



Le Quattro Volte

You could not find a more apt medium to explore existential transience, the metaphysical and cosmological origins and destinations of being, and the life of the soul than that of light beamed through moving celluloid. Such is the lesson of Italian director Michelangelo Frammartino's second feature film *Le Quattro Volte* (*The Four Times*) and the esteemed Chilean director Patricio Guzmán's recent documentary *Nostalgia for the Light*, both of which debuted earlier this year at Cannes, and have gone on to screen at festivals worldwide in 2010.

Le Quattro Volte begins with a mound of earth billowing smoke from the vents on its surface. This dark topography—which turns out to be a kiln for producing wood coal—evokes both the steaming primordial mire out of which our first ancestor crawled, as well as the barren wasteland in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), through which the film's bourgeois patriarch roams naked, screaming, and terrified for eternity. In addition to the beginnings and endings of life and of civilization, the kiln represents a place of transformation, as it ushers plant matter into the mineral realm in an age-old process of producing fuel.

Trained as an architect before making feature films and video installations, Frammartino expresses his audacity gently. His pastoral film's subject is nothing less than the transubstantiation of the soul, and while it ostensibly follows a decrepit old goatherd, a newborn goat, a mighty fir tree, a bundle of wood coal, and—last but not least—a plume of smoke as its protagonists, *Le Quattro Volte's* true subject is the invisible life-force that animates all of these forms.

Set in the southern Italian region of Calabria (the director's ancestral home), *Le Quattro Volte* is driven by an animistic spirit, which manifests itself in long, observational takes like one of the sun-dappled hillside vista that introduces us to the

elderly goatherd (Giuseppe Fuda) and his flock. Plagued by a hacking cough, the grey and grizzled old man spends his days out in the field with his goats, and his nights in a small, spartan flat poised above a *strada* that leads to the wilderness outside of town. Across from his home, the goats are penned up so that they are always within earshot of their keeper.

Frammartino neatly illustrates the passing of one day into the next, with the man keeping his deathly cough at bay through the help of a healing powder. This elixir is procured from the custodian of the village church, who meticulously folds up the dust sweepings from the church's floor into magazine pages that the goatherd pays for in bottles of milk. Each night he mixes the potion on one of the three simple chairs that he has repurposed into a bedside table. The man coughs, his dog barks, the goats bleat and ring their bells, and the hillside swells with the sound of birds and the wind in the trees.

The goatherd's routine is interrupted one day when, shitting, his daily dose falls out of his pocket. Discovering it missing later that night, he visits the church but his insistent knocks and tubercular wheezes go unanswered. The next night, he dies. This is about halfway into the film, and the last we see of the old man is his coffin being lowered (carefully!) down the very steep and foreboding stairs of his abode. He is then placed into a tomb and sealed up—with the camera alongside him, thereby plunging us into darkness. We are shocked back into the light and the living by a very graphic scene of the birth of a goat, as it slips out of its mother, trembling and flailing about on the ground, spitting, crying, and soiled by mucus and dirt.

Our perspective shifts tremendously: where once we observed the goats from the herder's point of view, viewing them as little more than a seething, collective entity, our eyes

LE QUATTRO VOLTE MICHELANGELO FRAMMARTINO ITALY+NOSTALGIA FOR THE LIGHT PATRÍCIO GUZMÁN CHILE BY JON DAVIES

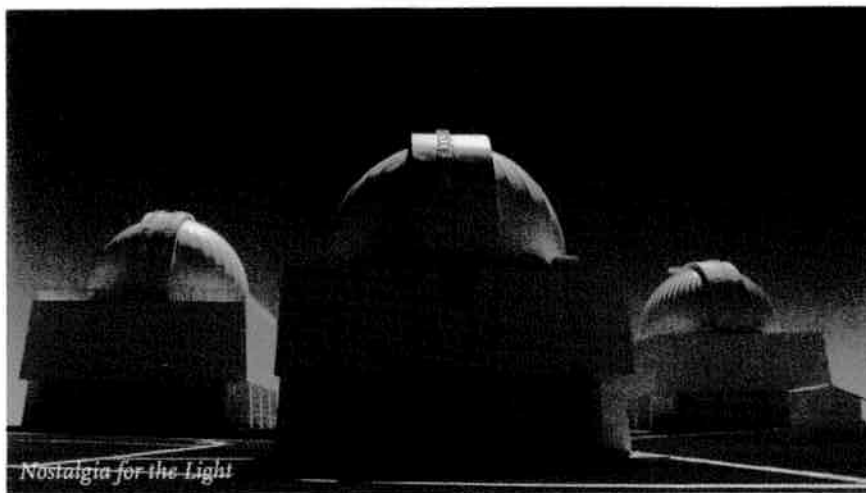
are now trained on them as individuals, as we follow not only the small woolly white body inhabited by our protagonist-soul but also its companions. We watch the kids play, competing to stand at the top of a junk pile, startled and then curious when one knocks over a broom. When they are let out with the rest of the flock for the first time, disaster strikes: the white kid gets stuck in a shallow ditch as its brethren drift out of sight. Despite much panicked, heartrending bleating the young goat never finds its flock again, and, completely lost, curls up next to an immense fir tree, presumably passing away over the course of a cold, snowy night. (We are shielded from witnessing the final moments of all of the protagonist-soul's containers, one of Frammartino's ways of downplaying the finality of "the end" in favour of creating a sense of continuity.)

The fir tree, now implicitly infused with the itinerant soul, duly becomes our star—and is promptly cut down and dragged away by crowds of rowdy villagers, who cheer as they walk, ride, and wend their way down the hill with our new protagonist in tow. The tree is subjected to the local rituals of the region's traditional "Pita" festivities: with presents lodged at its peak it is mounted in the town square, climbed by daring treasure-seekers, and then pulled down and rent asunder. (Trained as we now are to think of the tree as a subjective being, it's hard not to cringe a little at the townspeople's destructive gusto.) Cut up and trucked away, the tree becomes the centre of the massive kiln that we saw in the beginning, and changes form once again to a piece of wood charcoal. When delivered to a village home and ignited in the fireplace, our humble wayfarer undergoes one last transformation (at least the last one recorded by the film) into a wisp of smoke, its final physical state before diffusing into the atmosphere as the camera surveys the town and the sky one last time.

Primal to the extreme, *Le Quattro Volte* re-orient narrative cinema's ur-focus on the human subject and concerns itself with the lives of animals, vegetables, minerals, and, finally, smoke, as much as it does with the affairs of human beings: the emotional core of the film resides with the lost baby goat, while the most expressive actor is the goatherd's loyal dog. The subtitled human dialogue is treated identically to birdsong, goat bleats, dog barks, the swaying of tree branches or the crackle (or "singing" as Frammartino puts it) of the coal, as one layer of sound among many.

In the landscape of *Le Quattro Volte*, all forms of life are intricately intertwined. This delicate harmony is expressed by the patchwork quality of the village's buildings and the steep stairwells and roads that the residents must navigate on a daily basis. But the precariousness of existential interdependence is most memorably conveyed in a bravura, Tati-esque choreography between landscape, actors (human and otherwise), and camera during the sequence shot of a costumed religious procession through the town. Anticipating the progressive transformations of the wandering soul, the scene features at least three chief protagonists: a rock which, thrown out of the goatherd's window, is used by some of the processional participants (garbed as Roman centurions) to chock the wheels of their truck; the goatherd's dog, who aggresses the performers as the goats watch inquisitively, and then picks up the rock in its jaws, causing the truck to plow into the goats' rickety enclosure, freeing its bleating inhabitants; and, finally, the camera itself, which swivels up and down the road, its willfulness and keen curiosity transforming it from a neutral recording device into an animate being in its own right.

Just as Frammartino's film subtly muddies distinctions between its human, animal, vegetable, and mineral characters,



so too do the worldly and otherworldly realms intertwine and bleed into one another in Guzmán's. While the violent quashing of the Allende generation's socialist dreams by Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship has been Guzmán's subject for four decades—most famously in his 1975 epic *The Battle of Chile*—in *Nostalgia for the Light* Guzmán initially appears to have shifted his gaze to the seemingly apolitical realm of astronomy. While his youthful interest in astronomy was tied to the simple, untroubled worldview that childhood often allows, Guzmán's new film effects a reckoning with this science that can seem so divorced from the earthbound injustices and oppression that have haunted him throughout his mature life. The obstinate chronicler of Chile's suffering and keeper of its memories, Guzmán's mission here, as in all his films, is to honour those who refuse to remain silent about the past's still-open wounds. While starting out gazing at the stars, *Nostalgia* creates a dynamic interplay between the quest to discover our origins in the cosmos and the bitter, deadly conflicts that we embroil ourselves in here on earth.

The film opens in an observatory located in Chile's Atacama Desert, which boasts one of the largest astronomical telescopes in the world. Close-ups study the mechanics of the telescope as it slowly comes to life, its moving gears resembling a giant timepiece signaling the beginning of a new day as the roof cracks open to reveal blinding sunlight. The driest spot on earth, Atacama also possesses the clearest atmosphere, allowing the telescope's penetrating gaze to travel even further. Due to its unique conditions, the cosmic past and what it can tell us is more accessible, visible, and *present* in Atacama than it is anywhere else.

The desert's dry atmosphere not only allows for gazing skyward into the past, but also acts as a natural mausoleum, preserving archeological evidence of the people who traversed the arid landscape centuries ago, of the exploitation of indigenous people in 19th-century mines, and most recently, the thousands of corpses of the "disappeared" buried by the Pinochet regime. The high technology of the telescopes finds its inverted corollary in the weathered hands and tiny shovels of the weary old women who continue to comb the desert for the remains of their loved ones. One woman wishes that the telescopes "could also see through the earth so we could find

them"; later, she pointedly notes that she and her companions are "Chile's leprosy," their dogged pursuit eliciting little sympathy or understanding from a country that largely wishes to put its bloody past safely behind it.

For Guzmán, conversely, all Chileans of good conscience are haunted by the past, looking to it to reveal truths about the present—a more proximate, and no less profound, variant of the astronomers' searching after universal truths and cycles. Guzmán insistently creates visual links between sand and stardust, earth and heaven, to emphasize how the apparently "small" problems of one

nation can be of comparable scale to the massive drama of the galaxies. While the astronomers and the mothers of the disappeared represent the extreme poles of Guzmán's cosmology, he also introduces figures who bridge heaven and earth: a young female astronomer whose parents were "disappeared" and who finds a certain philosophical/therapeutic quality in her calling (existence is a "cycle that didn't begin and won't end with me"), and the mother of another astronomer who does physiotherapy with those who were tortured decades ago.

Echoing the optics of a film camera, the telescope stands totem-like as a metaphor for Guzmán's historical and ethical vision. Like the cinema, the telescope is a portal that connects us with our past, whether it's billions of years or mere decades ago. One of the film's most affecting moments comes when Guzmán arranges for two of the elderly female searchers to peer through the telescope—it cannot be pointed downward to aid them in their search, but they can at least look upwards.

It is the very plainness of Guzmán's metaphors that makes them so potent. Narrating the film himself with precision and gravitas, Guzmán endows *Nostalgia* with a crystalline clarity that brings it almost to a state of grace, even if it some of the many visual connections drawn between heaven and earth verge on the inelegant. (Guzmán's dissolves from shots of the cosmos to domestic interiors and vice-versa are the key visual trope of the film.) Guzmán's constant back-and-forthing between the cosmos and "home" stresses his thesis that everything that is here was once out there, and that we can find some sort of existential comfort in knowing that the very atoms in our bones are shared with those that make up the galaxies.

For both Frammartino and Guzmán, cinema is a sanctified space, the only appropriate medium for their philosophical *teorema*. The heavenly shaft of light that transports living images from the projector to the screen finds its way into both their films, representing the intermingling of the spiritual and physical realms: in *Le Quattro Volte* it illuminates the salutary dust of the church; in *Nostalgia* it traces in stardust a kind of umbilical cord connecting earth to the heavens, human beings to their carbon origins in the stars. In their transitory communion as they travel through the projector's gate, celluloid and light generate a striking metaphor in these two films for the ephemerality—and permanence—of body and soul. ■