

Animal Agency in *Le Quattro Volte*

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Le Quattro Volte (2010) – translated as ‘The Four Turns’ – tracks what the director Michelangelo Frammartino describes as ‘the journey of a soul’ through Pythagorean processes of transmigration, as the narrative focus shifts from an elderly goatherd to a kid goat to a tree to a batch of charcoal.¹ While *Le Quattro Volte* thus extends its attention across human, animal, vegetable and mineral realms, I wish to focus in this essay on the nonhuman animals – the dog, goats, ants and snails – that populate the film. *Le Quattro Volte* might appear to invest uncritically in an image of pastoral idyll through its nostalgic focus on farming practices in Calabria (the region of Italy in which the film is set), thereby undermining any progressive positioning of animals as agents or political beings. Yet while *Le Quattro Volte* takes risks, not only in its nostalgic rural vision but also in its mystical positioning of life cycles, the film balances this, I argue here, with a democratizing mode of human-animal representation. Drawing on the work of Jane Bennett, I explore questions of animal agency in the context of what I call Frammartino’s ‘horizontalist’ aesthetics – a mode of cinematic presentation that works against speciesist hierarchies of being. I read questions of animal agency, objectification and performance both within and against this horizontalist aesthetics in order to consider *Le Quattro Volte*’s cinematic and democratic re-imagining of cross-species relationality.²

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett uses the concept of horizontalization as part of a broader project of dissipating ‘the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic’.³ Invoking Bruno Latour’s figure of the actant ‘as a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman’,⁴ Bennett elaborates an account of nonhuman agency that encompasses both intentional and nonintentional effects. She draws on

Charles Darwin's reflections on the ways in which worms contribute to human history by enabling seedlings and thus engendering 'an earth hospitable to humans'.⁵ Darwin does not claim that this contribution to human history is intentional, but he notes that the 'accumulated effects' of these 'small agencies' are significant.⁶ This model of what Bennett calls 'a more *distributive* agency' – developed further with reference to Jacques Rancière's thinking of dissensus – allows Bennett to formulate 'a vital materialist theory of democracy', in which human and nonhuman agents are seen to play a part, in contradistinction to models of history, politics and democracy understood as exclusively human.⁷ As Bennett suggests, her aim is not to flatten differences between species, to 'horizontalize' completely, but to examine 'the affinities across differences'.⁸ As she observes: 'The task at hand for humans is to find a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants in order to be more faithful to the style of action pursued by each'.⁹

How does *Le Quattro Volte* envisage 'a more *distributive* agency', moving beyond reified relations of active (human) subjects and passive (nonhuman) objects? And how might this horizontalization of relations in the film expand the realm of the political beyond the human? In making *Le Quattro Volte*, Frammartino was motivated, he reveals, by the question: 'Can cinema free itself of the dogma which dictates that human beings should occupy the leading role?'¹⁰ A decentring of the human is clearly at work in the film in thematic terms, as, following the death of the goatherd, his 'soul' migrates to animal, vegetable and mineral forms. Yet this displacement of the human is also enacted at the level of form. The framing of humans and animals often establishes a form of parity across species lines within the space of the image. Our first glimpse of the goatherd, the dog and the goats is framed at an extremely long distance as they emerge together over a hill; at such a distance, it is difficult to draw species distinctions. Referring to shots of the rooftops and the village hillside, Jonathan Romney notes how this approach 'reduces the primacy of the human.'¹¹ Following Bennett, this visual approach can be read as a horizontalization of relations rather than a flattening of difference. As Frammartino suggests:

if I film from one metre off the ground, I'm taking a viewpoint which is no longer human but mechanical – the viewpoint of the camera. It's like trying to see the world through the eyes of someone who is not capable of making distinctions, of discriminating between things – who can't therefore establish hierarchies.¹²

Frammartino cites Michael Snow, James Benning and Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1965) as examples of attempts to formulate 'this non-human viewpoint', 'released [...] from a cultural burden'.¹³ In film theoretical terms, Frammartino's configuring of nonhuman vision resonates with André Bazin's idea of cinematic realism as a nonhierarchical opening to the world. For Bazin, 'the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions' does not privilege certain features, or beings, within the space of the image.¹⁴ In this way, as Jennifer Fay suggests, cinema's images 'put into relief, and may even help to redeem, the limitations of anthropocentric attention'.¹⁵ Or, as Anat Pick suggests, (Bazinian) realism 'encourages a view of the world as a biodiverse, material plane.'¹⁶ In this sense, *Le Quattro Volte*'s nonhierarchical aesthetic invites attention to interconnections across species.

The film's nonanthropocentric horizontalization of representation unfolds not only within the space of a single frame but also through visual patterning between scenes. In interview, Frammartino invites us to read the film in this way, drawing attention to the 'reversal of roles' at work: in a close-up of an ant crawling over the goatherd's face, '[t]he ant steals the scene, and the man's face, in close-up, becomes a landscape'; later, a man climbs up the tree that becomes the protagonist of the third section – 'tiny as an ant', the man is dwarfed by a landscape that now reminds us of the goatherd's face.¹⁷ The film is interested in the comic effects of these visual exchanges between realms of being. Frammartino explains that he is inspired by the work of Chaplin and Tati, in which 'things become other things'. This punctures the high seriousness of the Pythagorean framework

that shapes the film: ‘Filming a goat as if it were a person ends up making you laugh and this is also part of the game.’¹⁸

Such forms of anthropomorphism might appear to reduce nonhuman difference to human sameness. But by drawing our attention to patterns across human and nonhuman realms, *Le Quattro Volte*’s anthropomorphic impulse seems expansive rather than reductive, as it works to uncover commonalities across species lines. As Bennett suggests:

A touch of anthropomorphism [...] can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in ‘nature’ and those in ‘culture’, anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms.¹⁹

In addition to isomorphic resonances across shots and the nonhierarchical logic of the Bazinian long take, other forms of cinematic language in *Le Quattro Volte* reveal ‘structural parallels’ across species divisions. In a scene following the birth of the kid goat, a cut from a close-up of a goat looking up at the sky to a point-of-view shot of the sky itself (as the sound of the kid’s bleating fades in the background) produces an uncanny effect, whereby relations between perception, affect and time seem to hover between the human (viewer) and the animal (onscreen). The film does not confine such relations to exchanges between humans and animals: it extends them to include the vegetable and the mineral, most memorably in point-of-view shots framed from the perspective of the wood: first from the back of the truck and later from within the *scarazzo*, the ash pile used to turn wood into charcoal. The anthropomorphism of film language – and of the point-of-view shot in particular – is not necessarily at odds with a more democratic form of representation here. As Bennett suggests: ‘In a vital materialism, an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a

whole world of resonances and resemblances – sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure.²⁰ In *Le Quattro Volte*, anthropomorphic strategies of film representation allow for a nonanthropocentric distribution of perception and attention both onscreen and off.

This democratizing effect is developed further through sound patterns in the film. As Michael Phillips notes, the film is '[v]irtually without human speech, yet hardly ever silent'; '[s]o many bleats, barks, buzzing and birdsong fills [*sic*] the soundtrack, the lack of human voices barely registers.'²¹ While the goatherd's cough is persistent, it 'merges with the clamour of his charges' conversational baas and tinkling bells'.²² This effect of auditory merger is suggested further when the goatherd starts wearing a bell like the goats – during these sequences, human movement sounds like animal movement. This intermingling across species difference at the level of sound as well as image is underpinned by the repeated thuds produced by the labourers beating the *scarazzi*. The film opens with this thudding sound – 'the heartbeat of the region, or of the earth itself',²³ it murmurs under the various sound patterns of the film, giving auditory form to what Bennett calls 'affinities across differences', and allowing for a further sense of 'sounds and sights that echo and bounce' in a nonhierarchical manner.

Le Quattro Volte's interest in the displacement of the human is further explored through what Frammartino sees as the relinquishing of directorial control that arises from working with animals: 'I wanted to film animals because it was something that I could not control.'²⁴ He says that it was enjoyable but 'exhausting' to work with the goats in particular, precisely because they could not be easily directed (indeed, Romney notes something 'anarchic' about the goats).²⁵ Frammartino comments: 'You can't ask a goat to do specific things like climbing on a table. You need to stay there and wait. You're at the mercy of what happens. It's an exercise of humility of the eye, which I find very interesting.' He frames this as an attempt to 'reduce the self-importance of my perspective

as director, indeed, of our perspective as humans.’²⁶ Viewed along these lines, the centrality of the human is displaced both in front of and behind the camera, both onscreen and off. This seems affirmed by the sense of animal agency captured yet not controlled by the film. When the goats crowd into narrow interior and exterior spaces, some spontaneously jump to higher ground; the ants crawl across the packet of dust left on the ground by the goatherd; one goat knocks a pot of snails off the goatherd’s kitchen table; earlier, the snails escape from the pot, crawling across the table. Difficult to control fully, all of these scenes bear within them documentary traces of animal agency, and of the director being ‘at the mercy of what happens’.

Yet while the nonprofessional performances of the goats, snails and ants may bear out, to some degree, a relinquishing of directorial control, this is in tension with *Le Quattro Volte*’s investment in professional animal performance, notably in the eight-minute take that forms the film’s astonishing centre. In the midst of an Easter procession through the village, the goatherd’s dog removes a rock lodged under a van on a hill; the van crashes into a fence (off-screen), allowing a group of goats to escape from their enclosure. The sight gag was an extensive undertaking (including a week’s preparation and 130 extras),²⁷ and the financial stakes were high: Frammartino’s fraught conversations with his producer suggest that the scene was seen as key to the film’s success.²⁸ Thus the dog’s performance is not only highly trained but also highly spectacularized and commodified; indeed, his skilful display won him the ‘Palm Dog’ special jury prize at Cannes in 2010, no doubt generating further publicity for the film. A ‘deadpan, detached and altogether breathtaking *coup de cinéma*’,²⁹ the scene enacts a celebration of cinema (cemented by its invocation of Tati, Keaton, Chaplin), and of the relation between cinema and animality. Here the potency of animal magnetism is transferred to the ‘breathhtaking *coup*’ of the film. Yet this is a kind of fetishistic transference that, as Nicole Shukin has shown, rarely benefits the animal.³⁰ Indeed, in its conversion of animal performance (not only of the dog but also of the goats) into ‘entertainment capital’, this scene in particular echoes the visual and power economies of the zoo, and the ways in which zoo animals

become ‘subject to biopower, to forms of positive economic and emotional investment designed to mold them into docile, willing performers of capitalist spectacles.’³¹ As an entertaining *coup* dependent on what Shukin calls ‘animal capital’, the scene gestures to cinema’s long history of exploiting animals onscreen.

Against this backdrop of appropriation, however, the question of nonhuman agency remains emphatically present. Though the eight-minute scene is rigorously prepared, it is also open to contingency (for example, the exact timing and movements of the dog and goats). And though the dog is trained – a ‘docile, willing performer’ – he is also, to a certain extent, in control (as Frammartino notes, the dog is ‘the driving force in this scene’).³² The movement of the camera during this scene, panning from left to right and back again, is usually prompted by the actions of the dog; though the dog is offscreen at times, the camera often reframes in order to keep him in view. Motivating events in front of and behind the camera, the dog becomes not only an actor but an aesthetic agent, in a convincing display of what Donna Haraway calls ‘hermeneutic potency’.³³ Issues of training, performance and ‘entertainment capital’ thus complicate rather than negate questions of nonhuman agency here. In this scene and elsewhere, the film functions – both intra- and extra-diegetically – to document an interplay between human and nonhuman agents in ways that invoke Susan McHugh’s concept of ‘pack aesthetics’ – producing art through cross-species collaboration³⁴ – and Haraway’s analysis of entanglements of species beings, technologies and visual practices. In her reading of the National Geographic series ‘Cittercam’, Haraway suggests: ‘the animals, humans, and machines are all enmeshed in hermeneutic labour (and play) by the material-semiotic requirements of getting on together in specific lifeworlds.’³⁵ *Le Quattro Volte* emphatically documents these kinds of encounters between life-worlds through forms of cross-species aesthetic and hermeneutic practices.

Yet distinctions need to be drawn between different expressions of animal agency – and of professional and nonprofessional performance – at work in this scene. Once the goats have escaped, they roam over the road while the dog barks, rounding them up. Most of the goats follow the directions of the dog here, obediently climbing the hill, but there are a few stragglers, including one goat who appears to confront the dog, causing him momentarily to back off. The scene's strategies of long take and deep focus, ushering in a Bazinian parity of detail and movement, allow for a documenting of the nuanced contingencies of cross-species interaction onscreen that is enabled by, yet also in excess of, directorial control. This is emphasized by the way in which the static shot lingers at this point, allowing our gaze to wander between beings, long after the spectacularity of the sight gag. The deferral of the cut here resonates with Pick's elaboration of a creaturely realism that rejects 'the editorial constructions of humanism'.³⁶ Through the durational attentiveness of this scene, the film proposes a democratization of vision, but one that attends to rather than erases species difference. In contrast to an idea of cinema as a realm of representation that simply affirms the power of humans over animals, *Le Quattro Volte* thus suggests ways in which the documentary, durational and performative dimensions of cinema may foreground the fluctuating interactions of nonhuman animals.

Yet *Le Quattro Volte* explores these questions of animal agency onscreen in the context of stark asymmetries of power offscreen. As Frammartino observes:

The typical dish of Calabria is home-made pasta with goat meat. It's the animal we associate with the area. So the goat really is the figure in the background, behind the humans. And so in the interplay of levels that I have created, where I gradually substitute the human presence with what's in the background, in Calabria it was natural to move the goat into the foreground.³⁷

Here Frammartino frames the goat's shifting status, from background to foreground, in symbolic terms. Yet his comment also gestures to the lived, material conditions of animal being, to ways in which the film's engagement with animal agency is haunted by a deathly other side: the animal killed for meat, objectified and consumed. Viewed in this context, there is a deep irony to the film's celebration of life cycles, and of goat 'anarchy', particularly the overdetermined symbolism of the goats breaking out of their pen. These expressions of goat agency onscreen are in direct contrast to the material conditions of the lives of goats farmed for their meat offscreen. Attending to this extra-diegetic context allows for a political reading that interrupts the film's mystical and pastoral investments. Whether intended by Frammartino or not, *Le Quattro Volte*'s narrative and formal horizontalization of representation addresses the politics of the animal's reduction to an object. Frammartino has described *Le Quattro Volte* as 'a political film, because it gives viewers choices'.³⁸ He is not explicit about the film's nonanthropocentric politics. But by envisaging something close to Bennett's 'vital materialist theory of democracy', Frammartino's film implicitly asks questions about the lives that count in politics. While this extends to include vegetable and mineral realms,³⁹ the question of animal suffering – in dialogue with the extra-diegetic context – is posed in particular here. By offering what Bennett calls 'a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants', *Le Quattro Volte* suggests ways in which cinema might re-imagine the distribution of power and agency beyond the violent asymmetries of species divisions.

¹ 'Le Quattro Volte + Q&A', BFI 23 May 2011, <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/656>> accessed 28 January 2014.

² Chris Heppell offers brilliant readings of 'extended kinship networks' in the film in relation to work by Jean-Luc Nancy and Timothy Morton. See Heppell's 'The Withdrawal of Sense in Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* (2010)', Film-Philosophy Conference, University of Amsterdam, July 2013, and his 'Ecologies without Nature' (PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, forthcoming).

³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95–6. Bennett draws here on Darwin's *Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Actions of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits* (London: John Murray, 1881).

⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. ix, 96, 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰ Michael Phillips, 'Pastoral Depiction of Pythagoras' Theory', *Chicago Tribune*, 16 June 2011, <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-06-16/entertainment/ct-mov-0617-premier-attraction-20110616_1_baby-goat-hill-town-soul> accessed 28 January 2014.

¹¹ Jonathan Romney, 'Nature Calls', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 21, no. 6 (2011), p. 48.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 15.

¹⁵ Jennifer Fay, 'Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin's Posthumanism', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2008), p. 51.

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- ¹⁶ Anat Pick, 'Three Worlds: Dwelling and Worldhood on Screen', in Pick and Guinevere Narraway (eds), *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), p. 22.
- ¹⁷ 'Michelangelo Frammartino talks to Jonathan Romney', *Le Quattro Volte* DVD, New Wave Films, 2011.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 99.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Phillips, 'Pastoral Depiction of Pythagoras' Theory'.
- ²² J. Hoberman, 'Celebrating the Cycle of Life in *Le Quattro Volte*', *The Village Voice*, 30 March 2011, <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2011-03-30/film/celebrating-the-cycle-of-life-in-le-quattro-volte/full/>> accessed 28 January 2014.
- ²³ Romney, 'Nature Calls', p. 44.
- ²⁴ '*Le Quattro Volte* + Q&A'.
- ²⁵ 'Michelangelo Frammartino talks to Jonathan Romney'.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Romney, 'Nature Calls', p. 46
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ See Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 155.
- ³² 'Michelangelo Frammartino talks to Jonathan Romney'.
- ³³ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 262.
- ³⁴ Susan McHugh, 'Video Dog Star: William Wegman, Aesthetic Agency, and the Animal in

Experimental Video', *Society and Animals*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2001), pp. 229–251.

³⁵ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, pp. 262–3.

³⁶ Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p. 116.

³⁷ 'Michelangelo Frammartino talks to Jonathan Romney'.

³⁸ Romney, 'Nature Calls', p. 48.

³⁹ As Romney argues: 'Frammartino's film is also political in the sense that it's an example of eminently green cinema. As well as offering a vision of natural equality in which goats and logs have equal narrative rights with man, it also proposes a theory of universal recycling, in which nothing is wasted – not even the dust.' Ibid.