

The myth of Mount Etna: between literature and cinematography*

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1. Mount Etna and its myth

The history of Mount Etna is marked by a number of great natural events. This extraordinary active volcano is characterised by a unique environment. Its beauty lies in its landscape, as well as the magnificence of its eruptions. Mount Etna has more than a thousand years of culture. As a matter of fact, this mountain has a history of creation but also of destruction. Etna has a capricious nature. It has been willing to destroy the work of human generations by means of earthquakes or under the flow of lava.

The volcano has erupted millions of cubic metres of magma, due to its periods of explosive and effusive activity, and this has transformed its morphology in the course of the centuries. In particular new cones have been created on the south eastern side of its summit, and lots of casts have been incorporated in the “Bove” Valley.

Etna represents an island within the island of Sicily. It shows a constantly different environment characterized by strong contrasts. On Mount Etna the soil called “sciare” with rich woods and crops, is mixed

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with the “casudde” characterized by old villas surrounded by lush gardens.

This Mountain has been a reference point for sailors over the ages. From this standpoint, Etna can be considered the symbol of the Mediterranean. The volcano is as unpredictable and passionate as the people living in the Mediterranean (Sanfilippo, 1987; Busacca, 2000; Cirelli, 2002).

Etna has created a world of its own with its history, legends, laws and rhythms. The majesty of its size and the grandeur of its eruptive activity, have fascinated the Sicilians and stimulated the curiosity and imagination of travellers. Several poets have been inspired and have preserved the myth of “The Lord of earth, fire and power.”

Etna is a black flaming giant that encompasses our origins and marks our destiny. It is a theatre of myth and art. The volcano is a holy place where strong perceptions, difficult to describe, are expressed. Etna was defined by Pindar (470 Bc) as “the pillar of heaven” owing to its grandeur. It is primarily a mythical and mysterious place. It belongs more to the mind and the soul than to the body. The spectacular mountain we can admire today is a creation that summarises the work done, over millennia, by writers, painters, landscape engravers, travellers and more recently by filmmakers and tourists in search of strong emotions. There are numerous legends that describe Etna as the symbol of the supernatural and the home of mythical creatures, gigantic monsters, nymphs, demons, witches, fairies and heroes (Agati, 1987).

Historically, the perception of this natural beauty has both fascinated and terrified. While Homer enhances the fertility of its soil, “Here are raised skyward and the extensive forest growing rosy pomegranate and the apple and the pear tree and the tree of Pallas powerful, it does not harm the northern hemisphere winter or summer hot, but, as the placid zephyrs blowing breezes, year round tree abundant fruit, and apples on the pommel recent age than before, grape new cluster appears next to the already sweet” (Bembo, 1981), Virgil emblematically describes Etna during one of its eruptions “... but with fearsome ruins spear the sky thundering

Etna and smoke and pitch, balls of flame and sparks rising almost touching the stars, and sometimes the boulders, uprooted from the bowels of the mountains, erupting scale, turns in the air and liquefied rocks with a roar of thunder, shaking all the deepest abyss ... all Trinacria clattering shakes of hot clouds and the sky is covered” (Virgilio, Eneide, Book III).

The rich iconography is often imaginative, but also systematic and detailed. It is the result of the stories and descriptions collected by many travellers, often foreigners, who ventured to the steep paths leading to the crater. Their difficulties, anxieties, and wonder, are described in a number of travel accounts. Several Etnean places have been established and made known through the engravings enclosed. In the eighteenth century, Antonio Mongitore wrote that Etna “ made pens, poets minds, historians and philosophers tired”.

Spallanzani, Dolomieu, Houel, Goethe, Saint-Non and Brydon are only a few of many who have described the landscape, resting places (the hundred horses chestnut tree, the goat cave, the dove cave...) the means of transport and the local guides. These artists/writers have recorded both the events and the places we can only find in the engravers work.

The oldest famous mountaineer was, according to Augustan history, the Emperor Hadrian. In 125 AD, he visited the crater “in order to admire the birth of the sun characterized by such a variety of colours almost like a rainbow”. However Strabone used records of explorers (the “Anabantes”) in order to depict the “Geography” of Etna.

In the fifteenth century we can remember Peter Bembo among the ancient writers who described his ascent to the crater in “De Aetna”.

In the following century the historian Tommaso Fazello was impressed by the volcano and he wrote “why doesn't it let the fire be extinguished by the snow or the snow be dissolved by the fire”.

Filoteo Amodei (1591) begins his book *Aetna* by writing *Topographia* “It's really a horrible vision that such a wonder the one which gives Etna with its snow and red of fire that is felt by the earthquakes that shake the whole island”. This work is admirable considering its scientific approach in an

attempt to eliminate the supernatural interpretation of the volcano.

Numerous travellers' journals report that explorers were sometimes discouraged in their effort to climb the crater. Most of them grasp the opportunity to describe the volcano with admiration. The Englishman George Sandys, in the first decade of the sixteenth century, as well as the Dominican monk Jean Baptiste Labat (1711) were mystified by "the apocalyptic fire and flames escaping from the crater". The Prussian Baron Johan Herman Riedesel (1767) went up to the crater, and wrote "I was so astonished when I saw myself on the edge of this immense chasm, that I found it too big to be able to go around the mouth. I threw some stones in this pit, but not the slightest sound reached the ears". The Scottish Patrick Brydone (1770) observing the scene inside the crater, wrote: "rivers of fire erupt and throw out hot stones with a roar that shakes the whole island".

The Danish Friedrich Munter (1776) wrote that "after satisfying his eye and soul with an unforgettable view, as could not be seen elsewhere in the world" he was forced "to leave the beautiful mountain... because the sun was close to sunset". In spring 1787 Goethe was more cautious ending his visit in the small side craters called "Monti Rossi", the red mountains. He wished to see the summit of Etna "snow-covered and slightly smoking", but he could not reach the top of the volcano. The "known traveller" Johann Gottfried Seume was keen on going to the crater and managed to reach it. In 1801 he reported his feelings in a detailed guide book. He arrived first "at the extreme edge of the immense chasm within the crater". He did not resist the temptation of throwing a rock into the abyss, arousing the concern of the guides book, who advised him "not to wake the devils who are at the bottom of the cave" (Salmeri, 1997).

Since the nineteenth century there has been a fearless perception of this mountain. As well as greater attention to the ethnic territory in its complexity. In 1827, Tocqueville in his impressions of travel wrote "We leave the lava soon, and then we are left without the possibility to go on in the middle of an enchanted landscape that will surprise you everywhere, but even more in Sicily. It is but a succession of orchards intermixed with

huts and pretty villages, there is no wasted space, everywhere an air of prosperity and abundance”.

The 19th century novelists who visited mount Etna focused their attention on the landscape and on the emotions that arose in the local people. Recounting his journey along the circumetnea railway, Edmondo De Amicis describes the arca with its 38 villages as “an earthly land, broken here and there by areas of hell”.

Giovanni Verga used the special atmosphere of Mount Etna in his novel “Storia di una Capinera”. In 1995 “Tuzet wrote that Etna is neither classical nor romantic: it is contemporary in the world: whoever has a sense of mystery- whether a Greek, Latin, Christian, “philosopher”- will be subjugated by Etna”. The vulcanologist Haroun Tazieff mystified Etna by saying that “it seems that Etna has been in continuous activity for millennia”. Among the writers who described Etna in the second half of the 1900s, Vitaliano Brancati and Ercole Patti must be mentioned after experiencing an eruption. Leonardo Sciascia wrote that “with less fear people who do not live in that area”, can imagine such a familiar volcano to be like a “huge pet, a cat that quietly sleeps and occasionally wakes up, yawns, stretches slowly and lazily, with a careless paw, now covers a valley, now another, deleting villages, vineyards and gardens” (Sciascia, 1981).

Even cinematography has shown the magnificent scenery of this active volcano. Etna has several meanings and facet and directors have been able to turn them to fit the needs of narrative films. Mount Etna has proved to be the right place to the creation of fables and adventure. It was contemporary or historical. Several film directors, including Zeffirelli, Visconti, Pasolini and Epstein, have grasped the deep mysteries and the most recondite suggestions of the myth. (Gesù, 1997).

2. Etna landscape inspires cinematographic production

Landscape is the most essential element in the history of Italian cinematography. Theoretically, each film takes its natural “humus” from the landscape. The movie should be planned as an experience and not as an

independent object. The plot can be developed looking at the relationship between the characters and the place where they live. Moreover, in their background there is another point of view, that is the spectator's. The landscape, presented in the film, is often a huge place where the characters try laboriously not to get lost.

The study of such extensive spaces led to the birth and the spread, during the 20th century, of the neo-realistic cinema. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, several landscapes were filmed by directors and shown on the big screen. The camera could move freely in the immense space, showing the viewer an unknown world.

During this period even experts in geography began to study the landscape through cinematography. In the early nineties, geographers started making a careful examination of some Italian films.

They noticed that a degradation of the environment and the landscape had occurred, caused by hectic and chaotic urbanization. These films recorded the social life and the crisis that took place in specific Etnean areas (Lanfranco, 2002). For those experts who believed that film is an open museum, the Sicilian landscape was a myth. The vast natural backgrounds were amazing, in particular the coast of Catania characterized by the high cliffs, or the coast of Messina, with both small and large urban settlements. Sicily was a famous movie set thanks to its fantastic heritage mixing myths and legends.

Cinematography has described and preserved the unique geographical scenery of Mount Etna and of the city of Catania, a natural set for films thanks to the streets, the squares, the sea and Etna. Filmmakers express, through their films, the significance of living under the highest European active volcano. The landscapes help the cinema to find a perfect set for the stories and the human events which happened in Sicily. The environment is an active element of the action. The Etnean landscape, with its lava flows, eruptions, forests and chestnuts is an actor in itself.

To sum up the cinema depicted mount Etna and its extraordinary natural setting, modifying it according to the various plots. The images

filmed in the territory of Etna highlighted the scenic importance of the volcano as a natural source of irresistible attraction. Cinematography has boosted public awareness of the beauty of the foothill area around Catania. The movie art in Sicily and in particular in the Catania's area, has valued the foothill land both from a naturalistic and historical point of view. This art, combined with the Sicilian cultural heritage has today allowed the creation of film tourist itineraries in the Etnean province.

3. *Films made on Etna*

The environment, the place, the set location have always represented one of the essential ingredients for a successful film. Great artists have made the environment one of the cornerstones of their style (La Magna, 2002, pp. 9-65). The success of a movie lies in the genius of its directors, the charm of the actors but also in the place where it is filmed. In many films, the places are actors themselves. The landscape is something that pre-exists, survives and goes beyond the film. The cinema has used Etna as a location, changing its extraordinary natural beauty according to the film plot. The sets and tv pictures filmed in the territory of Etna highlight the importance of Etna as a natural and landscape element of irresistible attraction. Cinematography has helped to make public viewers more aware of the fascinating aspects of the foothill area creating new perceptions.

Catania¹ and its province have been selected by many Italian and foreign filmmakers. Catania developed many innovations that interested and improved the city. In particular, in 1890 the opening of the Massimo Bellini Theatre inspired a lot of writers including De Felice, Martoglio, Verga, Capuana, De Roberto and Rapisardi.

The early form of film-making used Etna to film the spectacular scenery of the Etnean landscape, its steaming plume, its eruptions and its

1. The advent of cinematography in Catania took place in 1905 with the opening of the first cinema, the Cine Teatro Sangiorgi. Later, in 1907, there was a considerable growth in the number of cinemas throughout the city so much so that mount Etna had the merit of attracting the middle class and above all many intellectuals and artists.

snowy peaks. These great natural events have fascinated and intrigued the spectators who have crowded the cinema since then. “The art of silence was around the landscape, the railway stations, the ports, the urban traffic, the walking along the beach, the snowy peaks of the volcanos” (Gesù, 2005, p. 15). From 1909 to 1913, many filmmakers began to show a particular interest in the activities of the largest volcano in Europe. Between 1914 and 1916, “Etna Film” was the first film company of amongst the foremost national film production houses². “It was based in the outskirts of the city, between the green of the countryside and the black of the lava, in the district of Cibali and connected to the centre through a modern and fast tramway” (Genovese-Gesù, 1995, p. 86).

The first shots made on the crater of Etna were made by the operator Maggiorino Zoppis. He was an experienced operator of Etna Film, and was sent to film “L'eruzione dell'Etna”, thus helping the spectacular volcanic eruptions to be spread throughout the world; the first films produced by the film company were: “La danza del diavolo”, “L'appuntamento” and “La sfinge dello Ionio”. In the early twentieth century, the pioneer of silent film in Sicily was the theatre company made up of the Catanese actors Giovanni Grasso, Virginia Balistreri, Giacinto Pezzana and Totò Majorana. Writers such as Giovanni Verga and Nino Martoglio, made a number of medium and short films. In 1910 “Cavalleria Rusticana” was directed by Ugo Falena. This work brought Sicily to the forefront of cinematic representation. In 1913, Nino Martoglio directed “Il salto nel buio”, a silent film set on the Etna slopes in the resort of Torre del Grifo. In the 1930s, the theatre group of Angelo Musco gave birth to the first feature films in Sicily. He made the sharp transition from the dialect theatre to the Sicilian cinema. “La terra trema” by Visconti, the post-war neo-realistic film, deserves special attention. This film recreates a superb

2. Other film companies based in Catania were: Sicula Film, Film Katana, Morgan (founded by Nino Martoglio and Roberto Danesi) and Juventus Film, founded in 1929 by Ugo Saitta who made many documentaries on folk-anthropological character, dedicated to Saint Agatha and the Sicilian puppets.

interpretation of the novel "I Malavoglia" written by Verga. Visconti had already produced "Osessione" when depicted the Sicily narrated by Verga. The film director, presented in 1948 a great masterpiece of Italian cinematography located entirely in Acitrezza and Acicastello.

Another work of Verga's that was turned into a film was the short story, "Storia di una capinera", directed by Giuseppe Sterni in 1917. The second interpretation was made in 1943, by Gennaro Righelli in Bronte. This film was interpreted by Martina Berti and Claudio Gora. The film which is best known to the public, is "Storia di una capinera", brought to the big screen by the director Franco Zeffirelli. "La Lupa" filmed in the 1950s by the director Alberto Lattuada is another famous work of Verga's. The director did not use the background landscape of Sicily to tell the passion between the two characters, but he transported that tragic and passionate Sicilian atmosphere to Matera. However, this city was unable to give the same atmosphere requested by Verga. The writer Pierpaolo Pasolini was the first who described the natural richness and the myths of Etna.

The volcano has a lunar and mysterious landscape of an extreme scenic beauty. The landscapes presented by Pasolini in some of his films, the most famous of his prestigious career. Etna was to become Pasolini's favourite place, allowing his characters to move in harmonious and natural way. In 1964 Pasolini filmed "Il Vangelo secondo Matteo", on the slopes of Etna, recreating the story of the temptations of Christ in the desert. The second film shot on Mount Etna was "Teorema", which tells the story of a bourgeois man who loves consumerism. In the sixties, Sicily was "invaded" by extremely famous film productions, including biblical masterpieces. "Etna becomes the privileged place which draws stories from the Old and New Testament", among which we include: "Sodoma e Gomorra", "Barabba" and "La Bibbia" (Gesù, 2005, pp. 45-55).

Recently Etna has again become the place for the spectacular shooting of extraordinary international cult films. In 2002 and in 2005 the director of "Star Wars", George Lucas, chose the eruption of Mount Etna as the background for some episodes in Star Wars II and Star Wars

III. Characteristic village on the slopes of Etna, called Linguaglossa, was the setting of the film directed by Maurizio Ponzi "Volevo i pantaloni" inspired by the best seller written by Lara Cardella. This movie portrayed a reactionary and sexist Sicily, where the woman is always the victim of so-called patriarchal sadism.

The natural majesty of Mount Etna has been used as the set for many other films. Among these it is worth mentioning "Arriva la bufera" because this had the backdrop of both Etna and Noto, "Gallo Cedrone" directed by Carlo Verdone, "La donna della luna", by Vito Zagarrio and "Ginostra", a thriller in which Pradal used the beautiful scenery of this volcano.

These great directors produced some unforgettable sequences in their films on Mount Etna and these images are among the most beautiful pages of Italian cinematography. It must be stressed that the relationship between Etna and cinematography has become even stronger since more productions were made in a number of Etnean villages.

The film industry in Sicily has enhanced and promoted the territory seeking to improve the regional economy. Therefore, the trade and the employment rate of local resources has noticeably increased. Recently, the Film Commission of the City of Catania, has been created in order to provide support for all film productions in the region. The Film Commission was supposed to be crucial especially to obtain local licences and organize press conferences. Unfortunately, the number of events, presentations, film premieres and festivals has been rather poor since the constitution of this Commission. In theory, a system to support the production should be used to build a culture of innovation. This will enable us to broaden our horizons, starting from the cultural heritage. Tourism and especially cultural tourism can become an area of development and an engine to enhance our economy. Giving a definition of cultural tourism today is not easy for a number of reasons. It is difficult to determine the nature of this practice and, consequently, its field of study.

have evolved over the centuries have been examined in cultural tourism studies. The revaluation of the cultural offer in tourism mainly depends on the a progressive ageing of the visitors. Generally, tourists can be harassed by the effects of globalization, and they want to reclaim their identity rebelling against the growing approval. In the new visitor for this reason we can see a growing interest based on the badge element of an area that will determine their final choices. Tourists become actors in the territory through the interaction between enjoyment and experience.

A film is a journey in which tourists are encouraged and stimulated by the vision of events, places and landscapes. In distant lands with customs and habits different from our own, we can learn a lot and our of curiosity may be aroused. There is an imaginary link between emotion and movement. Traveling and the identity of the people who experience it go through an unconscious sensory experience.

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Riassunto

L'Etna è un'isola nell'isola, un mondo a se stante, un ambiente, in perenne cambiamento, dai forti contrasti. Punto di riferimento per i naviganti di tutte le epoche può essere considerato il simbolo della mediterraneità, imprevedibile e passionale, come il carattere dei popoli che lo hanno abitato.

Fin dalla sua più remota antichità, la maestosità della sua mole e la grandiosità dei fenomeni, che ne caratterizzano l'attività, hanno colpito l'immaginazione degli abitanti e stimolato la curiosità e la fantasia dei viaggiatori e dei poeti, che con un sapiente missaggio di racconti, di personaggi, di storie hanno tramandato il mito “del signore della terra e del fuoco” e della sua potenza di volta in volta, apportatrice di lutti e di raccolti.

Anche il cinema ne ha mostrato il suo magnifico scenario, utilizzandolo e descrivendolo nelle sue più svariate accezioni adattandolo e trasformandolo alle necessità del racconto cinematografico ora favolistico, ora avventuroso, ora storico. Alcuni registi da Visconti a Zeffirelli, da Pasolini a Epstein ne hanno colto i profondi misteri e le più recondite suggestioni del mito. Un ampio catalogo di celluloidi che racconta anche i vizi e le virtù delle genti dell'Etna, attribuendone le intemperanze e le passioni come risultato naturale del vivere sotto il vulcano.

Nel lavoro saranno presi in considerazione gli aspetti letterari del mito dell'Etna e la sua rappresentazione cinematografica.

Resumen

L'Etna est une île dans l'île, un monde à part entière, un espace en perpétuelle mutation, aux forts contrastes. Point phare pour les navigateurs de toutes les époques, on peut le considérer comme le symbole de l'esprit méditerranéen, imprévisible et passionnel, tel le caractère de ceux qui l'ont peuplé.

Depuis l'antiquité, sa majestueuse présence et les impressionnants phénomènes qui caractérisent son activité, ont frappé l'imagination de ses habitants et stimulé la curiosité et l'esprit de voyageurs et poètes qui, par un savant amalgame en ont raconté les récits, les personnages et les histoires perpétuant le mythe «du seigneur de la terre et du feu » et de sa puissance, porteuse à la fois de deuils et de récoltes.

Le cinéma en a exalté le décor, magnifique, l'utilisant et le décrivant sous ses formes les plus variées et l'adaptant aux nécessités du récit cinématographique propre tantôt à la fable, tantôt à l'aventure ou au récit historique. Certains metteurs en scène de Visconti à Zeffirelli, de Pasolini à Epstein ont saisi les mystères les plus profonds et les plus lointaines suggestions de son mythe. Un vaste catalogue de pellicule qui raconte aussi les vices et les vertus des gens de l'Etna, leur attribuant les intempérances et les passions comme la résultante naturelle de la vie sous le volcan.

Dans le travail on prendra en considération les aspects littéraires du mythe de l'Etna et sa représentation cinématographique

Resumé

El Etna es una isla en la isla, un mundo en sí mismo, un ambiente en perenne cambio, de contrastes fuertes. Punto de referencia para los navegantes de todas las épocas, se puede considerar el símbolo de lo mediterráneo, imprevisible y pasional como el carácter de las gentes que lo han vivido.

Desde su más remota antigüedad, la majestuosidad de su mole y la grandeza de los fenómenos que caracterizan su actividad han capturado

la imaginación de sus habitantes y estimulado la curiosidad y la fantasía. Son muchos los viajeros y poetas que, con una sabia mezcla de leyendas, de personajes y de historias han transmitido el mito “del amo de la tierra y el fuego” y de su potencia de vez en cuando, aportadora de lutos y de cosechas.

El cine también ha mostrado su magnífico escenario, utilizándolo y describiéndolo en todas sus facetas y adaptándolo según las necesidades cinematográficas, unas veces más fabulistas, otras más aventureras o históricas. Varios directores, desde Visconti a Zeffirelli, pasando por Pasolini o Epstein, han captado los profundos misterios y las más recónditas sugerencias del mito. Un amplio catálogo de celulosa que narra los vicios y virtudes de las gentes de Etna, atribuyéndoles los excesos y pasiones que resultan del vivir debajo de un volcán.

En el trabajo tendremos en consideración los aspectos literarios del mito del Etna y su representación cinematográfica.