

# An “old drunken and malicious father”: the people of the Po’s volatile relationship with their river

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## 1. *Introducing Il grande fiume*

When we think about Italian rivers, those that usually spring to mind are the Tiber and the Arno (Mauch, Zeller, 2008, p. 1). Yet neither is Italy’s longest river, nor the most influential watercourse in modern Italian history. Instead, the status of *Il grande fiume* and *il fiume nazionale* has been awarded to the Po (Canestrelli, 1892, p. 23; Mammi, 1996; Papotti, 1996, pp. 27, 35, 53, 56). The main fluvial artery of Italian industry and commerce – the nation’s «only respectable river» according to journalist and writer Giovanni Guareschi (Guareschi, 2013), p. x) – the Po bisects Italy’s most productive agricultural region and most densely populated area. The river’s significance is also international. The science and technology of river control in continental Europe was born on its unstable banks. This cradle of hydraulic engineering is a superlative river of gastronomy too. The powerful taste of place transmitted by the river and its valley, Val Padana – also known as *la pianura padana* or *la Bassa* (Papotti, 1996, pp. 19-21) – has also inspired a wealth of literary and filmic representations. Culturally as well as economically, the Po has become *il Mississippi italiano*, or, *il nostro Old Man River*.

The relationship between the Po and its people – who, following the lead of film director Michelangelo Antonioni, we might refer to as *gente del Po* (Antonioni, 1947)<sup>1</sup> – is complex and multi-layered. As those who live with the river remark: *Al Po al dà ‘e’l tos* – the Po gives and the Po takes away (Zwingle, 2002, p. 100). Literary scholar Davide Papotti identifies the river’s «capricious independence» (*capricciosa indipendenza*) as one its core characteristics (Papotti, 1996, p. 27). Focusing on the most problematic feature of the Po’s capricious independence for its human residents – the capacity to overflow its banks – this essay explores how *gente del Po* have responded to a volatile river that the journalist, Gianni Brera, a self-styled “legitimate” son of the Po, personified as an “old drunken and malicious father” (Brera, 1963)<sup>2</sup>. Through literary and

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<sup>1</sup> *Gente del Po* is also the title of a novel by Umberto Cavezzali (Milano, Camunia, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> There is no space to address questions of nature and gender. A flood-prone river is frequently imbued with pejorative “female” qualities: temperamental, capricious, irrational, unpredictable and inconstant. The Po, however, has been represented over the centuries as unambiguously male.

filmic sources, I demonstrate how the Po has provoked a complex emotional reaction combining elements of affection and respect with feelings of anxiety, fear, exasperation and resignation. Continuing to draw on insights from creative writing and film, I then argue that those living on and near its banks (the river's "children") have developed a culture of coping and risk adjustment that allows them to coexist with a predictably unpredictable "father" (or "old man") river. My central contention is that the people of the Po have become human amphibians, suited for both land and water, in an amphibious relationship with their river. Moving beyond the strictly figurative use of liquidity in literary and cultural studies (Bauman, 2000; 2007), while retaining its central notions of uncertainty, flux and constant motion, I engage with liquidity in a literal, material sense as a definitive property of landscape (Swyngedouw, 2015; Navakas, 2017).

This case study of the Po (which draws on sources in both English and Italian) adds to the wider body of scholarship on the cultural representation of rivers generally and of the Po specifically (Cusack, 2010; Coates, 2013; Papotti, 1996; 2005)<sup>3</sup>. This essay also contributes a humanities perspective to discussions within water history and water studies about how different cultures respond to an excess of water. In terms of geographical coverage, explorations of floodings have largely been restricted to southeast Asia (Bankoff, 2004; 2007; 2009; 2017). Similarly, the notion of an amphibious culture, whose "essence" van Dam defines as «a series of adaptations to a wetland landscape» (van Dam, 2016, p. 78), has been effectively confined to the Netherlands (van Dam, 2016, pp. 78-93; Schenk, 2017, p. 51). Moreover, in terms of disciplinary approaches, this essay ventures beyond the perspective, methods and materials of the historian to embrace those of the environmental humanities – an interdisciplinary undertaking that takes fictional and filmic sources seriously as legitimate documents for the understanding of floods that complement traditional historical sources.

The complicated and often stormy amphibious relationship between the "father" river and his human "children" is examined, firstly, through attention to the double-edged sword that the Po represents in terms of promise and peril, and secondly, through an investigation of how *gente del Po* have learned to live with their river's tendency to flood – and not just through co-existence in a waterscape – or waterscape (Keating, Portman, Robertson, 2012), but through a positively affectionate watery co-existence.

## 2. *The gift of the Po: Promise (but also peril)*

The Po engenders a sense of promise and a sense of peril among those who live on its banks and in its valley. Though rising at just over 2,000 metres, Val Padana – Italy's only extensive plain – begins after just 30 kilometres at 240 metres above sea level. Its catchment area (*bacino fluviale*) is also remarkably large by Italian standards, occupying roughly a quarter of the country. Val Padana pos-

<sup>3</sup> For summaries of the historical literature on rivers, see Evenden (2018) and Schönach (2017).

esses that winning combination, on a grand scale, of suitable climate, soil and topography – a convergence of qualities exceptional in a nation dominated by uplands. Silt washed down from the Alps and Apennines since the Pliocene has built up alluvial deposits several hundred metres thick; northern Italians – and visiting Egyptians – described it as Italy’s Nile; Val Padana was the gift of the Po just as ancient Egypt was the gift of the Nile (Bey, 1902, p. 23).

For those from other countries, Val Padana was not the Italy of the popular imagination. As the US Department of Agriculture’s Chief of Irrigation Investigations reflected after his 1903 tour:

The appearance of the country was a surprise. I had thought of Italy as a land of oranges, olives, and grapes. The irrigated section is not, however, the fruit-growing one... Much of the country surrounding Milan is devoted to *marcite*, a kind of [winter] water meadow which produces enormously... and helps to make this one of the leading dairy districts of southern Europe... To the south the country was flatter, and the mulberry trees and grain fields gave way to great green stretches of rice fields (Mead, 1904, p. 7).

Yet the Po Valley’s abundance of water represented a bane as well as a boon. Italy is particularly flood-prone, and Val Padana – nineteenth-century geographers dubbed it the Italian Netherlands – is especially vulnerable. Rivers in the Po basin (*bacino idrografico*) are particularly dynamic (Braga and Gervasoni, 1990, pp. 113-126) and dramatically fluctuating seasonal water levels disrupted travel. The main channel’s drastic vacillations washed away entire settlements, switched them to the opposite bank or forced their relocation (Frye, 1908, pp. 352, 199). Communities faced the delicate balancing act of how to reap the river’s benefits without undue exposure to its risk, though we must bear in mind that vulnerability is not an intrinsic quality of place, but a product of human decisions (Bankoff, 2010).

Various river-related quotations from poems and fictional writing (including stories by Riccardo Bacchelli and Giovanni Guareschi that feature in this essay) are inscribed on marble plaques on a side wall of *Madonna del Po*, a tiny chapel situated between the levee (*argine*) and the river at Zibello. Among them is an extract from Virgil’s poem, *Georgic I*:

Monarch of rivers, raging far and wide,  
Eridanus [Po] pours forth his torrent tide,  
Down the wide deluge whirls th’ uprooted wood,  
And swells with herds and stalls th’ incumbent’d flood.

Virgil’s image of an angry, ferocious, destructive and all-encompassing river reappeared centuries later in a British army officer’s account of crossing Val Padana in 1816, en route from Milan to Rome. Major Frye quoted from *Orlando Furioso* (1516), an epic romance by Po valley poet Ludovico Ariosto:

Even with that rage wherewith the stream that reigns,  
The king of rivers – when he breaks his mound,  
And makes himself a way through Mantuan plains –  
The greasy furrows and glad harvests, round,  
And, with the sheepcotes, flock, and dogs and swains

Bears off, in his o'erwhelming waters drowned;  
 Over the elm's high top the fishes glide,  
 Where fowls erewhile their nimble pinions plied  
 (Ariosto, 1829, p. 137; Frye, 1908, p. 123).

The “world turned upside down” prospect of fish swimming where fowl usually fly is also evoked in a semi-autobiographical, novelistic account of early twentieth-century life on a farm near the river between Pavia and Cremona. In Mario Borsa's *The Farm on the River Po (La cascina sul Po)* (1931), the embankment (aka levee or *argine*) divides two starkly contrasting landscapes. On the inner side, heath, marsh and willows stretch down to the river. On the outer side lies the cultivated plain, with its fields of millet, maize, wheat, flax and rice, divided by rows of mulberry trees. Once extracted from the river, water is converted from potentially hazardous substance into benign commodity, «busy night and day, bearing everywhere nourishment, life, and verdure, it was the great, good, untiring housekeeper» (Borsa, 1931, p. 21).

At the heart of events in *La cascina sul Po* is a late autumn flood. Water barrels down from swollen tributaries (*affluenti*), the heads of poplar (*pioppo*) trees stick up above the water, the large rectangular vat for treading wine grapes doubles as an emergency raft for cattle, and troops from the barracks of military engineers in Piacenza and Pavia finally come to the rescue. The popular mind usually associates the breaching of flood defences with the overtopping of a levee. Yet, «not always does the river assail and beat down its banks fairly. More often it takes them treacherously by surprise, seeping in below by invisible and unsuspected ways» (Borsa, 1931, pp. 50, 74-94). Prolonged flooding generates subsurface leakage that travels horizontally, eventually collapsing a saturated levee.

In the dining room of Borsa's farmhouse, plates nailed to the wall record the crest of the waters lapping within the room in 1807, 1812, 1839, 1848, 1857, 1868 and 1872. But the most devastating floods (*alluvioni*) on record struck the lower river in November 1951. The immediate cause of *la rotta biblica* was prolonged heavy autumn rainfall. The “dreary sea” of the Polesine region (where the river rose 10 metres in places), recorded the American magazine, *Life*, was «fetid with carcasses of drowned animals, floating debris and uprooted coffins from cemeteries». Nearly 6,000 houses and 9,000 farms were destroyed. At least 150 *polesane* died and 160,000 became homeless. Casualties extended to 13,000 livestock and hundreds of thousands of tons of wheat and sugar beet were ruined (*Life*, 1951, pp. 39-43).

### 3. *The Po's watery brute force and Val Padana's culture of risk adjustment*

For Cesare Zavattini, the pioneering *neorealismo* screenwriter from the lower Po village of Luzzara (Zavattini, 1963), the flood of 1951 was a tyrannical force. Inundation, he reflected, reduced people to “slaves of nature” (*schiavi della natura*) (Chierici, 1994). Hydro-engineering works designed to emancipate human communities from this river bondage provide a compelling European example of the operations of a hydraulic society (a concept Karl Wittfogel

advanced in 1957 to characterize the intimate connections between the centralization of political power and ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Indian water management [irrigation] practices and infrastructure). A major body of law and intricate state apparatus emerged to govern possession and distribution of Po valley water, covering intake and outtake; the operation of embankments, dams and sluices; and the coordination of regulatory efforts (Manieri, 2016; Parrinello, 2017, pp. 65-96). Wittfogel suggested that the political and administrative system best suited to elaborate hydraulic controls is a highly centralized regime with basin-wide authority and armed with ample financial, technological and manpower resources (Wittfogel, 1957; Worster, 1985, pp. 21-30, 41-50).

Large scale flood defence and irrigation works begun in the sixth century BC were resumed by the Romans, who drained marshes, embanked the main river and cut canals. After the Roman Empire’s demise, an overarching authority was absent (Davidson, 1875, p. 74). From the 1600s, the state assumed more responsibility for water management. The practical work of confining the river and its tributaries underpinned the great leap forward in the «science of waters» (Maffioli, 1994, pp. 6, 12, 23; Davids, 2006, pp. 69, 711, 77). Successive generations of hydro-engineers thought they knew what to do to re-form the Po. The task of armouring (training) a winding river was particularly challenging: erosion is endemic to concave bends, so they straightened *il nostro Old Man River* to get him back on the proper track. They calculated that increasing the channel’s slope and speed by smoothing out the bends (canalization or channelization) would reduce discharge and lower the risk of overflow (Surian and Rinaldi, 2003, p. 312). Unfortunately, concentrating a river’s flow makes it behave like a bobsleigh run (Zwingle, 2002, p. 108). Confinement within levees usually accompanies channelization, exacerbating the danger of spillage by shrinking floodplain storage capacity. Even when canalization eases the flooding threat on an upper river, this simply transfers vulnerability to its lower reaches, where, in the case of the Po, it is already acutest (Marchi, 1995, pp. 475, 477).

Moreover, as the levees divorcing the river from its floodplain trapped the silt, the Po’s bed rose. The standard solution, from lower Po to lower Mississippi, has been to build up the levees. As a result, the Po flows well above its floodplain. In the 1870s, a British geologist recorded that «the full-flooded river often runs higher than the tops of the houses» (Ramsay, 1872, p. 125). Downstream from Ferrara, the Po is now a «perched river» without a functioning flood plain (Ferronnato, 2007, p. 1224).

Zavattini’s notion of enslavement to the Po’s brutal liquid force – like Berra’s analogy with a drunken, malicious father – is not just a colourful phrase. These figures of speech illustrate how those inhabiting risky biophysical environments employ black humour and resort to anthropomorphism as part of their psychological coping practices. At the same time, these personifications tend to obscure how the people of the Po adapted to the dominating liquid landscape. In this regard, Val Padana provides an instructive, if neglected example of how waterscape communities (Molle *et al.*, 2009; Rogers, 2013) develop a culture of risk adjustment and mitigation. Floods do not come as a

shock to these communities. Within a culture of risk adaptation, water out of place is not an unmitigated disaster. Floods are anticipated and an accretion of locally generated knowledge and experience helps members of a flood-labile community to read the signs of floodwater's approach and to take pre-emptive and/or impact-minimizing action.

This culture of coping evolved, of course, in tandem with ecological and economic shifts. As the risk averse hydro-culture's regulatory infrastructure of the Romans deteriorated, fields and villages were abandoned. The river reoccupied its floodplain and reconstituted its wetlands. The free rein that flooding now enjoyed along the middle and lower river discouraged the re-emergence of substantial settlements. Villages and farms retreated to a safer distance and adopted economies more appropriate to the re-natured fluvial regime than crops. A more diverse and flexible economy capitalized on existing fluvial assets by incorporating fishing, waterfowl hunting, grazing of water meadows and reed harvesting. Rather than being regarded as an aberration in an orderly and normatively dry world, the emergent culture of risk adjustment "normalized" the waterscape, which it recast as productive. By the eleventh century, though, the painstaking process of rebuilding Roman *argini* had begun and flooding once again became de-normalized (Squatriti, 2002, pp. 69-74).

The perception of a flood as aberrant tends to concentrate attention on technocratic solutions. Nonetheless, flood-susceptible communities in today's Po Valley display features of risk adjustment: floods are accepted as «a frequent life experience» and «coping practices» have emerged (Bankoff, 2009, p. 267; Bankoff, 2013, p. 19). Some of these practices are preventative. To maximize resilience and minimize risk, villages such as Zibello lie a discrete (and respectful) distance from the nearby yet invisible river. The protection afforded by a grassy earthen embankment is reinforced by a buffer zone of bottomlands (*golene*) occupying the land between levee and river. In villages like Guarda Ferrarese, the houses huddle behind the river-facing church, cheek-by-jowl with the levee. In his novel, *Il mulino del Po*, Riccardo Bacchelli, who grew up in the Po Valley city of Bologna, observed that the church protected the villagers «from the encroaching river, like a hen covering its chicks» (Bacchelli, 1952, p. 331).

The regional culture of risk adjustment (that did not place its trust entirely in God) is powerfully illuminated in the short stories of Giovanni Guareschi, set in his Po Valley homeland, and published in the late 1940s and the 1950s<sup>4</sup>. The mainstay of these tales (over 300) – located in an unnamed river village between December 1946 and December 1947, when many local communities elected communists to public office – was the incessant feuding between the parish priest, Don Camillo, and his arch-rival, Peponne, the local communist mayor (Guareschi, 1948, p. x). In the altercations and bickering between priest and politician, the omnipresent (and almost omnipotent) river often assumed a central role (Guareschi, 1952, p. 8).

<sup>4</sup> Davide Papotti has commented extensively on the sense of place that infuses Guareschi's stories (Papotti, 1996, pp. 27, 33, 35, 39, 40, 53, 55, 57-58, 73-74, 78, 81, 83, 87-88, 102, 123, 128-29), but does not specifically address flooding.

In this small, fluvial corner of the world, the author explained in his preface to the original Italian edition of the "Don Camillo" stories, the «landscape never changes» (Guareschi, 1948, p. x). On one level, he was referring to the placid nature of an uneventful river. Yet his comment can also be applied to flooding as an unchanging aspect of riverside life. *The Little World of Don Camillo* (1952), the first of five film adaptations of Guareschi's stories (black and white, French-Italian coproductions filmed in the *Bassa Padana* village of Brescello), was released shortly after the November 1951 floods (photos of Brescello's inundation that month feature in Brescello's Museo Peppone e Don Camillo). The opening scene (featuring many villagers as extras) is based on "The procession" (*La processione*). This story's starting point is the ancient tradition of propitiation: rivers that river people depend on but which also threaten their security must be rendered favourably disposed. The annual blessing of the Po (that it should refrain from excesses and behave decently) entails removing the crucifix from above the altar in the village church and carrying it down to the riverbank. The local communists boycott the time-honoured *benedizione del fiume* because Don Camillo bars them from bringing along their own sacred object, the red flag (*Bandiera rossa*). The priest is left in a quandary.

Shamed into action by an impatient God (who inquires «Are we going now?...The river must be looking beautiful in this sunshine and I shall really enjoy seeing it»), the cross-bearing priest sets off alone. On reaching the riverbank, he is surrounded by the communist citizenry, who eventually join him. The sharp rebuke he delivers to them illustrates the Judeo-Christian tradition's tendency to regard a flood as an "act of God" in the literal sense of divine retribution. Don Camillo would be delighted if a wrathful God could employ the river's power to flood as a weapon to punish sinful people. He tells the crowd that if the relatively few homes of decent people left in the godless village could float like Noah's ark, he would entreat the Lord to make the river overflow its banks and drown the filthy, communist-infested place. Since even God cannot launch a surgical strike that selectively punishes only wayward souls, he prays that God delivers everyone from the evils of floods and showers the locality with indiscriminate prosperity (Guareschi, 1980, pp. 68-71).

Guareschi's second collection of stories in English, *Don Camillo and the prodigal son* (1952), concludes with tall tales of high water suggesting that community solidarity is more potent than divine protection. In "When the rains came", the "mighty Po", swollen with days and nights of relentless rain, pushes harder and harder against the embankment. The villagers are particularly concerned about the security of a levee bombed in World War Two and only recently fixed. Old-timers associate the impending calamity with Don Camillo's absence; when the irascible and pugnacious priest was rusticated to an Alpine village, he took the crucifix that protects them against the river's wrath. Having returned, to demonstrate his faith in the Lord and his confidence in the engineers that inspected the dodgy dike, and to reassure villagers, he goes down and sits on it. Soon enough, his sworn enemy, Peppone, joins his vigil on the dike (Guareschi, 1980, pp. 217-19, 220-22, 223-25, 218-20).

The second film, *Il ritorno di Don Camillo* (*Return of Don Camillo*, 1953) cul-

minates in an almighty springtime flood. While the entire village population is perched on the main embankment on a Sunday morning, surrounded by their salvaged worldly goods, the doughty priest, standing waist-deep in the water that fills his church, tolls the bell at 10.00. Conducting Mass for an absent congregation, Don Camillo offers the consoling reminder that, just as this is not the first time the river has invaded their homes, as before, the waters will «return to their rightful place». Meanwhile, the work of reconstruction will begin afresh (Guareschi, 1980, pp. 220-25). Then, eventually, the entire process repeats itself.

This flood that features in the film and the story on which it is based illustrates some salient features of a culture that has learned to live with flooding. When a flood comes along – as Po villagers expect it to – they treat it more like an event than a disaster<sup>5</sup>. They engage in damage limitation by drawing on the social capital – collective memory (Viglione *et al.*, 2014, p. 72), ethos of interdependence and “brotherhood of pain” – they have accumulated by occupying this particular place for centuries. Moreover, community solidarity (togetherness), symbolized by the cooperation of Catholic priest and communist mayor to save the people and place they both love deeply, transcends religious and political divisions. After the flood of November 1951, devoted readers of Guareschi’s stories from around the world mailed him parcels containing blankets and clothing, marked «For the people of Don Camillo and Peppone» (Guareschi, 1980, pp. 17-18). A shared stake in an amphibious society helps bridge the bitterest of divides.

Guareschi’s hydro-citizens move possessions to a higher storey of their buildings. And if the water continues to rise, they transfer them to the highest ground until its level subsides. Meanwhile, they go about their business in watercraft. They also employ prayer: God and the river deity are beseeched to end the rains and make the floodwaters recede. This mentality should not to be confused with complacency – the so-called “levee effect” (Viglione *et al.*, p. 72; Di Baldassarre *et al.*, 2013, pp. 3295-96) – a delusional mindset of risk elimination insistent that floods should never happen again, delegates responsibility to the public authorities in charge of flood defence infrastructure and places its faith in technological solutions to what was previously regarded as more or less insoluble.

#### 4. *Conclusion: learning to live lovingly with the Po*

Over the centuries, the Po’s “children” have developed an elaborate place-based example of socio-cultural hydrology (Di Baldassarre, *et al.*, 2013; Viglione *et al.*, 2014). Integral to this hydro-social mindset (Linton, Budds, 2014, pp. 173-75; Budds, Linton, Mcdonnell, 2014) is an attitude of «fearful veneration» (*venerazione timorosa*) (Papotti, 1996, p. 115). This wary but respectful approach has allowed successive generations to curb the impact of the excessive drinking habits and nasty streak of their drunken, malicious father (as im-

<sup>5</sup> For further insights on how and when the idea of a flood as natural catastrophe (an abnormality) replaces the notion of a flood as natural event (the norm), see Castonguay (2007).



aged by Brera). His children have not stamped out his behaviour, identified by Virgil and Ariosto as autocratic, angry and wide-reaching in its disruptiveness. Not even with the assistance of the state and its engineering expertise have they managed to eliminate these traits. Indeed, this persistent threat to those who live in its valley (Savona, 2002, p. 47; Ghelfi, Bonafini, 1999) may explain why the Po has not acquired a secure position within the territorialized ethnoscape of Italian national consciousness comparable to that enjoyed by the Thames in England and the Rhine in Germany.

The key point is that *gente del Po* do not cling to unreasonable expectations of success regarding the feasibility or likelihood of a watertight defence system. In other words, they expect to get their feet wet. Writing in 1939, Michelangelo Antonioni, the film director from Ferrara (where the Po becomes tidal), emphasized just how difficult it was to “escape” the suffering brought by flooding. He also anticipated Brera’s attraction to the image of an autocratic and incorrigible father. For Antonioni, the relationship between people and river (*il rapporto uomo-fiume*) was visceral, spiritual and almost magical:

It is not ridiculous to say that the people of the Po Valley are in love with the Po. In fact, the river is surrounded by a halo of instinctive attraction...and, to a certain extent, the Po can be regarded as the despot of its valley. The people of the valley “feel” the Po. How this feeling comes to reification, we do not know. We only know that it is “in the air” and is felt as a subtle bewitchment (Antonioni, 1978, pp. 79-80).

He wanted to make a film «with the Po as the central character, in which the spirit of the river would provide the interest of the film» (Antonioni, 1978, p. 82)<sup>6</sup>. His 11-minute neo-realistic documentary, *Gente del Po* (1947), mostly shot in the delta region in the winter of 1942-43, depicts fragments of labouring life on and by the river – uncoordinated, banal glimpses of human stories connected by the thread of a hard-working river as protagonist that, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, seeps into every aspect of human life<sup>7</sup>. As part of their amphibious culture and as an expression of their watery sense of place (McEwen, Jones, Robertson, 2014, pp. 330-32; Vallerani, 2018, pp. 9-11) and co-constituted identities (Strang, 2004, pp. 4-5), *gente del Po* have tried to absorb as well as to repel the Po’s palpable liquidity.

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<sup>6</sup> A discussion of the agency of rivers lies beyond the scope of this essay. For further insight, see Coates (2013, pp. 24-27).

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the delta’s cultural representations, see Peterle and Visentin (2017; 2018).

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## Un “vecchio padre ubriacone e malignazzo”: la relazione instabile fra le genti del Po e il loro fiume

La relazione fra il Po e le persone che abitano il suo territorio è da sempre complessa e non di rado contrastata. Come spesso affermano gli abitanti del fiume: *Al Po al dà 'e'l tos* – il Po dà e il Po toglie. Il saggio esamina il modo in cui le genti del Po hanno risposto all'instabilità di un fiume che il giornalista Gianni Brera ha definito “un vecchio padre ubriacone e malignazzo”. Attraverso le fonti letterarie e cinematografiche, si cercherà di approfondire e analizzare la complessità delle reazioni, e relazioni, emozionali che coniugano da un lato, affezione e rispetto, dall'altro, ansia, paura, esasperazione e rassegnazione. Sempre sulla scorta dell'analisi della *fiction*, si cercherà di dimostrare che coloro che vivono lungo le rive hanno sviluppato una cultura di adattamento al rischio che gli permette di coesistere con l'imprevedibilità del fiume. L'argomento principale dell'articolo si basa sull'assunto che le genti del Po siano diventate esseri umani anfibi, adatti sia per la terra che per l'acqua. Al di là dell'utilizzo strettamente figurativo del concetto di liquidità, pur tuttavia mantenendo la sua immagine d'incertezza e di flusso in costante movimento, la liquidità verrà interpretata sia in senso letterale e materiale che come proprietà definitiva e intrinseca del paesaggio. Oltre ad aggiungere un contributo alla letteratura esistente sulla rappresentazione culturale dei fiumi, questo articolo (che utilizza fonti in inglese e italiano) si inserisce nel dibattito geografico e culturale per discutere il modo in cui le persone resistono alle inondazioni. Questo aspetto è stato spesso discusso e limitato ai paesi del sud-est asiatico, come pure la nozione di società anfibia è stata applicata soltanto ai Paesi Bassi. Inoltre, in termini di approccio disciplinare, il saggio va oltre la prospettiva, i metodi e le fonti della storiografia, per abbracciare quelli degli studi umanistico-ambientali – un'area di ricerca interdisciplinare che interpreta le fonti letterarie e cinematografiche come documenti legittimi per comprendere i fenomeni alluvionali.

## Un “vieux père ivre et méchant”: l'incertain relation entre la gens du Po e leur fleuve

La relation entre le Pô et les habitants de la vallée est multiple et souvent orageuse. Comme le remarquent ceux qui vivent avec le fleuve: *Al Po al dà 'e'l tos* – Le Pô cède et le Pô emporte. Dans cet article, nous examinons comment ils ont réagi à une rivière instable que le journaliste Gianni Brera a personnifiée comme un “vieux père ivre et méchant”. Je montre, à travers des sources littéraires et cinématographiques, comment vivre avec le Pô a provoqué une réaction émotionnelle complexe combinant des éléments d'affection et de respect avec anxiété, peur, exaspération et résignation. Tout en continuant à tirer parti des idées tirées de la fiction et du film, je soutiens ensuite que ceux qui vivent sur ses rives ont développé une culture d'adaptation et d'ajustement des risques qui leur permet de coexister avec un fleuve prévisible et imprévisible. Mon principal argument est que les habitants du Pô sont devenus des amphibiens humains, aptes à la terre et à l'eau, dans une relation amphibie avec leur rivière. Allant au-delà de l'utilisation strictement figurative de la liquidité, tout en conservant ses notions centrales d'incertitude, de flux et de mouvement constant, je m'engage avec la liquidité au sens littéral et matériel en tant que propriété définitive du paysage. En plus d'ajouter au corpus de connaissances existant sur la représentation culturelle des rivières, cette étude de cas (utilisant des sources en anglais et en italien) représente un élargissement du contexte géographique et culturel pour une discussion sur la manière dont les cultures gèrent les inondations. Cela a été largement limité à l'Asie du Sud-

Est, tout comme la notion de société amphibie s’est limitée aux Pays-Bas. De plus, en termes d’approches disciplinaires, cet essai dépasse les perspectives, les méthodes et les matériaux de l’historien pour englober ceux des humanités environnementales – un domaine de recherche interdisciplinaire qui prend au sérieux les sources fictives et filmiques comme documents légitimes pour la compréhension des inondations.

