as by Benjamin and Lacis two years earlier in the concept of its "porous" nature. In different ways, they correlate the broken and porous with the eruptive materiality of the volcano or archaic-anarchic shape of Naples and a "triumph of man over nature" that is not yet complete (Wessely & Voller 2018). Naples thereby becomes the embodiment of a different modernity, insofar as it lacks the rationality that normally governed urban chaos and caused the firm division of space into spheres of rural and urban, public and private, which was the case in the majority of northern and central European cities.

In their conception of Naples, Benjamin and Lacis examine a whole series of topoi of a "belated," "chaotic-loud," and "barbaric" European South, which selectively reveals a hegemonic regime of a north-to-south gaze in the style of the Grand Tour travellers of the late eighteenth century (Verdicchio 2007, 260). At the same time, their concept of the porous refers concretely to the material conditions of the city: Naples is essentially built on or from tuff, which is a porous type of rock. Tuff is formed as a result of volcanic eruptions after magma that has been ejected from the crater cools into stone. Water vapor and various gases that escape from the rock create cavities and a porous structure that is particularly suitable as building material due to its malleability (Mittelmaier 2015, 80).

Benjamin and Lacis refer to the metaphorical transferability of the tuff structure onto the city as early as the 1920s, when they describe not only the architectural shape of Naples but also the everyday life of the city and the

mentality of the Neapolitans as archaic-anarchic, based on the characteristics of the tuff:

> As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its "thus and not otherwise". (Benjamin & Lacis 1979, 165–66)

In 2015, Martin Mittelmeier presented a differentiated reading of the career and aesthetics of the concept of the porous, noting that the porous in Benjamin and Lacis is ultimately transferred from the material origin of the term to the shape, architecture, and mentality of the city in terms of cultural anthropology. The so-called porosity serves as a characterization for the chaotic diversity of Naples:

> Nothing is fixed, everything is allowed to mix in improvised and surprising turns, [. . .] private and public life become confused. [. . .] The porous is highly contagious. Observed as a natural property, it spreads through the architecture to all the everyday phenomena observed by Benjamin and Lacis. (Mittelmeier 2015, 79–80)

Mittelmeier makes it clear that Benjamin and Lacis do not stop at an anthropological approach to the porous but even make their essay structurally porous in the sense of an archaic-anarchic politics of form: "The 'unforeseen constellation' is shaped by things made porous, torn from their contexts" (ibid., 82). In the sense of an equal arrangement of things, Benjamin and Lacis focus on a "circular structure" in which "everything is equidistant from the centre. As a constellation, these porosities encircle a porosity as their empty centre" (ibid., 82). "The colourful hustle and bustle of Naples" thus becomes "the stylistic ideal of one's own writing" (ibid., 82). The individual fragmentary observations on Neapolitan porosity—like the material structure of the tuff or volcano itself—are full of holes, are archaic-anarchic in structure, and oscillate between the heights and depths of Naples and its peripheries. This is all the more true in view of the transformation of the landscape through human intervention; in other words, its material and climatic vulnerability.

From Realist to Porous Cinema

If one understands the concept of the porous as a politics of form, it appears to be extremely inspirational for the positioning of the New Neapolitan Cinema

in the area of tension between scenic materiality and visual imagination. While the early cinema of Turin, Milan, and Rome mostly consisted of studio productions, from the 1910s onward many films were made in Naples that stage the above-mentioned longing for an archaic-anarchic, imagined Mediterranean South in the style of cinematic realism. Recourse to techniques such as shooting outdoors and using amateur performers, that is, capturing the topography of the Gulf and the everyday life of the city—not least with a view to Vesuvius and the tuff architecture—allows for imagining volcanic nature and theatrical city spectacle as a "Neapolitan Formula," a quasi-orientalist echo of the Grand Tour (Marlow-Mann 2011, 41 ff.). Gustavo Serena and Francesca Bertini's *Assunta Spina* (1915), at the intersection of realist cinema and diva film, can stand as a paradigm for this. Popular sound films of the postwar period, for example anthology films such as Vittorio De Sica's *L'oro di Napoli* (*The Gold of Naples*, 1954), fall back on codes established here, often in the form of "pink neorealism" that captures the everyday life of the "little people" in optimistic, regionalist comedies with star casts. Vesuvius is often positioned as the epitome of Naples's passionate mentality in the opening credits. This procedure is countered by the cinema of the 1960s, such as Francesco Rosi's *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands over the City*, 1963), as a political answer to the comedy genre with panoramic shots of the city's periphery afflicted by building speculation.

From the early 1990s onward, the New Neapolitan Cinema tended to break with an orientalist representation of Naples, although individual films from earlier decades had already done so (Marlow-Mann 2011, 71 ff.). With its focus on the fringes of the city, it oscillates between a realistic and grotesque aesthetic that can be understood as porous cinema in the spirit of Pasquale Verdicchio (2007, 269):

> The activities of contemporary cultural workers in Naples provide varying views into the strata of Neapolitan reality that are as layered and hardened as the lava flows of Vesuvius. But the ancient volcano is dormant and the analogy functions for the city itself.

An excellent example of this is the five-episode film *I vesuviani*, which has been identified as a kind of manifesto film for the "Neapolitan School" (Marlow-Mann 2011, 1–2). The cast was predominantly Neapolitan but also had national stars such as Anna Bonaiuto, Iaia Forte, Enzo Moscato, and Toni Servillo and was produced by the Neapolitan company Megaris in co-production with Rome's Mikado Film and the TV stations RAI and Tele+. Like several other films of the New Neapolitan Cinema it premiered at the Venice Film Festival and was also reviewed internationally; for example, in the entertainment magazine *Variety* (Rooney 1997). At the box-office, however,

the film (which reached less than 20,000 viewers, 27 per cent of them in Naples compared to 6.8 per cent in Milan) was rather a disappointment. Unlike Antonio Capuano's anthology film, *Polvere di Napoli* (*The Dust of Naples*, 1998), which was released the following year, reached a slightly larger audience, and referred directly to De Sica's successful film *The Gold of Naples* (1954), *I vesuviani* is still not commercially available on DVD. Nevertheless, the episodes are by five of the most productive Neapolitan filmmakers of the 1990s, namely Papi Corsicato, Antonietta De Lillo, Antonio Capuano, Stefano Incerti, and Mario Martone, who all had previously made feature-length films. Luca Bigazzi (camera) and Jacopo Quadri (editor), two of Italy's most successful contemporary camera operators and editors, were also members of the film crew (Marlow-Mann 2011, 34–38, 204).

With a view to the realist, grotesque remediation of the relationship between scenic materiality and visual imagination, *I vesuviani* is a prime example of porous cinema. The filmmakers present a re-reading of the imaginary space of the Gulf of Naples as an area of tension between high(brow) and low(brow) by drawing on the anthology film as a popular Neapolitan postwar genre. In doing so, the film not only deliberately omits a classical narrativization of Naples but also intentionally disappoints any audience expectations of a volcano film. Symbolically charged and easily recognizable places of the Gulf, such as Vesuvius, form a deliberate blank space in a porous aesthetic. In view of the famous passage from Benjamin and Lacis's Naples essay quoted above, *I vesuviani* can thus be seen as a film that explores the relationship between cinema and landscape, imagination and materiality in unforeseen ways, avoiding "the definitive and the lasting" in the sense of an archaic-anarchic aesthetic (Benjamin & Lacis 1979, 166). The filmmakers rely on a style that decenters and amalgamates instead of familiarizing topographies and generic homogeneity. In other words, in analogy to Mittelmeier's analysis of the essay, the film is shaped by "things torn out of their contexts," namely episodes which are divergent in style and content and which form an "empty middle" in an equivalent; in this case, episodic structure (Mittelmeier 2015, 82).

I vesuviani: Climbing Naples

I vesuviani blends high and popular culture references on the basis of five very different peripheries and zones in the Gulf of Naples. They range from the flat industrial suburbs in the northwest, such as Pozzuoli, to Mount Vesuvius near the southeast of the city. The film does not focus only on the inhabitants of Vesuvius, the *vesuviani*, but uses them as a *pars pro toto* for the inhabitants of the entire Gulf. It thus creates a framework that (re)mediates a Neapolitan regionalism through topographies, figures, and plot patterns, not least by accumulating national and global genre traditions and trends. This is already

clear from the extra-diegetic film music, which introduces the film with a loud drumming that is followed by high-pitched vocals and makes the Italian or Global South into a cultural reference. The *vesuviani* are therefore located extremely heterogeneously in the contrasting areas of plain and hill, city and country, sea and volcano.

The anthology film also combines high(brow) and low(brow) in a figurative and literal sense. In the first three episodes, porous elements and "mythical" protagonists take center stage in different ways. They range from the descendants of the Roman goddess of the hunt (D-)Iana, who appear in the first episode as a biker gang, to the transvestite Maruzzella, who performs in a porn cinema in Naples, and to the mad fisherman Telemaco, who lives on the outskirts of Pozzuoli. More characters appear in the last two episodes: some seemingly aristocratic figures who live in the hills of Naples and the city's mayor, who embarks on an ascent of Mount Vesuvius. While women or queer figures in flat or maritime topographies are initially in the foreground, high-placed male figures and corresponding topographies gradually move into the center. These cinematic landscapes are strongly characterized by a porous remediation of popular cinematic genres and canonical texts and authors. These include Mafia films, fishing films, Westerns, martial arts films, Derrida, Lenin, Pasolini, Dante, and ancient Mediterranean myths. The episodes of *I vesuviani* are thus infused with a cultural and topographical aesthetic of heights and heightenings within the framework of the New Neapolitan Cinema's characteristically grotesque realism. An essential role is played by a porous aesthetic in the areas of tension between high and popular culture on the one hand and by scenic and material forms of staging via references to the "volcanic" elements of earth, fire, and air; that is, the components of lava or tuff and water on the other.

Papi Corsicato opens the film with "The Lineage of Diana" (*La Stirpe di Iana*), a medial mix of Roman and ancient mythology around the goddess Diana, who is presented at the beginning of the film in a cloud of garish pink smoke, followed by a sequence introducing a female biker gang with reference to popular genres such as the Western, martial arts, and Mafia films. He thus emphasizes the ambivalence of celestial and terrestrial dimensions; that is, the elements of air and earth. Images of the flat hinterland and the sea focus on prairie-like landscapes with cacti rather than on the scenery of the Gulf of Naples. This backdrop becomes the stage for the aforementioned "divinely" legitimized female biker gang, who are all named after cleaning and washing agents such as Ajax, Atlas, Dixan, and Tide (some also refer to Greek mythology), and who successfully manage to take on a male Camorra clan (i.e. the Neapolitan Mafia). The vertical, transcendental dimension cited at the beginning is accentuated in the episode mainly through the aerial acrobatics and martial arts of the female gang, who seem to be as invincible as popular

super-heroines and, in the end, manage to beat the clan and take over their sanctuary (Verdicchio 2007, 271–72).

Antonietta De Lillo's "Maruzzella" is the only episode that is almost entirely located indoors, which, metaphorically speaking, leads the audience from the plains into the "deep layers" of the city and negotiates the elements of fire and water in the form of a subcultural, queer Naples. Here, the mythical times of the Roxy porn cinema are retrospectively recounted. It owes its success to its star transvestite Maruzzella, whose name refers to the pasta dish of *maruzze* (sea snails) he used to cook in the cinema, and who stands for the Vesuvian passion that keeps the cinema going in the "belly of Naples" but which is eventually lost. He falls in love with the only female spectator, Elvira, and thus turns the episode from a *travesti* into a love story. A wedding scene as a happy ending, underlined on the soundtrack by a 1960s twist, shifts the film atmospherically and spatially toward the sea (Tabanelli 2012, 98–99). Vesuvius as a symbol of Neapolitan passion does not form a backdrop but rather a clearly defined empty space. The emphasis of the finale is placed on the transformation of the figures, who instead of looking at Vesuvius, gaze into a void.

Antonio Capuano's "Sofialorèn" makes porous Naples its material point of departure for the elements of earth, air, and water. Set on a hill above the sea in the Rione Terra of Pozzuoli, as the center of the volcanic Phlegraean Fields known for fumaroles (ejections of sulphurous gases) and bradyseism (the gradual rising and sinking of the ground), the episode is framed by underwater footage (Marlow-Mann 2011, 165). The action takes place partly in an abandoned and largely dilapidated palace, built on and made of tuff, more specifically, in the blue room of the protagonist Telemaco, and partly in and by the sea. Capuano (re)mediates the southern Italian fisherman's film against the backdrop of ancient mythology in a grotesque way. The name of the dishevelled protagonist Telemaco refers to Odysseus's son; his pet, an octopus named Sofialoren, refers to the famous Neapolitan film star from Pozzuoli. Symbolizing Telemaco's sexual desire, the octopus transforms into a princess at night and, at the end of the episode, is greedily devoured by the characters in an aberrant *Grande bouffe* (Marco Ferreri, 1973), and the original myth is thus symbolically consumed (Tabanelli 2021, 97–99).

The last two episodes largely dispense with such grotesque staging patterns. They link the scenic and material staging of the porous with a twofold aesthetic of height. The elements of earth and air are loaded with canonical genre references in the form of plot episodes that lead to the heights of the city and the Gulf. Stefano Incerti's "The Devil in the Bottle" ("Il diavolo nella bottiglia"), inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Bottle Imp*, links the plains and heights of the city with fairytale-Faustian as well as social-realist references by examining a socio-topographical positioning of Naples between street and palace. The focus is on a homeless man who washes car windows to

survive and on the (pseudo) aristocratic residents of high-rises, located in the hills of the city as symbols of a well-off milieu. The connecting link between the topographical extremes is the bottle that gives the episode its title, which still contains two wishes and, for a short time, opens up undreamed-of spaces of action for the protagonist. As in "Maruzzella," the episode concludes with a sea scene in which the protagonist sets off in a boat and Vesuvius becomes visible in the background. This is the transition to Mario Martone's episode "The Ascent" (*La salita*).

La salita: Ascent and Descent

The last episode continues the upward movement in both a cultural and topographical sense and also forms the medial counterpart to the beginning of the film, namely Papi Corsicato's grotesque Western, biker, martial arts, mafia-movie parody. Of all the episodes of *I vesuviani*, "The Ascent" is the one that is most strikingly different, as Martone focuses entirely on the ascent of Mount Vesuvius by the mayor of Naples, played by Neapolitan actor Toni Servillo. Clearly framed in a more minimalist and realist way than the other episodes, the sequence gradually proves to be a "mountain-ridge-like" reflection on the Italian left. "The Ascent" thus distances itself from the references to popular culture in the preceding episodes; the relationship between mountain and cinema is predominantly negotiated by means of canonical intermedial references and is thus particularly porously framed by the strong contrast.

As in many films that stage mountain climbs, "The Ascent" is framed in terms of cultural history. Only here, the film does not refer to any historical first ascent, as is the case in Philipp Stölzl's *Nordwand* (*North Face*, 2008), which is about the first attempt to climb the north face of the Eiger. In the person of the mayor of Naples, a politician takes center stage, who can stand for the political awakening in the Italy of the 1990s after the investigations of corruption surrounding *Tangentopoli* and *Mani pulite*, which shook Italy's political party landscape. An old woman calls to the mayor at the beginning of the episode, addressing him as "Tonino," which is a specific reference to the long-time communist and eventually socialist politician Antonio Bassolino. Bassolino was mayor of Naples from 1993 to 2000 and embodied not only the cultural revival of the city and an urban re-branding in the sense of a "Neapolitan renaissance" but also, at least from the viewpoint of the left-wing cultural scene, big promises that were made but never delivered (Marlow-Mann 2011, 165–66).

While in the first episode Papi Corsicato takes up the vertical, transcendental dimension in references to mythology or martial arts films, the last episode is followed by an entirely physical upward movement of the protagonist. Vesuvius is only brought into view as an exception. Instead of spectacular

views of the volcano, we have shots dominate that focus on the figure's immediate local surroundings: scrub and lava rock or sections of the volcano that oscillate between green zones and barrenness. When we see a wider shot of the landscape, the city of Naples lying at the foot of the volcano usually comes into the frame. The protagonist repeatedly emphasizes the changes in the city to the figures he meets on his path (Tabanelli 2011, 62). The self-reflexive, intensive experience of nature and the passionate ascent and self-exaltation historically associated with Mount Vesuvius and the Grand Tour are literally counteracted by Mario Martone. This becomes apparent in a realist, grotesque remediation already present in the first few shots, when the smartly dressed, cigarette-puffing mayor in a trench coat, suit, and Italian sash walks up the paved first stretch to Vesuvius. He is seen from the perspective of a coach of Japanese tourists, where the tour guide presents the mayor as a tourist attraction, in analogy to the increasing cult of personality in Italian politics, so that the tourists eagerly wave to him (Marlow-Mann 2011, 167).

After this, the focus is on the mayor's ascent of Mount Vesuvius. Instead of tourists, he encounters a number of people from Naples on his way through the undergrowth and tuff. To them he repeatedly stresses the cultural upswing of the ill-reputed Naples thanks to his urban policy. If they react at all to the self-praise of the increasingly insecure mayor, they do so in a critical manner. In addition to figures from everyday life in Southern Italy, including a policeman, a priest, and the old Don Giulio with his donkey, the film mainly shows people from Neapolitan cultural life who either want to leave the city, have returned to Naples after a long absence, or have already passed on to the afterlife. The mayor encounters, among others, a theater actress, who, out of frustration with local working conditions, emigrated to Australia for an extended period, where she regained her creativity and spirituality, and, from a distance, a man with a wheelbarrow full of books, whom the mayor chases through the undergrowth. Finally, he finds only the fallen books, among them Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917), a textbook of socialist state politics with a focus on the tasks of the proletariat, and Derrida's *Marx's Ghosts* (1993), an analysis of the legacy of Marxism listing the tasks of a "new international" in times of neoliberal and postnational states. This is followed by an encounter with a young singer, who wants to cancel his concert contract with the city and go to Palermo to be with his girlfriend.

At the end, the grotesque realism of the film, i.e. the dreamlike dimension of the mayor's ascent, becomes fully apparent, as Vesuvius here becomes a personal *purgatorio*, i.e. mountain of purification: Echoing Dante also in language, he meets the elegantly dressed communist *L'Unità* journalist Francesca Spada, who committed suicide and who denounces the patriarchal and petty-bourgeois mentalities in the party (Marlow-Mann 2011, 167). In other words, as the film progresses, the mayor is more and more confronted with his past,

not least with his transformation from communist intellectual to pragmatic reformist mayor. Instead of a sublime contemplation and determined ascent of the volcano, "The Ascent" stages an increasingly unbalanced figure, who realizes his "betrayal" of his own political principles.

The mayor walks down the path with a priest, who seems to be running away from him, sits down, and lights a cigarette. Suddenly a voice sounds from off-screen and a raven becomes visible on the ridge; this is the moment when it becomes clear that the parallelization of ascent and descent is presented as a remediation of Pasolini's *Uccellacci e uccellini* (*The Hawks and the Sparrows*, 1966). Like the original, starring the Neapolitan actor Totò, "The Ascent" deals with the failure of the social dialogue between Marxism and Christianity that aimed at overcoming capitalism in favor of a more just society without poverty. To this end, Martone revisits Pasolini's talking raven, which has been read as an echo of Palmiro Togliatti, the party leader and representative of a Christian Marxist path to communism, who died in 1964 (di Stefano 2015, 225). It comes flying into the frame while the melody of the partisan song *Fischia il vento* ("The Wind Whistles", 1943)[3] is heard on the soundtrack, which contrasts the marchers' broken shoes with the "red spring/where rises the sun of the future." As with Pasolini, the raven embodies the voice of reason that is critical of capitalism, interjecting the buzzwords "free market," "privatization," and the "consumption of cultural tourism" in the presence of the increasingly annoyed mayor and tracing his career to the "last King of Naples" in a sarcastic tone: "You have to believe in miracles. You too are a miracle: Always a communist, you now govern by accepting the values of a capitalist society. [. . .] The monarchs and the clergy have been replaced by the power of television"[4] (in Tabanelli 2011, 34).

Here the mayor's physical ascent becomes clearly intelligible as the political and moral descent of a career marked by compromises and contradictions. But if the raven in Pasolini is a strict ideologue, here at least it hints at a dialogue between the left-wing government and the left-wing grassroots in Bassolino's sense when it proposes accompanying him ("Do you want us to walk a little road together?"). This suggests that the mayor's ascent to the summit in office attire symbolically traces a path of repentance (Verdicchio 2007, 276), which is particularly evident in a previous scene of the ascent, when the mayor stumbles and catches sight of a group of people who live below in the tuff caves of Vesuvius. This encounter with card-playing cave-dwellers contrasts with all other encounters in a topographical, social, and linguistic sense. Emblematic of the left's unfulfilled political promises, the scene foregrounds the failures of the mayor's career as the residents mention the gas pipe explosion in the northern suburb of Secondigliano in January 1996 that killed eleven people, with one body never recovered from the rubble (Bini 2018, 561). When he finally hands down a packet of cigarettes to the people in the cave, the gesture becomes a

symbolic compensation for not having eliminated the housing shortage or carried out the necessary redevelopment measures to prevent the sacrifice of human lives.

If Martone's analogy of ascent and descent at first seems to deal with a certain generation of the political left and its disappointments, it is striking that many of the mayor's encounters are with children and animals and that the materiality and transformation of the volcano and of himself become more important. More clearly than in the other episodes, the dimension of the Anthropocene becomes visible when, in the course of the ascent, the mayor slips more often, is out of breath, increasingly soils his office clothes, and finally removes his Italian sash. The previous scene with those trapped in the caves can also be read in analogy to volcanic eruptions such as the historical burial of Naples or Pompeii. The raven's prophetic monologue, wrapped in poetic language about Vesuvius, which will one day erupt and flood the surrounding area like the sea, also points in this direction. Above all, the increasing blurring of boundaries between city and volcano is shown when, in one scene, a building site on Vesuvius finally comes into the mayor's view, where clearly child labor is employed. When he asks what they are doing there, he gets no answer. This can figuratively stand for the fact that the mayor has not only lost his political overview but also his moral compass.

The external transformation of the mountain and the protagonist can be read in Marxist ecocritical terms in analogy to the concept of the porous: As the vulnerability of the mountain becomes a symbol of political and moral failure, the mayor's ascent turns into a porous landscape of his soul. The people and animals the mayor encounters, starting with Don Giulio and his donkey, all either move slowly, or stand completely still, or even stand as if they were part of Vesuvius itself. As a sign of deceleration, they seem to be an ecocritical answer to the mass tourism around Vesuvius cited at the beginning, but also to the ambition of the mayor, who is completely committed to the principles of modernization and acceleration. Only the ever-increasing air pressure and the increasingly detached surroundings seem to allow the mayor to take a critically distanced view of his (actions in) Naples.

In their analogy of tuff soil, urban architecture, and mentality, Benjamin and Lacis emphasize that the Neapolitans preserve "[i]n everything […] the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations" and that in Naples "[t]he definitive is avoided" in favor of the porous (1979, 166); this is especially true for this last episode of *I vesuviani*. If Pasolini's *Uccellacci e uccellini* ends with a reference to the film's beginning—that is, a circular structure—Martone's abrupt ending underscores the absence of any meaning. The mayor remains alone and sits down on a stone, makes a quick grab for Lenin's *State and Revolution*, which he soon puts back into his coat pocket, and asks into the void: "But what am I supposed to be doing here?" ("*Ma che*

devo fare qua?"). Thus the last episode closes far from any summit heroics or hope for a change in social conditions, even in ecocritical terms.[5]

The ascending mayor's perception of Vesuvius, a volcano more subject to material and climatic change than other mountains, is analogous to historical accounts of volcano ascents. For example, Alexander von Humboldt already described that, at volcanic heights, self-perception becomes porous. In the face of distortion and confusion, heat and cold, rock and lava, above and below can no longer be clearly distinguished (Schaumann 2020, 56–59). In keeping with the merging of the elements of earth, rock, and air in tuff, that is, with the crater-like structure of the volcano, the protagonist's path up Vesuvius has no clear end point. Instead of a fixed center or summit, the volcano has a hole; in other words, a void. In this way, the last episode reflects the porous, formal language of the grotesque, realist film *I vesuviani*. Episodic in structure, the plot ultimately revolves around an empty center. The intense interaction of body and consciousness (essentially a transformative power) that is normally attributed to the mountain film is here at best a profound perplexity. Thus, the cult of altitude appears most powerfully as a postmodern worldly experience, far from the one that transcends everyday life, which is reflected in the general absence of panoramic shots, denying the audience any sweeping views into the distance.

Notes

1. Hecken (2012, 12) notes that "the terms *high* and *low* in the field of art and culture are often directed at works of certain genres, which are generally rated high in one case and low in the other. The aesthetic and/or political, moral criteria that are applied are mostly seen as fulfilled or disappointed by certain classes, so that sociological classifications and social assessments are also connected with the classification *high/low*."
2. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
3. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/music/lyrics/it/fischia-il-vento.htm.
4. "Bisogna credere ai miracoli. Anche tu sei un miracolo: sempre stato comunista, adesso governi accettando i valori di una società capitalista. (. . .) Ai monarchi e al clero si è sostituito il potere della televisione."
5. At the same time, the increasingly grotesque ascent can, in the sense of Roberta Tabanelli, stand paradigmatically for a porous cinema: "Like the asphyxiated and labyrinthine city that Benjamin and Lacis portrayed, so is Martone's Naples, made up of nooks and crannies, narrow alleys and doorways, fragmented among small squares, stairways, and hallways of buildings, often blocked by grates, gates, railings, and scaffolding, ready to disappear in every shot, an absolute theater where there are no longer any distinctions between inside and outside, public and private." ("Come la città asfittica e labirintica che hanno ritratto Benjamin e Lacis, così è la Napoli di Martone, fatta di angoli e crepe, vicoli angusti e portoni, frammentata tra piazzette, scale, androni di palazzi, spesso bloccata da grate, cancelli, ringhiere, impalcature, pronta a sparire ad ogni inquadratura, teatro-assoluto dove non ci sono più distinzioni tra dentro e fuori, pubblico e privato." Tabanelli 2011, 54).

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter and Asja Lacis. "Naples." Translated by E. Jephcott. In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by W. Benjamin and P. Demetz, 163–73. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.

Bini, Daniela. "Neapolitan Leopardi and the Naples of Mario Martone." *Forum italicum* 52 no. 2 (2018): 552–65.

Capuano, Antonio, dir. *I vesuviani*. Segment "Sofialorèn." Megaris, 1997.

Capuano, Antonio, dir. *Polvere di Napoli*. A.M.A. Film, 1998.

Christie, Ian. "Landscape and 'Location': Reading Filmic Space Historically." *Rethinking History* 4, no. 2 (2000): 165–74.

Corsicato, Pappi, dir. *I vesuviani*. Segment "La stirpe di Iana." Megaris, 1997.

De Lillo, Antonietta, dir. *I vesuviani*. Segment "Maruzzella." Megaris, 1997.

De Sica, Vittorio, dir. *The Gold of Naples*. Carlo Ponti Cinematografica, 1954.

di Stefano, Giovanni. "Pier Paolo Pasolini: Uccellacci e uccellini/Große Vögel, kleine Vögel (1966)."In *Italienische Filme des 20. Jahrhunderts in Einzeldarstellungen*, edited by G. di Stefano and A. Grewe, 215–31. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2015.

Emslander, Fritz. "'… eine der so vielen Fallen, in die unerfahrene Reisende gehen': Italiens Ciceroni." In *Dreckige Laken: Die Kehrseite der Grand Tour*, edited by J. Imorde and E. Wegerhoff, 13–29. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2012.

Hecken, Thomas. "Bestimmungsgrößen von high und low." In *"High" und "low": Zur Interferenz von Hoch- und Populärkultur in der Gegenwartsliteratur*, edited by T. Wegmann and N.C. Wolf, 11–25. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.

Incerti, Stefano, dir. *I vesuviani*. Segment "Il diavolo in bottiglia." Megaris, 1997.

Marlow-Mann, Alex. *The New Neapolitan Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Martin, Silke. *Berg und Film: Kultur und Ästhetik von Höhenlandschaften im deutschsprachigen Film der Gegenwart*. Marburg: Schüren, 2017.

Martone, Mario, dir. *I vesuviani*. Segment "La salita." Megaris, 1997.

Mittelmaier, Martin. "Asja Lacis in Neapel: Wie das Konzept der Porosität den Stil der Texte Walter Benjamins und Theodor W. Adornos beeinflusst." *Kulturas Krustpunkti* 8 (2015): 79–85.

Moe, Nelson. *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Pasolini, Pier Paolo, dir. *Uccellacci e uccellini*. Arco Film, 1966.

Richter, Dieter. *Der Vesuv: Geschichte eines Berges*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2007.

Rooney, David. "The Vesuvians. Iana's Descendants." Variety. https://variety.com/1997/film/reviews/the-vesuvians-2-1200452401, November 30, 1997.

Rosi, Francesco, dir. *Le mani sulla città*. Galatea Film, 1963.

Schaumann, Caroline. *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.

Serena, Gustavo and Francesca Bertini, dir. *Assunta Spina*. Caesar Film, 1915.

Stölzl, Philipp, dir. *Nordwand*. Dor Film-West Produktionsgesellschaft, 2008.

Tabanelli, Roberta. *I "pori" di Napoli: Il cinema di Mario Martone, Antonio Capuano e Pappi Corsicato*, Ravenna: Longo, 2011.

Tabanelli, Roberta. "An Unstable Body: The Cinema of Antonietta De Lillo." *Studies in European Cinema* 8, no. 2 (2012): 89–100.

Tabanelli, Roberta. "Das Groteske im Kino von Antonio Capuano." *Zibaldone: Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart* 72 (2021): 95–105.

Verdicchio, Pasquale. "'O Cuorp' 'e Napule: Naples and the Cinematographic Body of Culture." In *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, edited by L.E. Ruberto and K.M. Wilson, 259–89. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007.

Wessely, Christina and Christian Voller. "Neapolitanische Moderne: Der 'letzte Marxist' Alfred Sohn-Rethel besuchte in den zwanziger Jahren Neapel und lernte dort einen ehrfurchtslosen Gebrauch von Technik kennen". jungle.world. https://jungle.world/artikel/2018/44/neapolitanische-moderne, November 1, 2018.
Wessely, Christina. "Neapel und die 'poröse' Moderne." ORF: https://science.orf.at/v2/stories/2958140, January 14, 2019.