

# **Aesthetics of Control and Absence in the Vajont Disaster and Giovanni Michelucci's Chiesa Monumentale di Santa Maria Immacolata**

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This article examines the intersection of aesthetics, memory, and technopolitics through a critical analysis of the Vajont disaster and Giovanni Michelucci's Chiesa Monumentale di Santa Maria Immacolata in Longarone. It explores how Michelucci's controversial project, built on the site of a village church destroyed by the 1963 Vajont disaster, responds to the physical, environmental, and symbolic violence of the nearby Vajont dam, an emblem of the Italian technosphere and extractivist modernity. The disaster, caused by the collapse of Monte Toc into the dam's reservoir, represents a catastrophic failure rooted in the technocratic disregard for local and environmental semiotics in favor of technological abstraction. Drawing on the works of Marco Armiero, Peter K. Haff, and Gilles Deleuze, the article analyzes two competing semio-epistemic regimes: one grounded in dominance and blindness to natural and local signs; the other, in contemplative attention to presence and absence. The latter regime, exemplified by Michelucci's church, represents a new aesthetic paradigm for post-disaster remembrance through architecture. Accordingly, the article proposes a radical alternative to the aesthetics of epistemic control, reimagining community as a shared openness to loss rather than as a monument that recreates a fixed past.

**Keywords:** technosphere, environmental semiotics, Vajont disaster, Giovanni Michelucci

# Aesthetics of Control and Absence in the Vajont Disaster and Giovanni Michelucci's Chiesa Monumentale di Santa Maria Immacolata<sup>1</sup>

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«Vajont è anche questo: mille bare con qualcosa dentro e altre mille senza niente dentro... Mille e non più mille... Perché non c'erano corpi per tutte le bare... Da metterle in terra, o anche chissà dove, a riposare...»

Marco Paolini, Gabriele Vacis. *Il Racconto di Vajont*,<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

What purpose does aesthetics serve in the recovery period following a disaster? When commemorating the destruction of a landmark building, is it a profanation of the victims' memory to erect an experimental monument instead of rebuilding a copy of the original? Can an ostentatious display of aesthetic inventiveness convey the sense of profound loss that accompanies the extinction of a community? These and similar questions confront the modernist Chiesa Monumentale di Santa Maria Immacolata – with its spacious amphitheatres, rose-coloured concrete, and spiralling stairwells – which now stands in the place of the 18th-century Church of Longarone, a beloved chapel mourned by the surviving community after its complete destruction during the 1963 Vajont disaster. However, as I argue in this article, the commemorative building, despite its architectural and political contortions, liberates itself from the controlling imagination of its maker – the illustrious 20th-century architect Giovanni Michelucci – and gestures toward a speculative, contemplative dimension of memory that succeeds, if only fleetingly, to evoke a vanished community, the surrounding nature, and the

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<sup>2</sup> M. Paolini, G. Vacis, *Il Racconto del Vajont*, Garzanti, Milano 2013, p. 12.

hope for peace. In the end, Michelucci's architectural gesture, despite participating in the dynamics of technocratic power over local people and knowledge, becomes a sign of care that is radically opposed to the imposition of the Vajont dam three decades earlier.

The Vajont disaster of October 9, 1963, devastated several villages and left a death toll of 1,910 victims (the exact number varies by source<sup>3</sup>), all inhabitants of the Piave Valley on the border between the Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia regions of Italy. Due to its grandeur and technological power, the Vajont dam, a project built by the Società Adriatica di Elettricità (SADE) during the years of the Italian economic miracle,<sup>4</sup> was seen as emblematic of its time. The project, along with many other undertakings of similar magnitude and ambition, described by Marco Armiero as «modern<sup>5</sup> sirens – forces capable of transforming rivers into turbines and valleys into laboratories»,<sup>6</sup> was celebrated by engineers and political institutions as a symbol of progress and the definitive answer to the growing energy demands stemming from the rapid development and industrialization of the region. From the 1920s until 1943, the Vajont dam project underwent multiple iterations, each envisioning a larger dam than the previous one.<sup>7</sup> In 1943, as Armiero, citing Marco Paolini, recounts, «with the country divided between Nazi and Allied occupation, the Higher Council of Public Works met in Rome»<sup>8</sup> and approved a project that would be authorized in 1948 by the Einaudi government. The project's 1937 iteration proposed by SADE presented a dam 261 meters in height, while the final version, approved in 1957, reached 722 meters above sea level, with a reserve capacity of up to 150 million cubic meters.<sup>9</sup> Carlo Semenza, the project's designer, who would later become a world-renowned

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice notes that «The final count for the accident was 1,917 victims of which 1,450 in Longarone, 109 in Codissago and Castellavazzo, 158 in Erto and Casso and 200 from other municipalities». L. Temper, J. Martinez-Alier, *Vajont Dam disaster, Italy* in the “Global Atlas of Environmental Justice”, 2015, <https://ejatlas.org/print/vajont-dam-disaster-italy>.

<sup>4</sup> The Italian economic miracle refers to the rapid industrial growth of Italy between the late 1950s and early 1970s, when the country was transformed from a largely agrarian society into one of the world's major economies. The process was initiated as a break with the fascist regime's militarized economic policies.

<sup>5</sup> Translations from the Italian, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

<sup>6</sup> A. Marco, *La tragedia del Vajont: Ecologia politica di un disastro*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2023, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> For an engineering geology review of the logistical decisions that preceded the Vajont disaster, and for a summary of the studies undertaken before and after the landslide, see R. Genevois, P. R. Tecca, *The Vajont landslide: State-of-the-art* in “Italian Journal of Engineering Geology and Environment”, pp. 15-39, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4408/IJEGE.2013-06.B-02>. A timeline of major events leading up to the construction of the Vajont dam and the Vajont disaster can be found in F. Niccolini, *Timeline of a Disaster: From the Construction of the Vajont Plant to the Trial*, tr. A. Del Vesco, in “Vajont Foundation”, [https://fondazionevajont.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Cronologia\\_inglese.pdf](https://fondazionevajont.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Cronologia_inglese.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> A. Marco, *La tragedia del Vajont: Ecologia politica di un disastro*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2023, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

hydraulic engineer, set out to construct «the world’s tallest arch dam».<sup>10</sup> It was, for all intents and purposes, an exceptionally ambitious technological undertaking with significant economic and political backing.

However, the planning and construction regime imposed by SADE – and by the political apparatus that the company succeeded in mobilizing from the very start – systematically disregarded the material and immaterial signs emerging from the landscape and local community. For instance, the very name of the nearby mountain, Monte Toc, indicated a more troubling assessment of the natural environment and its capacity to host the dam: in the local Friulian dialect, Monte Toc translates as the «Rotten Mountain», as «toc», an abbreviation of the word «patoc», means «broken», «rotten».<sup>11</sup> During the construction of the dam, fissures opened in nearby roads, homes, and even along the mountain’s slopes, as reported by the locals and journalist Tina Merlin.<sup>12</sup> All of these and other signs were ignored by the project’s constructors, whose reliance on technical abstraction did not leave room for the inclusion of local and environmental knowledge. In fact, the epistemic regime adopted by SADE paid no attention to the mountain’s slow language and constant movement, and even deliberately suppressed any signs that would counteract its technocratic superiority.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Marco, *La tragedia del Vajont: Ecologia politica di un disastro*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2023, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Istituto di Ricerca per la Protezione Idrogeologica, *9 Ottobre 1963. Il disastro del Vajont*, in “Popolazione a Rischio da Frana e da Inondazione in Italia”, <https://polaris.irpi.cnr.it/9-ottobre-1963-il-disastro-del-vajont/>.

<sup>12</sup> Tina Merlin was a journalist from the neighbouring town of Belluno who worked for the journal *l’Unità* and undertook a detailed investigation of the corruption behind SADE’s project. She called attention to the risks that the dam posed for the community, warning years before of the impending disaster. Merlin was silenced by the political authorities – in fact, she was even denounced by the law enforcement agency for spreading misinformation and disturbing public order – and her warnings were considered alarmist. Her book (T. Merlin, *Sulla pelle viva: come si costruisce una catastrofe: il caso del Vajont*, Cierre, Caselle 2004) documents her investigation of the events that preceded the Vajont disaster and its effects over the following years. Merlin’s account served as a foundation for Marco Paolini’s public performance of the *Story of Vajont* (1993) and for Renzo Martinelli’s film *Vajont* (2001).

Figure 1. The Vajont dam, finished construction, September 1963.<sup>13</sup>

In 1960, SADE obtained authorization from the Superior Council of Public Works to fill, for the first time, the reservoir of the hydroelectric dam. A series of cracks appeared on the Monte Toc, with the most important being «the M-shaped fissure-imprint about 2,500 meters long [that] opened on Mount Toc».<sup>14</sup> Three years later, on October 9, 1963, a part of the mountain collapsed into the water reservoir, causing a tidal wave that crashed over the dam and engulfed the villages below.

This landslide and its relation to signs<sup>15</sup> is symptomatic of the different semiotic regimes employed by technocratic and vernacular epistemologies. The former involves a refusal to see, privileging abstract visualizations produced by planners. In this context, the M of the mountain, a sign of nature's role as both actor and archive, represents a counter-aesthetic to the engineering order imposed on it in order to erase what is inconvenient to future plans. In fact, it is important to note the fundamental difference between the two types of relation to signs and visual regimes:

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<sup>13</sup> Unknown photographer, Lecco, *Vajont. Per non dimenticare*, 2023, <https://primalecco.it/tempo-libero/eventi/vajont-per-non-dimenticare/>.

<sup>14</sup> R. Zanolli, *Vajont: Cronaca di una tragedia annunciata*, De Bastiani, Godega di Sant'Urbano 2016, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> For a technical account of SADE's process of handling the 1960 slope crisis – including the decision to ignore or gloss over several signs of fissures and erosion – with the participation of rock mechanics engineer Leopold Müller, hydraulics engineer and University of Padua professor Augusto Ghetti, and SADE's engineers, alongside Semenza, see P. Paronuzzi, A. Bolla, *I tecnici di fronte alla complessità del Vajont: carenze conoscitive e accondiscendenza*, in “Monografia sul Vajont (1963-2023)”, a cura di N. Aprilis, G. Dri, *Rassegna Tecnica del Friuli-Venezia Giulia & Notiziario Ingegneri*, LXIX, 2023, pp. 78-85.

the vernacular approach exhibits attentiveness to environmental signs, along with constant observation and interpretive reading, and is rooted in the present, while the technocratic approach is shaped by projection into the future and reduction of both spatial and temporal dimensions. The Vajont disaster, therefore, marks the triumph – and failure – of the aesthetics of control over nature and exemplifies the cost of ignoring a countervailing aesthetic regime of attention to material memory and environmental time.



Figure 2. Fissures that appeared on Monte Toc on November 9, 1960.<sup>16</sup>

The process of constructing the monumental dam and the recklessness of those responsible for its planning, along with the disaster that followed, are often forgotten despite being extensively documented.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the well-known instability of the Monte Toc followed a course that was forewarned by locals, journalists, and scholars – and by the mountain itself. The tragic and violent event that occurred on October 9, 1963, resulted from the systematic refusal to interpret and act upon the signs that did not align with the forward march of extractivist modernity. Thus, the epistemic split between reading and erasing signs maps onto a broader political economy of knowledge and attention, one that marginalizes environmental and communitarian epistemic practices to maximise control through abstraction. The dam functioned

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<sup>16</sup> G. Masè, M. Semenza, P. Semenza, M.C. Turrini, *Le foto della frana del Vajont. La scoperta dell'antica frana. Le fotografie e gli studi geologici di Edoardo Semenza, Franco Giudici e Daniele Rossi, prima e dopo la catastrofe del 9 ottobre 1963*, K-flash, Ferrara 2004, (3 maps & CD-ROM).

<sup>17</sup> In 2008, on the occasion of the International Year of Planet Earth, the Vajont disaster was declared by the UN as one of the 10 disasters caused by human negligence in the last 50 years. The records documenting and demonstrating that the Vajont disaster was caused by human negligence can be accessed at the State Archives of Belluno, Tina Merlin Cultural Association, Vajont Foundation of October 9, 1963, *Archival funds of the Vajont Criminal Proceedings*, [https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mow001/35\\_38%252B.pdf](https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mow001/35_38%252B.pdf).

as the central symbol of this forced interpretive regime – a symbol at the core of a semiotic apparatus geared to erase all signs that would obstruct the workings of the technosphere.

### The Standing Dam: A Monument to Technoscience

The Vajont disaster is a haunting symbol of what Peter K. Haff has termed *the technosphere*: «the set of large-scale networked technologies that underlie and make possible rapid extraction from the Earth of large quantities of free energy and subsequent power generation, long distance, nearly instantaneous communication, rapid long-distance energy and mass transport, the existence and operation of modern governmental and other bureaucracies, high-intensity industrial and manufacturing operations ... without which modern civilization ... could not exist».<sup>18</sup> In the case of Vajont, technological ambition detached from environmental reality produced a geo-technological assemblage with distinct metabolic and semiotic regimes. In fact, the metabolism of the Vajont dam was sustained by its disconnection from the semiotic ecology surrounding it. The dam functioned as an extension of the technosphere's isolated logic: it demanded and produced energy, scale, and spectacle while remaining indifferent to the fragile dynamics of the Monte Toc and the warnings of the local population. Moreover, as a monument to modern progress, the Vajont dam was a node in a larger system that prioritized extraction and systemic expansion over environmental stability, ethical considerations, and human and non-human lives. As Armiero argues, the tragedy of Vajont is emblematic of Anthropocene dynamics:

Looking out from the Vajont dam, it feels like one can touch the Anthropocene that everyone talks about. Certainly, the scientific definition emphasizes the planetary scale of humanity's transformative action; nonetheless, Vajont can function as a microcosm in which many of the central themes of the Anthropocene are reflected. At Vajont, humans became a geological force capable of moving mountains and setting a prehistoric landslide back into motion. At Vajont, engineers roam like gods – powerful and reckless in the way only gods and heroes can be. At Vajont, everyone seems to know that disaster is imminent, and yet it is never real enough to prompt immediate action – just as with climate change. The Anthropocene seen from the Vajont dam is the story of an

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<sup>18</sup> P. K. Haff, *Technology as a geological phenomenon: Implications for human well-being* in “Geological Society, London, Special Publications”, 395.1, 2014, pp. 301-309, pp. 301-2.

impending catastrophe caused by human arrogance, a story in which omens and signs are never enough to halt the relentless march of progress in the name of precaution.<sup>19</sup>

In the wake of the Vajont disaster, the Anthropocene can be understood as a regime of conscious forgetting in a double sense: one in which casualties are buried beneath monuments to progress, but also, as I will discuss in the second part of this article, as a regime that sets in motion an aesthetic machine that produces erasure and absence. Thus, the Anthropocene's monuments are those in which victims are entombed in silence – a condition captured masterfully by Paolini's description in the *Story of Vajont* (1993) as «mille bare con qualcosa dentro e altre mille senza niente dentro»<sup>20</sup> – «a thousand coffins with something inside and another thousand with nothing inside».

Particularly in academic parlance, we often approach great engineering projects, including failed ones, with an attitude of awe and respect, taking into consideration first and foremost their techno-industrial features while treating as secondary their social and environmental conditions and outcomes. Even in ecocritical frameworks, a project's supposed technical accomplishments can sometimes take precedence over its disastrous consequences, as illustrated in the introduction of the geological study of the Vajont disaster penned by Prestininzi: «While the construction technique used by Italian engineers in 1963 was adequate, as witnessed by the stability of the dam after 50 years, studies for the design of the impoundment and, in particular, applied geological studies proved to be inadequate».<sup>21</sup> In other words, the engineering and technical prowess of the dam remain unblemished; if anything, it was human error in adjacent fields that failed to live up to the dam's technological greatness.

However, the Vajont project was not merely a set of plans whose executioners overlooked some details, leading to disaster. Rather, the dam project, obsessed with its own technocratic transcendence, failed to live up to the environment, both natural and human, in which it was constructed. Given its outcome and consequences, what does it mean to state that «the construction technique (...) was adequate»<sup>22</sup> simply because the dam remains standing and inoperative fifty years after it levelled several villages? Is there anything adequate about a project

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<sup>19</sup> M. Armiero, *La tragedia del Vajont: Ecologia politica di un disastro*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2023, 14.

<sup>20</sup> M. Paolini, G. Vacis, *Il Racconto del Vajont*, Garzanti, Milano 2013, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> A. Prestininzi, *Editoriale*, in “International Conference on Vajont 1963-2013”, eds. R. Genevois, A. Prestininzi, Vol. 6, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2013, pp. 3-4, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

whose metabolic and semiotic regimes demolish the very conditions of its existence? Indeed, what does the popularity of this image – of the all-powerful technological landscape that survives its own destruction – reveal about the *aesthetic* power of the technosphere?

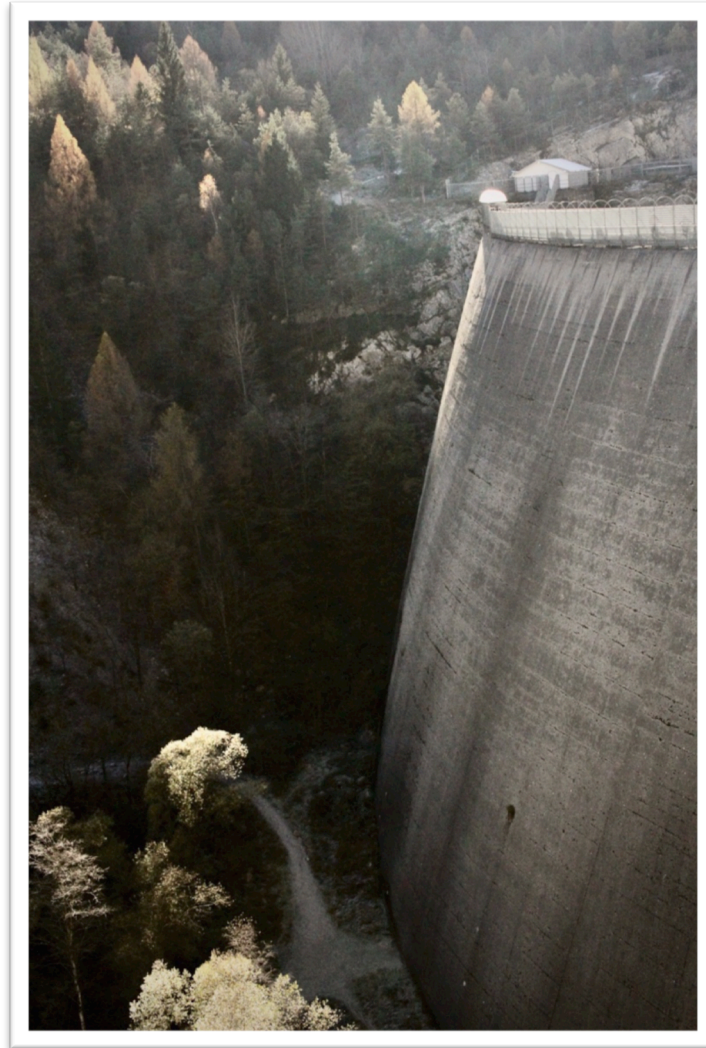


Figure 3. The disused Vajont dam, 61 years after the disaster.<sup>23</sup>

The dam's towering presence, its refusal to yield even in the face of geological instability, and its endurance after the destruction of Longarone, all exemplify the technosphere's ability to operate according to a logic distinct from, and often in opposition to, human and ecological well-being. Thus, the catastrophe is not a failure of *techné* but a manifestation of the technosphere's inherent drive to consume and transform the environment and its ability to

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<sup>23</sup> Photograph by the author, October 9, 2024.

immortalize the epistemic violence it imposes. The first witnesses to arrive at the sites of one of the five completely destroyed villages – Longarone – described their awe when confronted with the image of the immense dam that had remained undamaged:

Longarone had disappeared, turned into an immense riverbed, with very few houses left at the edges, visibly half-destroyed or damaged. The first image that aroused extreme wonder and deeply struck us was, on the right, the intact dam, gray, severe, and imposing as always, embedded in the sides of the mountain—those, yes, flayed and eroded by the immense, impetuous wave that had swept over them.<sup>24</sup>

It is, therefore, in the tension between the inhuman scale of the technosphere and the intimate scale of mourning that the task of memory begins. The technosphere's spectacle of mastery, symbolized in the witnesses' accounts by the towering dam amid the destruction, gives way to the imperative of reframing the narration of disasters representative for the Anthropocene with a focus on grief, silence, and the memory of those who were erased rather than through the neutralizing distance of technical adequacy. The asymmetry between engineered endurance and the vulnerability of the victims, as well as the dissonance embedded in the process of witnessing and remembrance, demand a reckoning that only art, in its ability to materialize and reproduce the very structures that were the cause of the destruction, can stage.

Valeria, who was sixteen at the time of the disaster and away from her village, Longarone, when the slide occurred, offers her account of the aftermath in an interview with Chiara Calzana – a voice that emerges from the void left in the wake of the tragedy:

You do not feel safe anymore, and security is the foundation of yourself. Why do I say that? Because it has become an abstract world, there is nothing that materially reminds you of your home, your nest, your parents, or the family. Nothing is left. You also have a different view of the place because the area was turned into a flood of stones and mud. So, your traditions, your history, which were your reference points... They were gone. You were thrown into nothingness. [...] I loved my little girl [meaning her young self]; I

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<sup>24</sup> I. Causeruccio, *Intervento degli alpini nella tragedia del Vajont*, in “Sei un alpino se”, <https://sites.google.com/site/mulidellacadore/racconti-e-poesie/intervento-degli-alpini-nella-tragedia-del-vajont>).

loved my place. I loved it. I loved my Longarone. My streets, my squares, the Piave River... All this was ripped away, even from within.<sup>25</sup>

The disintegration of the world that Valeria describes places loss at the centre of her imaginary and enacts a poetics of rupture in which the world becomes abstract – in the sense that both the visible and the referential have been lost. Thus, absence and abstraction constitute the world and the subject after the traumatic event, becoming foundational to the structures of memory and perception that narrate the loss. This testimony, like many others from Vajont and from environmental destruction sites across the world, demands an approach that reaches beyond the archival or evidentiary mode and builds a system of signs focused on absence and sustained by a reconfigured abstraction.



Figure 4. Longarone after the Vajont disaster.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> C. Calzana, *Witnesses, memories, and places of after catastrophe: the Vajont dam case* in “AHM conference 2022: witnessing, memory, and crisis”, Vol. 1, Amsterdam University Press, 2022, pp. 144-151, p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> Unknown author. Taken on October 30, 1963. UNESCO. *Criminal Proceedings of the Vajont Dam Disaster*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/criminal-proceedings-vajont-dam-disaster>.

## The Architect of the Technosphere

Engineer Carlo Semenza, the mastermind of the Vajont dam project, is recognized as one of the most prominent designers of dams in 20th-century Italy. Meanwhile, the «Grand Old Man of the Tuscan School»,<sup>27</sup> Giovanni Michelucci, is *par excellence* the architect of the great projects of the Italian technosphere of the same era. Michelucci developed his career as architect during the 1920s, under the Mussolini government, being connected with prominent figures of the Fascist regime, such as Minister of Education Giuseppe Bottai, architect Marcello Piacentini, and art critic Roberto Papini,<sup>28</sup> a prominent ideologue of the Fascist era. In the early part of his career, Michelucci participated in teams building colossal projects, such as the Città Universitaria di Roma, which promoted the Mussolini regime's nationalist and rationalist aesthetics. Perhaps his most celebrated project was the monumental train station Santa Maria Novella in Florence, built between 1934 and 1936. A highly controversial building due to its proximity to Florence's historic centre and the demolition of a row of historic houses to make space for it, the Santa Maria station is nevertheless considered one of the masterpieces of Italian Rationalism.<sup>29</sup> Besides promoting the Fascist regime's ideology, the station was intended to be a symbol of progress, movement, and industry,<sup>30</sup> much like the Vajont dam in the North.

The analogy between the two approaches – the construction of architectural masterpieces and the development of energy infrastructure – is not accidental and extends to the relations that the masterminds of such monumental projects had with the environment, the law, and the communities situated in the proximity of their works. Like Semenza, Michelucci did not hold much regard for the rule of law. Petrocelli notes, when setting the Vajont dam project in its historical context, that during «the years of the Second World War, there is a situation of confusion and power vacuum and the SADE obtains the necessary permits without any difficulty. The works were started in 1957, amid the protests of the inhabitants who feel in

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<sup>27</sup> M. D. Bardeschi, *Kiesler, the Florentine School and the Curving of the World (1966)*, in “*Histories of Postwar Architecture*” Vol. 10, 2022, pp. 75-81, p. 77, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/17720>.

<sup>28</sup> For more information, see F. D. Co, *Giovanni Michelucci: A Life One Century Long*, in “*Perspecta*”, 1992, pp. 99-115.

<sup>29</sup> For a reconstruction of the intense debates, controversies, and sociopolitical context around Michelucci's Santa Maria Novella in Florence, see C. Conforti, R. Dulio, M. Marandola, N. Musumeci, P. Ricco, *La stazione di Firenze di Giovanni Michelucci e del Gruppo Toscano 1932-1935*, Electa, Firenze 2016.

<sup>30</sup> For an exploration of the Florence Station in the context of fascist ideology and urban planning strategy, see W. Ward, *Rationalism: Architecture in Italy between the Wars*. “*Thirties Society Journal*”, 1987, pp. 32-41.

danger». <sup>31</sup> Semenza and SADE treated bureaucracy and the signs that the environment emits as unnecessary hurdles, which delay and hinder advancement toward progress. Likewise, describing with admiration Michelucci's process of building the imposing red steel bank in Colle Val d'Elsa, Brandlhuber states the following:

According to the building law, he should have cladded the steelwork for fire protection. But he didn't follow the regulations. I heard the story that he was telling: "I will never add it, because this legal system of Italy, well, it would take ten years or more to force me to modify it accordingly, and by then I will be dead anyhow." To me, this specific situation in Italy at the time, with this extremely slow legal apparatus, opened up a new exciting field to creating architecture: to not just go along with the rules but to use them creatively. <sup>32</sup>

Thus, both Semenza and Michelucci approached their projects with a combination of the ideology of progress and a Romantic vision of the individualist designer who overrides legal constraints, environmental concerns, and local lives and whose creative vision becomes the guiding force in a world reduced to a series of obstacles for the genius to overcome. Michelucci's approach, though centered on the expressive and mediating potential of architecture, mirrors the disregard for procedural norms exhibited by Semenza and SADE.

However, although Michelucci remained an architect of the technosphere, his sensibility – perhaps coupled with his affinity to informal aesthetics, which became dominant in the second part of his career – adds a sense of awareness and an excess in form that, instead of erasing signs, brings back heightened attention to them. These are signs of nature, of art, and of absence, embedded in projects that prioritize expression through action and movement rather than the commanding grandeur, traditionalism, and centralized aesthetics of his early works. Describing the shift in Michelucci's aesthetic register, Bardeschi writes as follows:

Thus Michelucci, who had always made the "praise of Nature", the critique of all stereotypes of Abstract Form and the exaltation of such fluid, pulsating, indescribable spaces (like life itself) his own constant point of reference for projecting himself into ever new experiments, was now returning to draw heavily on the great historical lesson of

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<sup>31</sup> C. Petrocelli, *Stability of the Vajont dam: the precision calculations of the Ferranti Mark I*, in "SIGCAS Comput. Soc.", Vol. 50, 3, 2021, p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3557900.3557904>.

<sup>32</sup> F. de Ferrari, A. Brandlhuber, *Don't follow the rules, create them!*, in "Laws", 104, 2020, pp. 12–33, p. 13.

Expressionism – from Mendelsohn to Taut – assimilated in his formative years and which he now effectively combined with a strong focus on the “avant-garde” of the Informal (this is surely one of the rare echoes in architecture of Action painting).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in the years following WWII, Michelucci’s vision and method of approaching his work took a turn toward openness to nature and away from the division between the inside and the outside. His work during this period was, on the one hand, in dialogue with the environment (though not in a representational relationship) and, on the other hand, in a tormented relationship with itself through the incessant vectors of movement it contained. This tendency toward expressionist and informal aesthetics in Michelucci’s later years was coupled with his growing interest in the architecture of memorialization. He participated in the reconstruction of the areas of the historic center of Florence, around the Ponte Vecchio, destroyed during WWII; designed, together with the sculptor Henry Moore, a project commemorating Michelangelo near Carrara (a project that was never implemented); built the Chiesa di San Giovanni Battista (known also as la Chiesa dell’Autostrada – the Church of the Highway) to commemorate the workers who died while building Italy’s longest highway, Autostrada del Sole (the Sun Highway, simply known as A1, that stretches from Milan to Naples); planned the reconstruction of the Santa Croce district in Florence after the devastating 1966 Arno river flood; and finally, designed and built, following a long process of negotiation, the Chiesa Monumentale di Santa Maria Immacolata in Longarone, commemorating the victims of the 1963 Vajont disaster.

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<sup>33</sup> M. D. Bardeschi, *Kiesler, the Florentine School and the Curving of the World (1966)*, in “*Histories of Postwar Architecture*” Vol. 10, 2022, pp. 75-81, pp. 77-78, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/17720>.

## Michelucci's Search for Lost Time



Figure 5. Chiesa Monumentale di Santa Maria Immacolata, exterior view.<sup>34</sup>

The building of the Chiesa Monumentale di Santa Maria Immacolata (also known as the Chiesa di Longarone) retains the technocratic posture exhibited by Semenza and SADE's Vajont dam. Michelucci set out to build a soaring modernist structure upon the scarred terrain of Longarone, imposing his own vision of memory over that of the community. It was a vision that retained elements of the same abstraction which, as Valeria testifies, lay at the centre of the mourning community's lives («it has become an abstract world, there is nothing that materially reminds you of your home, your nest, your parents, or the family. Nothing is left»<sup>35</sup>). Although Michelucci's application of abstraction is distinct from the Italian Rationalist version – in that, rather than celebrating technical progress, it is aimed at recovering the capacity to perceive the signs lost in the process that started with designing the dam and ended with the environmental disaster – the problematic history of this project needs to be taken into consideration along with the architectural, aesthetic, and philosophical merits of the building. The violence of the construction's aesthetic insertion is, in fact, one of the conditions for the mimetic gesture that

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<sup>34</sup> Photograph by G. della Longa in G. della Longa, *Ri-costruire identità. Le chiese e i cimiteri di Erto e Vajont*, in "Monografia sul Vajont (1963–2023)", a cura di N. Aprilis, G. Dri, *Rassegna Tecnica del Friuli-Venezia Giulia & Notiziario Ingegneri*, LXIX, 2023, pp. 42-51, p. 43.

<sup>35</sup> C. Calzana, *Witnesses, memories, and places of after catastrophe: the Vajont dam case* in "AHM conference 2022: witnessing, memory, and crisis", Vol. 1, Amsterdam University Press, 2022, pp. 144-151, p. 146.

Michelucci's church undertakes in relation to the Vajont dam and the difficult task of a mnemonic search for absence through signs. In this way, Michelucci stages a tension between form and formlessness, with concrete and mimetic forms that reproduce an irretrievable past.

Part of the violent gesture lies in the fact that the church was not the outcome of a communal process of consultation and participation but rather the product of a singular vision supported by political will. Due to the controversy surrounding Michelucci's project, the process of approval and construction lasted nine years: from 1966, when the plans for the church were selected by the jury, until 1975, when the church was finally built, although its consecration was postponed until 1983. As Della Longa notes in his account of the events that preceded the church's construction, the objections raised by the parish community, headed by the parish priest, Don Pietro Bez, as part of their sustained effort and protest against Michelucci's project, were the following:

1. It does not harmoniously integrate into the urban and natural context;
2. By reproducing in its architectural form the Calvary, an exemplary symbol – according to the architect himself – of the Passion of Longarone, it generates a sense of dismay and deep sorrow. The architect dwells on the tragedy of the Calvary, evoking in the minds and hearts of the survivors a sorrow that is an end in itself, that does not open to Hope nor sublimate into the Resurrection, as would be fitting for the parish church of a town risen from the rubble;
3. The proposed design – whose intrinsic artistic value, in terms of inspiration and originality of execution, we do not deny – might be appropriate as a Votive Temple, a Memorial Monument to the Victims of the tragedy, but it is not suitable as a parish church because [...] it does not create that atmosphere of warmth, intimacy, and contemplation which are a fundamental need of the religious spirit of our people. [...];
4. The absolute originality of the concept stands in open contrast with a glorious tradition of sacred architecture, a tradition which the people do not feel ready to completely renounce.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> G. della Longa, *Ri-costruire identità. Le chiese e i cimiteri di Erto e Vajont*, in “Monografia sul Vajont (1963-2023)”, a cura di N. Aprilis, G. Dri, Rassegna Tecnica del Friuli-Venezia Giulia & Notiziario Ingegneri, LXIX, 2023, pp. 42-51, p. 43.

At the same time, against the objections voiced by the community, there was strong political backing for Michelucci's project – from the enthusiasm of Giuseppe Samonà, the mayor of Longarone after the disaster, to the support of the Ministry of Public Works, of the Institute for the Development of Social Housing, and of the Bishop of the Diocese of Belluno-Feltre, Giacomo Muccin. It is also true, nevertheless, that Michelucci, invoking his wish not to disturb the community and acknowledging the parish's selection of an alternative project, which aligned more closely with their preferences, announced his withdrawal from the commission at one point. He wrote that he wished to «avoid the discomfort of feeling like an intruder in an environment where relationships between the community and the professional have long been established».<sup>37</sup> In the end, however, the authorities continued to support the project, and Michelucci's Chiesa di Longarone was built, facing its antithesis, the inoperative Vajont dam.

Although it is true, as the parish strongly contests, that Michelucci's evocation of the Calvary is central to the design of the Chiesa di Longarone, this centrality does not function as a reenactment of pain but rather as a reorientation of how pain is received. The cross, in this case, becomes a point of departure for a new regime of visual and spiritual attention. Michelucci, in his formal zeal, seeks to transform the act of mourning into an exercise in reading and perception: of the land, of history, of memory, and of loss. While forceful, Michelucci's gesture toward the community of Longarone involves cultivating a receptivity that exceeds representation and fosters non-static contemplation. By reorganizing visibility around signs and by providing the conditions for re-learning how to perceive them, Michelucci's church resists the technosphere, bending its logic from within – by using its materials, bureaucratic infrastructure, and scale – to orient attention toward another modality of being.

For example, the spiral forms and fractured lines of the building invite the visitor into a space where signs must be discerned rather than passively absorbed. The Calvary, evoked by the bell tower and steeple, reconfigures perception by producing a strong sensory response through its unexpected form. This, in turn, enables the viewer to access a state of attentiveness in which memory is neither fixed nor complete but continually unfolding. The Calvary-centered design of the church, in dialogue with the mountain behind it, opens a perceptual breach – a moment in

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<sup>37</sup> G. della Longa, *Ri-costruire identità. Le chiese e i cimiteri di Erto e Vajont*, in “Monografia sul Vajont (1963-2023)”, a cura di N. Aprilis, G. Dri, Rassegna Tecnica del Friuli-Venezia Giulia & Notiziario Ingegneri, LXIX, 2023, pp. 42-51, p. 43.

which the absence of a time past asserts itself through sensation. In this way, involuntary memory reactivates what has been submerged by the technosphere: the signs of the environment and the memory of an announced disaster. This regime of visibility and perception marks a decisive break between Michelucci's intervention and the visual logic of the technosphere, which operates through instrumental clarity, legibility, and control. In contrast, the church stages what Gilles Deleuze, quoting Proust, calls a «morsel of time in the pure state»,<sup>38</sup> meaning a temporal fold in which the memory of what was lost becomes palpable not because it is recalled but because it is allowed to haunt the present as absence.

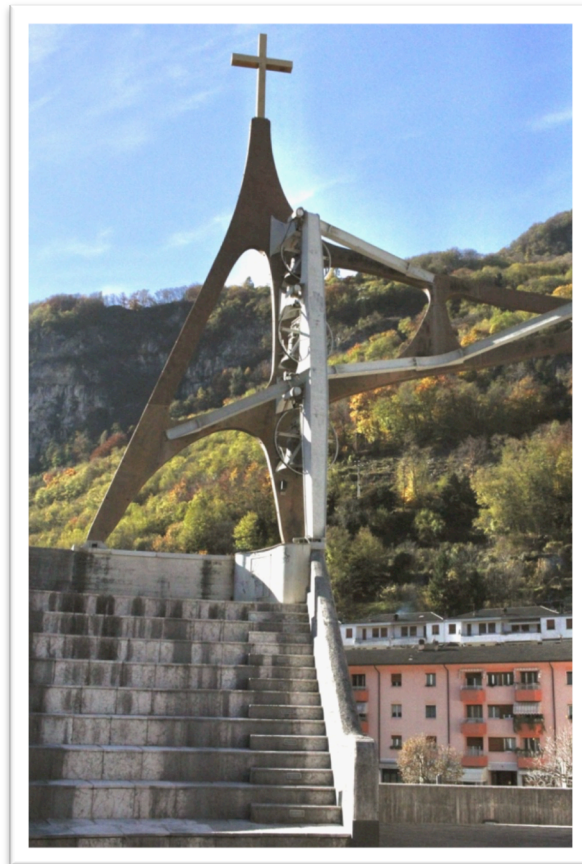


Figure 6. The bell tower and steeple evoking the Calvary and facing the mountain.<sup>39</sup>

The fluid spaces of the Chiesa di Longarone suspend the viewer in a temporal threshold, which creates the conditions for a search – a process of learning to read signs. As Deleuze notes,

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<sup>38</sup> G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. R. Howard, The Athlone Press, London 2000, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Photograph by the author, October 9, 2024.

«the sign and truth»<sup>40</sup> are the objects of this process. When designing the Chiesa di Longarone, Michelucci was careful not to create an architecture that is commemorative but which still maintains elements of a memorial. The structure does not use a representative schema; the difference it articulates lies between invoking memory through a direct temporal link – such as reconstructing a structure that was destroyed or a memory of the past – and, in Michelucci’s case, creating an environment in which what is lost can be experienced as lost and absent (rather than recovered) through a process of active, dynamic signification. Thus, when the parish notes that «it does not create that atmosphere of warmth, intimacy, and contemplation which are a fundamental need of the religious spirit of our people»,<sup>41</sup> this is indeed true. The space, instead of consoling and reconciling, creates the conditions for memory to register disappearance as lived intensity. For Deleuze, «memory is valid only as a faculty capable of interpreting certain signs»<sup>42</sup> because «what is essential is not to remember, but to learn».<sup>43</sup> Seen through this lens, the church becomes a medium for learning to read discernible signs and to recall «the ineffable vision... made of the mixture of survival and of nothingness»<sup>44</sup> – a vision recalled in Valeria’s testimony. Within the space of the Chiesa di Longarone, to perceive is to remember differently: to allow the past to fold into the present not as content but as absence.

Michelucci’s decision to structure the interior of the Chiesa Monumentale as an amphitheatre rather than following the traditional axial rows of pews constitutes one of the most radical spatial gestures of the project. The circular, descending configuration breaks with the linear logic of liturgical space – a logic historically tied to hierarchy, processional movement, and visual focus on a central altar – and instead fosters a sense of communal gathering that is spatially open, fluid, and decentred. The amphitheatre does not direct the gaze toward a fixed sacred object but disperses it across a dynamic field, inviting each visitor to inhabit the space differently, to participate in a form of memory that is collective yet unresolved. This spatial configuration also speaks to the kind of community that the church addresses itself to – or more precisely, the kind of community it invokes in its very fragmentation. The curved and layered

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<sup>40</sup> G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. R. Howard, The Athlone Press, London 2000, p. 91.

<sup>41</sup> G. della Longa, *Ri-costruire identità. Le chiese e i cimiteri di Erto e Vajont*, in “Monografia sul Vajont (1963-2023)”, a cura di N. Aprilis, G. Dri, Rassegna Tecnica del Friuli-Venezia Giulia & Notiziario Ingegneri, LXIX, 2023, pp. 42-51, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. R. Howard, The Athlone Press, London 2000, p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

seating of the amphitheatre suggests a series of singular viewpoints, discontinuous and partial, each oriented toward the outside, toward a horizon in which one is always waiting for someone absent to arrive. This shared exposure to absence gestures in the direction of what Maurice Blanchot calls «the unavowable community»<sup>45</sup> and Jean-Luc Nancy «being-in-common»<sup>46</sup>: concepts of community founded through the shared experience of loss, finitude, and the impossibility of full presence.



Figure 7. The internal amphitheatre.<sup>47</sup>

For Deleuze, absence is the generative core of any act of searching. Involuntary memory – which Michelucci’s church stimulates in its evocation of familiar forms while fundamentally changing their configuration, as the senses connect the familiar with the different, the indeterminate, the unfinished, the maimed – leads, on one hand, to the remembrance of lost vernacular epistemic practices (the reading of signs) and the ongoing suspension of memory as a

<sup>45</sup> M. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. by P. Joris, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, New York 1988.

<sup>46</sup> J. L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by P. Connor, trans. by P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland, S. Sawhney, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN 1991.

<sup>47</sup> Photograph by S. Gifthaler, in J. Glancey, *Giovanni Michelucci’s dramatic concrete church in the Italian Dolomites*, in “Wallpaper”, on March 16, 2024, <https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/santa-maria-immacolata-giovanni-michelucci-italia>.

recognition of the trauma without closure and compensation. Trauma, loss, and displacement are not, therefore, subjected to a regime of erasure and blindness but rather re-signified as the core of the present. The amphitheatre, in this light, is a temporal machine that orbits an absent centre, endlessly deferring resolution. It is this absence at the core that sustains its movement and the perception that it organizes.

Michelucci's departure from classical liturgical form is further reinforced by the presence of another amphitheatre, this time in open air atop the church. The upper level functions as an exposed civic terrace, opening toward the valley and facing the derelict Vajont dam. This spatial arrangement enacts a counter-technospheric logic that exposes the viewer to the landscape of the catastrophe. Contrary to the dam's system of containment and control, the amphitheatre opens to a horizon where the subject of the search becomes a witness to the geological trauma. The open structure orients the viewer toward a kind of speculative mourning: the site of the dam, alongside the view of Monte Toc, demands a semiotic reintegration of the environment. The spatial alignment transforms the dam from a monument of technocratic domination into a failed structure seen from the perspective of history – a perspective greater than the technological abstraction of the dam's semiotic regime and one that includes signs of geology, communities, and loss. Viewers are thus transformed into active participants in a mnemonic ecology in which the act of looking becomes a practice of critical remembrance.



Figure 8. The external amphitheatre of the Chiesa di Longarone.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, in the wake of a disaster born from the blindness of technocratic ambition, the Chiesa di Longarone stages a reconfiguration of space, memory, and the conditions of perception. Whereas the Vajont dam lingers on as a fossil of a regime of control, Michelucci's church unfolds as a gesture toward a regime of perception attuned to signs, absence, and silence. If the dam exemplifies the technosphere's drive to abstract, contain, and erase, the church counters it with an architecture of exposure that calls forth the unspoken and unhealed. The two amphitheatres and the elliptical structure of the church set in motion a learning apparatus that amplifies the absence at the heart of the community and rehearses a continuous movement around what can no longer be recovered. By refusing closure, it reclaims the right to mourn without consolation, to remember without monumentality, and to imagine community as a shared openness to loss. In this way, Michelucci's radical break with the aesthetics of the technosphere begins with a mimetic proximity to the architecture of control and ultimately unfolds into the

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<sup>48</sup> Photograph by S. Gifftaler, in J. Glancey, *Giovanni Michelucci's dramatic concrete church in the Italian Dolomites*, in "Wallpaper", on March 16, 2024, <https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/santa-maria-immeritata-giovanni-michelucci-italia>.

invention of a visual and affective apparatus through which memory is constituted in the interval of suspended attention.