



CHASING THE REAL: ITALIAN NEOREALISM

Stromboli

Stromboli (Stromboli, terra di Dio)

Director: Roberto Rossellini

Production Companies: Berit Film, RKO Radio Pictures

Production Managers: Enrico Donati, Ed Killy, Harold Lewis, Luigi Giacosi

Associate Director: Mario Tarchetti

Assistant Director: Marcello Caracciolo di Laurino

Screenplay: Sergio Amidei, Gian Paolo Callegari

English Dialogue: Renzo Cesana, Art Cohn

Story: Roberto Rossellini

Director of Photography: Otello Martelli

Camera Operator: Luciano Trasatti

Camera Assistants: Roberto Gerardi, Aiace Parolin

Editor: Jolanda Benvenuti

US Version Editor: Roland Gross

Music: Renzo Rossellini

Conductor: C. Bakaleinikoff

Sound: Eraldo Giordani, Terry Kellum

uncredited

Producers: Roberto Rossellini, Ingrid Bergman

Screenplay: Felix Morlion

Story: Sergio Amidei

RKO Version Editor: Alfred Werker

Cast:

Ingrid Bergman (*Karin Bjorsen*)

Mario Vitale (*Antonio Mastrostefano*)

Renzo Cesana (*priest*)

Mario Sponza (*lighthouse keeper*)

Roberto Onorati (*child*)

the inhabitants of Stromboli

Italy-USA 1950

100 mins

Digital

As a filmmaker, Roberto Rossellini has always been *de trop* (at least, for the Anglo-Saxon critical fraternity). His immediate post-war films, though by far the most ungrudgingly respected of his *oeuvre*, have tended in retrospect to be subsumed in the overall historiography of neo-realism; an eclectic middle period (stretching roughly from his divorce from Ingrid Bergman in 1958 to *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* in 1966) remains little known; and his late pedagogical documentaries have been either ignored or dismissed as a wrong turning by critics who had, however, displayed no particular enthusiasm for his earlier work. But to the extent that anything Rossellini did was classifiable, these films were (even the middle period could with hindsight be pigeonholed as 'interim'). On the other hand, his four undeniably major collaborations with Bergman (excluding the strange and marginal adaptation of Honegger and Claudel's opera-oratorio *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* and the home-movie oddity of their episode in *Siamo donne*) amounted to what exactly?

For many the question would be a rhetorical one were it not for the much-publicised idolatry of the *nouvelle vague* (plus the spirited defence of a few English critics, notably Robin Wood and David Thomson) which has meant that, although Rossellini's stock has generally fallen over the years, his films have never entirely gone away. A drawback, too, is their approximate nature purely as cinematographic artefacts. To an unsympathetic eye, *Stromboli, terra di Dio* must appear as hideously dubbed, laxly shot, somewhat indulgently cast (Bergman, playing a Lithuanian displaced person, looks in her slacks and sweater as radiantly chic as if she had just arrived from a photographic session), and ambivalent to a degree beyond what the director intended.

Yet, whatever material difficulties might have imposed these problems in 1949, they have become no less integral to the film's texture than the rough edges of *Rome Open City*, say, for which no one would think to reproach Rossellini. The fact that *Stromboli* is in a sense about dubbing – the 'dubbing' of the refugees' accents, the crude 'dubbing' of Karin's forged passport, even her single-minded determination to emigrate to America – legitimises the film's own linguistic statelessness. The relatively 'unframed' quality of the camerawork (combined with the wealth and animation of documentary detail, particularly in the virtuoso tunny-fishing sequence) suggests news-reel footage abruptly jerked into close-up, the implication being that if Rossellini had opted to focus instead on the person next to Karin in the DP camp, his or her story would just as hauntingly have characterised the post-war Zeitgeist. And the slight incongruity of Bergman's appearance is validated by recurrent hints that Karin's social aspirations have been conditioned by American movies (her obsessive readjustments to hair and make-up, her Joan Crawford-like manoeuvres to wheedle money out of the local priest and the handsome lighthouse-keeper), already evident in the camp where she tries to rationalise her marriage to the uncouth Antonio by imagining Stromboli – which turns out, in fact, to be a barren, friendless trap – as an archetypal Hollywood 'island', idyllic and practically palm-fringed.

In short, her personal Calvary cannot be made to coincide emblematically or, as it were, neo-realistically with the global catastrophe (and its troubled aftermath) by which it has been engulfed: her egotism and apparently chronic scheming wouldn't have been out of place in a conventionally shimmering 30s

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop or relax with friends in the BFI Bar & Kitchen.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious Italian sharing menu and gelato bar, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a lively DJ set with drinks on Saturday nights.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

CHASING THE REAL: ITALIAN NEOREALISM

Lights of Variety Luci del varietà

Sat 1 Jun 13:15; Mon 10 Jun 20:45;
Thu 13 Jun 18:00; Thu 20 Jun 18:20

Stromboli Stromboli, terra di Dio

Sun 2 Jun 18:15; Mon 3 Jun 12:00;
Wed 12 Jun 20:40; Sat 22 Jun 15:30

Rome 11:00 (aka Rome 11 O'Clock) Roma ore 11

Tue 4 Jun 14:50; Fri 7 Jun 18:10; Sun 16 Jun 14:00;
Mon 24 Jun 20:50

The Women of Italian Neorealism

Tue 4 Jun 18:10

Bellissima

Tue 4 Jun 20:35; Mon 10 Jun 18:10

Umberto D.

Wed 5 Jun 20:40; Sat 8 Jun 18:00;
Wed 19 Jun 20:40; Sat 29 Jun 13:10

Journey to Italy Viaggio in Italia

Thu 6 Jun 12:15; Sun 9 Jun 13:00; Tue 11 Jun
11:30; Fri 21 Jun 20:50; Tue 25 Jun 18:15

The Machine That Kills Bad People

La macchina ammazzacattivi

Tue 11 Jun 18:10; Sat 15 Jun 13:40;
Wed 19 Jun 12:20; Thu 27 Jun 20:55

Miracle in Milan Miracolo a Milano

Thu 13 Jun 20:40; Sun 30 Jun 12:10

Relaxed Screening:

The Machine That Kills Bad People

La macchina ammazzacattivi + intro and discussion
Mon 24 Jun 18:35

With thanks to

Camilla Cormanni, Paola Ruggiero,
Germana Ruscio, Marco Cicala at Cinecittà
Carmen Accaputo at
Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna

CINECITTÀ



SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**,
the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine.
Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK
only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where
you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema
on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark
British and independent titles, films are available to
watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals
& Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

or 40s melodrama. Blonde and complacent, Karin is a rather more authentically Hitchcockian heroine than any ever played by the actress for Hitchcock himself, and the film (like all Rossellini's collaborations with Bergman, most markedly *Fear*) can also be taken as a case-history study of terror. But if its plot vaguely recalls that of *Rebecca* – Karin, marrying a man she barely knows to gain her liberty, finds herself even more inexorably imprisoned – salvation comes, not through a novelettish plot contrivance, but by the ultimate annihilation of narrative: the revelation of God. And here Bergman's scrubbed Nordic glamour becomes a positive asset, rendering Karin's despairing confrontation with the mindless, 'Mediterranean' violence of the erupting volcano all the more lonely and vulnerable. Karin's own calm reflection the next morning, 'What mystery... What beauty...', takes the very words – the only ones possible – out of the critic's mouth.

Gilbert Adair, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1980

Rossellini, in his first film with Bergman, *Stromboli*, released in 1949, drew in particular on the aspects of Bergman's star persona – her intense, even scandalous sexuality, her attraction to pain and suffering, her anger – which, though certainly central in a number of her Swedish films, were foregrounded only later in her Hollywood career, and most forcefully in her films with Hitchcock. Yet Rossellini puts these features of the Bergman persona to a very different use. In *Stromboli* as well as subsequent films Rossellini made with Bergman (such as *Europa '51* and *La paura*) her figure as the site of pain, suffering, and anger becomes linked in new and interesting ways to the director's depiction of the traumatised condition of the of the post-war European subject. Furthermore, Rossellini draws not only on characteristics connected to Bergman's Hollywood persona, but also on editing patterns and framing devices conventionally used in classical cinema to film the female star – such as the close-up and the immobilisation of the frame in relation to the woman's figure. However, in Rossellini's films, these aspects of the woman's image, which in Hollywood tend to be contained within the 'single voiced' narrative trajectory of romantic love, instead become linked to the director's use of Bergman as a surface upon which is reflected the damaged fabric of the post-war European milieu.'

Rossellini's aim in *Stromboli's* closing sequence is to endow the image of Bergman's face as well as the Italian landscape with a sense of ambiguity. He does this by way of the logic of the 'encounter,' which, Deleuze suggests, 'is... a suffusion of the new spaces available to the camera in its new exterior mobility: from studio set and montage to location shooting and the long take, as Bazin observed.' These techniques release cinematic space from its subordination to narrative, and thus have a greater capacity to depict the openness of the subject's connection with the environment and with a community. In the case of *Stromboli*, the encounter depicted is a surprising one, in that it is only fully realised in the moments when Bergman's character is isolated from the community of the village. This encounter is based not so much on the drama of Karin's situation – her inability to conform to life on the island – as on an exploration of the potential for newness or change in the image of the Italian landscape and of the Hollywood star. What better way to discover this than by representing her confrontation with that object in nature which is the very symbol of radical contingency?

Ora Gelley, *Cinema Journal*, Winter 2008